



Policy learning, parliamentary diplomacy and gender equality: a CWP research project

The extent to which policy learning as a parliamentary diplomacy activity to achieve gender equality is important for women parliamentarians engaged in the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians network

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ABSTRACT

Women parliamentarians have used inter-parliamentary bodies to engage in a multitude of activities including policy learning to advance gender equality. The Inter-Parliamentary Union asserts that the active participation of parliamentarians in such bodies should be for the purpose of 'increasing parliamentary knowledge and insights necessary to scrutinize a national government's policies' (Hamilton 2012: 6-7). Women parliamentarians across the Commonwealth have the ability to engage in policy learning through the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) network which seeks to ensure that issues impacting women are brought to the forefront of parliamentary debate and legislation. However, how important is policy learning as an activity when they have access to a multitude of activities that could also advance their efforts towards achieving gender equality? Using a mixed-method approach, this study gathered evidence from a survey completed by sixty-nine members of CWP and interviews with four members of CWP to explore the extent to which policy learning as a parliamentary diplomacy activity to achieve gender equality is important for women parliamentarians engaged in CWP. Research findings clearly illustrate that policy learning is considered to be an important activity however, it is as equally important and complementary to other activities. Additionally, findings highlight the difficulty women parliamentarians face implementing learnt policies. In as much as the network is there to support the advancement of gender equality, findings offer insight into the role CWP plays as a support network to its membership.

INTRODUCTION

Parliamentarians in their capacity as policymakers have the responsibility and duty to ensure that all government laws and policies reflect the interest of the public they represent. This is very much true for women parliamentarians across the world who in their power as elected representatives commit themselves to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women both within and outside the walls of parliament (United Kingdom Government 2018). Achieving gender equality is considered by the United Nations (UN) to be an 'integral' and importantly the best chance United Nations member states have should they wish to fulfil their commitment to attaining the seventeen goals as referenced in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN Women No Date a). Meaning that this ambitious goal cannot be achieved without the meaningful participation of women.

Despite traditionally having very limited representation in parliament currently only representing 24.9 per cent of members of parliament worldwide, women parliamentarians are recognised as being 'the main drivers of change in terms of gender equality' in parliament and beyond (Rubio 2021). As policymakers, they have the unique ability to significantly influence and shape policy (Jann and Wegrich 2007: 49). They do this by holding the government to account, raising awareness of issues, drafting, and passing adequate policies and legislation to work towards the realisation of gender equality. However, in order to succeed in the journey towards attaining gender equality, women parliamentarians must be aware of what exactly needs to be changed in current government policy but importantly, they must know how to successfully apply such changes. This can be done through policy learning which is the practice of reconsidering behaviours and beliefs embedded in existing policies that have been identified as the government's effort to resolve a particular policy problem (Lowry 2006: 315-317). Parliamentarians often do this at a local or national level by looking back at their government's previous policies on the issue. However, in the instance those past policies are considered to be 'obsolete', 'no longer adequate' (Rose 2005: 2-3) or parliamentarians have no knowledge on how they can address the problem, they can take policy learning to a transnational level and learn from policymakers and governments across the world. This is best achieved through parliamentary diplomacy.

In recent years, inter-parliamentary institutions have been present figures within international relations that facilitate parliamentary diplomacy. These institutions have increased in number throughout the past decades. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) founded in 1989 was the world's first inter-parliamentary institution and as of 2013, the number has risen to 70 (Zlatko 2013: 20). It is likely that this will increase again in the upcoming decades. As stated in research conducted by the European Parliament that was published in 2021, parliamentary diplomacy plays an important role in advancing gender equality as international parliamentary institutions have a high concentration of expertise in one place (Janic, Druciarek, Niztynska et al 2021:148). Additionally, given that many issues and challenges parliamentarians seek to address are interconnected and transcend national boundaries, there has equally been an increase in the formation of specialised transnational parliamentary networks that constitute themselves as sub-groups or sub-networks within an inter-parliamentary institution. This is clearly the case when it comes to addressing challenges to gender equality.

The ParlAmericas Parliamentary Network for Gender Equality, the IPU's Forum of Women Parliamentarians, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Francophonie is Réseau network of women parliamentarians and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's (CPA) Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) network, all of which have a membership of women parliamentarians are just a few examples of these gender-focused transitional parliamentary networks. CWP is a voluntary network that consists of a membership of women parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth that seeks to ensure that issues impacting women are brought to the forefront of parliamentary debate and legislation (Childs 2020).

