Report on International Parliamentary Conference on Gender and Politics, 6-8 November 2012

Introduction

The conference which was organised by CPA UK Branch and the British Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union was attended by 60 international Parliamentarians. Consequently, delegates and parliamentarians came from not only from Commonwealth countries but from the wider International community as well. Over the three days there was an excellent range of speakers who stimulated wide-ranging and thought-provoking discussion.

Tuesday 6 November

The opening plenary session on the first day noted the global campaign for gender equality and the growing recognition of women’s’ rights. It was pointed out that the barriers were often social and cultural but that evidence suggested more female representation boosted economic growth resulting in a higher GDP per capita and that companies with women were identified as having a 53% increased output.

Throughout the discussion in the morning it was emphasised that there was strength in unity and in collaborating with other groups and while there is no doubt that advances have been made, the real danger is complacency and an effort must be made to maintain and increase these gains.

It was also stressed that female representation was not about quantity but quality. Various delegates gave examples of good practice and equally not so good practice and outlined key the objectives from their countries. For example the delegate from Palestine emphasised it was important to facilitate participation of women in every field. In Afghanistan it was noted that war had provided opportunities for women to participate in areas where they previously would have been side-lined. The need for women to be involved in the development of the peace process was stressed - this had not happened to date.
The delegate from the Philippines advised that she tried to put the women’s perspective in the work she dealt with including legislation and bills. She gave the example of climate change where she was able to put forward women’s concerns in terms of disasters and the effect on families.

One of the MPs Nasrim Pillane Mia from Malawi pointed out that Malawi had a female president and that last year that parliament had passed in inheritance bill which means that women can now inherit from their spouse. However, despite this, men still fight the law. She emphasised the need for women to have confidence generally but particularly in their own abilities. It was also pointed out that child and maternal mortality remained a major issue.

There were various sessions with academics including Professor Sarah Childs of Bristol University and Dr Joni Lovenduski of Birkbeck University, who considered the theory behind calls for equality of political representation. Sarah Childs, in particular, focussed on the terminology and the need to change the language to talk about the over-representation of men within Parliament as opposed to the under-representation of women. She also pointed out the need to address this democratic deficit because by this under-representation half the talent pool is missed, as it the opportunity for the introduction of new values and concerns from a female perspective.

I then attended a workshop on social media which highlighted some of the positive aspects generally in terms of it being an immediate source of news and some of the negatives consequences of the use of social media.

**Wednesday 7 November**

The second day of the conference was opened by the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow MP who spoke about his experience of raising the issue of, and eventually introducing, a nursery in the House of Commons. Quite simply it appeared to him bizarre that the House of Commons should have a shooting gallery but no nursery or crèche.

There followed a fascinating discussion on gender, media and politics. The discussion focussed on the challenges faced by women politicians, in particular, the sexualised and sensational portrayal of women on the front pages of the newspapers. The Guardian’s Women’s Editor, Jane Martinson, noted that 83% of front pages refer to men and that women are generally portrayed as victims if they are on a front page. More generally, the media tend to describe women in terms of their dress sense and appearance. Baroness Shirley Williams closed the session by noting that President Obama’s victory in the US Presidential election earlier this month, was in large part due to the collective political will of women voters. Baroness Williams expressed optimism that this would make the media shift further towards the view that women’s voices matter.
I attended a workshop on the role of civil society organisations in mobilising the electorate and raising the profile of, and campaigning for, gender equality in decision making. There was some discussion about the definition of civil society.

At the end of the day I also attended a breakout session on human rights where it was pointed out that the emphasis and effort should be on prevention and that CWP should be focusing on this rather than responding to abuses.

Thursday 8 November

The final day of the conference began with a plenary session on ‘women, leadership and public life’. The opening panel included Baroness Glenys Kinnock who had some fascinating statistics. I spoke to her later and she said that these were statistics she had gathered herself and it may therefore be worthwhile obtaining a copy of her presentation. Again she pointed out that productivity increases in business and growth if women are involved and their voices are heard.

The session also saw calls from speakers for action on wage gaps, an end to child marriage, on the importance of getting girls to school and to stay in school, and for an end to violence against women and girls.

Other plenary sessions during the course of the day considered the importance of the economic empowerment of women and of education for all. Throughout the conference there was a common theme that girls in urban areas were generally better educated, the real gender gap was in the rural areas. The importance of education was highlighted by the situation of Malala Yousafzai, who was shot by the Taliban for standing up for the rights of girls to be educated. Delegates added messages of support to a card which was delivered to her after the conference.

Lastly, the closing plenary session considered violence against women and girls. The session featured robust calls for action, from speakers and delegates, for action against gender-based violence.

Closing Remarks

This was an excellent conference and well worth attending. The three days provided the opportunity to learn about a diverse range of experiences from delegates and parliamentarians from over 50 countries. As such it proved to be an invaluable insight into the cultural, social and other factors facing parliamentarians from very different backgrounds from the countries represented and provided a clear steer of the way forward.

http://www.parliament.uk/documents/CPA/Gender%20Conference/Programme%20for%20distribution.pdf
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15 November 2012