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The Time is Now: Making Our Parliaments a Safe Workplace

ABSTRACT

Australia's federal parliament made headlines in many parts of the world this year, sadly for all the wrong reasons.

There were already allegations & accusations of sexual harassment and then there was a shocking allegation of rape which is now before the courts.

Women MPs and party members have complained publicly about the behaviour of men, but nothing changed.

We now have that opportunity to change our parliament to make it a safe workplace and a place where women are respected but will we and are we bold enough?

The impact of the Covid pandemic on women's economic and personal safety

There is no doubt that the global Covid-19 pandemic has changed our lives and what we know already is that it's made the lives of women harder, not easier. It is women as front-line workers who have been most at risk over the pandemic, women who have gone out to work and picked up the majority of home-schooling and caring for others. We know that rates of domestic and sexual violence have risen exponentially during the pandemic and calls to domestic violence services are at record highs.

Covid has impacted our economies and our responses in ways in which we could never have imagined. Most countries have in some form or another restricted people's movement, but the impact on economies has been huge. International and domestic border closures, lockdowns, social distancing rules, closure of hospitality venues and highly restricted international and domestic tourism opportunities have severely reduced economic activity. Schools and universities have been closed for months at a time and in countries such as Australia, the loss of international university students has created new economic burdens for universities.

Most governments have had to intervene with stimulus packages and direct payments to individuals and households as work was reduced or stopped. Whilst these packages were essential for many families and small businesses to survive, they have created massive debt burdens for future generations.

The pandemic has certainly highlighted the heavy reliance on international supply chains, created labour shortages and put a spotlight on the widespread nature of precarious employment.

Just this week the International Monetary Fund warned that the pandemic has caused a "dangerous divergence" in the economic outlook of rich and developing countries.

In its latest World Economic Outlook report, the IMF suggests most rich countries will return to their pre-pandemic growth paths next year and will be ahead of them by 2024. By contrast, the output of developing countries (excluding China) will still be 5.5 per cent below pre-pandemic forecasts in 2024, resulting in a "larger setback to improvements in their living standards".[1]

It has been the low paid and women who across the world are the frontline workers in the pandemic – cleaners, carers, hospital workers, childcare workers, teachers and so on. The

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[1] International Monetary Fund. 2021. World Economic Outlook: Recovery during a Pandemic—Health Concerns, Supply Disruptions, Price Pressures. Washington, DC, October.
https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/10/12/world-economic-outlook-october-2021

World Health Organisation estimates that 70 per cent of healthcare workers - both paid and unpaid - across the world are women. These workers will become even more marginalised in a "post-pandemic" world.

Economic conditions will continue to tighten – food prices increase, and reduced government support will "raise the risk of social unrest".

Australian Women's Economic Security Statement 2020

The Australian Government published its most recent Women's Economic Security Statement in October last year[2]. Between February and May 2020, 162,000 women lost employment in accommodation and food services, making up 58.3 per cent of total employment lost in the industry. In the same period, 72,000 women lost employment in retail trade, making up 87.1 per cent of total employment lost in the industry. Young women have been hit particularly hard by COVID-19, accounting for one third of the total fall in women's employment.

The Government's statement provides data that shows women's workforce participation was at the highest it has ever been before the pandemic. It increased from 58.7% in 2013 to 61.5% in January 2020, and the gender pay gap was at a record low of 13.9%.

The impacts of the pandemic quickly demonstrated how precarious this progress was for women. It had been achieved on increases in employment that were highly insecure and vulnerable to external forces.

International contexts

Sadly, we know that the impacts of the pandemic in other countries have even further exacerbated existing inequalities for women.

In September last year UN Women published data showing the pandemic's economic toll on women.

Women who are poor and marginalized face an even higher risk of COVID-19 transmission and fatalities, loss of livelihood, and increased violence. Globally, 70 per cent of health workers and first responders are women, and yet, they are not at par with their male counterparts. At 28 per cent, the gender pay gap in the health sector is higher than the overall gender pay gap (16 per cent).

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[2] Australia. Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2020). *Women's Economic Security Statement 2020*. https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/images/wess/wess-2020-report.pdf

For the last 22 years, extreme poverty globally had been declining. Then came COVID-19, and with it, massive job losses, shrinking of economies and loss of livelihoods, particularly for women. Weakened social protection systems have left many of the poorest in society unprotected, with no safeguards to weather the storm.

As UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned at the outset of the pandemic in April last year *"COVID-19 could reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women's rights".* Unfortunately, we have seen this prediction come true on many fronts and the impacts will likely follow on long after the health crisis subsides.

