

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERING WITH PARLIAMENTARIANS

To truly understand European support for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), one should become aware of the massive efforts that have been made at all levels of decision making – pan-European, European Union, regional, national and even sub-national – to create partnerships with and among Parliamentarians.



Recent European leadership on SRHR would not have been possible without a cohort of well-informed Parliamentarians who have progressed from being the largest of education efforts to some of the strongest and most influential advocates making the right decisions at the right times. For NGOs that support SRHR, Parliamentary advocacy has become a significant, if not major, aspect of their work in Europe. This phenomenon has expanded over the past five years, when less than 10 European SRHR NGOs made that an important aspect of their work; there are now SRHR NGO advocates actively working with Parliamentarians in over 20 European countries.

**The role of IEPFPD**  
The Inter-European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development (IEPFPD) is the newest regional Parliamentary network, concerned with SRHR. It is preceded by sister Parliamentary networks on other continents. The Asian Parliamentary Forum for Population and Development was founded in 1982. The Inter-American Parliamentary Group was founded in 1983 with the support of the International Planned Parenthood Federation Western Hemisphere Regional Office. Finally, the Forum of African and Arab Parliamentarians was created in 1997 with the help

of the United Nations Family Planning Association. It was not until 1999 that the European forum was created with the help of the International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network. In the subsequent five years, the IEPFPD expanded its membership from seven to twenty-eight all-party Parliamentary groups (APPGs) and built relationships with Parliamentarians and SRHR advocates in an additional nine countries in Europe (Europe is defined as including all the members of the Council of Europe). Altogether, by 2005 IEPFPD had worked in 83% of European countries, with member APPGs in over half the Parliament in Europe (this excludes the micro-states of Andorra, Monaco, Liechtenstein, San Marino and the Holy See).

The IEPFPD fills a gap in SRHR advocacy in Europe, namely that of offering a pan-European platform for the exchange of information, experience and ideas among Europe's political decision-makers. This gap became all the more apparent in the late 1990s as decision-making in Europe became more complex. During that time, increasing powers were being transferred from the national to the EU level per the Nice and Amsterdam Treaties and the work on a European Constitution. Twelve countries intensified their negotiations for accession to the EU,

requiring a complete overhaul of their legislation in many areas in order to meet new EU standards. National parliaments were exercising oversight of EU decisions more thoroughly than before. And some countries initiated or intensified a process of devolution from a centralized national parliament towards legislative assemblies (United Kingdom, Spain, Belgium and the Russian Federation are some examples of the trends in some countries towards federalism). Decisions on SRHR, both in international development and in domestic policy, were thus being taken all over Europe, but in different settings and by new actors compared to even a few years prior in many countries.

**The importance of Parliamentary advocacy**  
It was for this reason that many SRHR NGO advocates came to see effective Parliamentary advocacy as critical to their work. At the same time, Parliamentarians themselves associated working through an APPG as an expression of joining a Europe-wide consensus on SRHR. The existence of an independent organization whose membership is composed of APPGs and was directed by Parliamentarians (namely, the IEPFPD Executive Committee) liberated many from feeling uncomfortable at being too closely linked

to any one organization or approach to an issue (which in a number of countries is a source of concern for Parliamentarians regardless of the specific issue or organization in question). In this way, the IEPFPD facilitates partnership between Parliamentarians and NGOs so that they can benefit from each other's expertise and work together for a common goal, but still maintain their independent identities.

The first Parliamentarians to become involved in SRHR advocacy have generally been women from left-leaning parties, such as the Socialists or the Greens. This has been the case in Portugal, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Scotland, Poland, Lithuania and Turkey. In countries where (as of 2005) there is no APPG, women Parliamentarians from left-leaning parties have been one of the most active in trying to start one – for example in the Netherlands, Cyprus, Albania and Estonia. As of 2005, 79% of the chairs of the APPGs around Europe were women and 37% of all APPG chairs (both men and women) came from Socialist or Green parties.

The role that these "founding" Parliamentarians play is of critical importance in generating consensus on SRHR. Once they have participated in an SRHR advocacy activity, they understand that advancing the SRHR agenda requires some level of cross-party consensus so that gains are not reversed with a change in government. They therefore actively reach out to like-minded Parliamentarians from other parties, often other women Parliamentarians, to share their newly acquired understanding of the importance of SRHR and the need to take it up actively in Parliamentary work.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the women with the highest representation of women in Parliament, namely Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Iceland and Germany, are all among the strongest supporters of SRHR and largest donors to the field (1).

**The role of Parliamentarians in SRHR for advocates who work with members of Parliament:** it would be useful to remember a few key characteristics about their needs and motivations. First and foremost, Parliamentarians are a group of people who have made a commitment to a political party (except those who are unaffiliated/independent) and have expressed a public commitment to certain goals and ideas, which in their opinion will somehow improve society. Second, upon election a Parliamentarian will be called upon to take positions and vote on a whole range of issues ranging from foreign affairs to international trade, health care reform, budgetary or fiscal policies, immigration, agriculture or education. Many Parliamentarians may have expertise in a specific field, but few can claim to be equally expert in all areas. Finally, Parliamentarians are politicians and are therefore ambitious and forward-looking. With the exception of those planning to retire shortly, most Parliamentarians do wish to advance within their political party, within parliament and would like their political party to gain in influence.

Thus we can sum up three important characteristics of Parliamentarians: they are committed to improving society; they are forced generalists; and they are ambitious. Each of these characteristics generates certain needs, which can be met by involvement in SRHR advocacy. For example, because SRHR affects fundamental aspects of health and well-being, NGOs can offer concrete suggestions to Parliamentarians for improving society in a way that touches every human being.

Experience in mobilizing Parliamentary support for SRHR has demonstrated that the parliamentarians themselves benefit from their involvement in advancing SRHR causes. This is true because all Parliamentarians, regardless of their level of experience, will be called upon to make legislative, policy, and budgetary decisions on a wide range of issues, whether they are equipped to do so or not. In addition, Parliamentarians have an honest desire to make the right decisions, and to do well in their own careers.

For these reasons, Parliamentarians would benefit from expert information that is best-based

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and has the public's best interests at heart. It is in the interests of good policy-making both from the Parliamentarians and the SRHR advocates' perspective to ensure that information and expertise is available when necessary. Access to information and the opportunity to develop their own expertise lead to more convincing, fact-based argumentation by Parliamentarians. Gradually, these Parliamentarians can become recognized as 'experts' on SRHR and related issues (such as women's rights, international development and HIV/AIDS). This in turn improves the quality of the debate and leads to a higher profile and greater prestige for the issues and the member of Parliament.

**Conclusion**  
NGOs can also help generate media visibility for a Parliamentarian's involvement in SRHR (such as participation in a field visit, international conference, United Nations meeting, and so on). This in turn can result in greater knowledge of and recognition for the issue, the activities, the Parliamentarian, the APPG, and the importance of Parliamentary leadership. The experience of the IEPFPD shows that the partnership between NGO advocates and Parliamentarians can be mutually beneficial, but more importantly, it proves that Parliamentary advocacy is an essential tool for creating a broad base of support among European decision-makers for protecting and promoting SRHR.

**Reference**  
1. Women in National Parliaments. archive of statistical data of women in national parliaments, date: 31 December 2002, Inter-Parliamentary Union, www.ipu.org

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