



PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

Policy Statement: Preventing Violence¹ Against Parliamentarians in the Global Context of Democratic Backsliding

Board of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting on the 16th of December, 2021;

The world of today is marked by armed violence and conflict in combination with a decline in democracy. The current global COVID-19 pandemic further aggravates this situation. As highlighted in Global Peace Index's report from 2021, the average level of global peacefulness continues to deteriorate², further contributing to the challenge of advancing towards the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this regard, parliamentarians have a critical role in ensuring that the socio-economic and democratic gains achieved until today are not jeopardised, as to promote the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda.

In a democratic system, parliamentarians, as the elected representatives of the people, represent all different segments of society. The parliament can only fulfil its role if parliamentarians' right to freedom of expression is protected, which is essential for parliamentarians to be able to speak out on behalf of constituents.³ Democracy is commonly regarded as necessary for safeguarding human rights, freedom, and equality, as well as for strengthening peace and sustainable development. However, a recent upward trend of violence against parliamentarians⁴ undermines the right to freedom of expression of

¹ As stated by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the concept of violence includes ill-treatment, acts of violence and harassment, as well as human rights abuses and violations (e.g. undue suspension and loss of parliamentary mandate, lack of fair trial and other unfair proceedings, threats and acts of intimidation, and violation of freedom of expression).

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). 2020. Annual IPU figures reveal increasing violence against parliamentarians, especially women MPs. Last accessed 2021. 12.07 <https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2020-12/annual-ipu-figures-reveal-increasing-violence-against-parliamentarians-especially-women-mps>

² Global Peace Index 2021.2021. The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP). p.2.

³ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). 2016. Human Rights Handbook for Parliamentarians. Last accessed 2021.11.24 <https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/handbookparliamentarians.pdf> p.91.

⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). 2020. Annual IPU figures reveal increasing violence against parliamentarians, especially women MPs. Last accessed 2021.10.28 <https://bit.ly/2Zx4iaI>
United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/38/25. Last accessed 2021.12.07 <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/38/25> p.5.

parliamentarians, which is generally protected by parliamentary immunity to ensure their autonomy, independence and dignity in the parliamentary function. Parliamentarians need immunity to express themselves freely without fear of any threat, intimidation or arbitrary measure by public officials or other persons.⁵ Efforts must therefore be made to ensure that adequate conditions are in place in which parliamentarians can exercise their parliamentary work safely, in order to safeguard the freedom of parliamentarians to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds⁶ without fear of violence.

As an international organisation of parliamentarians, the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons (hereinafter: the Forum) is convinced that parliamentarians are key actors for contributing to sustainable peace and development in view of their legislative, oversight and awareness-raising functions. In this context, the Forum's Theory of Change is to contribute to the achievement of more peaceful and sustainably developed societies by enhancing parliamentary action in the implementation and universalisation of international frameworks relevant to the prevention and reduction of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)-related violence through capacity-building, policy-shaping and awareness-raising.

The need to strengthen democratic institutions and restore institutional confidence is more critical than ever, especially following the dire consequences and developments during the current COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has exacerbated the threats towards democracy through the imposition of states of emergency, the spread of disinformation and crackdowns on freedom of expression.⁷ Members of parliaments around the world have experienced abuses, harassment,⁸ online violence⁹ and received death threats.¹⁰ In 2020, for example, 552 parliamentarians from 42 countries suffered from human rights violations, with 85 per cent of them being members of opposition parties.¹¹ In light of aforementioned serious facts, the Forum emphasises the importance of safeguarding parliamentarians' freedom of expression and immunity, as to protect democracy and promote more peaceful and sustainably developed societies.

⁵ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). 2016. Human Rights Handbook for Parliamentarians. Last accessed 2021.11.24 <https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/handbookparliamentarians.pdf> p.92

⁶ United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/23/40. Last accessed 2021.11.20 https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session23/A.HRC.23.40_EN.pdf p.6.