UN Women reported at that time that since the start of the pandemic, in Europe and Central Asia, 25 per cent of self-employed women had lost their jobs, compared to 21 per cent of men — a trend that is expected to continue as unemployment rises. The International Labour Organization projected that the equivalent of 140 million full-time jobs may be lost due to COVID-19; and women's employment is 19 per cent more at risk than men.[3]

Estimates from UN Women show that an additional 11 million girls may leave school by the end of the COVID crisis. In previous crises impacting the accessibility of education, such as the most recent Ebola outbreak, many girls did not return to education.

And as we know from the data available in Australia, women's economic insecurity increases the risk of gender-based violence.

Due to reduced access to sufficient economic resources, and government restrictions, such as lockdowns and travel limits which restrict the ability to leave the house, women are unable to escape abusive partners and face a greater threat of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

UN Women made five recommendations to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on women and girls:

1. Direct income support to women
2. Support for women-owned and -led businesses
3. Support for women workers
4. Support for informal workers
5. Reconciliation of paid and unpaid work, providing primary caregivers with paid leave and flexible working arrangements.

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[3] **UN Women (2020).** *COVID-19 and its economic toll on women: The story behind the numbers*.

https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women

These initial impacts of the pandemic on women are continuing, however there is now the added consideration of access to vaccines, which creates an even larger gap for the world's most vulnerable women - migrant workers, refugees, marginalised racial and ethnic groups, youth and the world's poorest.

Countries such as Papua New Guinea, our close neighbour, have limited access to reliable information about the virus, safe and secure places to quarantine, and to testing, and very limited access to reliable high efficacy vaccines. The fully vaccinated rate is one of the lowest if not the lowest in the world at just over 1% of the population.

There does not appear to be readily available data on the gender breakdown for vaccination rates in PNG, though CARE International recently published data showing that only one woman for every three men is being vaccinated against COVID-19 in 16 of the world's lowest income countries.[4]

In high-income countries, slightly more women are getting vaccinated, and more vaccine hesitancy arises amongst men, a trend seen in Australia. However, in many low- and middle-income countries, it is the opposite, with scarce health resources often placing men's wellbeing above women. This gap is resulting from difficulty in getting to health clinics, lack of permission from husbands and other male relatives, and a lack of accurate information about vaccine side effects.

In Papua New Guinea, there is widespread hesitancy about vaccines, with most people relying on social media for information rather than health professionals. The rural nature of PNG, plus its challenging geography, makes controlling the virus very difficult. There are heartbreaking stories of pregnant women dying with the virus. Of course, PNG's health systems have been completely overwhelmed. Sadly, these stories are not unique across the world and there are many countries that have been and are continuing to be challenged by the virus.

These experiences of women in general society have also been mirrored in some ways in our political and parliamentary systems during the pandemic. Discussion of this has particularly intersected in Australia with the long-overdue focus and call for action on increasing women's safety in our political and parliamentary settings.

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[4] CARE International (2021) *Women in Low-Income Countries Denied Access to COVID Vaccines, New Research Reveals. https://www.care-international.org/news/press-releases/women-in-low-income-countries-denied-access-to-covid-vaccines-new-research-reveals*

Women's political inclusion and participation during and after the pandemic

Michelle Ryan, a co-author of the theory of the glass cliff, has spoken about how women are often handed the opportunity of leadership roles in crisis. Consequently, when they fail to overcome the crisis, their gender is attributed to the reasons that they failed.[5]

Conversely, in the initial responses to the pandemic, a common theme was how countries with women leaders fared better than many male-lead countries. The policies and strategies of Germany's Angela Merkel and New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern were held up as proactive, decisive and compassionate, leading to more effective control of the virus and limiting negative impacts on their societies and economies.

How might these positive depictions of women leaders during the pandemic crisis have influenced women's inclusion and participation in politics more widely?

In recent research, two trends have emerged on the impacts of the pandemic on women's inclusion in the political system.

In some ways complimenting the glass cliff theory, research published in December last year suggests that exceptional environments - in particular public health crises, but often also involving conflict and political corruption scandals which are accompanied by downturns in public trust - can generate public support for female political representation.[6]

Such environments may promote female candidates either because they increase the demand for desirable qualities associated with women or because they focus voters' attention on issues that women are perceived to be especially competent in addressing.

The second trend, encapsulated in research published by both the UN Women Expert Group and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace[7], finds that conditions that affect women and have been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic, may in turn discourage women from becoming involved in political activity.

UN Women recommended that further research is needed to examine to what extent these developments will have negative consequences for political representation, including for achieving greater gender equality in elected and appointed office.

