E-Discussion Summary

CLOSING THE GENDER GAP IN POLITICS

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LAUNCHING MESSAGE

Background

More than 40 years after the entry into force of CEDAW and 26 years after the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, progress around women's full and equal political participation has stalled and gender balance remains a long way off. Women only make up 25% of all national parliamentarians, 36% of local government members, and 21% of ministers.[1] Only 23 countries are headed by a woman Head of State or Government, and States have yet to have a woman leader.[2]

While some countries have made progress towards gender balance in politics, the vast majority are lagging behind. In 114 countries, between 10% and 29.9% of parliamentarians are women, and in 25 countries, women make up less than 10% of parliamentarians. Women account for less than 30% of ministers in 130 countries, 12 of which have no women's representation at all.[3] Gaps in politics persist because of structural barriers and challenges that reinforce discriminatory beliefs, norms, practices, and policies.

In this year's Agreed Conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 65), States agreed to a raise the bar to 50/50 gender balance in all elected positions by taking all necessary measures to break barriers and accelerate progress, including: set specific targets and timelines to achieve gender balance in all branches of government and at all levels through temporary special measures such as quotas and appointments; encourage political parties to nominate equal numbers of women and men as candidates; eliminate, prevent and respond to all forms of violence against women and girls; and develop, fund and implement policies and programmes promoting women's leadership.

At the current rate of progress, gender parity will not be reached in national legislatures before 2063, and among Heads of Government before 2150.[4] The world cannot afford to wait any longer to achieve equal representation for women. With 50/50 gender balance in politics as a global goal, fast tracked actions are needed to close the gender gap in politics once and for all.

Objective

Following the CSW 65's outcome, this e-Discussion raised awareness about the slow progress towards achieving full and equal participation of women in politics and gathered experiences and recommendations on how to best accelerate progress and close the gender gap in politics. Participants were invited to join this e-Discussion **from 11 May to 1 June 2021** by answering the

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[1] Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls: report of the Secretary-General: https://undocs.org/E/CN.6/2021/3

[2] Based on calculations by UN Women, as of 1 April 2021.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls: report of the Secretary-General: https://undocs.org/E/CN.6/2021/3

below questions. The submissions contributed to the elaboration of a summary, augmenting the knowledge base available on the topic.

Questions

1. What are the levers of success in countries with high representation of women in politics?
2. More than half of countries have no temporary special measures, several of which have less than 10% of women in parliament. What can be done to ensure gender balance in politics is achieved in such countries? What role can political parties play?
3. Women are under-represented in all spheres of public life, including in public administration and the judiciary. What measures do you propose to ensure women have equal representation in all public life sectors?

CONTRIBUTORS

iKNOW Politics and its partners thank their followers for taking the time to contribute to this e-Discussion and share experiences, practices, and recommendations. The following participants joined the e-Discussion:

1. [Agata Walczak and Charles Chauvel](), UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub, **Thailand/Asia Pacific** (English)
2. [Akua Sena Dansua](), Former Ambassador of Ghana to Germany, Former Minister of Tourism, Former Minister of Youth and Sports, Former Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs, Former Member of Parliament (MP), **Ghana** (English)
3. [Amélie Leclercq](), Business and Professional Women Representative to the European Women's Lobby, **France** (French)
4. [Elisha Bano](), Founder and Coordinator of Act It Network, **Fiji** (English)
5. [Lilliam Arrieta](), **El Salvador** (Spanish)
6. [Marie Misukyo Amisi](), Executive Director of SOFIBEF (Solidarité des Femmes de Fizi pour le Bien-être Familial), **Democratic Republic of Congo** (French)
7. [Maryse Helbert](), Lecturer at Leiden University, College The Hague, **Netherlands** (English)
8. [Mercedes Velazquez](), **Argentina** (Spanish)
9. [Mykola Yabchenko](), Civil Society for Enhanced Democracy and Human Rights Project, UNDP Ukraine, **Ukraine** (English)
10. [Prerna Jha](), Young activist and university graduate, **India** (English)
11. [Samira Elmasoudi](), President of the Development to Support Women and Youth Organization, **Libya** (Arabic)
12. [Santosh Kumar Mishra](), Technical Assistant (retired), Population Education Resource Centre (PERC), Department of Continuing and Adult Education and Extension Work, S. N. D. T. Women's University, **India** (English)
13. [Tayo Agunbiade](), Author and Researcher at the Nigerian National Assembly, **Nigeria** (English)
14. [Terry Ince](), Founder/Convener at the CEDAW Committee of Trinidad and Tobago, **Trinidad and Tobago** (English)

