

## Gender representation in parliament

ABSTRACT

### **Beyond numbers: The role of specialised parliamentary bodies in promoting gender equality**

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*In the past two decades there has been increased international recognition of the role of specialised parliamentary bodies in promoting gender equality. Such bodies began to proliferate in the 1990s and data on them has been collected by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) since 2006.*

*IPU data collection focuses on two main types: single portfolio or multiportfolio Standing Committees and women's caucuses. Standing Committees may have a strongly institutionalised role in applying a gender lens to the legislative process, for example, the FEMM Committee of the European Parliament. By contrast, a cross-party women's caucus such as those found in sub-Saharan Africa may be a much more informal body, specialising in providing support to members through mentoring, capacity-building and networking.*

*A third type of specialised parliamentary body that can have a gender equality mandate is the all-party parliamentary group. Such groups require a minimum number of parliamentary members from across parties and need to be approved by a presiding officer or comparable parliamentary authority. The number of such bodies with a gender focus has also been increasing.*

*This paper uses a comparative institutional approach to examine these different types of specialised body and their ability to perform functions including legislative scrutiny and providing a channel for community groups and gender experts to participate in the legislative process. It examines existing parliamentary bodies specialising in gender equality in terms of their structure, membership, mandate, working methods and relationships and draws attention to their relative absence in Australia.*

### **Introduction**

During the 1990s, campaigns to increase the number of women in parliament became an important part of the international agenda; in countries transitioning from Communist or authoritarian regimes the under-representation of women was seen as a significant democratic deficit.<sup>1</sup> However it was soon recognised that there was a need to move 'beyond

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> European Conference on Politics and Gender in Barcelona, 2013: Marian Sawer, Lenita Freidenvall and Sonia Palmieri, 2013. 'Playing their part? Parliamentary institutions and gender mainstreaming'. [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2488867](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2488867)

numbers' and to examine the kind of institutional supports that facilitated the representation of women's interests or the so-called 'substantive representation of women'.

Specialised parliamentary bodies dealing with gender equality had started multiplying in the 1990s and the 2000s, for example the European Network of Parliamentary Committees for Equal Opportunities was established in 1997. A decade later a UN survey of national mechanisms for promoting gender equality noted that establishment of mechanisms within parliaments was a growing trend although still not as common as women's policy agencies within government.<sup>2</sup>

In the Nordic region specialised parliamentary bodies are mostly quite recent and have come after the significant inflow of women into parliaments. In Sweden, Speaker Birgitta Dahl established the Speaker's Network for Women Parliamentarians after women had become a record 41 per cent of the parliament in the 1994 general election. She convened a meeting of women from all seven parliamentary parties to advise on how to make best use of this new strength in numbers.

The chief multilateral support for the development of such bodies has come from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which sees them as providing important infrastructure for 'gender mainstreaming'.<sup>3</sup> In transitional democracies, bilateral and multilateral donors have provided technical and other support for them, for example the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) supported the creation of the Committee on Human and Minority Rights and Gender Equality of the Serbian National Assembly.

The IPU has been collecting data on specialised parliamentary bodies since 2006 and by February 2013, it had recorded 100 parliamentary bodies dealing with gender equality across 86 countries.<sup>4</sup> The IPU database contains two types of gender-focussed bodies – standing committees constituted under standing orders and women's caucuses, usually constituted more informally by women parliamentarians. The IPU, together with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and the Organization

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<sup>2</sup> Jahan, Rounaq, 2010, *Strengthening National Mechanisms for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women: A Global Synthesis Study*, New York: UN Division for the Advancement of Women, p. 24: [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/TechnicalCooperation/tcprog\\_strengthening.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/TechnicalCooperation/tcprog_strengthening.htm)

<sup>3</sup> IPU, 2007. *The Role of Parliamentary Committees in Mainstreaming Gender and Promoting the Status of Women*, Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/instance-women.asp>.

for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), has commissioned studies of such bodies and of the factors contributing to their effectiveness.<sup>5</sup> Independently, a number of case studies have now appeared on the role of such committees and caucuses.<sup>6</sup> There is also an extensive US literature on women's caucuses in State legislatures in particular, replete with varied and sometimes contradictory definitions ranging from 'voluntary associations' to 'institutionalised bipartisan associations'.<sup>7</sup>

A third type of specialised parliamentary body, consists of parliamentary groups, requiring a minimum number of members from across parties and approval by a presiding officer or comparable parliamentary authority. Parliamentary groups have not been systematically included among the types of parliamentary bodies surveyed, by the IPU, despite the growth in recent years of their number, including groups with a gender focus.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless there is at least one case study highlighting the role of a parliamentary group in the substantive representation of women.<sup>9</sup> Women's NGOs (non-government organisations) work closely with these groups and in the UK regularly provide secretariat services for them.

