

ADVANCING INCLUSIVITY IN PARLIAMENTS THROUGH AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

Societies thrive when their equal rights, opportunities for growth, fair representation and participation in decision-making processes are ensured. The principle of political equality is enshrined in the UN Charter, UN Declaration of Human Rights, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Achieving gender equality is also affirmed as a precondition in the Sustainable Development Goals, especially in SDG 5 and 16. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and its Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) network also play an integral part towards this global endeavour.

The world has witnessed substantial gains in the representation of women in national Parliaments i.e. from 11.3% in 1995 to 27.2% in 2025.¹ However, the pace of progress has slowed in recent years. Women's participation is hindered by a range of structural and institutional barriers that limit their role in political and public life. Procedures, policies and cultures sometimes act as barriers to participation in decision making process. Women frequently struggle to be nominated, let alone elected as political parties prefer male candidates to contest elections. Structural barriers include outmoded work practices and workplaces that fail to be gender-neutral, and influential groups that benefit people who have been there the longest rather than those who need it the highest.² The modern era of digitalisation has added to the misery politicians as violence now comes from social media.

Inequalities in Parliaments cannot be attributed to a single factor. Multiple factors such as procedures, structures,

power relations and experiences affect gender equality in many parliamentary setups. Since such inequalities are multifaceted, the intersectionality approach provides a comprehensive framework to analyse and reform the systems by addressing underlying barriers.

The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Organisations often do not have a clear understanding of what intersectionality means. Inclusion strategies often follow traditional patterns without realising that gender diversity policies do not work the same way for everyone.

According to Bowleg *"Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how multiple social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and disability intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism) at the macro social structural level."*³

Gender sensitive policies may have distinct results for individuals from minority and privileged classes. Thus, Parliaments must reconsider embracing intersectionality at the organisational, structural, systemic and policy process levels in order to become more responsive and inclusive for all.

Gender Sensitivity Strategies for Parliaments

Members of Parliament across the globe can reflect on the global best practices to chalk out a strategy for realising gender sensitivity in Parliaments. In order to be inclusive,

Parliaments must possess forward looking leadership. As there are many interconnected challenges, efforts to break them down should also be comprehensive. Drawing inspiration from the *IPU Gender-Sensitive Parliaments* (2011) and *CPA Gender Sensitising Guidelines* (2020), a conceptual model of adoption of intersectionality in Parliaments is presented at Figure 1, with a focus on four areas where Parliaments can bring reforms.

1. Representational Reforms

The introduction of quotas is one of the easiest routes to remedying lower proportion of Parliamentarians. This can be done by either amending the Constitution or the relevant laws. Enshrining gender-sensitive measures in the Constitution offers a comparatively fixed foundation for gender equality as they're sacrosanct and difficult to amend.

Rwanda is a good example with its Constitution requiring 30% of decision making positions in state organs to be filled by women. In South Africa equality before the law is enshrined in the Constitution. Therefore, Parliaments must also reserve a specific number of seats for women and allocate formal gender quotas in party nominations and local body elections.

While developing party candidates list, a gender balanced approach can be adopted. The same model can be replicated for internal leadership roles. Namibia's zebra list is seen as an example of best practice due to the fact that Namibia's National Assembly has reached ~40.6% women in the Parliament.⁴