SUMMARY

1. **What are the levers of success in countries with high representation of women in politics?**

High political participation and representation of women contribute to more peaceful societies as they lead to stronger and more transparent democracies, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs and increased cooperation across political parties, reminds Santosh Kumar Mishra. He also shares research findings suggesting that as more women are elected, there are more policies that support quality of life and reflect the priorities of families, women, and ethnic minorities.

Quoting Women Deliver, Santosh Kumar Mishra shares that although the global representation of women in national parliaments is still below the 30% benchmark often recognized as the minimum proportion to reach a "critical mass," some regions have had notable progress in the past two decades, such as **Sub-Saharan Africa** with a rise from 11% to 23.6% and the **Arab States** with a rise from 3.1% to 17.5%.

According to Agata Walczak and Charles Chauvel, a sustainable shift to a culture that normalizes women's representation and participation in public and political life is a strong lever of success in countries with high levels of women's representation. Noting that this kind of shift does not happen overnight or by itself, they argue that well-executed political advocacy and broad-based public campaigns for the introduction of temporary special measures can lead to change in politics and be an empowering effort in itself.

Citing an Inter-parliamentary Union report, Tayo Agunbiade adds that countries with high women's representation in parliament have laws that facilitate women's inclusion in public decision-making institutions. The most common method that proved effective in increasing and strengthening women's political participation and representation are temporary special measures (TSMs), such as quotas, argue Maryse Helbert, Tayo Agunbiade, Mykola Yabchenko, Agata Walczak and Charles Chauvel, Lilliam Arrieta, and Santosh Kumar Mishra.

Tayo Agunbiade notes that countries that have advanced women's political participation and representation have instituted gender quotas in one form or another, either through legislation or woven into constitutions. According to her, quotas have proven to be a successful instrument to ensure women are more included in political parties, put forward as candidates, win seats, and have a voice in politics.

Maryse Helbert and Tayo Agunbiade point to **Rwanda** as an example of successful constitutionally mandated gender quotas, resulting in women making up 61.3% of MPs in 2021. Tayo Agunbiade adds the progress of **Senegal**, **Namibia**, and **Mozambique** as other African examples of more than 40% women's representation in parliament. Mercedes Velazquez shares that in **Argentina**, mandatory legislated quotas first imposed a 30% minimum of women in legislative elections' candidate lists and were amended to raise the bar to 50%. With these progressive measures, Argentina has now more than 40% of women MPs.

Recently, Chileans voted for an assembly to draft the country's new constitution with a 50-50 gender representation as a result of a parity measure, which according to Tayo Agunbiade will ensure gender-sensitive provisions are included in the new constitution. **Chile**'s example is a template for other countries to follow, she argues.

Maryse Helbert warns that progress can be made in matters of women's representation in politics only when well-designed and stringent quotas and implementation frameworks are put into place. For instance, in **France**, a parity law with quotas was implemented in 2001, but limited progress was made due to the "sloppiness of the law", according to her. Quotas and other TSMs that are well-designed can contribute to a long-term change in 'hearts and minds' needed to normalize equal representation, argue Agata Walczak and Charles Chauvel.

Noting how the conversation on quotas can be controversial, Maryse Helbert does not ignore the arguments against them. She highlights how women politicians often want to be recognized for their qualities and not being reduced to numbers only. Furthermore, Agata Walczak and Charles Chauvel warn that TSMs alone cannot be expected to drive change, as several other actions must be taken in parallel.

