



“The Role of Global and Regional Actors to Advance Gender Equality and Political Empowerment of Women”

Summary of UNGA side-event

The Community of Democracies (CoD), in collaboration with the UNDP and International IDEA, held a side-event on women and political participation at which there was a panel discussion relating to the results of five regional consultations that took place over the past year discussing the challenges of ensuring gender equality in democratically elected bodies. These consultations led to the development of an Inter-Regional Report that gathers the main legal and policy instruments that exist at the global and regional levels, and present relevant policy recommendations on how to effectively advance women’s political participation. This publication was presented during the UNGA side event, and the panel discussion allowed speakers to highlight the main findings of these consultations and discuss next steps.

Thomas Garrett, Secretary-General of CoD, opened the meeting on behalf of Audra Čiapienė, Chair of the Working Group on Women and Democracy of the CoD, pointing to the importance of advancing female participation, and successes but also the limits of progress so far. Mr. Luis Consuegra, of International IDEA, presented the preliminary version of the Inter-Regional Report. He stressed that this was the result of effective collaboration among global and regional organizations, as well as among parliamentarians, politicians, civil society organizations, experts and other key stakeholders, and informed that the final report will be launched on 5 December in Brussels. He passed on to Mr. Massimo Tommasoli, Permanent Observer of International IDEA to the United Nations, to present the panel which consisted of Ms. Hannah Forster from Ghana, Ms. Zuraida Karamuddin from Malaysia, Ms. Gabriela Trigueros from El Salvador, and Ms. Omezzine Khalifa from Tunisia, speaking in relation to the regional consultations in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the MENA region respectively. He asked panelists to talk about the role of regional organizations and partnership with civil society, the 2030 agenda and the opportunities it created for the advancement of gender equality, and their opinions of the next steps for the advancement of gender equality.

As Mr. Consuegra stated, it was “quite impressive to see the consistency of structural barriers that exist.” Despite diverse regional situations regarding women’s political participation, the panel discussion brought out several consistencies in the challenges facing women across the world.

It was clear that the barriers to female participation in politics are not solely, or even mainly, legal. Even where policies are in place to advance women’s participation, there is a disparity between law and practice. Systemic inequality and patriarchal norms were seen as the cause of this. Ms. Karamuddin stated that the conclusion of the consultation in the sub-Saharan African region was to revisit CEDAW, as there are no tools or mechanisms with which to monitor the achievements of countries that signed the declaration.

Hannah referred to the importance of the 2030 agenda in setting agreements, and the way it had allowed gaps within the implementation of the legal framework to advance women and their representation to be



identified. She also emphasized the need to evaluate the effectiveness of the mechanisms currently in place. There was a general sentiment that legal advancements needed to be accompanied by a parallel advancement in the political will for progress.

All participants also stressed the role that political parties play in women's political participation. Ms. Khalifa discussed her own experience in returning to Tunisia to participate in the transition efforts following the revolution, and noted that she "quickly understood that the transition was led by political parties": if she wanted to make an influence, she concluded, she had to join a party. Ms. Trigueros and Ms. Forester both talked about the difficulty of finding funding outside of the party structure. As such, it is important for the parties themselves to support and encourage female participation. However, as the majority of those currently involved in politics are male, the will to change may be lacking.

To this end, the impact and importance of affirmative action, namely in the form of quotas, was stressed by almost all members of the panel. Quotas had been introduced in some way, voluntarily by particular parties or legally enforced, in all the respective states of the panelists. Zuraida's party was the first party to constitutionalize 30% participation at all levels in Malaysia and she emphasized the impact this had had on gender sensitization. It forced men to include women, and as more women are brought into mainstream politics, more women can be brought to center-stage and function as role models for future generations. Omezzine highlighted the positive changes that had occurred in Tunisia since laws had obliged parties to have gender parity in participation levels, including the passing of a historic law that protects women against violence.

However, it was noted by both Hannah and Gabriela that care must be taken in the way quotas are implemented. Hannah stated that they "need to be introduced consistently because many times you find out that it is a token" that can be taken away as suits. Indeed, this was the experience of Gabriela in El Salvador who had been so delighted that internal elections within her party would have parity, only to discover that this was mere lip-service, and party leaders then manipulated the system to maintain it as it was. She added her view that it should be about quality rather than quantity, it is not a worthy goal to have 30% female participation if the women filling the quotas "are going to say yes to everything that a man's going to say".

A related point, also mentioned by all members of the panel, was the importance of having male allies. Given that societies have been based for so long on patriarchal structures, it is mostly men that hold leadership positions. Gabriela talked about how even when laws were introduced, the patriarchal structure limited their implementation as "most of the judges are men." It is important that there are men in influential positions that are aware of the gender gap and see the values of female participation. Omezzine and Hannah both argued for the need for training of civil servants, particularly in the realm of law enforcement, in relation to women's issues.

Nevertheless, something that was very strongly emphasized throughout the panel discussion, and again when discussion was opened to the floor, was that "it's not about men letting women be in power, it's about them being able to step up into it". Solutions to this emphasized the importance of building women's confidence and empowering them to take up the important roles that they can and should be able to take. Women's movements, education, and targeted training were seen as key methods to achieving this. Another factor



brought up in the floor discussion was the importance of giving women access to birth control and safe abortions to ensure that they had the economic independence to make their own choices.

Crucially, it was also stated that violence towards women in politics is something that must be overcome if women are to be encouraged to take the reins. Gabriela had personal experience of harassment when she decided to make a statement against her party, where her party attacked her “as a woman.” Hannah cited the example of Charity Ngilu, who was the target of an attack from a male MP who said that she “should be raped in her office if she doesn’t drop her stance against President Kenyatta”. These violent attacks reinforce women’s fear of stepping into the traditionally male domain of politics. Gabriela stated that there “has to be this precedent that it’s not OK to have this attitude, it’s not OK to attack a woman, it’s not OK to attack anyone”, which is why she filed a lawsuit against the party leaders for their treatment of her.

Generally, panelists were united in their views of what needed to be done to pave the way forward for female political participation as well as what challenges women faced. The importance of collaboration, of civil society engagement, of engaging men as well as women and addressing the grassroots were all mentioned, as was female education (from an early stage) and training to facilitate women’s empowerment, and ensuring that development goals were stuck to, and laws on the advancement of women’s participation were effectively upheld. All were also united on the critical importance of the advancement of women’s political participation.