The three types of specialised parliamentary body dealing with gender equality cover the spectrum from the most formalised (dedicated or multi-portfolio standing committees) to the least formalised (cross-party or single party women's caucuses), with parliamentary groups coming somewhere in between in terms of being subject to formal parliamentary approval although not constituted under standing orders. Standing Committees may have a

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<sup>5</sup> Keila Gonzalez and Kristen Sample, 2010. *One Size does not Fit All: Lessons Learned from Legislative Gender Commissions and Caucuses*. Lima: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) for International Affairs; Sonia Palmieri, 2011. 'Setting up dedicated gender mainstreaming infrastructure', Ch. 5 in Sonia Palmieri. *Gender-Sensitive Parliaments: A Global Review of Good Practice*, Geneva: IPU; Sonia Palmieri, 2013, *A comparative study of structures for women MPs women's parliamentary bodies in the OSCE region*, Warsaw: OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/105940?download=true>

<sup>6</sup> Jackie Steele, 2002. 'The Liberal Women's Caucus', *Canadian Parliamentary Review* Summer: 13–19; Joan Grace, 2011. 'Parliament with a Purpose: Holding the Canadian Government Accountable to Women', paper presented at Second European Conference on Politics and Gender, Budapest, 13–15 January; Monica Costa, Marian Sawyer, Rhonda Sharp, 2012. 'Women acting for women: Gender-responsive budgeting in Timor-Leste', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* DOI 10.1080/14616742.2012.714119.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Leah Olivier, 2005. 'Women's Legislative Caucuses', National Conference of State Legislatures, Briefing Paper on the Important Issues of the Day 13(29); Anna M Mahoney, 2011. 'Politics of presence: A Study of Women's Legislative Caucuses in the 50 States', State Politics and Policy Conference Dartmouth, Hanover, New Hampshire.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the number of parliamentary groups in the UK parliament has more than doubled since the 1980s. In 2012 there were 420 such groups, of which around a dozen had a gender focus. Information from Paul Thomas, undertaking a PhD thesis at the University of Toronto, comparing parliamentary groups in the UK, Scotland and Canada.

<sup>9</sup> Marian Sawyer, 2012. 'What makes the substantive representation of women possible in a Westminster parliament? The story of RU486 in Australia'. *International Political Science Review*, 33 (3): 320–335.

strongly institutionalised role in applying a gender lens to the legislative process, for example, the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM Committee) of the European Parliament. By contrast, a women's caucus such as those found in sub-Saharan Africa may be a much more informal body, specialising in providing support to its members through mentoring, training, capacity-building, confidence-building, networking, discussions and information sharing. The resources available to such bodies also vary considerably, whether the parliamentary resources and staff allocated to a standing committee or the technical or research help that may be provided to women's caucuses by, for example, the UNDP or by NGOs.

While the development of such gender-focused parliamentary bodies is now the subject of an international research network,<sup>10</sup> it is only beginning to be theorised as part of the repertoire of contemporary women's movements and of critical actors. One reason for this neglect may have been an earlier tendency of women's movement scholars to focus on contentious action or disruptive protest and to see institutionalisation in negative terms. However recent theorising has been more inclined to see women's movements as engaging in a range of repertoires, some of which involve autonomous organisation and some of which involve institution-building within existing political and governance institutions. The earlier tendency to privilege 'autonomous' groups over those advocating for women inside mainstream institutions is now disputed.<sup>11</sup>

And the role of feminists in the creation of specialised parliamentary bodies is undeniable and almost without exception. For example, Anne-Marie Lizin, President of the Belgian Senate, has spoken of how she worked to create such bodies in all the institutions in which she served during her career – the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Belgian House of Representatives and municipal government.<sup>12</sup> As we have seen, a feminist presiding officer was also responsible for what became the Speaker's Reference Group on Gender Equality in the Swedish Parliament.

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<sup>10</sup> The International Research Network on Gender-Focused Parliamentary Bodies (GenParlNet) was established at the 3<sup>rd</sup> European Conference on Politics and Gender in Barcelona in 2013 in order to develop information sharing and research collaboration in this area. <<http://cass.anu.edu.au/research-projects/genparlnet>>

<sup>11</sup> Lee Ann Banaszak, 2010. *The women's movement inside and outside the state*, New York: Cambridge University Press; Laure Bereni and Anne Revillard, 2011. 'Contentious Institutions: Rethinking the Movement-State Intersection', paper presented at Second European Conference on Politics and Gender, Budapest, 13–15 January.

<sup>12</sup> Anne-Marie Lizin, 2007. 'Keynote Address'. In *The Role of Parliamentary Committees in Mainstreaming Gender and Promoting the Status of Women*. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, p. 5.

The aim of this paper is threefold: to outline the theoretical and empirical arguments for paying more attention to such parliamentary institution building; to provide a global overview and comparison of such bodies; and to draw attention to their relative absence in Australia. Existing survey material and data collection has been supplemented by interviews conducted in March 2013 with NGOs servicing gender-focused all-party parliamentary groups in the UK parliament and by a global survey conducted in August 2014 of parliamentary groups on population and development. The paper will begin with the case for parliamentary institution building. It will then examine existing parliamentary bodies specialising in gender equality in terms of their structure, membership, mandate, working methods, and relationships.