It is within the walls of this network Commonwealth women parliamentarians engage in parliamentary diplomacy activities such as policy learning to acquire knowledge that will help them better advocate and respond to pertinent gender inequality issues affecting their jurisdictions. The knowledge available in these networks can serve as a vital tool to support other parliamentarians and their respective parliaments in mainstreaming gender in the policies that are considered to be ineffective and problematic. Although CWP like other inter-parliamentary bodies has the ability to provide women parliamentarians with the opportunity to actively participate in policy learning, it should also be highlighted that such networks offer women parliamentarians the opportunity to engage in a wide range of other activities.

According to the IPU, the active participation of parliamentarians in inter-parliamentary institutions should be for the purpose of 'increasing parliamentary knowledge and insights necessary to scrutinize a national government's policies' (Hamilton 2012: 6-7). This could therefore be interpreted to mean that policy learning should be the main priority for Commonwealth women parliamentarians. However, when exposed to a multitude of activities such as promoting relations with other parliaments, exchanging best practices and ideas, and raising awareness of issues, is policy learning that important? This dissertation investigates the importance of policy learning as an activity to achieve gender equality when conducted by women parliamentarians engaged in CWP. The dissertation seeks to answer the following question; how important is policy learning as a parliamentary diplomacy activity to achieve gender for women parliamentarians engaged in CWP? Given the limited literature on policy learning from the views of parliamentarians, the dissertation collected primary data from a survey and four interviews with members of CWP. This was done to explore the views and opinions and gain some understating of the significance of policy learning from the unique first-hand perspective of women parliamentarians who are at the centre of this research. The specificities of the methodology will be discussed in a dedicated section later in the dissertation. The dissertation will be structured in the following manner. The first section will seek to begin with a review of literature on the key topics and concepts addressed in this research. The second section will consist of the theoretical framework which will review the key theories that served as a strategy to develop the arguments raised in the discussion of the research findings. The third section will present the methodology used to conduct and gather data. The fourth section lay out the results from the survey and interviews that were conducted with women parliamentarians of CWP. Section five will not only summarise the findings but will delve into a deep discussion of the importance and meaning behind the results and will support arguments with literature addressed in the literature review. This section will also highlight some of the limitations of the research. Finally, the conclusion will also recommend some future avenues for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As stated in the introduction, to find out how important policy learning is as a parliamentary diplomacy activity to advance gender equality for women parliamentarians engaged in CWP, the dissertation will begin by analysing concepts that are key to this body of research. The following topics and concepts have been identified and discussed in this literature review: policy learning, parliamentary diplomacy, transnational advocacy networks, women parliamentarians in parliamentary diplomacy, gender equality and CWP.

Policy learning

Policy learning is a concept that spans multiple disciplines in political science. Dunlop and Radaelli define policy learning as ‘the updating of beliefs based on lived or witnessed experiences, analysis or social interaction’ (2013: 599). Sanderson provides a slightly different definition and suggests that policy learning is a ‘socially-conditioned discursive or argumentative process of development of cognitive schemes or frames which questions the goals and assumptions of policies’ (2002: 6). This could be linked to Hecló’s understanding of the concept as he defines policy learning as the ‘enduring alterations of thought or behavioural intentions which result from experience and which are concerned with the attainment (or revision) of policy objectives’ (1974: 306) and Cairney who vaguely defines it ‘as acquiring new knowledge’ which ‘can be based on information regarding a current policy problem, lessons from the past, or the experience of others ... to inform policy and policymaking (2019: 208). However, Cerna notes that policy learning like many other concepts in political science is a ‘heterogeneous category’ meaning that how the concept is interpreted and understood varies from scholar to scholar and across disciplines (2013). This, therefore, makes it a complex and very broad notion to study. According to Hecló, policy learning can be viewed as a ‘less conscious activity often occurring as a governmental response to some kind of societal or environmental stimulus (Bennett and Howlett 1992: 276). Conversely, Dunlop and Radaelli argue that ‘learning may be unintentional, but it does not occur randomly’ as there are ‘specific hindrances and triggers’ that facilitate learning (2018: 255 - 257). Witting on the other hand offers an opposing yet assertive view arguing that as a process, policy learning is a political activity ‘grounded in the assumption that individuals in a complex policy context strive to increase the utility of their choices by optimizing their judgment in order to fulfil their individual goals—in particular when they encounter an unfamiliar situation and non-routine tasks... where they demand information in specific ways, to reflect their existing beliefs, and the way in which they define problems’ (2017: 2). Howlet, Ramesh and Perl, reinforce this argument and view policy learning to be both ‘intentional and progressive’ and should be understood as a deliberate activity to improve or enhance policies (2009:181). This dissertation will understand policy learning to be an intentional and calculated activity as claimed by Witting, Howlet, Ramesh and Perl.