According to Akua Sena Dansua, common success factors for greater gender equality in politics include: committed political will, enforceable electoral reforms facilitating inclusion, well-designed affirmative action, civil society advocacy, men allies, and media support. Mercedes Velazquez adds that persistent patriarchal social norms and practices are unfair to women as care and domestic responsibilities fall heavier on them. To her, policies that favor equitable distribution such as parental leave for men and women, telework arrangements for parents and people with care responsibilities, subsidized daycare centers, and tax incentive programs for companies with greater women's representation, help promote greater gender equality in decision-making positions, including politics.

2. **More than half of countries have no temporary special measures, several of which have less than 10% of women in parliament. What can be done to ensure gender balance in politics is achieved in such countries? What role can political parties play?**

All participants agree that more needs to be done to improve women's representation and close the gender gap in politics as existing efforts are not enough to reach parity in the near future. Women's underrepresentation in politics is the result of deeply-rooted barriers restricting women's access to decision-making positions. Referring to an academic study on the effect of women's representation in parliament, Santosh Kumar Mishra shares the following barriers:

- Prevalence of the 'masculine model' in political life and elected government bodies
- Lack of political party support for women candidates such as limited access to political finance and networks
- Lack of access to quality education and training for women's leadership, and for orienting young women towards political life
- The nature of the electoral system, which may discriminate against women candidates

Participants agree that for countries where such barriers are prevailing and preventing women from fully and equally enjoying their right to participate in politics, temporary special measures

are the answer. For example, with **Nigeria** ranking 180th in terms of women's representation in parliament, Tayo Agunbiade shares there are ongoing efforts in the National Assembly to pass a law that includes quotas and reserved seats for women as TSMs to reduce the gender gap in politics.

In **Ukraine**, a 30% quota was introduced to the Political Parties Law in 2014 but because it lacked sanctions, many political parties did not comply or nominated women in unwinnable positions, which resulted in women making up just 12% of MPs, reports Mykola Yabchenko. A new 40% gender quota mandated in the electoral code was applied in the local government elections of October 2020, but not as effectively as planned, she argues, with women ending up with much lower than 40% of the local seats. To avoid this, Tayo Agunbiade stresses the importance of using well-designed quotas to ensure impact with strict requirements on party lists and non-compliance penalties enforced by the electoral management body.

Demand for more women in politics has been growing among the public in **Ukraine**, reports Mykola Yabchenko, as opinion polls show that ¾ of men and women do not base their electoral choice on gender. She notes that women's political representation has increased with the public's shift in perception of women in politics, as more women appeared on party lists in the 2019 parliamentary election, resulting in women representing 20.6% of MPs.

Quotas are an example of a temporary special measure designed to address the stark underrepresentation of women in politics by ensuring they fill political positions and are not only represented in a tokenistic manner. Culture change can take longer to take place than what is meant by 'temporary,' note Agata Walczak and Charles Chauvel, as there are examples of countries where the removal of a TSM proved premature and resulted in a reversal in women's representation.

Agata Walczak and Charles Chauvel argue that to better understand and support sustainable change, there is a need for an objective test to measure the success of a TSM and when it is safe to remove it. Moreover, they note that numerical representation mandated by TSMs does not automatically translate into a substantive opportunity for women to take full advantage of elected positions. To be able to thrive in institutions designed by and for men, women must have equal access to resources, education, mentoring, and training.

Elisha Bano and Prerna Jha stress the importance of providing education, training, and mentorship especially for young women to cultivate their skills and guide them in their political aspirations. Elisha Bano calls for scholarships for young women to study political science, law, and international relations and related subjects in addition to mentorship and internship programs within political parties and government institutions. As a young graduate, Prerna Jha echoes this point by sharing that although she is interested in getting involved in politics, she does not know what opportunities are available to her and how to go about taking the first step.