### **The case for parliamentary institution building and its study**

Many studies have noted that initial hopes of women in parliament ‘making a difference’ and acting in women’s interests have not always been met. A number of reasons have been offered for this, including that of timing. The inflow of women into parliaments from the 1990s coincided with the increased influence of neoliberalism over mainstream political parties. In this context, raising women’s concerns in parliament may run counter to party agendas, if the concerns relate to the gender impact of welfare state restructuring and public sector cuts.<sup>13</sup> Expecting individual women parliamentarians to assume all responsibility for raising in parliament the concerns of women in the community is clearly unrealistic and unfair when it may result in marginalisation and damage to political prospects. It may also absolve male parliamentarians from responsibility for raising such concerns.

The constraints on what individual parliamentarians can do underlines the importance of creating bodies that have a mandate to apply a gender lens to policy and to oversee the gender mainstreaming commitments of governments. Such bodies may facilitate the critical acts of individuals but their institutionalised focus on gender equality provide a legitimacy that might otherwise be lacking. This is the same rationale as for other forms of women’s movement institutionalisation – to build women’s movement agendas into institutional

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<sup>13</sup> For an overview see Marian Sawer, 2006. ‘From women’s interests to special interests: Reframing Equality Claims’, in Louise Chappell and Lisa Hill (eds), *The Politics of Women’s Interests*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 111–29.

norms and practices, so that new generations are socialised into these agendas. It is only through such institutionalisation that such agendas can be sustained over time, despite new generations arriving that are unfamiliar with them.

The role of gender-focused parliamentary bodies varies along with their mandates and structural relationships and a comparison of the role of different types of body is presented in the next section. Nonetheless, studies conducted to date have identified important functions performed by such bodies, regardless of specific type.

First, both the institutional mandates of gender-focused bodies and the less formal mandates of collective bodies of women parliamentarians provide a focus and leverage beyond that of individual parliamentarians.<sup>14</sup> As we have noted, regardless of equity commitments, individual parliamentarians are constrained by conflicting accountabilities and limitations on their power to act. The leverage provided by institutionalising gender equality commitments means that such issues can be raised more effectively in the parliament as a whole. As we shall see below, even in the women-friendly Swedish Parliament a gender-focused group is seen by its members as providing a recognised platform to speak on gender equality issues.<sup>15</sup>

Second, where such bodies are of a cross-party nature they may promote trust across party lines and facilitate joint action to promote gender equality. In the Australian Parliament, joint work within the Parliamentary Group on Population and Development helped build the trust needed for women from four different parties to co-sponsor a successful private member's bill on RU486 – a unique co-sponsorship within a highly adversarial Westminster political culture.<sup>16</sup> In general, such cross-party cooperation is most likely to be forthcoming on issues such as violence against women, equal opportunity and women's health. Gender-focused parliamentary committees and parliamentary groups also provide opportunities and encouragement for men to become champions of gender equality issues.

Third, gender-focused bodies serve as an 'alternative reference point' for parliamentarians, in other words validating norms that are different from those dominant within the

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<sup>14</sup> Monica Costa, Marian Sawer, Rhonda Sharp, 2012. 'Women acting for women: Gender-responsive budgeting in Timor-Leste', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* DOI 10.1080/14616742.2012.714119.

<sup>15</sup> Marian Sawer, Lenita Freidenvall and Sonia Palmieri, 2013. 'Playing their part? Parliamentary institutions and gender mainstreaming', p. 23. [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2488867](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2488867)

<sup>16</sup> Sawer, 'What makes the substantive representation of women possible in a Westminster parliament?'

parliament.<sup>17</sup> As Joan Grace has written, a body such as the Standing Committee on the Status of Women in the Canadian House of Commons has enabled Committee members to frame policy discussion through a gender lens in a way that would be impossible in their own party rooms.<sup>18</sup> Collective affirmation of feminist insights and values and the personal support networks generated by such gender-focused bodies may play a significant role in empowering parliamentarians and enabling them to move beyond cognitive dissonance to be 'brave' on issues.

Fourth, such bodies may provide a channel for participation of NGOs in the parliamentary process. For example, gender-focused parliamentary committees and commissions may regularly call upon women's NGOs to present submissions and give evidence at hearings. This may be particularly significant given findings that in general parliamentary standing committees rarely call upon gender experts or women's NGOs to give evidence.<sup>19</sup> It is specialised parliamentary bodies that may take responsibility not only for bringing a gender perspective to bear but also ensuring that relevant NGOs are involved in both review of legislation and of its implementation.<sup>20</sup>

Women's caucuses may build partnerships both with women's NGOs and with women's policy agencies within government or statutory commissions. Gender-focused parliamentary groups may have an even closer relationship with the women's NGOs that provide them with secretariat services, resulting in the issuing of joint reports.<sup>21</sup> Such close relationships between parliamentary bodies and women's NGOs fosters the engagement of the latter with processes of legislative review and executive scrutiny. These linkages have also been found to have positive effects on parliamentarians, with those in regular contact with women's organisations having greater commitment to represent gender-specific concerns

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<sup>17</sup> Marianne Githens, 2003. 'Accounting for women's political involvement: The perennial problem of recruitment'. In Susan J Carroll (ed), *Women and American Politics: New questions, new directions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 43; Sandra Grey and Marian Sawyer, 2005. 'Australia and New Zealand'. In Yvonne Galligan and Manon Tremblay, *Sharing Power: Women, Parliament and Democracy*. Aldershot: Ashgate, p. 186.