⁷ IDEA.2021. Global State of Democracy Report: Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era. Last accessed 2021.11.20 <https://www.idea.int/gsod/global-report>

⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). 2020. Annual IPU figures reveal increasing violence against parliamentarians, especially women MPs. Last accessed 2021.10.28 <https://bit.ly/2Zx4iaI>

⁹ UN Women. Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report & Recommendations. Last accessed 2021.12.03 <EGM-report-Violence-against-women-in-politics-en.pdf> (unwomen.org)

¹⁰ Deutsche Welle (DW). 2021. Politicians across the world face growing dangers. Last accessed 2021.12.03 <https://www.dw.com/en/politicians-across-the-world-face-growing-dangers/a-59542600>

¹¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). 2020. Annual IPU figures reveal increasing violence against parliamentarians, especially women MPs. Last accessed 2021.10.28 <https://bit.ly/2Zx4iaI>

Both men and women parliamentarians have been victims of the above-mentioned violations of rights. Women in politics are specifically targeted because of their gender, where women parliamentarians are subjected to sexist threats or sexual aggression.¹² This tendency violates parliamentary immunity, which is used to protect parliamentarians' right to exercise their function. This is also a type of discrimination against women that is forbidden by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1979¹³, that requires States to use due diligence in preventing, investigating, and punishing acts of violence against women.¹⁴

Violence against women in politics, including women parliamentarians, has generally gone unnoticed as it has largely been normalised; abuse, harassment, and assault being perceived as an integrated part of the function.¹⁵ Violence against women parliamentarians includes not only physical harm but also psychological violence. Moreover, the global COVID-19 pandemic appears to have sparked more online violence against women in parliaments¹⁶, via social media and other platforms, with a disproportionate impact because of its ripple effect. Women in politics are 27 times more likely than male colleagues to receive online abuse, according to Amnesty International.¹⁷

It is essential to highlight that the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs are mutually reinforcing and indivisible, and their realisation is therefore mutually dependent. In this context, women play a vital role in identifying sustainable solutions to the challenges posed by poverty, inequality, armed conflict and violence, which are critical to the successful achievement of the SDGs. However, the high number of women parliamentarians facing widespread sexism, harassment and violence not only poses a threat to the implementation of SDG 5 on Gender Equality but also jeopardise democracy strengthening in general. Furthermore,

¹² National Democratic Institute (NDI). 2021. Not the Cost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics: A Renewed Call to Action. Last accessed 2021.10.28 [NTC EXEC SUMMARY 2021 ENGLISH FINAL.pdf \(ndi.org\)](https://www.ndi.org/NTC_EXEC_SUMMARY_2021_ENGLISH_FINAL.pdf) p.1.

¹³ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Last accessed 2021.11.20 <https://www.ohchr.org/documents/professionalinterest/cedaw.pdf>

¹⁴ United Nations General Assembly, A/73/301. <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/73/301> Last accessed 2021.10.28 p.17.

¹⁵ National Democratic Institute (NDI). 2021. Not the Cost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics: A Renewed Call to Action. Last accessed 2021.10.28 [NTC EXEC SUMMARY 2021 ENGLISH FINAL.pdf \(ndi.org\)](https://www.ndi.org/NTC_EXEC_SUMMARY_2021_ENGLISH_FINAL.pdf) p.3.

¹⁶ Parliamentarians for Global Action. 2021. S.T.O.P Violence Against Women Parliamentarians. Last accessed 2021.10.28 [S.T.O.P. Violence Against Women Parliamentarians - News and Activities \(pgaction.org\)](https://www.pgaction.org/S.T.O.P.Violence.Against.Women.Parliamentarians-News.and.Activities)

¹⁷ Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK. 2021. Online violence against women parliamentarians hinders democracy, and all parliamentarians are responsible for addressing it. Last accessed 2021.10.28 <https://bit.ly/3q0iWCD>

violence or threats against women in politics is risking dissuading other women from entering politics.¹⁸

Since its foundation, the Forum has highly prioritised promoting the active participation of women as decision-makers in peace and security process. Moreover, the gender equality perspective is also integrated into the Forum's work through the thematic inclusion of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, including in capacity building, policy-shaping and awareness-raising activities. Therefore, the Forum's engagement related to the WPS agenda, through the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and subsequent resolutions, has bolstered women's active and full participation in parliaments, which is crucial for the development of more peaceful, democratic, and sustainable societies.

A worrying trend worldwide can be noted where democratically elected governments, including established democracies, are increasingly adopting authoritarian strategies to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁹. The pressure on opposition parliamentarians has intensified in several countries, particularly as they criticise governments' anti-democratic attitudes, such as abusing power or weakening critical institutions under the pretence of countering COVID-19. In other words, the pandemic has allowed some governments to silence opposition parliamentarians by using lockdown laws to detain or violate their rights.²⁰ This development has detrimental effects on freedom of expression and inclusive democracy. As the Nobel Peace Prize Committee noted in 2021, one cannot promote international fraternity, disarmament, and a better world order without freedom of expression.²¹ For this reason, all parliamentarians, including women parliamentarians, parliamentarians from minority groups and opposition members, must be protected from harassments. Otherwise, it undermines democracy and peacebuilding by increasing the risks of parliamentarians refraining from active participation in political life.

