

GENDER-BASED
POLITICAL
HARASSMENT:
BUILDING
AWARENESS IN
PARLIAMENTS

*An inter-parliamentary meeting
for the Anglophone Caribbean*





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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ParlAmericas extends its appreciation to the Parliament of Saint Lucia for hosting this meeting, and in particular to Speaker of the House of Assembly **Peter Foster**, for supporting the initiative. The outstanding parliamentary staff and providers in Saint Lucia furthermore ensured the meeting's success.

We express our thanks to all of the meeting's delegates for their invaluable contributions, as well as to subject experts **Gabrielle Hosein** (Institute of Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies), **Tonni Brodber** (UN Women Multi-Country Office — Caribbean), **UnaMay Gordon**

(Caribbean Institute for Women in Leadership) and **Yasmin Solitahe Odlum** (Inter-American Commission of Women at the Organization of American States) for sharing insight and specialised knowledge. We also thank **Anne-Marie DeLorey** who served as facilitator to the working sessions.

Based out of the ParlAmericas Secretariat in Ottawa, research interns **Caitlyn Hyndman** and **Eilish Elliott** provided essential input and assessment of the meeting's outcomes. Finally, ParlAmericas gratefully acknowledges the financial support of **Global Affairs Canada**.



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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF PARLAMERICAS



Dear colleagues,

Political harassment is a topic of fundamental importance to ParlAmericas. The deep commitment of our membership to tackling this issue was demonstrated once again through the work and conversations that took place during the meeting in Castries, Saint Lucia, on January 26 and 27, 2016.

The results of the discussions of the meeting are important additions to ensure the success of the *Plan of Action to Prevent Harassment and Political Violence against Women*, which was initially developed during the last annual gathering of the Group of Women Parliamentarians of ParlAmericas in Termas de Rio Hondo, Argentina.

Both events have made it clear that we

must respond to this problem forcefully; employing a number of tools simultaneously to generate awareness about the urgent need to eradicate political harassment and violence against women, and to achieve the larger goal of gender equality.

I urge everyone to share the progress and initiatives that arise from this meeting, and to spread the commitment to taking concrete measures, using the action plan and the solutions you developed collectively as a guide.

Cordially,

Marcela Guerra

Marcela Guerra

Senator, Mexico

President, ParlAmericas

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE GROUP OF WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS



Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Group of Women Parliamentarians, thank you for having contributed your voice and experience to the ParlAmericas meeting *Gender-based Political Harassment: Building Awareness in Parliaments* convened in Saint Lucia. Our perspectives as parliamentarians regarding the dynamics at play enabling this violation of women's political and human rights are essential to the development of effective tools to combat it. Your conclusions and the consensus reached among neighbour countries at this meeting will guide ParlAmericas' ongoing work in the Caribbean to raise awareness, coordinate work with partner institutions, and secure practical commitments to eliminate gender-based political harassment.

I encourage you to circulate this report within your networks and invite stakeholders to become involved in our upcoming projects. Together we will continue to expose the magnitude of this problem and put into action our collective determination to respond to it. I look forward to the continued growth of this ParlAmericas initiative and to witnessing the changes uniting our voices can bring about in the parliaments of our hemisphere and across the entire world.

Best wishes,

Gina Godoy

Gina Godoy

*Member of the National Assembly of Ecuador
President of the Group of Women
Parliamentarians of ParlAmericas*

ABOUT PARLAMERICAS AND ITS GENDER EQUALITY WORK

ParlAmericas is the network of the national legislatures of the member states of the Organization of American States (OAS). Headquartered in Ottawa, Canada, it serves as an independent forum for parliamentarians of the Americas and the Caribbean dedicated to cooperative political dialogue and participation in the inter-American system. Since 2001, ParlAmericas has created a supportive professional community for parliamentarians through regional forums, training opportunities, year-round discussions, and follow-up actions. Our network is a space to share experiences and best practices on gender equality, legislative transparency and other issues of hemispheric concern, and to strengthen the ties between member countries through parliamentary diplomacy.

ParlAmericas is managed by parliamentarians for parliamentarians, with a Board of Directors representing member legislatures from North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean.

The Group of Women Parliamentarians was established as a permanent body within

ParlAmericas in 2003, and since then has organized numerous initiatives to promote women's political empowerment and the application of a gender lens to the legislative agenda of member parliaments.

Gender-based political harassment surfaced as a top concern in the strategic planning session held at the Group's 2014 annual gathering and has become an important advocacy area.¹ The topic was central to the following year's gathering in Argentina, titled Action Plan for Preventing Political Harassment and Violence Against Women. The Group also launched an interactive project to share the personal experiences and viewpoints of parliamentarians throughout the region on this issue. ParlAmericas has emerged as a leader in building understanding about gender-based political harassment and is part of a growing global network working to address the problem.

¹ In 2011, ParlAmericas (then known as FIPA) began its work addressing gender-based political harassment. At the annual gathering of the Group of Women Parliamentarians, delegates issued a solidarity manifesto stating "We denounce and condemn all political, physical and psychological violence against our Haitian women parliamentary colleagues."

Mapping gender-based political harassment: Parliamentarians speak out

In 2016, ParlAmericas launched a video project called “Mapping gender-based political harassment: Parliamentarians speak out.” This interactive map features the testimonies of parliamentarians from across the Americas and Caribbean on the topic of political harassment. ParlAmericas will continue adding videos to this map on an ongoing basis in order to illustrate the magnitude of the problem in our hemisphere and the shared objective of political actors fighting against it.



ABOUT THE PROBLEM

What is gender-based political harassment?

Gender-based political harassment is intimidation, coercion or violence targeting women and other marginalized groups for their activity in political and public life, in ways that exacerbate gendered discrimination. In parliamentary politics, this can manifest as sexist language on the floor of legislatures, biased media coverage undermining women's leadership, pressure to renounce elected office, or physical assault, among others. Acts of political harassment reinforce traditional gender roles and male-dominated decision making spaces, creating a hostile environment that can deter women from political engagements.

