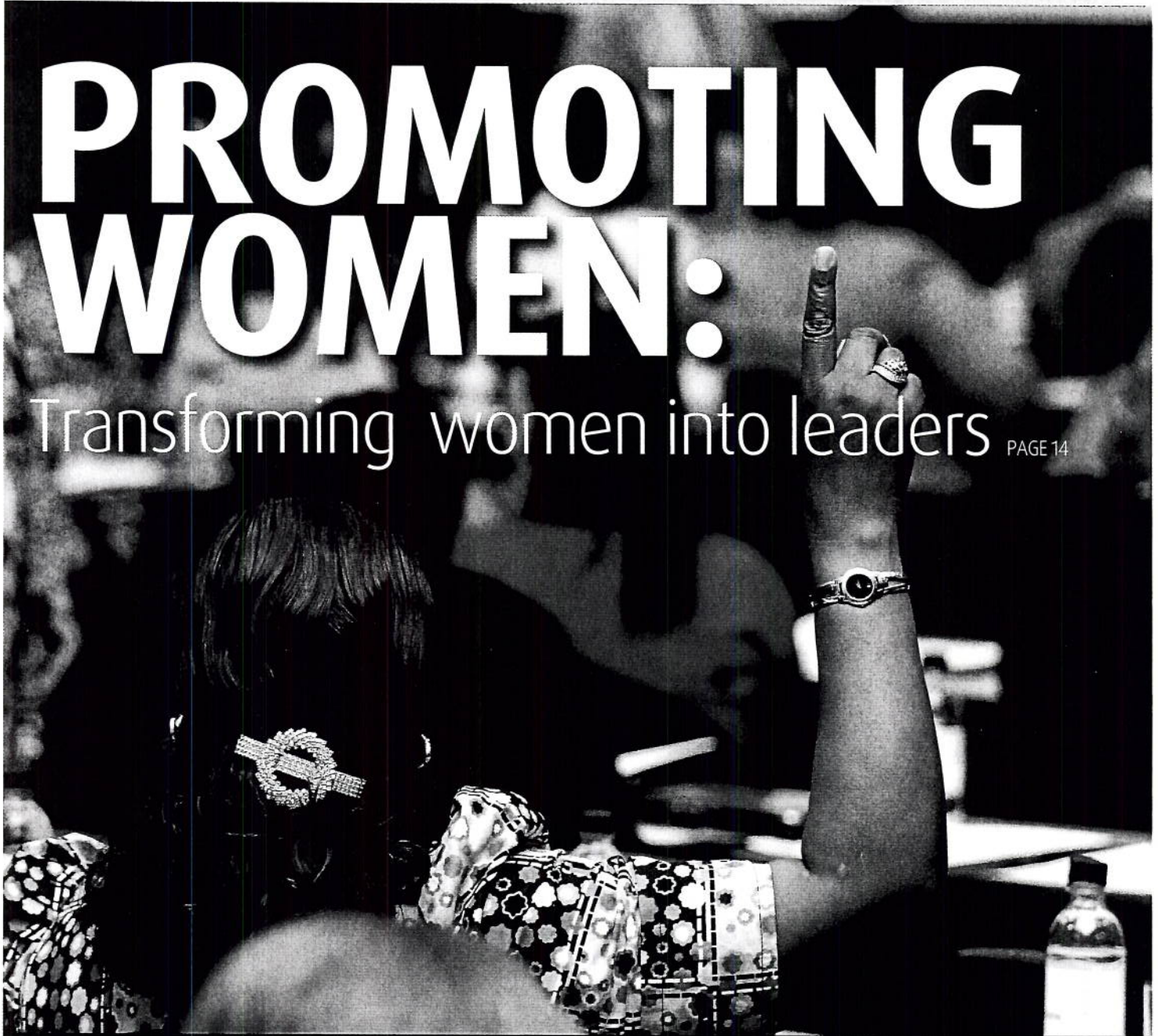




PROMOTING WOMEN:

Transforming women into leaders PAGE 14



PLUS

Reserved seats for women: encouraging female political participation in the Pacific

PAGE 18

Overcoming the big challenges for a small Parliament: the Cook Islands

PAGE 28

Understanding conduct, ethics and codes

PAGE 40

Parliamentary privilege: ancient origins, modern relevance

PAGE 46

PROMOTING WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION IN PARLIAMENT

Gender equality in politics is still a distant reality across the globe, with only one-third of Commonwealth countries exceeding the global target of 30 per cent women's representation in Parliament. Organizations like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is fighting to change this, writes the UNDP's Parliamentary Advisor, through its support of various projects and forums to help strengthen Parliaments and encourage female engagement and participation at the decision-making level.