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[5] Ryan, M., Haslam, S. & Kulich, C. (2010). Politics and the Glass Cliff: Evidence that Women are Preferentially Selected to Contest Hard-to-Win Seats. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 34. 56-64.

6 Piazza, K.S. & Diaz, G. (2020). Light in the midst of chaos: COVID-19 and female political representation. *World Development.* 136.

[7] Brechenmacher, S. & Hubbard, C. (2020). *How the Coronavirus Risks Exacerbating Women's Political Exclusion.* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Brechenmacher_Hubbard_Women_Exclusion.pdf

From the outset of the pandemic and continuing into the second year, the social and economic impacts have weakened *"hard-won gains for women and girls in education and the paid employment, to intensify social tensions and weaken public trust in politics, as well as to undermine democratic processes and institutions through sidelining parliaments and postponing elections, with potentially negative consequences for the advancement of women's participation and empowerment."*[8]

The advice published by the UN Women Expert Group at the 65th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women in October 2020, recommended that the entity commissions new research documenting the systematic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's participation, empowerment, and the threat of violence against women in public office, coordinating this initiative with the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, officials in national parliaments and local governments, and NGOs.

This recommendation is particularly important in the context of women's safety in our parliaments. Despite the heavy burden the pandemic has inflicted on women, our voices are still not equally represented across the world in our parliaments. I further acknowledge that our focus in Australia needs to be on electing First Nations women and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union, or IPU, is the leading body in monitoring the representation and experiences of women in political and parliamentary systems internationally. However, as one of the other largest representative bodies of political representation in the world, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association significantly lags on concrete responses to monitor and act on empowering women in our parliamentary systems.

Actions needed to make our parliaments into safer and more inviting places for women

Recording of data on women parliamentarians

A key point made in any discussion of changing the culture of parliamentary representation and experiences for women is that more women are needed in these spaces. Not just elected representatives but political advisers and other roles intersecting with parliamentarians, including the media and bureaucratic roles.

The CPA currently does not publish numbers of women parliamentarians across the Commonwealth. We need to manually select the Commonwealth countries from the IPU's published monthly ranking of women in national parliaments to gather this information.

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[8] Norris, P. (2020). *The State of Women's Participation and Empowerment: New Challenges to Gender Equality.* UN Women. https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/norris_state%20of%20womens%20participation%20and%20empowerment_bp1_csw65egm.pdf?la=en&vs=1554

Measuring on numbers in a parliament's lower house, where government is formed, Australia's Federal Parliament ranks 11th out of Commonwealth countries, 57th out of all global national parliaments.

Rank (IPU)	Country	Region	Lower House		
			Seats*	Women	% W
1	Rwanda	East Africa	80	49	61.3
6	New Zealand	Oceania (Australasia and Polynesia)	120	59	49.2
9	Grenada	West Indies	15	7	46.7
16	Namibia	Southern Africa	104	46	44.2
38	Tanzania	East Africa	388	143	36.9
39	Guyana	South America	70	25	35.7
43	Dominica	West Indies	32	11	34.4
44	United Kingdom	Northern Europe	650	222	34.2
45	Cameroon	Central Africa	180	61	33.9
46	Uganda	East Africa	556	188	33.8
57	Australia	Oceania (Australasia)	151	47	31.1
59	Canada	Northern America	338	103	30.5
61	Singapore	Southeast Asia	104	31	29.8

Table 1: Top 13 Commonwealth Countries ranked by number of women in lower houses or unicameral parliaments. [9]

Rwanda tops both the IPU and the CPA ranks with 49 out of the 80 seats in their parliament held by women – 61.3 per cent, over 12 per cent higher than the next CPA member country, New Zealand. Two Commonwealth parliaments currently have no women, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu.

Women constitute an average of just 26 per cent of parliamentarians globally in lower houses.

Rwanda's achievement in this area has been credited to the introduction of a mandatory quota of 30 per cent for women in elected positions, implemented through the 2003 constitution, barely a decade after the genocide, and political parties adopting their own voluntary quotas.[10]

However, even though women have held the majority of seats for several years, many women leaders still report that their competency and capabilities are questioned within the parliament and on a broader societal level.

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[9] Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2021). *Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments – 1 October 2021.* https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=10&year=2021
[10] Gomez, J. & Koppell, C. (2008). *Advancing Women's Caucuses in Legislatures.* The Institute for Inclusive Security. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Advancing%20Women%27s%20Caucuses%20in%20Legislatures.pdf

One approach to strengthen the position of women is the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians, established in 1996 by the transitional government, just a couple of years after the genocide. The Forum is a powerful caucus to which all female members of parliament belong, irrespective of political party or ethnicity.