<sup>18</sup> Grace, 'Parliament with a Purpose', p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Anne Maria Holli, 2009. 'The representation of women in the parliamentary standing committee hearings in Finland'. Paper to the IPSA World Congress in Santiago, Chile: [http://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/paper\\_3991.pdf](http://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/paper_3991.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Julie Ballington, 2008. *Equality in Politics: A Survey of Men and Women in Parliaments*, Geneva: IPU, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> For example, the 2011 Shadow Report on implementation of the UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, produced by the Associate Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security and the NGO umbrella group, Gender Action on Peace and Security.

than those that do not.<sup>22</sup> Women’s movement organisations are a source of evidence on the concerns of different groups of women in the community. They may also be a source of external recognition and affirmation of the value of speaking out in parliament on gender-related issues.

The arguments for specialised parliamentary bodies can be summarised as falling under three main headings, depending on whether they are concerned with empowering individual MPs, improving the functioning of parliament or realising feminist values (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Arguments for specialised parliamentary bodies dealing with gender equality**

Empowerment arguments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce pressure on individual MPs</li> <li>• Create cross-party networks</li> <li>• Support ‘critical acts’, provide leverage</li> <li>• Provide scope for male champions</li> </ul>
Functional arguments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster cross-party collaboration</li> <li>• Apply a gender lens to legislation</li> <li>• Oversight gender mainstreaming</li> <li>• Promote NGO engagement</li> </ul>
Feminist arguments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustain movement agendas through institutional mandates</li> <li>• Act as alternative reference point to dominant norms</li> <li>• Provide gateway for concerns of diverse groups of women to be registered</li> </ul>

Clear practical reasons have been identified for supporting feminist institution-building in parliament, as in other political and governance institutions. Yet specialised parliamentary bodies are also nested within larger institutions with their own norms and practices, including norms of parliamentary behavior that are far from gender neutral.<sup>23</sup> Do such dynamics, including those of partisan competition, prevent gender-focused parliamentary bodies from having an impact in terms of mainstreaming gender perspectives? One way to answer this question is by examining the expanding number of such bodies worldwide and comparing their roles and relationships.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Manon Tremblay, ‘Do female MPs substantively represent women? A study of legislative behaviour in Canada’s 35<sup>th</sup> parliament’. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 31(3): 435–465.

<sup>23</sup> Fiona Mackay, 2009. ‘Institutionalising “New Politics” in Post-Devolution Scotland: “Nested Newness” and the Gendered Limits of Change’, paper presented at Political Science Association Annual Conference, Panel: Feminist Institutionalism: The Way Forward? Manchester, 7–9 April.



### **Standing Committees dealing with gender equality**

Examples of dedicated gender equality committees include the Belgian Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, the Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women, the Indian Committee on the Empowerment of Women, the Spanish Committee on Equality, and the Task Forces on the Rights of Women and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women in both the French Senate and the National Assembly. These are permanent bodies of their parliaments, constituted under standing orders, with membership reflecting the representation of political parties (or parliamentary party groups) in the parliament. As is the case with any parliamentary committee, dedicated gender equality committees may hold public hearings and consult with their policy communities to determine the gender effect of policies, programs and legislation. Ministers and government officials may be brought before the committee to answer questions.

Dedicated parliamentary committees have been found to make an important contribution to gender mainstreaming, including initiation of gender equality laws, review of implementation and application of a gender lens to other legislative proposals. In South Korea, the Standing Committee on Gender Equality and the Family has promoted initiatives such as the gender budgeting clause included in the 2006 *National Finance Act*. Dedicated gender equality committees have also been tasked with auditing national women's machinery as in India, or may commission audits of gender mainstreaming in government, as in Canada. As with all specialised parliamentary bodies, good working relationships with women's policy agencies, gender research institutes and women's NGOs may be helpful in identifying key gender issues.

The best-known of the dedicated parliamentary committees on gender equality is probably the FEMM Committee of the European Parliament and it is considered here as an exemplar of this type of specialised parliamentary body. As with so many of these bodies, the catalyst for its establishment was both a feminist presiding officer and an influx of women parliamentarians. In this case it was the election of Simone Veil as the President of the European Parliament that was the key factor, along with an increase in the number of female MEPs (from five per cent to 16 per cent) after the first direct election to the

parliament in 1979.<sup>24</sup> Originally an ad hoc committee, it became a permanent committee in 1984.

The FEMM Committee consists of representatives from all political parties represented in the European Parliament. Its major tasks include overseeing women's rights policies in the EU and evaluating policies and programs that concern women. Other tasks include monitoring the implementation of international agreements and conventions involving the rights of women. As one of the standing committees of the European Parliament, it also reviews draft legislative documents and amendments that have been assigned to it by the Parliament and appoints a *rapporteur* to draft a report. Proposed amendments are discussed and voted upon in committee before the text is finalised. The Committee also votes on 'gender mainstreaming amendments' prepared for other standing committees in order to integrate gender issues into their reports.