Another complexity to the study of policy learning is that as a result of the diverse literature that has been produced by scholars, literature highlights that there are different types of policy learning. Sabatier identifies that there is a type of learning called ‘policy-oriented learning’ which refers to ‘relatively enduring alterations of thought or behavioural intentions which result from experience and which are concerned with the attainment (or revision) of policy objectives’ (1988: 133). Another is ‘social learning’ which ‘attempts to understand why certain initiatives may have succeeded while others fail (Bennett and Howlett 1992: 276). ‘Political learning’ like the above also addresses the relationship between policy learning and policy change but is considered to be a type of policy learning that is ‘undertaken by policymakers as a reaction to changes in external policy ‘environment’ (Bennett and Howlett 1992: 277). Furthermore, ‘lesson drawing’ is a type of policy learning that is used when ‘confronted with common problems, policy-makers in cities, regional governments, and nations can learn from how their counterparts elsewhere respond ... and draw lessons that will help them deal better with their own problems’ (Rose 1991: 4).

Cerna makes the important point that despite the existence of all these categories, 'it has been difficult to operationalise and measure the concept of learning in general' and 'adding more categories does not necessarily lead to a better understanding of the concept' (2013).

Moyson, Scholten and Weible highlight that existing literature on policy learning can be divided into three approaches: a micro-level approach which assumes that 'learning occurs within and among individuals within social settings', a meso-level approach which focuses on organisational learning, precisely how organisations can 'identify, react, and adapt to the changes in their environment', and finally a macro-level approach which looks at 'how learning occurs at the system level' (2017: 163 – 164). Cairney agrees with Moyson, Scholten and Weible's concept that policy learning can take place at three different levels but further elaborates the point by highlighting that although 'analytically' separate, policymaking is not linear but rather a complex process and these three levels of learning are 'connected in practice' as 'policy actors do not simply learn by receiving clear information; they generate learning by engaging – individually and collectively – with many sources and forms of information' (2019: 208 – 209). This dissertation will understand policy learning to be a consolidation of all the types of policy learning mentioned in this literature review which is best defined in Cairney's purposefully vague definition which is the process of 'acquiring new knowledge' which 'can be based on information regarding a current policy problem, lessons from the past, or the experience of others' 'to inform policy and policymaking' (Cairney 2019: 208).

Parliamentary Diplomacy

It must first be acknowledged that parliamentary diplomacy is a relatively new concept in international studies and has not widely been studied by scholars (Weisglas and de Boer 2007:93). Unlike traditional diplomacy which many scholars argue can be dated as far back as ancient civilisation (Leguey-Feilleux 2009: 23 – 47; Abdurahmanli 2021; Black 2010: 11 – 42), parliamentary diplomacy was promoted from as early as 1918 with one example being the League of Nations (Götz 2005: 264 – 270). However, Stavridis and Jančić note that the creation of the IPU in 1889 could also be seen as the emergence of parliamentary diplomacy (2016). Despite the practice existing for over a century, Götz recognises that 'parliamentary diplomacy is a concept that is 'increasingly used by politicians today yet it has been largely ignored by scholars' (2005: 265). This sentiment is reinforced by Sayfullaev who writing almost ten years after Weisglas and de Boer still considers the concept to be a relatively 'new classification of diplomacy' (2016: 53). As a result of this, Stavridis like many scholars admits that there is 'a rather small, limited, but hopefully emerging' literature on parliamentary diplomacy (2006).

From the limited but informative literature available on parliamentary diplomacy, Sayfullaev makes the interesting point that parliamentary diplomacy is 'yet to be given a precise definition' (2016: 53). Cutler also concurs with this acknowledging that there is no agreed or prevailing definition of parliamentary diplomacy (2006: 82). This presents a problem when trying to define exactly what it means as an activity or skill as there are multiple interpretations of the term. Unlike traditional diplomacy which could be understood as the 'peaceful and continuous' conduct of relations and communication in international relations among states, their principles and their agents based on 'intermediation, reciprocity and formal representation' (Hamilton and Langhorne 2010: 1; Spies 2018: 8), parliamentary diplomacy in the mid-twentieth century was understood to be 'the practice of inter-governmental negotiations and discussions carried on under fixed rules of procedure in bodies like ... the United Nations (Thompson 1965: 396). However, it has now been argued by parliamentarians themselves that this is an 'old idea' and 'outmoded' understanding of the term and that parliamentary diplomacy has evolved from being a 'particular kind of debate in diplomatic conferences' (Kaboré 2005; Götz 2005: 267).