Bolivia's groundbreaking **Law against Political Harassment and Violence against Women** (No. 243), which was passed in May 2012 and has served as a legislative model for other countries in the Americas region, defines political harassment as “an act or set of acts of pressure, persecution, harassment or threats

committed by one person or a group of persons, directly or through third parties, against women who are candidates, elected, designated or exercising a public/political role or against their families, with the purpose of reducing, suspending, preventing or restricting the function inherent to their positions, to induce or oblige them to carry out, against their will, an act or omission in the performance of their functions or in the exercise of their rights.”

IN THE WORDS OF THE DELEGATE ▶

“When people hear political harassment generally they might think of something physical or something sexual, but the undertones, or overtones [of] ... ‘Why would you want to get involved in that? Why don't you go take care of your husband? Why don't you go take care of your children?’ ... All of that impacts your decision making in terms of going forward.”

discrimination politically motivated sexual harassment
 tokenized "the cost of doing politics" coercion
 violence social media abuse femicide pressure to resign silencing
 slander undermining competence
 restrict political participation leadership ceiling "boy's club" undermining women's leadership
 intimidation threats hostile working environment lack of resources
 derogatory images scrutinize appearance backlash harassment
 sexist remarks psychological abuse sexism gender-based
 media bias systemic aggression physical assault stereotyping
 caregiving expectations

What makes it a gender issue?

As detailed in *#NotTheCost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics*, a call to action published by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), political harassment and violence can be experienced by both men and women, but it often takes on three unique characteristics when experienced by women: “it targets women *because* of their gender; in its very *form* it can be gendered, as exemplified by sexist threats and sexual violence; and its impact is to discourage *women in particular* from being or becoming politically active.”

As participants discussed throughout the ParlAmericas meeting, parliamentary politics is a space traditionally created and filled by men from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. This means it is often more accommodating to the participation of this group of individuals over others. While women may be most commonly affected by gender-based political harassment, stereotypes or assumptions about masculinity can also negatively impact the political landscape, as discussed during the ParlAmericas meeting by Dr. Gabrielle Hosein (Institute of Gender and Development Studies

of the University of West Indies). Intersections with other forms of discrimination are also important to consider.

IN THE WORDS OF THE DELEGATE ▶

“We have to look back at the culture that defines us as individuals. We grew up in societies where the culture is that it’s the man that’s in charge of everything and is needed, where really and truly that is just a cover to the fact that women must take the back seat.”

“The boxing ring [of parliamentary politics] has been established between largely specific kinds of people over long, long periods of time. And when other people come in, they demand a different kind or sets of ethics, ways of speaking, or ways of looking at how everyone now feels in the room. And a challenge is re-thinking the room ... Some things become gendered issues of political harassment particularly because they cause more damage to women’s lives than men’s lives. What might be just neutral life for some people, [for others] is lived in ways that reflect the hypocrisies and different demands on respectability and so on for women ... It’s lived by everybody but lived in different ways. Often in ways that make women feel more personally and sexually vulnerable.”

DR. GABRIELLE HOSEIN (UWI)

“We are consistently working toward a shared understanding, an equitable and comfortable space for both men and women.”

TONNI BRODBER (UN WOMEN)



ABOUT THE MEETING



From January 26 to 27, 2016, former and sitting parliamentarians from more than 10 countries across the Caribbean and from Canada convened in Castries, Saint Lucia, to discuss experiences with and strategies to overcome the problem of gender-based political harassment. Delegates were joined by subject matter experts from regional and international organizations, namely, UN Women, the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) at the OAS, the Caribbean Institute of Women in Leadership (CIWiL), and the University of the West Indies (UWI).



Opening remarks

The meeting began with words of welcome by President of the Senate of Saint Lucia **Claudius James Francis**; Minister of Health, Wellness, Human Services and Gender Relations of Saint Lucia **Alvin James Francis**; Senator of Mexico **Marcela Guerra** (President of ParlAmericas, [via video](#)); and Speaker of the House of Assembly of Saint Lucia **Peter Foster** (ParlAmericas board member).

“The men at the forefront of our parliaments must be allies in these noble and honourable endeavours and must be focused on ... promoting women’s equal voice and representation in parliament and the decision making that affects our citizens.”

SPEAKER PETER FOSTER

“We must be mindful that gender equality requires much more than the presence of women in parliament. It depends on the parliament’s gender sensitivity and awareness, and its policies and structures. Consequently parliaments have an important responsibility to raise awareness and address this problem of political harassment. Traditional roles, gender roles, must be seriously challenged ... and legislators, both men and women, must lead in the promotion of gender equality. We therefore welcome this initiative and look forward to the support of the Group of Women Parliamentarians and ParlAmericas as we move this process forward.”

MINISTER ALVINA REYNOLDS

Caribbean perspectives on political harassment

The first session featured a panel on the conceptualization of the problem and recent trends in the Caribbean subregion of harassment against women in politics. The speakers included Senator Irene Sandiford-Garner presenting on behalf of **Yasmin Solitahe Odlum**, Coordinator for the Caribbean at CIM;² **Tonni Brodber**, Deputy Representative of UN Women — Caribbean; and **UnaMay Gordon**, coordinator of CIWiL. The parliamentary delegates had the opportunity to hear each of them speak about



their organization’s work to combat political harassment and advance gender equality, the necessity of this work in Caribbean countries, and the primary obstacles and prospects for achieving progress.

Senator Sandiford-Garner spoke first of the CIM’s work to secure, protect and promote women’s civil and political rights, a core component of which has involved programming on political violence against women. Senator Sandiford-Garner stated, “Political violence is an expression of discrimination against women on the road to power ... in government institutions, in polling booths, in political parties, social organisations and in trade unions, and through the media.” In response, the CIM has focused on building the institutional capacity of political and electoral authorities to prevent the phenomenon’s occurrence. This involves identifying prominent challenges and appropriate policy responses through dialogue, legal and legislative reviews, and engagement with experts.