Mr Charles Chauvel

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Why is the UN Development Programme interested in encouraging more women to be active in politics, and then trying to ensure that they can participate effectively in public life? Simply this: the evidence¹ shows that sustainable human development – whether reducing child and maternal mortality; improving access to education for women and girls; combating HIV, TB, malaria and other diseases; or improving the environment – works much better in societies that are more equal.

Despite constituting half of the world's population, women continue to be disproportionately under-represented in governance and at all levels of decision-making. Last year, a milestone² was reached in women's participation in Parliaments, with one in five MPs in the world now being female. However gender equality in politics is still a distant reality in most countries. Progress has been slow toward achieving even the minimum target of 30 per cent representation of women in national Parliaments, regarded as a "critical mass"³ level of representation. As of 1 December



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2013, the worldwide average was only 21.4 per cent.⁴

UNDP is currently working to strengthen Parliaments in 22 of the 53 members of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is an important partner in this work, including in efforts to increase women's political participation. The Harare Commonwealth Declaration of 1991⁵ reaffirmed the commitment of Commonwealth countries to gender equality. The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015⁶ draws on international commitments for the realization of

women's rights. The Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians association⁷ does significant work on strategies to increase women's participation in Parliament and mainstream gender considerations in all CPA activities and programmes. In 2013, eleven Commonwealth member countries were in the top 40 countries for mainstreaming women into Parliament: Guyana, Grenada, Lesotho, Mozambique, New Zealand, Rwanda, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago and Uganda.⁸ Member nations such as Rwanda, with 64 per cent representation of women in Parliament, are showing real global leadership in this field,⁹ closely followed by Seychelles with 43 per cent and South Africa with 42 per cent.¹⁰ However, it is still the case that only one-third of Commonwealth countries have exceeded the global target of 30 per cent women's representation in Parliaments¹¹ envisioned in the 1995 Beijing Declaration,¹² representing a global commitment to achieving equality, development and peace for women worldwide. A lack of gender balance



Left: A Rwandan female MP speaking to people in her constituency. The country is setting an encouraging example with 64 per cent of its Parliament consisting of women.

Above: The statue of a woman holding a child's hand outside the Parliament building in Kigali.

still persists, with continued weakness in Pacific Island member countries where women represent an average of only four per cent of all elected representatives, and only 10 per cent in the West Africa region.¹³

Late last year, over 300 women MPs from around the world – including many from the Commonwealth – met at the European Parliament in Brussels for the Women in Parliaments Global Forum Summit.¹⁴ Along with former MEP Ms Begona Lasagabaster¹⁵ – now head of governance at UN Women – I convened a panel on women's parliamentary representation entitled "Beyond the Numbers". The promoter of New Zealand's marriage equality law, Ms Louisa Wall,¹⁶ was one of the three women MP panelists. The purpose of the session was to promote a discussion on the barriers that exist to women's political participation, and mechanisms that women MPs – and their male allies – have used to overcome them.

The discussion in Brussels reflected on a number of factors

contributing to why women are still politically under-represented, and why many still face obstacles in entering and advancing in public life. Economic dependence; a lack of access to economic resources and employment; abuse of religious and traditional practices; patriarchal societal structures; prejudice and cultural stereotypes; limited educational opportunities; a lack of adequate funds and resources to run as candidates; violence in politics; and discriminatory institutional, political, legislative and electoral frameworks that have discouraged and disadvantaged women – all of these came up in the experience-sharing part of the panel discussion.

The forum also discussed some of the constitutional and parliamentary mechanisms that have helped in a range of countries to address these barriers. Most fundamentally, political rights and civil liberties for women embodied in national constitutional documents establish the broadest context for political gender equality. This is especially true of voting rights, the right to hold public office, and

the right to exercise public functions, removing any residual forms of sex discrimination or limits to equal citizenship. Gender equality legislation can provide an important basis for promoting women's political rights. It should embrace election, campaign finance, and political party laws.

Elected bodies should also review their internal procedures to ensure the inclusion of gender-sensitive policies, rules and code of conduct, structures and working methods and conditions, including consideration of parliamentary sitting hours and the provision of childcare and maternal facilities within parliaments. Parliaments can also ensure that new women members have equal access to capacity development through induction programmes and training on parliamentary rules, legislative drafting skills, and debating procedures. Parliaments can and should harmonize national laws in accordance with international standards promoting and advancing gender equality, including in the area of politics, for example the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination

against Women.¹⁷ Gender equality commissions and women's cross-party caucuses in Parliament have often helped to promote gender equality. Not only can they promote public policy that effectively responds to women's demands and interests, but they can also have a positive effect on the consolidation and progress of women's political leadership. Finally, temporary special measures – such as quotas – have been instrumental in promoting women's political participation.

