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PARLIAMENTS AND

THE WOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

The women, peace and security agenda remains critically important in a world that grapples with complex conflict, whether it be violent state-based warfare, civil war, internal conflict or violent extremism. In nearly 80 countries, National Action Plans (NAPs) on women, peace and security have been developed to set priorities for action by government bodies and other agencies. In other countries, gender-sensitive peace and security priorities have been captured in sectoral strategies on gender, justice or national security. The participation of parliaments in efforts to support the women, peace and security agenda has been variable, with many parliaments either unaware of or uninvolved in national implementation efforts.

As elected representatives of the people, parliamentarians have a duty to ensure that all people, including women and girls, can live their lives safely, securely and peacefully and have equal opportunities to build peaceful and secure societies. To these ends, parliamentarians can use their powers in the legislature to promote laws, budgets, policies and programmes.

Setting national priorities: WPS and national development frameworks

The localisation of the WPS agenda aligns with governments' commitments to localise Agenda 2030, and with the overarching recognition that there can be no sustainable development without peace.

The NAP development process is an opportunity for parliament to get involved in setting the priorities for WPS implementation. MPs may be directly involved in the drafting process, and the final WPS NAP may be officially submitted for consideration and endorsement by the legislature.

Making laws to implement the WPS agenda

Advocating for, initiating, debating and enacting law reform is a key contribution that parliaments can make to supporting implementation of the WPS agenda. In support of law reforms to promote women's peace and security, MPs may want to request parliamentary staff to undertake a law reform assessment to identify which laws need to be amended and whether any new laws are needed to implement the WPS agenda. (Ideally this will be embedded within a whole-of-government process such as the development of a WPS NAP.) In support of SDG 5 on gender equality, ideally any such assessment would examine not just law reforms to promote WPS, but also to promote gender equality and women's empowerment more broadly.

Depending on the extent and complexity of the law reforms that are required, MPs may wish to discuss the results of any law reform assessment to prioritise reforms. This may even result in the development of a broader legislative reform agenda, which could be used to guide efforts of both the executive branch and parliament to draft and enact laws.

There are no templates for legislation to promote women, peace and security, but experience around the world shows that parliaments can and have taken action to legislate on a range of different issues.

Budgeting for WPS implementation

At a minimum, parliamentary review could include a hearing by the public finance committee and with representatives from the ministry or department for women's affairs. Officials would be asked whether and how they have budgeted resources to address priority WPS issues for the country. Such budget review could also involve holding hearings with a broader cross-section of relevant ministries, including, for example, the ministries responsible for foreign affairs, the police force, military and security services, welfare, employment

and peacebuilding. Each of these ministries could be asked about what funds they have allocated to the WPS agenda.

It is important to review a budget holistically, and not just focus on funds for the women's affairs ministry, because addressing WPS requires a cross-sector approach. Commonly, budgeting for WPS becomes a request for additional resources, but in many countries with a limited budget, this may not be possible. Nonetheless, parliament can still inquire whether existing budgets could be used more effectively or efficiently.

Even where an adequate budget is allocated towards gender equality or women's peace and security, it is still critical for parliament to assess whether such funds were received by the relevant government department and used efficiently and effectively. MPs can address this issue by using their oversight powers to track actual disbursements by the government.

MPs can play a role in budget oversight, by engaging with their own constituents to find out whether the services promised by the government were actually delivered. For example, were survivors of violence able to access police and welfare services? Were shelters for women operational and accessible? Were livelihoods opportunities for war widows or women-headed households actually made available? Were pensions for war widows actually paid out to the right people?

Oversight of WPS implementation

Where a WPS National Action Plan has been developed, parliamentary committees can play a key role in overseeing government implementation. While committees dealing with foreign affairs or international development have clear mandates to deal with UNSCR 1325 and related WPS resolutions and activities, many other committees have related mandates. Ensuring women's peace and security is a cross-cutting issue that may require action by a number of sectors, including the military, police force, human rights, education, economic development, religious affairs and

peacebuilding. In many parliaments, these sectors will be dealt with by different parliamentary committees, meaning that each has a right to inquire into aspects of the WPS agenda that relate to their mandate.

In many countries, there are processes that MPs can use to push for action where the government or the ruling parliamentary party has not prioritised key issues or reforms. One of the most common forms of oversight that an individual MP can use is to ask a question of the government. Such processes can be useful to draw attention to WPS issues. They can also be useful in countries that have a WPS National Action Plan, to provide oversight on implementation progress.

In addition to internal parliamentary processes whereby members take on oversight activities, some countries have created independent bodies which have a mandate to conduct such monitoring. Examples of such bodies are diverse. Many countries use an ombudsman, who might be responsible for investigating complaints about improper conduct or repeated problems with gender-sensitivity in the security services. In other countries, such independent monitoring may be done by a National Human Rights Commission or Gender Commission, which will have an overarching mandate to examine complaints regarding gender equality and women's rights, including the failure of the government to properly implement elements of the WPS agenda. These bodies are typically required to report to the legislature, which provides an opportunity for MPs to initiate discussion on how to implement the WPS agenda. Even where such bodies are not obligated by law to report to the legislature, parliaments can still develop cooperative relationships to access information and reports to inform their work.

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Representation

In order for a parliament to maintain its legitimacy, it is critical that citizens are provided with meaningful opportunities to provide feedback and input into the work of the MPs and parliament on what matters to them, including in relation to promoting the WPS agenda. When reaching out to communities to engage them in the WPS agenda, parliamentarians are encouraged to partner with civil society organisations, which often have strong community networks, convening power and/or gender expertise that can be harnessed by MPs to assist them in organising public forums and consultations.

In the context of supporting the WPS agenda, effective representation means that parliamentarians should proactively reach out to women and men, young and old, to find out what issues are most impacting women's peace and security. In addition to technology-based communication mechanisms, experience from around the world highlights two common approaches to MP outreach: local public forums and public consultations.

Parliamentarians as gender-sensitive peacebuilders

In addition to their work as representatives, parliamentarians have a critical role to play as peacebuilders. At a very minimum, in times of crisis, there is a duty on all parliamentarians to take care that their engagement with the community does not inflame tensions or encourage partisan violence. MPs can have a huge impact on public sentiment, and as such they are encouraged to use language that promotes moderation, reduces tensions and encourages peaceful resolution of conflict. Similarly, MPs can encourage their followers to respect human rights, including the rights of women to live securely and peacefully.

Parliamentarians as partners

MPs often work closely with local community groups and civil society organisations in such areas as women's rights or peacebuilding. Such partnerships can benefit both partners, with MPs able to draw on subject matter expertise, research skills and community trust amongst beneficiary groups, and NGOs able to harness MPs' convening power and boost their advocacy efforts. Where governments produce a WPS NAP monitoring report, NGOs may issue "shadow reports" to provide a community-based perspective on national implementation. These shadow reports are commonly shared with UN bodies, but can also be a useful source of information for MPs and parliamentary committees seeking to cross-check the government's own data.



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