Like ParlAmericas, the work of the CIM is hemispheric in scope, though there has thus far been more engagement on this issue in Latin America³ where there has been

greater citizen and parliamentarian advocacy than in the Caribbean. However, Senator Sandiford-Garner emphasized a renewed local recognition of the problem in the wake of previous spots of activism on the topic. Recent debate has heightened awareness, as seen in the discourse sparked by prominent women parliamentarians in the Caribbean like Loretta Butler-Turner, among others.

“Today, in the Caribbean, we are breaking the silence on gender-based political violence and harassment in anticipation of a new political culture and a reconfigured public space based on real parity. Ultimately, nothing less than fierce political will—and ferocious watchdogs—will ensure women’s rights as citizens in their private, public and political lives.”

DELIVERED BY SENATOR IRENE SANDIFORD-GARNER, ON BEHALF OF YASMIN SOLITAHE ODLUM (CIM)

² As Ms. Odlum’s travel was delayed due to weather conditions, Senator Sandiford-Garner presented on her behalf, in her capacity as Barbados’ Principal Delegate to the CIM.

³ To learn more, see “[Gender and political violence in Latin America: Concepts, debates and solutions](#)” by Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín (in *Política y gobierno*, Vol. XXIII No. 1, I Semester 2016, pp. 125-157).

In her presentation, Ms. Brodber echoed the concern that gender inequality is deeply engrained in culture. She stressed that historical differences have led to power imbalances between present day social groups now reflected in institutions including parliament and political parties. To overcome this inequality, we must de-normalize structural violence, build trust, recognize and understand our privilege and channel this into a shared understanding of the situations of different individuals. From there, it is possible to create comfortable spaces for engagement.

“And I do understand the trouble for many in our region, because if a fish looks to another fish and says, ‘How is the water today?’ And the [other] fish says, ‘What do you mean the water? This is just what we’re in.’ It becomes difficult to understand the challenges. And we need to know the water that we’re swimming in, in the Caribbean. So where does it end and where does it begin? I think it begins with listening.”

TONNI BRODBER (UN WOMEN)

Ms. Brodber outlined political, legal and legislative instruments that exist nationally and internationally to help create safer spaces for women’s participation in public affairs. These included agreements like the Sustainable Development Goals and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), national legislation on political participation, codes of conduct for political parties and the media, and mentorship programs. In addition to the UN housing some of these initiatives, UN Women further supports parliaments in contributing to the fulfilment of these agreements through the provision of technical assistance and resources for legislators. Regardless of the solution pursued, Ms. Brodber emphasized the need to adapt to the cultural context and consider the capacity for implementation and accountability.

In her remarks, Ms. Gordon shared CIWiL’s mission of advancing women’s transformational leadership across the Caribbean through engagement with local organizations and the provision of direct

support for women running political campaigns. Collective action, education, and cross party dialogue were emphasized as vital to the goal of increasing the number of women in politics and other decision making spaces. After providing a number of recent examples of disrespect and harassment in the Caribbean subregion—especially in the form of gendered verbal attacks on the floor of parliament—she reflected on trends; for example, the biased interpretation of women’s leadership based on gendered stereotyping of women as overly emotional or sensitive for the “rough and tough” political realm. One of her recommendations for engendering social change was the need to recognize emotion as strength.

While Ms. Gordon drew attention to social media as a new space where harassment occurs, she also stressed its “now” power and urged participants to use these platforms to call attention to issues of harassment and inequality. Ms. Gordon reiterated her fellow presenters’ calls for codes of conduct and mentorship programs to create more

accommodating spaces for political engagement. She referenced CIWiL's successful "Boot Camp" programs and "Ready to Run" guides in different Caribbean countries that empower women to participate in politics.

"It is felt across the region that women should wait their turn until there is really nobody else ... [As seen recently] it was felt that, 'there's a man there, so where are you going?' And you're also asked to step down and wait your turn. 'Wait it out and let's see what happens in the next round.'"

UNAMAY GORDON (CIWiL)

Each of the panellists stressed the dual nature of political parties as key areas where gender-based political harassment is perpetrated, and also essential sites for implementing solutions. In the plenary discussion that

followed the panellists' remarks, family and youth was another recurring topic of interest; participants noted the importance of immediate responses alongside sustained investment in early education for gender equality to improve the situation for future generations.

Participants also discussed how many incidences clearly falling on the spectrum of gender-based political harassment are either disregarded entirely or perceived as insignificant. Research on the long-term consequences of political harassment was identified as a necessary tool to alter perceptions on the significance of the issue.

Overall, the session served as an informative, thought-provoking introduction to candid and dynamic conversations on gender-based political harassment from a parliamentary standpoint.



IN THE WORDS OF THE DELEGATE ▶

"I know now that there are regional and international organizations available to offer support to MPs who are concerned about gender-based political harassment."



Obstacles to gender-sensitive parliaments

During the next session, participants linked gender-based political harassment to the parliamentary precinct as a workplace. Former parliamentarians Ms. **Jeannine Compton-Antoine** (Saint Lucia), Honourable **Jean Augustine** (Canada), Dr. **Rosemarie Husbands-Mathurin** (Saint Lucia), and **Dame Billie Miller** (Barbados) shared personal reflections, struggles, and techniques employed to overcome gender discrimination encountered in their political careers. Their anecdotes illustrated a variety of ways parliamentary infrastructure, practices, and culture can restrict women's efficacy in their roles as members of legislatures. Importantly, they left the other delegates with strategies that were both practical and inspirational.

Ms. Compton-Antoine opened by explaining that even though she was born into a political family — her father was Saint Lucia's first prime minister and served in this role on three occasions — she was acutely aware of

the challenges facing women in politics, due to the lack of support structures and the need to manage family obligations.

