Gender equality is achieved when women and men enjoy the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, including economic participation and decision-making, and when the different behaviors, aspirations and needs of women and men are equally valued and favored. Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.

While the world has achieved some progress towards gender equality and women’s empowerment under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), women and girls continue to suffer discrimination in all areas of social and economic life. Moreover, the world is yet to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5: ‘Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls in all spheres of life.

Nevertheless, women have made important inroads into political life across the world, but their 23.7% representation in national Parliaments is still far from parity—an indication that gender equality in Parliament is still a long way off and current progress is far too slow. Most Parliaments are still heavily male-dominated. Even where women are present in greater numbers, glass ceilings often remain firmly in place.

Women running for election face numerous challenges, such as, addressing discrimination or cultural beliefs that limit women’s role in society, balancing private, family and public life. Gender stereotypes about women and men are often highly negative and gender inequality can be reinforced by legislation. Furthermore, women may be dissuaded from running for office, or in the United States of America. This trend is positively changing over Parliaments—otherwise called Speakers or Presiding Officers—has grown at a remarkably slow pace. However, that of women presiding over Parliaments—otherwise called Speakers or Presiding Officers—has grown at an even slower pace. The Australian Parliament was the only one to have a woman Speaker before the Second World War.

Between 1945 and 1997, only 42 countries had had a woman preside over Parliament, the majority of which were located in Europe or in the United States of America. This trend is positively changing in the 21st century as the percentage of women occupying posts of Presiding Officer in Parliaments has nearly doubled, from 8.3% in 2005 to 15.6% in 2016. On 14 November 2015, the number of women Speakers reached a record 53 women, making up 19.1% of the total. Women Speakers now span every area of the world, including the Arab region, where the first woman became Speaker of Parliament in the United Arab Emirates in 2015.**

Nevertheless, it should be noted that a majority of these women are Deputy Speakers, who barely preside over Parliament, except in the absence of the main male Speaker. Women Speakers have enhanced Parliaments’ role in overseeing the work of government in the area of gender equality. They also serve as role models for fellow women who aspire to top decision-making positions or desire to participate in politics in their respective countries.

Women and Elections

According to UN Women, “the percentage of women in national Legislatures has become a standard measure of a country’s achievements in women’s political participation.” When women participate in elections as candidates and as voters—decisions better reflect the electorate, and democracy is strengthened. However, women currently comprise only 22.6% of all Parliamentarians worldwide. Three important factors deter women from entering politics globally. Firstly, individual barriers impede women’s self-efficacy and empowerment. Secondly, government barriers include legislative and regulatory provisions that undermine women’s participation. Thirdly, societal barriers include norms of patriarchy that exclude women from participating fully in the public sphere. These three types of barriers can exist in isolation, but they are more often mutually constitutive and reinforcing and have direct effects on women’s political participation. For example, electoral rules that fail to explicitly protect women’s access to political and electoral processes often indicate deeply embedded social norms of patriarchy. Therefore, the need for involvement of women in society is often multi-dimensional, reflecting the complex interaction of cultural values and institutional rules. Overcoming these barriers necessitates not simply encouraging women to overcome them, or even changing laws and practices, but also transforming the gender norms that underpin them.

Gender mainstreaming in legislation

In 1995, gender mainstreaming was established in the Beijing Platform for Action as an internationally agreed strategy for promoting gender equality. Since then, the achievement of equality between women and men has become a major objective and integral part of the international development agenda.

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in 2017, defined gender mainstreaming as “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral element in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.”

Following the above definition, national Parliaments are well placed to champion the objective of gender equality and promote gender mainstreaming in government. Parliaments aim to reflect society; hence they must reflect the changing dynamics of their electorates. A gender-sensitive Parliament is a Parliament that responds to the needs and interests of both women and men. For example, gender-sensitive Parliaments can contribute to removing the barriers to women’s full participation in society, and empower both women and men to shape their own lives and make decisions.

The legislative process is a vital entry point for gender mainstreaming. Legislation has a direct and tangible impact on the lives of citizens, and reflects in the most direct manner the needs and priorities of various constituencies. The legislative process creates a platform for dialogue on issues that matter most in society and may foster the expression of multiple voices and perspectives. Thus, the legislative process presents an effective vehicle for the promotion of gender equality values and principles.

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Women and social media

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram can facilitate the way politicians interact with their electorates, and vice versa, and have altered the communications landscape in politics especially for women. Consequently, women who are frequently at a disadvantage when competing for time, financial and other resources, have equal access to social media. Social media would facilitate the communications of female Parliamentarians with child-rearing responsibilities and those in other societies where cultural norms restrict their movement.

Social media, particularly e-learning, is an excellent forum for female politicians to improve their political education without displacement. Women Parliamentarians share information among each other faster and easier through social media. Most importantly, social media exposes women Parliamentarians and politicians to the illegitimate, who serve as role models especially for younger women and girls, empowering them to make better choices about their lives.

Unfortunately, social media has also brought new risks for female Parliamentarians, as they receive insulting or threatening comments about women’s ability and/or role. The cyber-violence against women in general, and against women in politics in particular, needs to be addressed by both the public and private sectors in order to raise awareness and develop new codes of conduct that can better protect legislators when interacting with citizens online.

Equality in the workplace

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2015, the participation of both women and men in the labour force is an important social and development goal. However, marked inequality in the workplace still persists between the two genders.

Two major factors account for women’s low labour force participation. Firstly, fertility significantly affects female labour force participation, because, each birth on average decreases women’s labour supply by almost two years during a woman’s reproductive life. Secondly, gender-based legal restrictions in terms of weak or restrictive laws related to family, gender-based violence, and economic opportunities may substantially impede women’s empowerment.

Conversely, educational attainment, together with maternity leave and child benefits policies for women are positively correlated with female participation in the labour force. Moreover, better access to comprehensive, affordable, and high-quality childcare frees up women’s time for formal employment. Women in leadership positions (like Parliamentarians) may also increase female labour force participation by providing role models for other women, and by combating stereotypes. Also, women Parliamentarians can significantly change public attitudes towards women and, most importantly, raise the aspirations parents have for their daughters and the aspirations teenage girls have for themselves.

*Olga Rudil-Zymkow (1871–1948), was an Austrian politician and journalist (She served as President of the Bundesrat (the Federal Council or upper house of Austria) in 1927–29 and 1932. She was the only woman Speaker or Presiding Officer before the Second World War.

**Amal Al Qubaisi (born 1966) is currently President of the Federal National Council of the United Arab Emirates. She is first female leader of a National Assembly in the Arab world. Before holding the position, she was the Chairperson of the Abu Dhabi Education Council.