The UN system is committed to making gender equality a reality in democratic processes. Right now, 39 of UNDP's 68 parliamentary strengthening projects specifically promote women's empowerment. These include candidate training, induction and mentoring programmes; and awareness campaigns to counter gender stereotyping of candidates, and are being implemented on



every continent. Some examples of recent successes and best practices worldwide include:

Algeria: UNDP sponsored a parliamentary forum on effective and sustainable participation of women in elected assemblies in December 2013, which facilitated the launch of an Algerian action plan for women MPs. Enabling mechanisms and legal frameworks were identified to promote a meaningful and sustainable participation of women in decision-making processes. A network of women Parliamentarians in the Arab region was also consolidated and empowered to promote such vision at regional and national levels.

Argentina: we helped develop a toolkit for legislators on gender mainstreaming.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: we assisted members of the Committee for Gender Equality to come to an in-depth awareness of relevant international obligations and national frameworks for the promotion of women's political participation.

Iraq: we provided training to the Women's Committee within the Iraqi Council of Representatives on law-drafting and legal reviews through a gender lens. We also worked with the Women's Committee on a Bill to establish a High Commission on Gender equality.

Jordan: we supported the finalization of a Gender Strategy for the Independent Electoral Commission. We are also working with political parties to develop a common Gender Strategy to ensure the parties are actively creating opportunities and space for women

to participate and get nominated to Executive positions and for elections. A political party legal framework review (including internal regulations of parties) was conducted and resulted in a list of interventions to ensure active women political participation including through the establishment of a women caucus to conduct mentorship programmes and advocacy for active women participation.

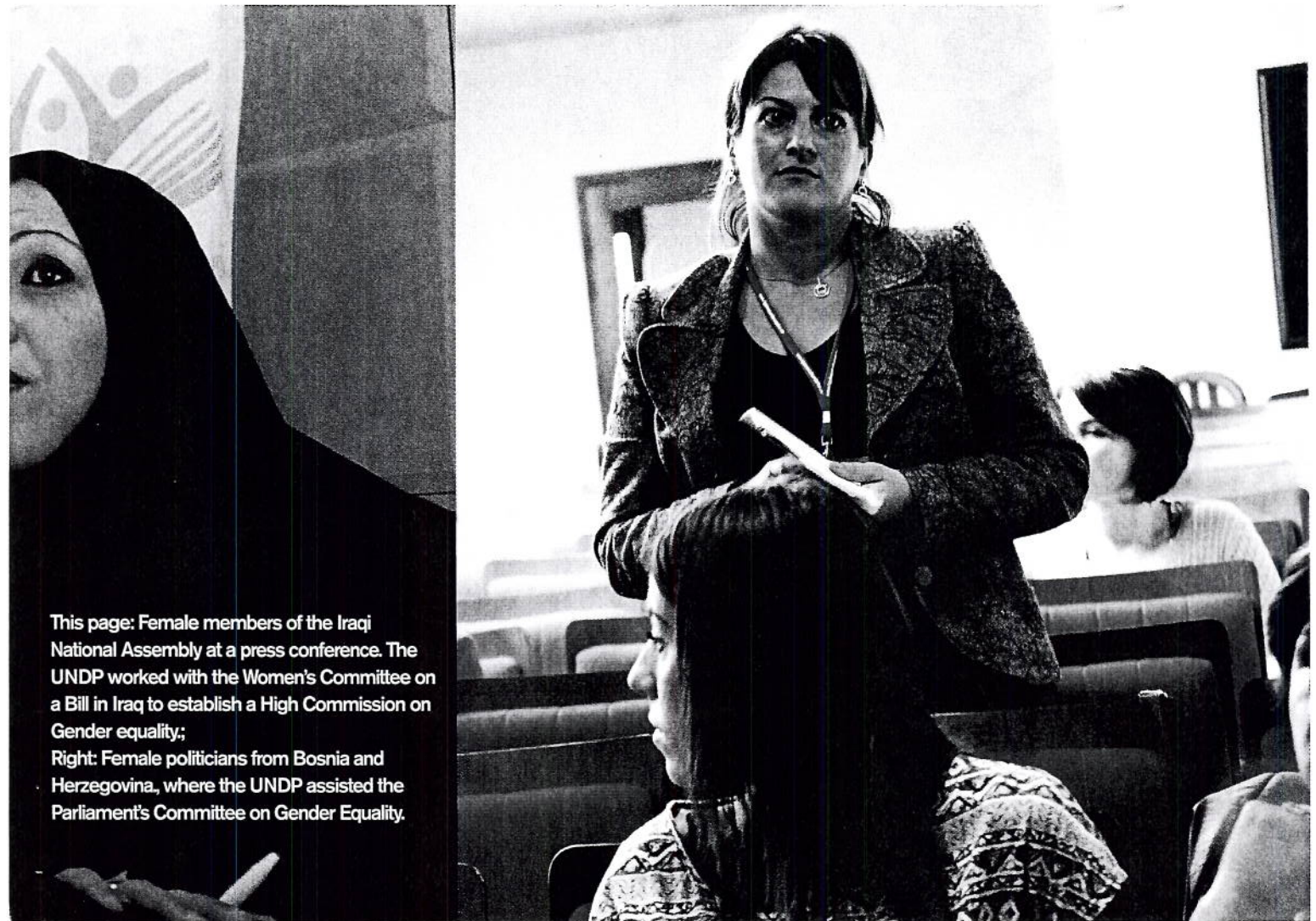
Kosovo: we provided support to the Gender Equality Committee in drafting the new designs, methods and techniques for monitoring of the law implementation in Kosovo. Socially sensitive laws, such as the Law on Gender Equality, were monitored with a new strategy which implied usage of online self-administered questionnaires for respondents and randomly sampled