She gave examples from her time as a member of the House of Assembly, where at times she was **thought of first as a woman and only second as a parliamentarian**. Gendered expectations came into play, for instance, during a period when she spoke out critically in budget and policy debates and was harshly criticized by her peers, whereas “other persons who were making no contributions of substance were patted on the back.” She was furthermore criticized for wearing the same dark suit twice (at a time when women were not permitted to wear pants in the lower house).⁴

“A man can come and wear the same suit for the entire time he’s in parliament ... For my third budget, I wore the same suit as I wore in my first budget. And the comment was, ‘do you see that she’s wearing the same suit?’ Not on the content of what I said in the house.”

MS. JEANNINE COMPTON-ANTOINE

⁴ Compare this to a mayor in Canada who wore the same suit for 15 months to all public events and council meetings without anyone noticing. He did this to highlight the double standards faced by women politicians.



On another occasion, following concerns over the nature of insults hurled during debates, Ms. Compton-Antoine was invited to a meeting of the wives of parliamentarians to discuss this troubling parliamentary conduct. Yet she was not asked to take part in any gathering with other parliamentarians that might have prompted change in this area.

She strongly advocates for **codes of conduct** to govern political engagements, stressing a systematic approach to orientations and ongoing trainings to ensure politicians are aware of expectations around acceptable behaviour. This will help transform political parties and parliament into a more respectful environment for voicing concerns, and

by extension a more diverse and effective legislative branch.

Hon. Augustine then discussed the situation in the context of Canadian politics, highlighting recent cases of harassment and online death threats directed at women premiers. There exists a need for greater documentation and access to information about instances of harassment, she said.

She then turned the conversation to the **physical elements of the building** that made the Canadian parliament a less than ideal workplace for women when she entered in 1993, becoming the first black woman elected to the House of Commons. “The Parliament of Canada was built by men to do men’s work,” she said.

Hon. Augustine explained that the design of the seats meant many women could not reach the floor without a stool; unlike the men’s facilities, women’s washrooms were located far away from the chamber so they had to miss longer amounts of time during sessions; and since microphones were not used, women who did not have booming voices that carried were viewed as weak. Sitting hours were also problematic, as sessions could begin as early as 7:30 am and continue late into the evening, which caused greater challenges for women balancing caregiving responsibilities.

To address these barriers to women’s participation, Hon. Augustine and her women colleagues established a **women’s caucus**,



which she chaired. They were teased for discussing these issues but their efforts led to a number of improvements in parliament as a workplace for women.

“If we are talking about gender equality, we need to look at structures, procedures, how we do business, and all of the symbols in Canadian society.”

HON. JEAN AUGUSTINE

Despite the changes that have been made, Hon. Augustine shared that discussions continue today on how to make the infrastructure of parliament more conducive to life outside of politics. The behavioural standards and professionalism demanded in other spaces and sectors must also be applied to the political realm. “Isn’t it time to make political life more like real life?” she said, paraphrasing a recent [news article](#) that reflects

an ongoing debate in Canada about making parliament more accessible to its members.

As a former Speaker of the House of Assembly of Saint Lucia (and former President of the Senate), Dr. Rosemarie Husbands-Mathurin spoke about the unique perspective this position afforded her to witness the gendered discrimination occurring on the floor of parliament. From this vantage point she noticed the change in behaviour of fellow parliamentarians when women spoke. “When a woman took up the floor, the men were reading newspapers, the men were having private conversations with each other,” she said. She also shared a story of the governing party putting forward a bill that was unable to pass because the House lacked quorum. Rather than reprimanding the government members who were absent, the

woman parliamentarian who abstained from voting on the bill was criticized.

Similarly, Dr. Husbands-Mathurin was continually discredited by her colleagues and questioned on how she had obtained the position of Speaker, in ways she felt a man would not have been.⁵ She was called a “political operative for the government,” despite serving in the Senate as an independent member before being appointed Speaker. Dr. Husbands-Mathurin was also frequently challenged on the decisions she made in her role, and she found that disruptive members of parliament would simply ignore her when she called for order.

To overcome the consequences of such attitudes, Dr. Husbands-Mathurin developed her own mechanisms for maintaining order effectively. When she noticed someone who was not paying attention to the remarks of a colleague, regardless of their respective party associations, she would write a note asking them to change their behaviour and have the Sergeant at Arms deliver it to the individual directly. Soon, parliamentarians began to recognize that being delivered a note meant

being reprimanded by the Speaker for your actions, and she noticed there were fewer disruptions in the legislature during women’s interventions. “I have got my authority established, but in a quiet way,” she said, recognizing how, in order to succeed in their professions, women must often devise tactics to assert their leadership in ways that are not seen as too direct or forceful to men.

Finally, Dame Miller, former deputy prime minister of Barbados, shared various lessons from her distinguished career in parliament. She began with her first campaign, which was a by-election and featured the largest crowds at speeches that she has encountered. Dame Miller said that, at some meetings, she would have bottles thrown at her and would have to duck out of the way, only continuing with her speech once this had ceased. She also told delegates that, predictably, because of her name, someone walked up and down the street one day during the campaign with a goat, making reference to how it would be a “Billie Goat” representing them in parliament if she were elected. At her next campaign event, she turned what was intended as an insult back on



itself, and embraced the nickname “Billie Goat” in her campaign. She believes it was the way she handled these types of incidents that led political opponents to be very cautious about attacking her.

⁵ Similarly, one of the young parliamentarians in attendance related how she constantly faces assumptions that “she probably slept with all the men to get where she is.”

“I always go to the dictionary, let me start there ... I went to the dictionary and I discovered that ‘harassment’ comes from the French word meaning ‘to set the dog on’ ... And there were many references to ‘dog’ in our earlier session. It came back to me, this definition. In my case, it was not the dog, it was the goat, even before I got to parliament.”