Breaking down systemic barriers to representation, according to Agata Walczak and Charles Chauvel, requires commitment and action that are structural and permanent rather than temporary, including the elimination of discriminatory and gender-blind social and economic policies, programmes and practices, and a shift to more equal ones. Participants agree that

political parties have a crucial role to play in stimulating this shift for long-term substantive equality.

Referring to the first question of the e-Discussion, Akua Sena Dansua argues that political parties are supposed to be identified as the main levers of success of equal gender representation in politics, but that in reality, they are the worst culprits when it comes to enforcement of gender balance in politics. Because of harmful negative stereotypes associated with women's leadership and the prevalence of sexist and macho leadership styles, she notes that many male political party leaders are against inclusion of women. Furthermore, she claims that rather than being the solution, political parties have been the problem in initiating and perpetuating the underrepresentation of women in politics and the lack of progress towards gender balance. To her, many political parties' leaders play an active part in keeping politics out of reach for women, notably financially.

Commitment on the part of political parties is critical in ensuring women candidates have winnable positions, Agata Walczak and Charles Chauvel say. Measures such as equality incentives or benchmarks tied to public funding for political parties or limits placed on campaign spending by candidates can be effective in jump-starting the process of achieving equal representation among candidates and elected representatives, they add. But to ensure that such advancement is not merely tokenistic and brings a real long-term change in the existing power relations, they argue, a commitment at the level of values is vital. This requires a fundamental reflection among party membership, facilitated by the leadership, as to the need for equality and diversity in politics, and whether and why measures are required at the level of political parties' rules and ways of working to promote it.

Many political parties include women among their members and volunteers, who overwhelmingly take on mobilizing and events coordination responsibilities, claim Terry Ince. However, these same women are often either reluctant to step forward for higher positions or overlooked and discouraged when they do. Terry Ince calls on political parties to seize the opportunity of greater inclusion and encourage, groom, train, and support women members in filling positions at all levels of party management and leadership. Tayo Agunbiade joins this call, adding that political parties must be incentivized or pushed to ensure their decision-making structures, including governing boards and candidate selection committees, include women. She argues that TSMs imposed on political parties can be useful tools in reaching this goal.

3. **Women are under-represented in all spheres of public life, including in public administration and the judiciary. What measures do you propose to ensure women have equal representation in all public life sectors?**

Santosh Kumar Mishra stresses that there are significant barriers to women's participation in all spheres of public life that stem from economic, social, and cultural issues, in addition to the harmful and negative stereotypes about women and entrenched gender roles. Equal gender representation in public life can be achieved by ensuring a level playing field at the entry point and across all levels of responsibility of public service institutions, claims Tayo Agunbiade. One of the main ways to do this, according to Samira Elmasoudi, is to end all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls. To her, this is the first essential step towards ensuring women

are empowered and financially independent to aspire to and fully participate in all spheres of public life.

Lilliam Arrieta shares that in **El Salvador**, while there are gender quotas for the Legislative Assembly, there are no measures or affirmative action to reduce the gender gap in the Executive and Judiciary branches, including the Supreme Court of Justice. Indeed, although women make up 54% of the population, only 33% of the Supreme Court Justices are women. Lilliam Arrieta argues that this under-representation of women in decision-making positions makes women's issues invisible and the proposed solutions inadequate because they emanate from the male vision and experience. She adds this is a loop that increases discrimination against women, and with El Salvador having one of the highest rates of femicides in the world, she urges for affirmative action in favor of greater representation of women in the Judiciary, most notably in the Supreme Court of Justice.

Marie Misukyo Amisi argues that international conventions and instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, should be enforced more strongly so that women have equal access to leadership positions in public life. Mercedes Velazquez adds that more needs to be done when it comes to encouraging young women and giving them equal access to public service and leadership positions, mostly through education, training, and public information and media campaigns. To Akua Sena Dansua, it is also essential to have women leaders such as herself act as role models and mentors to younger generations so that young women can relate, be encouraged, and have better access to networks and expertise.