As emphasised in SDG 16, strong institutions are key factors for sustainable development, in particular during the current COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated democratic backsliding worldwide.²² In this regard, parliamentarians are key actors for achieving the SDGs and advancing the crucial approaches to democratic strengthening, as outlined in the parliamentary handbook "*Assuring Our Common Future*" in support of the UN Secretary

¹⁸ National Democratic Institute (NDI). 2021. Not the Cost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics: A Renewed Call to Action. Last accessed 2021.10.28 [NTC EXEC SUMMARY 2021 ENGLISH FINAL.pdf \(ndi.org\)](#) p. 4.

¹⁹ IDEA.2021. Global State of Democracy Report: Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era. Last accessed 2021.11.20 <https://www.idea.int/gsod/global-report>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The Peace Nobel Prize. 2021. Last accessed 2021.11.08 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2021/press-release/>

²² Freedom House. 2020. Democracy Under Lockdown: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom. Last accessed 2021.11.08 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/democracy-under-lockdown>

General's (SG) Disarmament Agenda.²³ Therefore, investing in parliamentary institutions and organisations is imperative, contributing to protecting democracy, effective governance as well as parliamentarians' right to exercise the democratic and parliamentary function. Failing to address the serious situation and protect the human rights of parliamentarians could pave the way for authoritarian rule and lead to distrust in the democratic system.

Lastly, as mentioned in the UN Resolution on the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, "Sustainable development cannot be realised without peace and security; and peace and security will be at risk without sustainable development"²⁴. Due to their multifunctional roles, parliamentarians are key actors in contributing to peace, security, and sustainable development. Therefore, human rights violations against parliamentarians not only impair democracy but also jeopardise the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, which aims to establish more peaceful, democratic and sustainable societies. The Forum's effort to strengthen the capacity of its members is relevant not only in terms of SALW-related violence; it also contributes to increased parliamentary ownership, political accountability, and the overall function of parliaments, ultimately safeguarding democracy.

Objectives

The Board of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting on the 16th of December, 2021;

Acknowledges increasing violence against parliamentarians worldwide, a situation further exacerbated by the current COVID-19 pandemic;

Condemns strongly all forms of violence targeting parliamentarians;

Expresses solidarity with all parliamentarians subjected to violence;

Recognises violence against parliamentarians as an obstacle to democracy as well as for the achievement of more peaceful and sustainably developed societies;

Acknowledges the need to improve the conditions for parliamentarians exposed to violence, including women parliamentarians; and prevent the risk it poses to democratic institutions;

²³ Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (PNND), Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA), Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons (PFSALW), World Future Council (WFC) and The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA). 2020. Assuring Our Common Future: A Guide to Parliamentary Action in Support of Disarmament for Security and Sustainable Development. Last accessed 2021.11.08 https://disarmamenthandbook.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/disarmament-handbook-2020_v07.pdf

²⁴ United Nations General Assembly. A/RES/70/1. Last accessed 2021.10.28 https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf p. 9.

Calls for urgent actions to be taken, not only by States and parliaments but also by international organisations, to prevent all forms of violence against parliamentarians, including independent monitoring mechanisms on violence against parliamentarians;

Encourages ongoing dialogue between civil society and public institutions on issues relating to violence against parliamentarians and *recognises* the significance of taking appropriate measures to enhance cooperation among national, regional and international actors promoting human rights, including women's rights;

Calls on parliaments to enable a conducive environment to deter all forms of violence against parliamentarians;

Promotes women's participation in democratic processes at national, regional and international levels and *calls for* the establishment of solid mechanisms in parliaments to ensure parliamentarians' safety;

Recognises the important role women play in strengthening political institutions and *recommends* the strengthening of policies and programmes aimed at advancing women's leadership and decision-making in governance, specifically women in parliaments;

Encourages the international donor community to invest in parliamentary organisations as an effective way to strengthen democratic institutions at the national, regional and international levels, ultimately safeguarding democracy, peace and sustainable development.

Mandates the Forum, its members and the Secretariat to undertake all necessary efforts towards promoting safe conditions for parliamentarians to exercise their function, as to promote democracy and more peaceful and sustainably developed societies.