DAME BILLIE MILLER

After winning the election, Dame Miller became the third woman to sit in the Parliament of Barbados, and was the only woman at the time. She said that she often wished that there was greater representation of women, with reference to a time in particular when her party was government and was advancing a suite of legislation and social policies to which she wished other women could have lent their voices. It was 18 years before she saw two other women—both of whom she had mentored—take their seats in the legislature.

Dame Miller mentioned infrastructure limitations when she was first elected similar to those raised by Hon. Augustine,



characterizing them as “things that make life unnecessarily difficult for women when they come into parliament.” She noted that real progress was made in her legislature once she became Leader of the House and was able to decide upon parliamentary business such as sitting hours. This demonstrated the importance not only of women’s presence in parliament, but their ability to reach positions

of higher influence where they can affect changes in broader terms. Regardless of their positioning in parliament, however, Dame Miller encouraged the women delegates in attendance to become well versed in all aspects of parliamentary procedures and information. She said that this would put them at an advantage, as many members are not familiar with the underutilized avenues



they may pursue to introduce issues of importance to them.

Dame Miller then continued with further strategies for moving forward as she shared her approach to campaigning. Building “constituencies of interest,” she said, is of key importance for success in politics. She indicated this is crucial for women because it elevates their profile and value to the party and

can eventually contribute to higher standing within it. She also encouraged women to make themselves an authority on a specific issue; in her case, Dame Miller noticed other candidates were not addressing health in their platforms so she made that her issue. This led to being offered a cabinet position since she had gained specialized experience her fellow parliamentarians lacked. “Many issues will

transcend partisan politics,” she said, “and this can lead to future opportunities, such as a seat on the front bench, committee membership or a chair position.” Establishing connections with NGOs and social movements connected to the issue can provide further support.

Dame Miller emphasized the broader point that “female aspirants need to learn the politics within the politics of the political parties” in order to make the game work for them. She explained how she carefully studied things like electorate boundaries to be strategic in campaigning. As five opposition strongholds surrounded her constituency, she first worked to secure her borders and then moved inwards, whereas other candidates unnecessarily canvassed at places that were not actually part of their constituency. Having a solid plan for your constituency after election is also important, she said, as it informs your actions as a parliamentarian.

All of the speakers in this session commented that progress has been made in addressing gendered discrimination and political harassment in parliamentary affairs, but ultimately concluded that there

is still much to be done. Each echoed Ms. Compton-Antoine’s call for training for all parliamentarians, and emphasized the importance of supporting other women candidates and parliamentarians to bring about greater change. “The more women who come to parliament, the more women ... will come,” Dame Miller affirmed. These topics were similarly the focus of much of the question and answer period that followed the presentations.

“Parliament is usually not considered a workplace for women, which it should be. It’s considered a place where we have to go fight for equality. There should be no fight. Unless we get rid of that, where we ... have to be fighting, then we will not be making enough progress.”

UNAMAY GORDON (CIWiL)

Throughout the discussion period, delegates brought up additional methods for improving the gender sensitivity of parliamentary infrastructure, particularly emphasizing gender-based analysis of legislation and budgets. These exchanges

further addressed aspects of politics and campaigning that deter women from running for election in the first place, such as the process of securing a nomination from the party executive, raising adequate financial support, facing disapproval from family members,⁶ and the likelihood of negative media attention. Cross-party collaboration and media sensitization were identified as important means for overcoming these barriers in more systemic ways. Where national-level support was lacking, drawing on resources like ParlAmericas that foster regional solidarity networks was seen as another important path to positive transformations.

“How is the budget addressing gender? Where are women harmed in these sorts of things?”

DR. ROSEMARIE HUSBANDS-MATHURIN

Participants also discussed the idea of reaching a “critical mass” of women in parliament (generally considered to be 30%) as a larger number of women can have a significant impact on changing conversations

and policies to better represent and respond to women’s concerns. However, some also cautioned against conflating sex and gender; not all women will necessarily analyse legislation and budgets from a gender perspective, nor will all men necessarily lack a gender lens. As a result, participants stressed that gender sensitivity training should remain a priority in all parliaments and for all parliamentarians.

IN THE WORDS OF THE DELEGATE ▶

“A man can get away with anything, dressing anyhow, but for the women it’s so much more. And so we need support and we must form those allies.”

⁶ According to a study titled *The Female Political Career* published by the Women in Parliaments (WiP) Global Forum in conjunction with The World Bank, “Overwhelmingly, women who ran [for office] were those with supportive families. More men than women felt they could manage without strong family support which, one might say, left a large pool of male candidates standing after their families ‘voted’” (page 20).

WHAT CAN PARLIAMENTS DO TO BECOME MORE GENDER-SENSITIVE WORKPLACES?



Inter-Parliamentary Union

Facilitate a work-family balance

- Rearrange their sitting hours (e.g. by establishing compressed sitting weeks, creating schedules that start early, avoiding late voting, and aligning sitting times with the school calendar) so that parliamentarians can return to their electorates and spend more time with their families.
- Allocate space in the parliamentary building for a childcare centre and a family room so that parliamentarians can be close to their children during sittings.
- Ensure that parliamentarians—both men and women—are entitled to parental leave on the birth of their children.
- Consider alternatives where long-term parental leave cannot be implemented,

such as accepting parental leave as a legitimate reason for missing a sitting day, in addition to that of “official business.”

- Give parliamentarians who are still breastfeeding the opportunity to use a proxy vote or vote pairing so that they need not attend the sitting.

Foster a work culture free of discrimination and harassment

- Conduct a gender-based analysis of parliamentary rituals, dress codes, forms of address and commonly used language, conventions and rules.
- Provide gender-awareness training seminars for all members of parliament and ensure that induction for new members is gender-sensitive. This could take the form of mentoring

for new women parliamentarians, pairing women with experienced parliamentarians (men or women) or presentations by senior women parliamentarians on strategies to cope in the parliamentary environment.

Provide equitable resources and facilities

- Conduct a gender assessment of the facilities provided to all parliamentarians.
- Ensure that allowances and parliamentary travel entitlements are provided to parliamentarians equitably and transparently and that parliamentary delegations are gender-balanced, when possible.

