

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women in Politics

iKNOW Politics e-Discussion

Contribution from Hannah Johnson and Sonia Palmieri

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We are delighted to submit the following as a collaborative contribution to the iKNOW Politics e-Discussion on the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Women in Politics. We restrict our comments to the third set of questions relating to the gender-sensitivity of remote parliamentary working arrangements. Specifically, the e-Discussion prompts reflection on two questions:

What is the gender impact of virtual parliamentary work and participation? Have remote parliamentary arrangements affected your parliament's gender-sensitivity and diversity?

Background

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated, like nothing before, parliaments' implementation of remote working arrangements. These included the use of digital innovations such as voting applications and cloud storage of information management systems, which had previously been seen primarily through a 'risk' lens. That is, virtual participation and voting had been seen as a working modality open to compromise, or subject to claims of illegality and unconstitutionality. For the vast majority of parliaments, remote working arrangements were far from well established, if not rejected outright. This is despite arguments that had been made for years on the value of flexible working arrangements to attract a more diverse parliamentary workforce (among both parliamentarians, their (political) staff and parliamentary staff), particularly those with caring responsibilities.

Pandemic-motivated remote working arrangements

When, in March 2020, the global community was required to work from home where possible, parliaments could hardly fail to follow suit. Research by Hannah Johnson¹ details the varied forms of remote participation across parliaments:

- **Remote plenary sessions**, which were used by several parliaments. Fully remote plenary sessions were used during the pandemic by the Belgian *Chambre des Représentants*, the Latvian *Saeima*, Lithuanian *Seimas*, Romanian *Camera Deputaților*, Slovenian National Council and *Drzavni Zbor*, among others.² Hybrid plenary sessions, where some MPs sat

¹ Johnson, H. (forthcoming) Does virtual participation create more gender-sensitive parliaments? Inter-Pares Issues Brief.

² Luigi, E. (2020) [State Of Covid-19 Measures In Parliaments](#), European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation

in person and others participated online, were used by the European Parliament³ and UK House of Commons.⁴ Other procedures were also moved online, such as the tabling of questions to Ministers in Tanzania;⁵

- **Remote committee meetings**, which were used by the Argentinian Senate, Australian Parliament, Canadian House of Commons, Danish *Folketing*, French Senate, Italian Chamber of Deputies, and Mexican Chamber of Deputies, among others (either fully remote or hybrid);⁶
- **Remote voting**, which was allowed by parliaments in different circumstances. Some parliaments allowed remote voting for committees (including the German *Bundestag and Bundesrat* and Norwegian *Stortinget*). Others only allowed remote voting for MPs isolating due to COVID (such as the Croatian *Sabor*). Remote voting was in place in the Hellenic Parliament, both Polish Chambers, and both Spanish chambers. Remote voting is always allowed in the Slovenian National Council;⁷
- **Proxy voting** (where an MP casts a vote on behalf of another MP who cannot vote in person) was implemented by the New Zealand Parliament⁸ and a UK House of Commons pilot (which was initially introduced for new parents) was extended to MPs unable to attend due to health reasons;⁹
- **Virtual public engagement** increased too, such as: livestreamed proceedings (online or televised) in Argentina,¹⁰ remote committee evidence-taking in the UK Houses of Parliament,¹¹ virtual tours of the parliament in Austria,¹² large, interactive, multilingual online events in the European Parliament,¹³ video meetings with constituents and local groups,¹⁴ online education and Youth Parliament sessions in the Welsh *Senedd*.^{15,16}
- **Remote working for parliamentary staff**. Many parliaments required staff to work remotely unless in-person work was specifically needed (such as IT or security teams). Some parliaments put rotation systems in place to reduce the numbers of staff in the

³ Welle, K. (2020) 'Protecting Members and staff, ensuring business continuity and implementing practical solidarity', in Robert Shuman Foundation (2020) [The European Parliament in the time of coronavirus](#)

⁴ UK Parliament (2020) [House of Commons takes historic first step towards virtual proceedings](#)

⁵ IPU (2020) [Country compilation of parliamentary responses to the pandemic](#)

⁶ IPU (2020) [Country compilation of parliamentary responses to the pandemic](#)

⁷ Luigi, E. (2020) [State Of Covid-19 Measures In Parliaments](#), European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation

⁸ IPU (2020) [Country compilation of parliamentary responses to the pandemic](#)

⁹ UK House of Commons Library (2020) [Proxy voting in divisions in the House](#)

¹⁰ IPU (2020) [Country compilation of parliamentary responses to the pandemic](#)

¹¹ Fowler, B. (2020) [Remote select committee evidence-taking is a Coronavirus change that should be kept](#), Hansard Society

¹² Republic of Austria Parliament, [Virtual tours](#)

¹³ Welle, K. (2020) 'Protecting Members and staff, ensuring business continuity and implementing practical solidarity', in Robert Shuman Foundation (2020) [The European Parliament in the time of coronavirus](#)

¹⁴ Lake, B. (2021) 'Representation and the Constituency' in Study of Parliament Group (2021) [Parliaments and the Pandemic](#)

¹⁵ Senedd Cymru, [Education and Youth Engagement](#)

¹⁶ Senedd Cymru (2021) [Power of your Vote: Mock Election Event](#)

office, whereas the Slovak *Narodna Rada* only allowed vulnerable staff to work remotely.¹⁷

Gendered consequences of remote working arrangements?

