

Are quotas necessary to have more women in parliament?

Parity is one of the priorities of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which states in its Universal Declaration on Democracy (1997) that *the achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in equality and complementarity, drawing mutual enrichment from their differences*. Does this mean that women's election to parliament depends on quotas? Three women give their views.

Mrs. Liliane Maury Pasquier

President of the Swiss National Council (until 26 November 2002)

"Women can fundamentally change the way parliament works"

Q : You are one of the rare women to lead a Chamber. Why is it important to have women presiding officers in parliaments?

Liliane Maury Pasquier: Because they can put forward another point of view, even if it is only through the way they do things. I hope that this will be the start of equitable representation of society, which is composed of men and women. I will be delighted the day the subject of women's representation in parliaments becomes a non-issue because it has become something natural.

Q : Does having women in politics make a difference?

L.M.P. I am certain of this because, above and beyond opinions, what I have seen as an MP is that women in parliaments and in society in general are always respectful of others. They attach more importance to meetings, to devising solutions that enjoy the broadest consensus, they work to secure a solid and effective majority. They are in touch with others and are more interested in what works than putting themselves forward. In this respect, they can fundamentally change the way parliament works.

Q : Are quotas necessary to have more women in parliament?

L.M.P. I believe that unfortunately, there is no getting round quotas, because in the end only Swedish women have managed to achieve parity with Swedish men in parliament. I think that without firm action, we will not achieve our goal, or perhaps only in a few centuries... But I can't wait that long!

Q : You took the floor at the 171st session of the Inter-Parliamentary Council. Why in your view is the IPU important?

L.M.P. The IPU is important because it brings male and female representatives of practically all of the world's countries together at the parliamentary level. It provides a means of creating relations, ties and networks and strengthening the role of parliaments, particularly in the globalization process, where parliaments must ensure that the people's voice is heard.

Q : You are interested in parliamentary diplomacy and more particularly in the Middle East. The IPU Council hopes that the IPU will sponsor a proposal submitted by the Swiss Inter-Parliamentary Group and the Manifesto - Movement for a Fair and Lasting Peace in the Middle East, to organize a meeting in Geneva between members of the Knesset and members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. Why do you support this cause?

L.M.P. The situation in the Middle East is particularly worrying. Instead of working itself out, it is becoming more and more complicated. This conflict seems insoluble and in a field like this, parliaments cannot sit idly by. As parliamentarians, we can perhaps try an approach, arrange a meeting, bring people together or foster dialogue with a view to changing the way people think. When people meet, it helps them understand the way others see reality. If this is the case, then we will have taken a step in the right direction. Naturally, the parliamentary sphere is not the governmental sphere, but parliament is one of the components of public opinion and can help to make things change.



Photo MAP. H.M. King Mohammed VI surrounded by the women elected to the Moroccan Parliament.

Morocco:

"Quotas may not be democratic, but they are a path leading to democracy"

In the Arab countries, even though men still have a firm grip on politics (on average, only a scant 4.6% of all Arab MPs are women), there are encouraging signs as far as women's participation is concerned. In Morocco, after the election of 35 women on 27 September 2002 (out of a total of 325 seats), women now account for 10.8% of all MPs, thanks to the introduction of a 30-seat quota.

Mrs. Amina Ouchelh is one of the women elected on the national women's list. A professor of Arabic and Education Studies, she is also First Secretary General of the women of the USFP (main, center-left political grouping) and Vice-President of the Council for the commune of Agdal Ryad (Rabat). Her views on the challenges of this historic result follow.

Q: What is going to change after the elections?

Amina Ouchelh : The way people think, I hope! And priorities too. The fact that 35 women have entered parliament will ensure that questions like literacy and education, the family, the status of women and that of abandoned children, as well as violence against women and children, are given priority rather than being viewed as minor issues. These questions are essential to the social and economic development of Moroccan society. I do not mean that Moroccan women MPs should focus exclusively on these fields - we are the militants of political parties which have their own social projects. We must therefore show an interest in all fields, but the family and women's place in society must be tackled urgently. Women have another way of approaching problems, they are interested in the details, they are better listeners and they have the patience to follow even the smallest details of a case through to the end. They also have an overall view of problems, which is a real asset. Moreover, we hope to establish contacts and exchanges with other MPs from democratic countries, who believe that women's participation in politics is important for social progress.

