Madam Chair, I am grateful for this opportunity to address distinguish friends/colleagues. To put what I will say into context, I come from St. Helena, a small island in the South Atlantic covering 47 square miles with a population of 4,000 with no airport and so to reach here on Friday night, I had to leave St. Helena on 31 August. With that as background, I’ll now speak about strategies to increase women’s representation in parliaments in small states.

According to the United Nations, men and women should take part equally in decision-making in parliament.

Over the past forty years In St. Helena, the makeup of our Parliament has been dominated by men. As I look around the room this morning, perhaps not only St. Helena has this problem.

Up until our last General Election in 2009, there has from time to time been an overall shortage of candidates willing to stand for election. In many instances candidates have been elected to parliament unopposed.

There has particularly been a shortage of women willing to be considered for parliament even though there have been, and still are, no obvious barriers to women becoming involved in politics. It is entirely a woman’s own choice and it’s very much down to whether she has the desire to aspire to a political career.

We have no party politics in St. Helena and so candidates don’t have to get pass any preliminary hurdles and can be nominated simply by wanting to stand for parliament and having seven supporters.

Before looking at possible strategies for increasing women’s representation in Parliament - and using St. Helena as an example- let’s consider some of the possible reasons why not many women have put themselves forward. A situation that has existed for nearly half a century in St. Helena.

Could it be money? Until recent years only attendance allowances were paid and so it attracted mainly those who were retired or were self employed and perhaps able to manage a dual career.

However, the 2009 General Election occurred shortly after the St. Helena Government decided that politicians should be paid a salary. This was to attract more candidates and allow those pursuing a working career to also see Parliament as a viable option. This change did indeed attract more candidates, twenty-five altogether to fill twelve seats, but yet only three were women.

So pay alone has not been an obvious problem. Also many women now hold senior positions in the civil Service - the major employer – and are probably paid good salaries and have more favourable conditions of employment than any woman would if elected to Parliament.

These same women would also be the group who would have the background knowledge and experience suitable to embark on a political career but because they are now better off overall perhaps they see politics as an option, either when they think it’s right in the future, or if later, when they retire.

So, have women lacked political ambition in St. Helena? This is probably true to some extent but this is unlikely to be the only reason. We shouldn’t also lose sight of our past culture where it has been,
and sometime still is, for women to stay at home to bring up their children and take care of elderly members of the family.

Also, women as leaders have not been too obvious in the past but this is changing but it will take time, encouragement and support.

What else has been a deterrent? Perhaps it’s because politics is not a popular choice of career! Expectations by the public are huge and politicians are often blamed for everything that’s not seen to be correct. Plus, there is often the belief that politicians have to come up with solutions to individual problems, regardless! When you can’t, it puts politicians in a poor light!

How effective is Parliament perceived to be by the public as a whole and women in particular? Perhaps not very as it is not easy from the outside for the public to see that effective participation in parliament actually does make a difference. But because progress is not obvious and quick, this may also be a factor that women, even if only subconsciously, take into account.

There is a difficulty, which presumably exists also in other small states, that when having to make difficult decisions these will invariably impact on either family or friends. How much this is a deterrent - to women in particular - is an interesting question.

There has also, apparently, been no desire by the public to get more women elected to Parliament because of under representation in the past. This was borne out in St. Helena when in 2009, twenty-five candidates emerged for twelve seats and of the three that were women, only two were elected. Since then, as from 1 September we are now down to one female politician only as the other has resigned.

This then raises the question as to how women are viewed in politics. It is also perhaps about how women perceive themselves as parliamentarians!

Therefore, suggestions for increasing women’s representation are far from simple.

So what are the possible strategies to increase Women’s representation in small states? My thoughts, which are based on the context in St. Helena will may be have some similarities to those that exist in other small places. I will be interested to hear where experiences are different.

Firstly, to embark on a plan to increase women’s representation in parliament, I believe we must demonstrate to women that being a member of parliament, they can make a difference! We need as politicians to do more to make known our successes which we don’t actually do as well as we should. This situation has allowed negative perceptions to exist which the press loves to exploit. We therefore must enhance the image of politicians.

Secondly, we also need to educate people what politics is all about. When the question of politics comes up many see it as something that is complicated and difficult to understand. With our past history as a colony it has often been asked, what’s the point of being a politician because civil servants make decisions anyway! The whole profile of parliamentarians needs to be raised.

Thirdly, some thought could be given to the idea of having an explicit quota for women’s representation as already exists in some countries. This has never been discussed in St. Helena but
on the other hand I think that any suggestions along these lines will probably meet with some opposition on the grounds of discrimination. It could, though, be tested.

**Fourthly**, we could encourage women to come together for regular group sessions to become more aware of politics, the environment in which it takes place, and the rewards. Also to get women themselves to focus on wanting to increase their representation in Parliament.

**Fifthly**, complement this by having capacity-building workshops for women and get present and past politicians involved to create a better awareness and hopefully removing some of the reluctance towards being a politician and demonstrating that one can actually make a difference.

**Sixthly**, what about moving beyond only paying a salary to women in parliament, which currently is the case in St. Helena. While I’ve said that pay is not the biggest deterrent, money is always a factor and so, for instance, it would probably be more of an incentive for a woman to become a politician if in addition to a salary, women were eligible for maternity and similar benefits.

Those six points would only be some of the ways that we could encourage more women to take a greater interest in politics. To address this issue fully, women would need to be mentored and nurtured. We need to show them the importance of having a gender balance in Parliament.

It would also need to be a continuous process with not only a beginning but it needs to be sustained. Once we do have some success we then need to make sure it continues as it can’t be a situation that once a tick is put in the box, that’s that! It needs to be imbedded and become part of the culture.

In going forward with this, we would have to make sure that women appreciate how important it is for them to have appropriate and adequate representation in parliament to take care of the interests of women in our society.

So let’s do something! But who would say that here today I would be advocating something that may well do me out of a job!