Adapted from the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s [Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments](#), action area 4 “Institute or improve gender-sensitive infrastructure and parliamentary culture” p. 24-25

Media representations of women politicians

Women politicians are frequently the subjects of negative, and at times slanderous, media attention relying on gender biases that shape public opinion about women's competence in public leadership roles. Delegates at the meeting spoke of the detrimental impact this has had not only on them, but also on their families. Media coverage was frequently identified over the course of the meeting as a major deterrent to women considering entering or continuing careers in politics. The media can simultaneously be an important tool for women politicians to gain political capital and communicate their ideas and opinions to their constituents. Social media furthermore allows women in politics to directly control and time their messaging.

Because of this complex reality, the third session focused on media representations of women politicians and possible changes that could be implemented. Delegates agreed that the general approach employed by traditional press in covering politics, and

women politicians in particular, is harmful and unnecessary. It perpetuates negative stereotypes and contributes to an environment that can restrict women's political participation. More often than not, as one of the delegates pointed out, men fail to speak out and challenge attacks against women; for example in the case of abuse through social media, their silence as bystanders can serve to justify the behaviour.

“We have to visualize and vocalize the harassment, because sometimes when silence is an option and we choose that option we also participate in the harassment. So call it out.”

UNAMAY GORDON (GIWIL)

To move towards an exchange of promising practices, the delegates participated in a series of roundtable discussions and then shared recommendations that could be adopted by the media to limit the personal impacts of their stories and promote more gender sensitive reporting. Firstly, they stressed media sensitization training and education on political harassment and the personal impact



of sensational reporting. This training could be offered by NGOs and could include politicians sharing stories of the impact media has had on their lives. This should also extend to the media's analysis of legislation and its differential impacts on gender. Secondly, the development of a code of conduct for reporters was seen as a priority. Thirdly, they called for increased numbers of stories that bring attention to the significance and positive impact of the work of women at all levels of politics.

GENDER NEUTRAL COVERAGE OF WOMEN CANDIDATES AND POLITICIANS



As part of its “[Name It. Change It.](#)” campaign, the [Women’s Media Center \(WMC\)](#) released a guide on gender neutral media coverage of politicians, following research in the United States showing that language shapes actions and perceptions of reality, and that sexist media coverage drastically decreases voter confidence in women running for election. Many of their practical guidelines for journalists revolve around the **rule of reversibility**. For example:

- Avoid writing about a woman politician’s clothing or physical appearance unless that outlet has published similar articles about men in politics.
- Do not use gendered terms like “feisty,” “spirited,” or “opinionated” unless similar terms would be used to describe a man (the guide also includes a glossary of terms to help identify examples of discriminatory language).
- Do not discuss a woman politician’s identity as a mother unless she brings it up first.

By contrast, the guide recommends:

- Write about symbolically important clothing regardless of the politician’s gender.
- Ask questions about a male politician’s role as father if he speaks of it as a job qualifier.
- Question men in politics about sexist language they use.

Learn more in the [Women Media Center’s Media Guide to Gender Neutral Coverage of Women Candidates + Politicians](#).

In addition, delegates discussed strategies that individual parliamentarians could employ while engaging with the media to encourage more objective representation. The recurrent suggestions emerging from their exchange of personal experiences were:

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“We do not do enough to recognize the work of the women around us. And when we don’t recognize the work of the women around us, we don’t cause other young women to aspire to move up. Not only in politics, but in business and in leadership ... We need to put a structure together to cause that to happen so that they have somebody to look up to.”

1. Do thorough research prior to making a comment or participating in an interview.
 - Understand the agenda of the interviewer, what they want to ask, and what they hope the interview will achieve.
 - Know your message and make clear what you would like the key takeaways of your comments to be.
2. Control the timing of your engagement; only comment or take an interview when you feel comfortable with the subject matter.
 - Do not postpone addressing the issue for too long.
 - Recognize the strategic importance of silence at certain times.
3. Engage with interviewers in a personal way to build respectful relationships.
 - Create a comfortable yet professional interviewing environment.
 - Consider arranging meetings in your office rather than commenting immediately when reporters show up at meetings.
4. Find opportunities to listen to and speak with the public directly in order to build support and shape conversations.
 - Build relationships based on trust with civil society and NGOs that have shared objectives.
 - Engage with constituents through social media in ways that provide an authentic depiction of you.
5. Develop a communications strategy that helps set a precedent for the media’s engagement with parliamentarians.
 - Incorporate both traditional and social media and the practices above.
 - Have a plan for reacting quickly and effectively when issues arise.

Finally, because gender-based political harassment is a social phenomenon, delegates echoed the calls to educate the public broadly on sexism in politics in order to create more widespread pressure for media practices to change.

IN THE WORDS OF THE DELEGATES ▶

“Engage ... in a discourse about changing how we deal with each other as men and women from a perspective of respect and taking it on as a national, societal change.”

“As women, we owe it to ourselves to have our own PR. What do we want people to know about us? ... Promote the positive and allow people to make [their own] choice. What are you going to spend your time on? This daycare, the 500 children who are benefiting from this program? Or what I wore yesterday in parliament?”

“I now have a broader perspective on the issue and can see how mainstream media can influence the change needed.”



Political and legal frameworks

Following the concentration on the social and political impacts of gender-based political harassment and its impacts on the first day of the meeting, the delegates turned on the second day to formal avenues for taking action. The options addressed were legal and political reforms and new policy frameworks for responding to and preventing political harassment, at both the national and international levels. Delegates' group discussions centred on how the electoral systems and political party structures of their respective countries could be transformed to become more gender sensitive.

“Backlash comes from gendered perceptions of a threat to male superiority, control and toughness with the perceived ‘feminization’ of politics and public office. Although this problem is not new, its entry into the regional and international agenda itself is a recent phenomenon. Clearly, instruments need to be developed at the regional and international levels to provide support to countries for responding effectively.”