Q: What do you think of quotas?

A.O. : I feel that quotas are not democratic, but in order to achieve democracy, this stage is necessary to change the way people think. Quotas are a tool designed to help parties and people finally to realise that women are men's equals. Instead of waiting generations for a change in the way people think, we are forcing mentalities to change, and the role of the 35 elected women MPs is very important at this stage. It is up to them, or rather us, to prove that Moroccan women can be politicians, just as they have proven that they can be lawyers and doctors, for example. In Morocco, people are prepared to put their lives in the hands of lady doctors because they trust them. The same holds true for those who turn to a female lawyer to defend their interests or to solve their problems. Today, the unresolved problem is women's participation in political life, and quotas are a very important tool for getting past this stage. Even though quotas are not democratic, they are a path leading to democracy. I hope that later on, we won't need them any more. I am counting on the wholehearted commitment of all in this respect.

Q: Is it necessary to help women who do not necessarily have extensive political experience, after this first stage?

A.O. : Yes, they will need help, because some women have no parliamentary experience. In my view, it shouldn't be difficult to organise the corresponding meetings or workshops. I believe that most of the women MPs will fit in easily, because they have valuable experience in the field of associations, as some are communal councillors. We must now shoulder our responsibilities and take up an essential yet daunting challenge. Here, I would like to stress that this result came under the reign of His Majesty Mohammed VI, due to the will of the new majority government headed by Mr. Abdehmane Youssoufi. I do not know whether we could have achieved this under another government.

Djibouti:
A political will to promote women

In Djibouti, Parliament has adopted a law establishing that the minimum number of either women or men candidates in each political party's list must be equivalent to 10 per cent of the seats to be filled, a key first step which **Mrs. Hawa Ahmed Youssouf**, Minister-Delegate to the Prime Minister in charge of the Promotion of Women, Family Welfare and Social Affairs in Djibouti, views as a "decisive stage".

Q : Why is this law important?

Hawa Ahmed Youssouf: The decision to set aside 10% of the seats for women is a decisive stage, which shows political resolve. 1999 was an important year as far as women's integration in politics was concerned.

Q : Are the political parties prepared to implement this measure?

H.A.Y.: The new law obliges all political parties to include women on the lists they present in the December elections so as to ensure that women obtain 10 % of the seats in the National Assembly. We have asked them to abide by this law and include many women's names on these lists, for women represent 52% of the population. Before, women were virtually shut out of the decision-making process.

Q : Why is women's arrival in politics important in Djibouti?

H.A.Y.: Because women can help change the way people think. Since 1999, the government has done a great deal to promote the cause of women. The elected women MPs will be able to prove that they are as responsible as men and can contribute to the country's development. Men recognise that women appointed to high-level positions are always totally committed, do serious work and display great willingness. By tabling bills, women will have an opportunity not only to help improve the living conditions of other women but also to boost development.

Q : Are women prepared to shoulder this responsibility?

H.A.Y.: They are prepared and they have sound arguments to take on this responsibility. They have fought for their rights since independence, but also for their own independence! The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Djibouti is a woman, and women serve as technical advisors and directors in public establishments.

Q : Can the Inter-Parliamentary Union be of help?

H.A.Y.: We are indeed expecting support from the IPU. A year ago, an IPU representative came to Djibouti (editor's note: the former Assistant Secretary General, Ms. Christine Pintat) to see how women had organised themselves to take up their responsibilities and to vote and stand as candidates in the legislative elections. She noted that the President of the National Assembly was willing to back the project to get women into political life, which we subsequently implemented together. Accordingly, we look to the IPU for support not only to help women mobilise, but also to teach them how to campaign and, once in office, to train them and explain, to women and men MPs alike, exactly what an MP does. We do not intend to discriminate. Once elected, we will have to educate all MPs, with the IPU's help.