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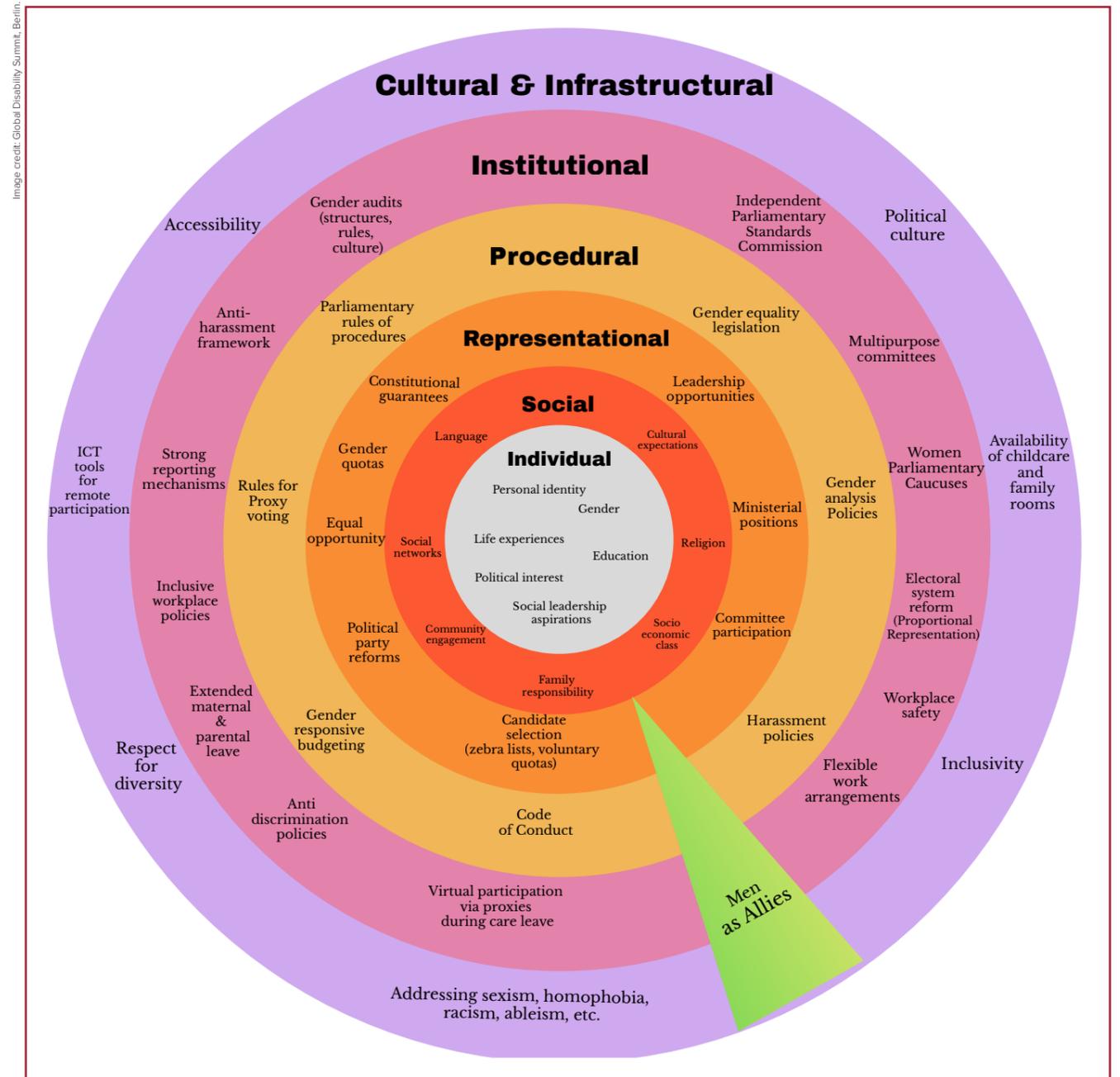


Figure 1: Conceptual Intersectionality model for advancing inclusivity in Parliaments. Political parties can also promote gender equality by adopting voluntary party quotas. A notable example is Australia, where the Labor Party set a voluntary quota in 1994, initially aiming for 35% representation of women in winnable seats. This target was later revised upward to 40% in 2002, and further to 50% by 2025. This simple initiative led to 30.3% increase in women in the Australian House of Representatives in 2025 as compared to 8.8% in 1995.¹ Parliaments must strategically plan a comprehensive strategy where political parties proactively allocate general seats to women candidates.