Reports of the FEMM Committee are usually based on background work conducted by committee personnel, who consult both civil society organisations and the research community for their work. Researchers are also invited to carry on studies on the behalf of the Committee, for example, the regularly updated study 'Electoral Gender Quotas and their implementation in Europe' led by Drude Dahlerup. The most recent study shows there are now eight EU countries that have introduced electoral gender quotas by law, most recently Greece and Ireland.<sup>25</sup> In terms of legal reviews, there has been a focus on treaties such as the Equal Treatment Directive 2002 and the Good and Services Directive 2004 as well as on issues such as violence against women and trafficking. Gender mainstreaming has also been important subject for the Committee's attention.

Besides its ordinary committee work, the FEMM Committee also organises hearings, workshops and other events, engaging actively and sometimes proactively with women's advocacy groups. For example, in the run up to a public hearing on women and climate change, the Committee brought together women's advocacy, aid and environment organisations to promote an international network on the issue. As is clear from this example, the Committee's focus is not restricted to matters internal to the European Union

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<sup>24</sup> Johann Kantola, 2010. *Gender and the European Union*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>25</sup> Drude Dahlerup et al, 2008, 2011, 2013. 'Electoral Gender Quotas and Their Implementation in Europe'. Policy Department C, Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/493011/IPOL-FEMM\\_NT\(2013\)493011\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/493011/IPOL-FEMM_NT(2013)493011_EN.pdf)

(EU). In 2012, a delegation to Tunisia led to a draft resolution on the need for the EU to support the participation of women in the democratisation process including support for a women's caucus or special parliamentary committee in the Tunisian parliament.<sup>26</sup>

However the Committee also has an important role in relation to internal EU gender policy such as a hearing in 2012 addressed by gender experts on the best legal and institutional mechanisms for achieving gender equality in the EU. Sometimes workshops are organised to enable MEPs to put questions to and exchange views with experts on subjects related to current committee work such as the costs and benefits of maternity and paternity leave. Interestingly, the differences expressed within the Committee are often more between member states than between political parties. On 8 March. In 2012, as part of its International Women's Day celebration, an inter-parliamentary committee meeting was organised in Brussels for members of national parliaments as well as members of the European parliament on the topic of equal pay for work of equal value.

When it comes to cooperation with other gender policy actors, the FEMM Committee stays in contact with other EU policy agencies, such as the European Commission's Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men. The FEMM Committee also has a strong NGO partner in the European Women's Lobby (EWL), which has observer status on the Committee. Like most gender-focused parliamentary institutions the FEMM Committee has been under threat on a number of occasions and the EWL has campaigned to ensure its continuing existence.<sup>27</sup> The operation of the FEMM Committee illustrates what Alison Woodward calls the 'velvet triangle' of policy actors within the European Union sharing a collective feminist identity and often acting in alliance.<sup>28</sup> The 'triangle' consists of feminist politicians, typically found on the FEMM Committee, femocrats found in the European Commission and other EU institutions, academics and experts advising on feminist policy, and women's non-government organisations.

Apart from dedicated parliamentary committees like the FEMM Committee, multi-portfolio committees that include gender equality exist in many parliaments. IPU data suggests that there are two predominant sub-groups of multi-portfolio committees that include gender

<sup>26</sup> Silvia Costa (Rapporteur), 2012. *Draft Report on the Situation of Women in North Africa (2012/2102 (INI))*, Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, European Parliament, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Kristi Kolthoff, 2007. 'The European Women's Lobby', *Role of Parliamentary Committees in Mainstreaming Gender and Promoting the Status of Women*. Geneva: IPU, p. 95.

<sup>28</sup> Alison Woodward, 2000. 'Building Velvet Triangles: Gender in EU Policy Making', paper presented at European Consortium for Political Research 28th Joint Sessions, Copenhagen, April.

equality concerns: those that have a heavy emphasis on social affairs and the family and those that are more interested in human rights, and legal and constitutional matters. Examples of the former category include the Committee on Families, Women and Children in El Salvador, the Committee on Family and Social Policy in Poland, and the Norwegian Parliament's Standing Committee on Family and Cultural Affairs. The latter category includes the Estonian Constitutional Committee, Irish Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality and Zambia's Committee on Legal Affairs, Governance, Human Rights and Gender Matters. While multi-portfolio committees may result in a gender focus being brought to bear on a number of policy areas, they may also have less time to devote to gender issues.

In Sweden all parliamentary committees have been given responsible for considering gender equality issues within their respective fields of work. However, in practice the Committee on the Labour Market plays a major role. The *Riksdag Act* allocates special responsibility for dealing with issues relating to equality between women and men in working life to this committee, which also prepares appropriations falling within expenditure area 13, 'Integration and gender equality'.