institutions to be visited by MPs. This approach has shown to be more time and cost effective and has enabled the Committees to reach in-depth information and data from a broader number of institutions.

Libya: we facilitated intensive workshops for 180 women candidates who were trained in media skills and electoral campaign management in advance of the General National Congress elections; eight of these women are currently elected members to the National Congress.

Lebanon: we funded a gender legal review of all current Lebanese legislation that produced a list of new laws to be drafted or current laws to be amended for the promotion of gender equality.

Tunisia: we supported Tunisian Parliamentarians' knowledge



This page: Female members of the Iraqi National Assembly at a press conference. The UNDP worked with the Women's Committee on a Bill in Iraq to establish a High Commission on Gender equality;

Right: Female politicians from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the UNDP assisted the Parliament's Committee on Gender Equality.

of international best practice on gender equality, quotas, and constitutionalization of equality provisions. The new Constitution of Tunisia (adopted on 26 January 2014) is ground-breaking in its provisions to assure women's equality, in explicitly committing to eliminate violence against women, in promoting women's assumption of positions of responsibility in all sectors, and in working towards parity in all elected bodies within the country. UNDP has also been promoting equal access for women candidates to political parties campaign funding. Last November, I participated in a training session in Tunis for 120 representatives from Tunisian political parties on party regulations and disclosure mechanisms to redress gender inequities in political party campaign funding.

Commonwealth-specific examples of our recent work include:

Samoa: A 'Women's Parliamentary Forum' in Samoa on 8 and 9 October 2013 was held to coincide with Parliament's October sittings. The initiative was designed to inform and encourage women by acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to enter the realm of politics or sustain interest in it; and to serve as a medium to promote and support women's participation in the legislative process.

The programme aimed to provide them with: basic knowledge of parliamentary procedures and processes; exposure to Parliament and interactions with Parliamentarians to initiate and encourage interest in politics; as well as practical elementary legislative training with the assistance

of Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. Participants were asked to assist with formulating a framework for future parliamentary capacity building support, including for women from different sectors of the country leading up to the 2016 general election.

Solomon Islands: A mock Parliament for women was also conducted at the National Parliament of Solomon Islands from 10 to 13 February 2014, as part of the efforts to advance women's participation in leadership and decision making. The three-day training programme was aimed to provide participants with necessary skills and knowledge of parliamentary procedures, the Electoral Commission, good governance and parliamentary leadership in Solomon Islands, separation of powers (Executive,

Judiciary, Legislative) and Parliamentary Committees. A total of 35 women participants from across the country took part in a mock debate about the Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF) and its effectiveness in funding some essential services such as health, education, rural development & domestic violence.