In our research,¹⁸ we have discovered a number of conceptual and methodological challenges in understanding the relationship between remote working arrangements and parliaments' gender sensitivity and diversity:

Monitoring and reporting on diversity data

Most parliaments did not disaggregate participation data by indicators of diversity (gender, geography, ethnicity, disability). The United Kingdom's House of Commons and House of Lords are a rare exception.¹⁹ It is unclear – on a global scale – whether marginalized groups such as women, those with caring responsibilities or a disability, were more likely to participate remotely. An intersectional approach to data collection is required. Aggregating all women, for example, is unlikely to clarify our understanding of why some women were able to participate remotely for long periods of time, while others were not.

Reasons for remote participation

Precisely because the pandemic instigated parliaments' implementation of remote participation, it is hard to know whether those who used it did so because they preferred to work from home (or their electorate), or because they were forced to. Internal border closures (that is, between provinces/regions/states) meant that some parliamentarians and their staff were forced to participate remotely while others were able to attend the parliament in person. There is a need to consider the agency of diverse cohorts of parliamentarians and staff in making decisions about their form of participation.

Participation as speaking

Remote participation was often more restricted than in-person participation. For example, in plenaries, remote participants were not always allowed to vote, or make interjections or points of order. Where marginalized cohorts of parliamentarians and staff are already less visible in the parliamentary process, remote participation effectively rendered those people even more invisible. It also privileges active speaking in parliament, when the work of a parliamentarian is so much more.

Establishing a new hierarchy of presence

For most parliaments, remote working arrangements complemented in-person attendance in parliament (albeit in reduced numbers), resulting in 'hybrid' arrangements. Thus while some parliamentarians were able to participate 'as usual', for those online, there were additional

¹⁷ Luigi, E. (2020) [State Of Covid-19 Measures In Parliaments](#), European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation

¹⁸ Johnson, H. (forthcoming) Does virtual participation create more gender-sensitive parliaments?; Palmieri, S. (forthcoming) 'In the eye of the beholder: Gendered consequences of parliamentary hybridity in Australia', paper to be delivered to the Workshop on Gender and COVID, Banff, Canada, 12-13 May 2022.

¹⁹ Uberoi, E. (2020) [Coronavirus: MPs' use of virtual participation and proxy voting by gender](#), House of Commons Library, Brown, T. (2020) [House of Lords: Virtual sittings, participation and Covid-19](#)

technological limitations. It is feasible that the two-tiered system had a differential impact on diverse cohorts of parliamentarians and staff.

Establishing new rules for gender and diversity sensitive remote working arrangements

In November 2021, the Australian Human Rights Commission handed down a report on its inquiry into the safety of Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces, entitled *Set the Standard*. Among its 28 recommendations, the Commission considered that:

... a review into the extension of remote work opportunities, the Parliamentary sitting calendar and Order/Routine of Business are warranted in relation to both Houses of Parliament. While the solutions for change will need to be tailored to certain parts of CPWs where appropriate, each review should be guided by the following principles:

- **Predictability:** While there is a need for political spontaneity in the chamber, parliamentarians, MOP(S) Act employees and employees of the parliamentary departments require more certainty in their work schedules, so that they can meet commitments outside of work, including caring responsibilities.
- **Agency:** People should be entitled and empowered to choose working arrangements that best suit their personal circumstances, where possible.
- **Flexibility:** Where possible, people should have the opportunity to work flexibly, including through the use of remote work.
- **Effectiveness:** Work arrangements, sitting hours and patterns and chamber processes should support effective work at an individual level, as well as the effective delivery of the business of government.
- **Compassionate leadership:** Leaders within CPWs should model compassionate leadership and be empowered to support their employees or party members in balancing work with other commitments.²⁰

We commend these principles to parliaments and parliamentarians interested in designing new rules for remote working arrangements. **Virtual participation should not be seen as a replacement for existing practice, but an additional option available to those who need it. The priority should be to ensure that both methods of participation are equally valued and respected.**

²⁰ Australian Human Rights Commission (2021) [Set the Standard: Report of the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces](#). Canberra, p. 270.