**Table 2: Parliamentary committees dealing with gender equality, February 2013**

<b>Committee type</b>	<b>Number of bodies</b>	<b>Membership (% women)</b>	<b>Leadership (% women Chairs)</b>
Dedicated gender equality committees	40	66	87.5
Multi-portfolio committees	53	38	41.5

*Source: Table prepared by Sonia Palmieri from the IPU Database of specialised bodies dealing with gender equality.*

The membership and leadership of these two categories of parliamentary committees are presented in Table 2 (above). Women constitute the majority of the membership of the dedicated parliamentary committees on gender equality (66% of all members). Women are also far more likely to chair these dedicated committees (87.5%) than multi-portfolio committees (41.5%).

In some countries the membership of committees with a gender equality remit is not restricted to parliamentarians, for example the Croatian Committee on Gender Equality has, in addition to its parliamentary members, three appointed members from institutions in the field of the promotion of gender equality and the protection of human rights.

### **Women's Caucuses**

A second type of gender-focussed parliamentary body is a parliamentary women's caucus. These are often found in conjunction with a dedicated standing committee and can play an important role in building a cross-party consensus on an issue before it is considered more formally.<sup>29</sup> They also characteristically provide a support network and mentoring for women parliamentarians, with their mode of operation decided by those establishing the caucus.<sup>30</sup> Jennifer Piscopo, argues that while in Latin America women's caucuses may often be formal rather than informal in terms of rules and recognition by the legislature, their tactics need to be informal to maximize their adaptability and effectiveness.<sup>31</sup>

Women's parliamentary caucuses may be either of a cross-party type, common in transitional democracies, or of the single-party type often found in countries with stronger party systems including Australia, Canada and Norway. Women's cross-party parliamentary caucuses are common in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and in the former Soviet bloc countries.<sup>32</sup> Some include men, in an attempt to ensure that gender equality issues are not only advanced by women, but this is not the case in Latin America.

Women's caucuses have been created to serve a number of purposes and functions, some of which are covered above in the general arguments for gender-focused parliamentary bodies. First, they may seek to ensure that gender equality issues are mainstreamed across the work of the parliament and government, as when the Women's Caucus in the Timor

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<sup>29</sup> Palmieri, 2011. *Gender-Sensitive Parliaments*, pp. 49-50. See also Susan Markham, 2012. 'Strengthening Women's Roles in Parliaments', *Parliamentary Affairs* 65, doi: 10.1093/pa/gss024.

<sup>30</sup> National Democratic Institute, 2008, 'Women's Caucuses Fact Sheet', Washington: NDI.

<sup>31</sup> Jennifer Piscopo, 2014. 'Committees and Caucuses: How Legislative Institutions Shape Substantive Representation in Latin America'. Paper presented at the IPSA World Congress, Montreal, July, p. 8. <https://www.ipsa.org/sites/default/files/ipsa-events/montreal2014/papers/paper-28984-2014-07-04-0100.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Gonzalez and Sample, *One Size does not Fit All*, pp. 18-19.

Leste Parliament introduced its gender responsive budgeting initiative.<sup>33</sup> They may play an important role in the passage of legislation such as the Law on Gender Equality in Albania and in the introduction of gender electoral quotas.<sup>34</sup>

In the US, the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues (in existence since 1977) boasts of legislative achievements including the *Pregnancy Discrimination Act*, the *Violence against Women Act* and the *Commission on Advancement of Women and Minorities in Science, Engineering and Technology Development Act*.<sup>35</sup>

Most distinctively, in terms of the three types of specialised parliamentary body, women's caucuses are likely to provide support to their members in the form of mentoring, training, capacity-building, confidence-building, networking, discussion and information sharing. For example: the Network of Women Deputies of the Finnish Parliament organises seminars and informal events to promote information exchange and to raise awareness of gender issues; the Rwandan Women Parliamentarians' Forum organises training to fill in skills and knowledge gaps.

It is rare for a women's parliamentary caucus to have full-time dedicated staff.

although international organisations such as the UNDP and the IPU have sometimes provided women's parliamentary caucuses with both financial and technical assistance.<sup>36</sup>

Women's non-government organisations and research institutes may also help women's caucuses identify key gender issues in proposed legislation and in turn women's caucuses as well as standing committees can enhance the access of NGOs to the legislative process.

Women's caucuses benefit from good relations with the relevant parliamentary committee tasked with gender mainstreaming. Formalising such relationships can prove a successful strategy. For example, the leadership of the Macedonian Women's Parliamentary Club has 'ex officio' status on the parliamentary committee on Equal of Opportunities for Women and

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<sup>33</sup> Costa et al, 2012. 'Women Acting for Women'.

<sup>34</sup> For examples including Albania, Macedonia and Poland, see Palmieri, 2013. *A Comparative Study of Structures for Women MPs in the OSCE Region*, pp. 28–29.  
'Caucus Accomplishments', 2014. <http://www.womenspolicy.org/our-work/the-womens-caucus/caucus-accomplishments/>

<sup>36</sup> The Gender Caucus in the National Assembly of Burkina Faso (established 13 October 2005 by resolution of the Assembly President), for example, has a formal bureau and a plan of action.