The Forum builds the capacity of women parliamentarians, and advocates for a gender perspective in legislation. Its achievements include a reduction in discrimination against women in nationality and citizenship laws, the securing of women's inheritance and land ownership rights, and the development of gender-based violence legislation that incorporated community consultation and support.[11]

The Rwanda example illustrates how the outcome of a mandatory quota won't necessarily result in a change of culture and attitudes; discrimination will still occur. What is needed are structural and procedural changes enabled through bringing more women into government, creating a safer parliament for those women, and strengthening legislators' capacity to draft inclusive laws.

However, as a trans-national representative organisation, the CPA must provide a similar, easily accessible ranking system such as the IPU does. Whilst the CPA undertakes research and assistance on many issues, it doesn't specifically focus on gender equality as an organisation in any actionable way. It would seem to me at least this is a huge failing in the role of the CPA. Particularly as much time and resources are allocated to promoting democracy, but that it ignores a fundamental tenant of democracy in ensuring that women can vote and that women are elected to Commonwealth parliaments in equal numbers to men.

Regular survey of experiences of women in Commonwealth parliaments

The IPU also leads the way in conducting surveys to record the experiences of women in parliaments when it comes to their safety. In 2016 and 2018 the IPU, in conjunction with the Council of Europe, conducted a survey into sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe.

The 2018 study surveyed 123 women from 45 European countries, 81 of these women were members of parliament and 42 were members of the parliamentary staff. Some of the shocking results showed:

▪ 85.2 per cent of female MP respondents said that they had suffered psychological violence during their term of office.

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[11] UN Women. (2018). *Revisiting Rwanda five years after record-breaking parliamentary elections.* *https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/8/feature-rwanda-women-in-parliament*

▪ 46.9 per cent had received death threats or threats of rape or beating.

▪ 58.2 per cent had been the target of online sexist attacks on social networks.

▪ 67.9 per cent had been the target of comments relating to their physical appearance or based on gender stereotypes.

▪ 24.7 per cent had suffered sexual violence.

▪ 14.8 per cent had suffered physical violence.

• Female MPs under the age of 40 were more frequently subject to psychological and sexual harassment.

• Female MPs active in the fight against gender inequality and violence against women were often singled out for attack.[12]

The undertaking of this survey correlates with UN Women's recommendation to conduct research documenting the systematic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's participation, empowerment, and the threat of violence against women in public office.

If we don't count and record these experiences, how is anything going to change?

As an organisation, the CPA must take advantage of a global push for reform in how parliaments respond to harassment and abuse of women working there.

The experiences of women in three parliaments of the Commonwealth, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, have been the subject of political and public soul-searching over recent years.

All three parliaments have conducted inquiries into allegations made by women, both MPs and staff, against male colleagues. All three have resisted fully implementing the recommendations that came from these inquiries.

As we saw, Australia's parliament recently introduced a new policy on managing allegations of sexual harassment, after several alleged and confirmed incidences, including Brittany Higgins allegation that she had been raped by a fellow male staffer in Parliament House in 2019 - an allegation she said had not been acted upon by her ministerial employers since that time.

In the *Commonwealth Priorities for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2017– 2020 and Beyond*, it is alarming to read that we are committed to ensuring more women in

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[12] Inter-Parliamentary Union & Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. (2018). *Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe.* https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2018-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-europe

leadership roles, in owning businesses, to eradicating violence and poverty, but nowhere does it mention or measure women's participation in democracy through election to parliaments.

I am proposing two statements for inclusion in the conference's final report that would go towards bridging the gap between the CPA's stated commitments to women parliamentarians and measurable action in this space:

Statements
- The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association will introduce and publish on their website a monthly ranking of women in national parliaments, using data published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and work towards collecting and publishing data on women in Commonwealth sub-national parliaments.
- The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association will conduct and publish on their website a survey into sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians and staff in Commonwealth parliaments.

Conclusion

This covid pandemic took the world by surprise. The virus has consumed our thinking, planning and responding, almost to the exclusion of other issues.

It's in environments like this that women fare worse. With bureaucracies and services focussed on the pandemic, there's no doubt women across the world have been among the biggest losers.

Women's responsibilities have increased whilst at the same time women's vulnerabilities are intensifying.

Now is our opportunity to make lasting systemic change, to make a commitment to drive profound and sustainable change. A change where women's leadership and equal participation and influence are the norm. Across the CPA we can mobilise women political leaders to drive real legislative and societal transformation to equality across politics, the private sector and civil society.