YASMIN SOLITAHE ODLUM (GIM)

Delegates debated at length the most structurally facilitative electoral system for increasing the number of women in parliament. Many felt that systems based on or including



elements of **proportional representation**, in which political parties receive a number of seats roughly equal to their share of popular vote support, were preferable because they better predict the election of more women to parliament than with a “**first past the post**” system (though this was also considered imperfect).

Further, they discussed the possibility of legislating a minimum number of women required on each party's candidate list for parliamentary elections. This is the case in Guyana and other ParlAmericas member legislatures with gender quota laws.⁷ However sanctions need to be sufficiently severe to ensure party compliance. In some countries, for

example, the penalty for not meeting the quota is a fine, and parties will pay this rather than attempting to meet the requirement.

Regardless of the electoral system, campaign finance rules can put women at a disadvantage. Women also face a rigorous selection process for placement on the candidate list, which can be a deterrent to participation as gendered biases among party leadership are not uncommon. Even if they make the party list, women can be overlooked when decisions are made regarding winnable seats or appointment to higher positions after they enter parliament. As a result, delegates stressed the importance of networking and community involvement for women candidates

to raise their political profile and support.

The meeting's delegates considered political parties the key gatekeepers to women's greater participation in parliamentary politics, and emphasized the potential of parties to radically level the playing field through more inclusive practices. Candidate selection was seen as the most direct way to do this; they were of the opinion that parties should prioritize the goal of gender parity throughout the process. However, the party environment must also be more welcoming and accommodating to women's leadership at high levels. Mentoring programs and women's arms or leagues were highlighted as important spaces within a party to elevate women's engagement, build constituencies of interest, and maintain pressure with respect to gender equality concerns. Delegates stressed that in many cases internal party structures must be reformed to achieve these objectives. Governing documents such as political party constitutions and

⁷ For a complete list of countries (as of 2014) in Latin America and the Caribbean with legislative quota laws, see pages 10 and 11 of “[Women in Politics and Policy in Latin America and the Caribbean](#)” by Mala Htun and Jennifer Piscopo (Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum Working Papers on Women in Politics: No. 2, Social Science Research Council)

manifestos⁸ were seen as places to formalize not only potential structural changes, but also a commitment to gender equality and a culture of respect within parties.

During this session Ms. Odlum also presented on CIM's project "Preventing, Punishing and Eradicating Political Violence against Women in the Americas," which strengthens the institutional capacity of political authorities within the framework of the Belém do Pará convention, and which supports the formulation or adaptation of policy and programmatic responses, model protocols and the review of legislative initiatives. She noted a generalized gap in terms of legislation against gender violence in the public sphere and referenced Bolivia, the only country that has adopted a specific law. As the issue is becoming more prominent on the public agenda, there is a window of opportunity to legislate, she noted, citing the cases of Costa Rica,

Ecuador, Mexico and Peru where bills have been introduced in parliament.

"Despite these advances," she noted, "from a regional perspective the response by laws that sanction this violence is still limited." Ms. Odlum also made reference to the October 2015 Inter-American Declaration on Political Harassment and Violence against Women; it promotes "the adoption, where appropriate, of regulations, programs and measures for the prevention, attention, protection, eradication of political violence and/or harassment against women, that allow the proper punishment and reparation of these acts, in the administrative, criminal, electoral norms spheres, taking into account the applicable international instruments."

Some of the recommended practices identified in the CIM's work developing anti-harassment guidelines include: identifying the most appropriate types of

⁸ For an example, see "Women's Manifesto: 10 Demands of Women of Trinidad and Tobago" released by the Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women.

Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women (Belém do Pará, 1994)

Article 4: "Every woman has the right to the recognition, enjoyment, exercise and protection of all human rights and freedoms embodied in regional and international human rights instruments. These rights include, among others ... The right to have equal access to the public service of her country and to take part in the conduct of public affairs, including decision-making."

Article 5: "Every woman is entitled to the free and full exercise of her civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and may rely on the full protection of those rights as embodied in regional and international instruments on human rights. The States Parties recognize that violence against women prevents and nullifies the exercise of these rights."

Visit CIM's website for more information on the convention and its follow-up mechanism known as MESECVI.

sanctions, prioritizing prevention, designing specialized services to care for women in situations of political violence, establishing clear mandates for critical actors (electoral institutions, political parties and the media), designing specific policies for election periods (when violence may become more extreme), obligating public institutions to produce data on the issue, and establishing specific mechanisms for the local level, among others.

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“The matter of gender-based political harassment is so entrenched in our societies that persons seem to accept it as the norm. Women are most targeted and dragged through the ‘rumour mill,’ insults, threats, verbal and physical abuse. This conversation must be propelled beyond the talk period to the direct action legislatively if such negatives must be eradicated.”

Empowering parliamentarians through research

One of the recurring tools proposed towards the objective of ending gender-based political harassment was research. There exists very limited information globally on the phenomenon, and in the Caribbean in particular there have been very few documentation efforts, limiting the prospects of developing evidence-based solutions. In this session Dr. **Gabrielle Hosein** of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies spoke to delegates about a research project she hopes to pursue to close this knowledge gap in the Caribbean subregion, and which ParlAmericas will support.

Dr. Hosein intends to undertake a series of interviews with parliamentarians from across the Caribbean about their experiences negotiating gender-based political harassment and, importantly, the outcomes of strategies employed to overcome it. The proposed project would further understanding of the issue, informed directly by the insight and stories of politicians who have encountered it firsthand.

This research method would also ensure the project's relevance for parliamentarians, as it would collect, analyze, and then disseminate best practices.

The delegates expressed their strong agreement that this research was necessary in the Caribbean. One of the concrete benefits the delegates saw from such a project was that the results could be used to build a case and defend the need to respond to the issue with the gravity it merits. Both the parliamentarians and experts in attendance spoke about the



direction they felt the research should take. After participating in roundtable discussions to get a sense of their colleagues' perspectives and experiences, they shared the **research questions** they thought should be examined.