Men. While the Club serves as an informal forum where gender-related policies are debated and agreed across party lines, those policies are then formally discussed within the Committee, giving them the attention of the Minister. This process resulted in the adoption of the Law for Equal Opportunities of Women and Men, and the Law on Maternity Leave.<sup>37</sup>

### **Parliamentary Groups**

As we have seen, one of the distinctive features of parliamentary groups is the role often played by NGOs in providing their secretariat. For example, in the UK, the Fawcett Society ('Closing the inequality gap since 1866') helps provide the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Sex Equality, the Howard League for Penal Reform provides the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System and Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) assists the relevant parliamentary group on women, peace and security. Issue-based parliamentary groups tend to strengthen the relationship between NGOs and the parliamentary process and provide a channel whereby NGO expertise is shared with parliamentarians and NGO priorities can inform the legislative process.

Internationally it is the parliamentary groups on population and development that have been the most active of the gender-focused groups. These have been established in all regions of the world particularly to support and promote the Program of Action adopted at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (the Cairo Program). This was a landmark program in its recognition of reproductive health and rights, as well as women's empowerment and gender equality, as the cornerstones of population and development programs. The parliamentary groups put gender equality at the heart of their objectives as in this self-description of the Australian group: 'We are a group of politicians across Federal, State and Territory Parliaments who have put our political differences aside to work together to champion women's empowerment, break down gender discrimination and advocate access to safe reproductive health services'.<sup>38</sup> The parliamentary groups (or the bodies servicing them) have received assistance from the UN Fund for Population Activities and family planning associations as well as from US philanthropic foundations such as the Rockefeller and Hewlett Foundations. This was part of an explicit strategy following the Cairo Conference, when the creation of parliamentary groups (like that established in

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<sup>37</sup> Palmieri, 2011. *Gender-Sensitive Parliaments*,

<sup>38</sup> See <http://www.pgpd.asn.au/#!about/cqn6>

the UK in 1979) was seen an effective way to bring pressure on donor governments to meet the commitments they had made. Today the many parliamentary groups being established in transitional democracies also have an important role in promoting and gaining public support for the rights of women, particularly their sexual and reproductive health rights

There are now some 65 parliaments with parliamentary groups on population and development, with at least half of them created since 2000. In addition there are related regional forums of parliamentarians in each continent. For example, the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development (EPF) is made up of 27 all-party parliamentary groups across Europe. Its website points out that Europe is home to 18 of the world's 23 donors of development assistance and hence that the parliamentarians in this forum have a crucial role in ensuring aid commitments are met by national governments.<sup>39</sup> In recognition of the importance of this role the EPF attracts support from a wide range of donors, including German and US philanthropic foundations as well the UNFPA and the European Commission. These resources enable the EPF to support participation in its events by members of new national parliamentary groups such as the Armenian All-Party Group on Population Growth and Reproductive Health. Like most parliamentary groups on population and development, the EPF provides an important space for male champions, although women form the majority of activists and executive members.

Since 2002 there has also been an international Parliamentarians' Conference (IPCI) on Implementation of the Cairo Program. The sixth of these international conferences was hosted in 2014 by the Swedish All-Party Group on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, together with the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development. The parliamentary groups on population and development are credited with promoting or defending policies on reproductive health and women's rights. For example, the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health (the model for many others around the world) is credited with being the catalyst for new legislation on female genital mutilation,<sup>40</sup> while the Australian Parliamentary Group was eventually successful in the restoration of family planning programs in Australian development assistance.

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<sup>39</sup> See the European Forum's website, (<http://www.epfweb.org/about-epf>).

<sup>40</sup> Moira Dustin and Anne Phillips, 2008. 'Whose agenda is it? Abuses of women and abuses of "culture" in Britain', *Ethnicities*, 8 (3), p. 415.



Somewhat similar in operation to a parliamentary group, but with parliamentary staff rather than an NGO providing secretariat services is the Speaker's Reference Group on Gender Equality in the Swedish Parliament (initiated, as noted above, in 1995 by then Speaker Brigitte Dahl). It is chaired by the Speaker, has one representative from each parliamentary political party and has a staff of two parliamentary officials with gender expertise. It holds breakfast meetings and seminars to promote awareness of gender issues and develop the capacity to apply a gender lens in parliamentary work. It also produces gender-disaggregated statistics and reports. The rules of procedures regulating the current Speaker's Reference Group are stipulated in the *Gender Equality Action Plan of the Swedish Parliament 2010-2014* where it is recognised as a key parliamentary body in promoting gender equality internally. It does not have formal power to review legislation but is a meeting point for gender equality spokespersons from the different parliamentary parties and provides institutional legitimacy for a focus on gender issues. It also enables the sharing of information concerning what the different political parties are doing about gender equality.<sup>41</sup>

The Speaker's Reference Group has relations with a range of parliamentary bodies as well as with NGOs. It has overlapping membership with the Committee on the Labour Market, the standing committee with special responsibility for gender issues, and also cooperates with other parliamentary networks such as the Network of Male Parliamentarians for Gender Equality and the Network against Discrimination and Crime in the Name of Honour. While the Reference Group involves the Swedish Women's Lobby (SWL), and the national federations of women's organisations in some of its activities, the relationship is not apparently close, unlike the case with parliamentary groups elsewhere.<sup>42</sup> Internationally the Speaker's Reference Group has visited the FEMM Committee in the European Parliament and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) in Vilnius.