Tonga: Tonga's first Practice Parliament for Women will be held on 10-11 April 2014 hosted by the Legislative Assembly of Tonga in Nuku'alofa. Candidates will undergo training and mentoring programmes with current MPs and former women MPs on 7-9 April, followed by a live broadcast of the two-day sitting. It is part of UNDP's efforts to help the Speaker, Lord Fakafanua, fulfill his stated commitment to building a modern and more representative



Parliament for Tonga which currently has only one woman in Parliament.¹⁸ It will be an opportunity for Tongan women to demonstrate their talent, knowledge and potential capacity while empowering them to have their voices heard and to prepare for the upcoming 2014 General Election in November. Previously, UNDP has also assisted national Parliaments to arrange mock Parliaments in Papua New Guinea and Kiribati.

Lesotho: In Lesotho, selected Members of Parliament, Political Party Representatives, and Senior Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) officials participated in the Gender and Elections Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) training from 29 July to 2 August,

2013. The BRIDGE training was designed to expose trainees in ways of mainstreaming gender in elections. UNDP also held a workshop for women Parliamentarians from 4 to 7 June 2013, to enhance their confidence and increase their participation in parliamentary debates. Major conclusions from the meeting found that the Women's Caucus should raise awareness for women related issues in Parliament including maternity leave, the Married Person's Equality Act and all laws of equal importance. Another recommendation pushed for networking with other women in different Parliaments for skills sharing purposes and training in conflict management.

Nigeria: UNDP has supported the

development of the two-year strategic plan of Nigeria's National Assembly Gender Technical Unit (GTU). The GTU supports gender mainstreaming and women's rights agenda at the Parliament. Its main functions include: to provide accessible resource tools, research materials and skills for the analysis and articulation of gender-sensitive legislations by all law-makers in Nigeria; provide technical support particularly to female legislators to enhance quality participation and contributions to legislative processes; and provide links between legislators and civil society groups, corporate organizations and individuals doing gender work in Nigeria. The institutional capacity building and development of the GTU as well as support for specific activities, as

outlined in the strategic plan, have been included in UNDP's upcoming interventions.

India: UNDP has called for the formation of a caucus of women political leaders across party lines to enhance women's participation within political parties, and to advocate for the Women's Reservation Bill (which would provide for one-third of the seats in national and state assemblies to be reserved for women) as a collective voice.

The Bill passed the Rajya Sabha in 2010 but at the time of writing had not come to a vote in the Lok Sabha. Caitlin Wiesen, UNDP Country Director, summed up the outcome of the Roundtable by saying, "the key ingredients of success for women's participation in politics are money,

Left: The National Assembly of Nigeria. The UNDP has supported the development of Nigeria's National Assembly Gender Technical Unit (GTU), which supports gender mainstreaming and women's rights agenda at the Parliament.

Below: Bangladeshi women visiting the Parliament pictured in the background. A UNDP project that includes a specific gender focus aims to increase the representation of women in Parliament and committees.



mentoring, mobilization and men". Women who had contested in local self-government elections pointed out that having a large base of elected women at the Panchayat (local self-government) level is not enough to ensure that more women will contest or win elections at the state or higher levels. Hon. Shalini Tomar who contested state Assembly elections from Uttar Pradesh said, "education, self-confidence and leadership skills are very important to bridge this gap. For this capacity development, networking with other women in politics and mentoring is very important".

Pakistan: UNDP has supported the establishment of a Women's Caucus, whose aims include cutting across party lines, allowing consensus-building around priority issues concerning women, and ensuring that gender concerns are

addressed through legislation, policies and programmes.

Bangladesh: UNDP's project includes a specific gender focus, through interventions which aim to increase the representation of women in Parliament and committees. Specific support has been provided to women Parliamentarians as part of a multi-party caucus on gender and via the Standing Committee on Women and Children Affairs.

All knowledge material developed by the project encompasses a gender component. For example, a study on gender mainstreaming in the Bangladesh Parliament was submitted to the Committee for Women and Children Affairs leading this Committee to initiate the drafting of an action plan for the implementation of key recommendations. UNDP also ensures gender messages are a

central component of parliamentary education initiatives; i.e.: roundtable discussions focusing on the gender aspects of the budget were held with parliamentary committees, and increasing their understanding of their role in budgetary oversight from a gender perspective.

Other activities include: ensuring that the Parliament's human resources management systems are gender sensitive; developing a gender policy for Parliament; facilitating the introduction of a social impact assessment of legislation; and supporting women's access to parliamentary committees' inquiries.

In addition to this work being implemented by UNDP Country Offices, we are cooperating with partners to host two global online knowledge platforms - AGORA¹⁹ - the portal on parliamentary

development, and the International Knowledge Network on Women in Politics (iKNOW Politics²⁰). We welcome participation, directly and via AGORA and iKNOW Politics, from all who share the objective of empowering women politically, and increasing the percentage of women legislators globally.

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