The questions delegates developed covered a range of concerns related to gender-based political harassment. It was evident they felt the project should gather **Caribbean-specific data** to document not only the extent of the issue in the region, but also illustrate how it is currently interpreted by parliamentarians.⁹ Participants felt it was valuable to understand whether individuals viewed themselves as having personally been a victim of gender-based political harassment, how they were affected, and what strategies they have employed or would recommend for negotiating these situations. Within this, they also hoped to understand how the nature of the experiences of women and men differed.¹⁰

In addition to building consensus on what constitutes gender-based political harassment and the specificities of the phenomenon in the Anglophone Caribbean context, participants placed importance on the proposed project's emphasis on the responsiveness of various



tools (e.g. protocols, policies, legislation), the actors that could play a role in improving the situation, and the role of culture.

“Have you ever been politically harassed or witnessed political harassment? If harassed, has it been mentally, physically or verbally? What was the source of the harassment? (ex: party, media, opposition, general public, etc.)”

“If a [woman] member of your political organization says, ‘I have been politically harassed,’ a) what do you understand [her] to be saying? B) what would you do? How would you seek to engage your male counterparts in order to win their support, advice, partnership in the sharing of best practices that would lead towards the eradication of political harassment?”

⁹ While they did not feel this should be a focus area of the research, several delegates felt it was worth interrogating how gender and sexuality can be invoked advantageously in the political environment, in order to better understand the way notions of masculinity and femininity can both damage and benefit politicians. They agreed that while people are often quick to point out when they believe women are “playing the gender card,” it is less common to see recognition of men’s reliance on notions of gender and sexuality in their political campaigning and work.

¹⁰ In discussing examples of how manhood can come into play in the harassment faced by men in politics, the most frequently mentioned insults were homophobic in nature; they also tended to revolve around ideas of impotence vs. virility, in addition to comments on weight.

“Are there any frameworks, formal or informal, to address conduct between members (a) in your party and (b) in your parliament? If so, are they enforced? Is there any special effort by your party or parliament to eliminate sexual harassment?”

“Where/what would be the best entry point to address gender-based political harassment? What remedial actions should be instituted to address the issues of gender-based political harassment? Do you think the issue is understood enough to be debated at a national level?”

“How do you feel you can generally contribute ... other than in legislation ... in ending political harassment? What sources of support can Caribbean women count on locally or regionally? What role can the family play in preventing political harassment?”

IN THE WORDS OF THE DELEGATE ▶

“It must be exposed. We must not just hear about it, we must know the facts about it.”



All of the delegates in attendance confirmed their interest in taking part in Dr. Hosein’s project as research participants. They also agreed that the format of the research results should be accessible to parliamentarians, as well as youth groups, the women’s arms of political parties, and grassroots organizations.

Developing work plans

In the final session, the delegates reflected on the lessons of the meeting and discussed the roles they could each play in combatting gender-based political harassment in their respective countries. Parliamentarians then committed themselves to taking the specific actions that would allow them to have the greatest personal impact in addressing the issue. Each delegate designed a work plan that outlined their individual commitment, as well as the steps, resources and other support necessary for its achievement. Two examples of the work plans are discussed below.

The long term objective of one parliamentarian was to ensure that the issue is discussed at all levels. “I am committed to breaking the silence on political harassment,” she stated. Some of the principal stages and resources she identified in working towards this objective included: gathering information from the individuals present at the meeting, drafting a statement and social media postings, requesting research be conducted on the local situation, organizing a debate on the issue

for university students, preparing reports for Cabinet and the Party Executive, and submitting a motion for parliamentary debate. Among the support networks she planned to draw upon were ParlAmericas, her political party, prominent political figures in her country, and civil society groups.

The approach of another parliamentarian was focused on awareness raising and education, particularly among youth as a means of countering the declining political participation of this segment of the population. The key steps he identified to achieving this included engaging high school students in political processes initiatives like youth voting, and meeting with the relevant ministers and colleagues from all parties to lobby for gender issues to be debated in the next youth parliament. His commitment to action for the following week was to make a member’s statement on the meeting and arrange a meeting with the ministers for education and youth.

These individual work plans reflect the common themes and strategies for moving forward that surfaced frequently throughout

the course of the meeting: broader **education and awareness** on the issue, the creation of **support structures**, engagement with **youth** in order to transform culture, and cementing formal commitments to action among political leaders. They also highlight the variety of ways in which individual parliamentarians can begin to address this issue and help to drive broader, systemic change.



CLOSING



The meeting was closed with remarks by President of the Senate Claudius Francis, on behalf of the host parliament of Saint Lucia. President Francis congratulated and thanked delegates for their work over the course of the two day meeting.

IN THE WORDS OF THE DELEGATES ▶

“I’m motivated to speak out more on this subject and to give greater support to victims.”

“The actions taken against women in the region is alarmingly extreme. This type of forum is an organized way of engaging women to stand up and participate in positive action to end political harassment and encourage more women to enter elective politics.”

“I knew first hand of the political harassment since I have been a victim of it for more than two decades. I was astounded by the widespread aspect of [it] across the region and around the world. I am now more empowered about the numerous strategies which I can devise and implement in my quest to eradicate such a scourge. I am energized to share my experiences with other MPs ... I shall use every opportunity to work with my constituents to minimize their acceptance of [political harassment].”

PARTICIPANTS



Delegates representing the following parliaments

- Antigua and Barbuda
- The Bahamas
- Barbados
- Belize
- Canada
- Dominica
- Grenada
- Guyana
- Jamaica
- Saint Kitts and Nevis
- Saint Lucia
- Trinidad and Tobago

Subject matter experts representing the following organizations

- UN Women Multi-Country Office — Caribbean
- Inter-American Commission of Women of the Organization of American States
- Caribbean Institute of Women in Leadership
- Institute for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies



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