2. Procedural Reforms Parliaments may review their rules of procedures to eliminate implicit biases, ensuring equitable opportunities for all Members to contribute in debates and decision-making processes. All laws, policies and proposed legislative frameworks must be analysed from a gendered perspective. Parliaments should also prioritise strengthening internal mechanisms and fostering a zero-tolerance culture for gender-based violence, sexual harassment and other forms of sexism in workplaces,

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public spaces and online. Parliaments must enforce rules and policies to prevent sexual harassment and discrimination of women within parliamentary spaces. Parliaments should ensure equitable distribution of resources by implementing gender responsive budgeting (GRB). In Pakistan, the concept of GRB was first pilot tested in 2005. Recently in 2025, Pakistan has included gender budget statements in the annual budget.

3. Institutional reforms

Parliaments must carry out a gender sensitive audit of their structures, rules, and culture to identify barriers to equal representation and participation. The Scottish Parliament has undertaken a comprehensive Gender Sensitive Audit in 2022. The *CWP Gender Sensitising Parliaments Guidelines* provide a valuable tool for this process which can be utilised by Legislatures to identify priority areas for reform. Parliaments must also institutionalise gender-based analysis of all policies, legislation and budgetary decisions. A leading example is Canada's Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+), a framework that goes beyond gender to consider multiple intersecting identity factors such as age, ethnicity, disability and socio-economic status.

Parliaments can establish a multi portfolio Committee that has a responsibility for gender equality or a women's caucus to promote a gender equity agenda. Parliamentary Committees can provide a more formal mechanism for MPs to influence legislative and policy agendas. They can also be tasked with auditing national women's machinery operating within the country.⁵ Women's Parliamentary Caucuses (WPC) can be

formed to bring women MPs together to advocate for women's issues ensuring their voices in decision-making processes. The caucuses can also collaborate with bodies outside of Parliament who can supply the necessary data and can seek technical advice in reaching the goal of gender equity.

Pakistan has set a good example by establishing WPCs in the National Assembly and all of the Provincial Assemblies for advocating gender related issues. Parliaments can set up an Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission (IPSC) with a mandate to uphold ethical conduct, promote a respectful workplace, and ensure accountability among Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. In Australia, an IPSC is operating in a similar manner.

Parliaments must create accessible and confidential mechanisms for the reporting of Violence against Women in Politics (VAW-P) cases. The systems must allow the victims to be able to disclose incidents without fear of being bullied or facing retaliation. Independent Complaint Committees or units trained for gender sensitivity and victim support can also be established in Parliaments. Strong reporting mechanisms should be accompanied by monitoring and evaluation of institutional responses ensuring perpetrators are held accountable.

4. Infrastructural and Cultural Reforms

Gender sensitive Parliaments cannot be realised without a strong focus on infrastructural reforms and the promotion of an inclusive parliamentary culture. Parliaments should promote inclusive workplace policies. These might include entitlement to parental

leave, extended maternal leave, mental health support, flexible work arrangements and training programmes that address unconscious bias, anti-discrimination and respectful conduct. Parliaments must also improve laws related to their safety in the workplace. Gender-sensitive infrastructures must comprise of childcare facilities, family rooms and safe reporting mechanism. Women MPs must also be facilitated to participate virtually or via proxies during parental or caring leave. A culture of respect for diversity must be promoted.

The policy and legislative change on the gender equality and sensitivity issue has frequently been the result of collaborative efforts from inside and outside the Parliament. Gender equality is often misperceived to be a women's issue. Since political institutions are often male dominated, especially the leadership roles, it is essential that men are engaged as allies for providing cross-cutting support across all levels. With active support of males, gender sensitive reforms become easier and more sustainable.

References

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- ⁵ UNDP. 2016. 'Guidance Note: Strategies and Good Practices in Promoting Gender Equality Outcomes in Parliaments'.