### **Australian gender equality architecture**

While Australia was a pioneer in terms of women's policy machinery and was once regarded as a source of best practice, the parliamentary component of its gender equality architecture has always been extremely weak. There have been some important

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<sup>41</sup> See the case study on the Speaker's Reference Group in Marian Sawer, Lenita Freidenvall and Sonia Palmieri, 2013. 'Playing their part? Parliamentary institutions and gender mainstreaming'. [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2488867](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2488867)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

parliamentary enquiries, for example into pay equity or the effectiveness of sex discrimination legislation; however there has never been a standing committee in any Australian parliament tasked with promoting gender equality or overseeing gender mainstreaming. Neither has there been a cross-party women's caucus, although events such as women's dinners have been organised from time to time.

One exception to this absence of specialised bodies has been the existence for over 30 years of an effective single-party caucus, the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party's Status of Women Committee (SWC). This was established by a feminist Senator, Pat Giles in 1983 and is still in operation despite occasional threats, for example from streamlining of party committees in 2010. Similar bodies within State Parliamentary Labor Parties have been less successful. The SWC has been important in drawing the attention of Labor ministers and shadow ministers to the gender implications of policy proposals. In 1993 the SWC was responsible for a temporary reprieve for the federal government's women's budget statement, an Australian innovation that was the forerunner of the gender budgeting process now recommended by the OECD.<sup>43</sup> Although federal governments stopped producing full women's budget statements covering the gender effects of outlays, the SWC took on the role of presenting analyses of the gender implications of government budgets at annual budget breakfasts.<sup>44</sup> Women's NGOs are a primary audience for these budget breakfasts and women's NGO representatives also bring issues of particular concern to the SWC, for example over the cancelling of a national time-use survey in 2013.

In addition to the single-party women's caucus, there are also currently three parliamentary groups in the federal parliament with a gender or sexuality focus. As we have seen, there has been a Parliamentary Group on Population and Development in the federal parliament since 1994 and this has a government chair and opposition and minor party vice chairs. Its first chair was feminist Senator, the Hon. Margaret Reynolds and its secretariat was provided by the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance, created for this purpose with funding from US philanthropic foundations and the UNFPA. Today its secretariat is provided by Care Australia and it still has some UNFPA funding. It has 48 members from the different parties in the federal parliament and 43 from parties in the State and Territory

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<sup>43</sup> OECD, 2014. *Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering Diversity for Inclusive Growth*. OECD Publishing: pp. 190–96; p. 199.

<sup>44</sup> Alicia Turner, 2014. 'An Inquiry into the Functions of the Status of Women Caucus Committee of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party'. Hons thesis, School of Politics and International Relations, ANU.

parliaments.<sup>45</sup> Its most high-profile achievement was its role in the success of a cross-party private members' bill on RU-486.<sup>46</sup> More recent parliamentary groups in the federal parliament dealing with gender and sexuality issues are the Parliamentary Friendship Group for LGBTI Australians and the Parliamentary Friendship Group for Women in Science, Maths and Engineering. None of these bodies has been reported to the IPU in response to the surveys on specialised parliamentary bodies concerned with gender equality and nor do they appear in Australia's UN reporting on its gender equality machinery, so they have a low profile internationally.

## Conclusion

Parliamentary committees on gender equality, parliamentary groups and women's caucuses play different, but complementary, roles in promoting gender equality and applying a gender lens to legislation and policy. Their effectiveness varies, and the strength of party adversarialism, the nature of parliamentary culture or lack of strong leadership may lead to marginalisation. However, the very creation of parliamentary institutions with a gender equality mandate provides space for deliberation on gender issues.

Such bodies provide an alternative reference point to dominant parliamentary norms as well as a platform for gender-focused debate. They can provide leverage and legitimacy beyond that of individual parliamentarians. At the same time, they may be a source of networks and partnerships that amplify the effectiveness of individuals and provide support for their interventions. Regardless of their particular type, they all provide some additional access for women's civil society organisations to the legislative process.

Despite the achievements of such specialised parliamentary bodies, as identified by their members in surveys and case studies, we still lack systematic knowledge of the role of such parliamentary bodies within processes of gender mainstreaming. We need to know more about perceptions of these roles – not only from members of such bodies but from others within the parliament, and from the women's NGOs that work with them. Only comparative research, comparable to that now available on women's policy agencies, will provide a clearer picture of the part now being played by gender-focused parliamentary institutions in

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<sup>45</sup> See <http://www.pgpd.asn.au/#!about/cqn6>

<sup>46</sup> See Sawyer, 2012. 'What makes the substantive representation of women possible in a Westminster parliament? The story of RU486 in Australia'.

the promotion of gender equality. This is important knowledge for understanding the kind of institutional supports needed if the substantive representation of women is to be achieved, rather than simply more women in parliaments

**Biographical details**

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