Yet, Stavridis and Jančić bridge the gap between the two different definitions by making a clarifying claim that is two definitions of parliamentary diplomacy with one being viewed as the definition as understood in the mid-1950s which referred to ‘the use of parliamentary procedures in intergovernmental negotiations in order to facilitate the conduct of classical diplomacy’ (2007: 109) and another definition which is dubbed as ‘modern parliamentary diplomacy’ is defined as the ‘individual or collective action by parliamentarians aimed at ‘catalysing, facilitating and strengthening the existing constitutional functions of parliaments’ (2007: 109). This dissertation will use the term parliamentary diplomacy as understood in its modern sense.

Scholars who have written about the concept in the twenty-first century like Hallunaj similarly to Stavridis and Jančić above understand parliamentary diplomacy to be ‘the means by which two or more parliaments conduct an ongoing dialogue with regard to key international issues’ (Hallunaj 2005). Götz provides somewhat of a vague definition stating that ‘parliamentary diplomacy is about the construction of state actors, about the pooling of power and about common ideals’ (2005: 276). He does not stop there but further elaborates on the complexity of the definition by stating that it can be used to describe two distinct details. The first is the institutional background of persons, specifically, parliamentarians or legislators, or bodies involved in diplomatic activities and the second is ‘a method of multilateral negotiation primarily carried out by professional diplomats... in connection with... the increasing need for legislatures to tackle transnational issues’ (Götz 2005: 264). De Fouloy defines parliamentary diplomacy as compromising ‘the full range of international activities undertaken by parliamentarians in order to increase mutual understanding between countries, to assist each other in improving the control of governments and the representation of a people and to increase the democratic legitimacy of inter-governmental institutions’ (2019). Unlike other scholars, De Fouloy highlights that the international activities undertaken by parliamentarians in their participation in parliamentary diplomacy are delivered through International Parliamentary Institutions, specifically International Parliamentary Organs which are ‘organs of international governmental organisations composed of parliamentarians’, International Parliamentary Associations which ‘are not attached to an international organisation but rather constitute such themselves’ and finally Transnational Networks of Parliamentarians’ which are ‘voluntary associations of national parliamentarians’ and ‘can be considered as a major subcategory of an organisation composed of parliamentarians’ (2019).

Transnational Advocacy Network

As mentioned above, by De Folouy, transnational bodies and networks have been a crucial way in which parliamentarians engage in parliamentary diplomacy (2019). Stone attributes this to globalisation which has increased the interaction and interconnectedness of people across the world and has impacted ‘the ability of national governments to deal with ... “domestic” policies’ (2008 :24). According to Keck and Sikkink, a Transnational Advocacy Network ‘includes those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services (1999: 89). Keck and Sikkink proceed to make the distinction that unlike interest groups, Transnational Advocacy Networks are ‘principled and strategic actors’ that ‘frame’ issues to make them comprehensible to target audiences, to attract attention and encourage action’ and may also be understood as ‘political spaces, in which differently situated actors negotiate – formally or informally – the social, cultural and political meanings of their joint enterprises’ (1999: 90). Klotz highlights that the transmission of information in the form of ‘values’, ‘principled ideas’, ‘common discourse’ and ‘facts’ is an important activity for actor who engage in Transnational Advocacy Networks (2002: 52 – 53). However, Moghadam offers an interesting perspective and makes the pertinent argument that literature on Transnational Advocacy Networks ‘lack attention to women as actors... and to the ways that gender is built into political, organizational and cultural processes and the extent to which women have organized and mobilized politically, and the ways they have formed their own alternative movements and organisations’ (2005: 59 – 60).

In response to this, she proposes a feminist lens of viewing Transnational Advocacy Networks through the concept of transnational feminist networks which can be defined as ‘mobilizations that advocate for women’s participation and rights while also engaging critically with policy and legal issues and with states, international organizations, and institutions of global governance’ (O’Donnell 2020). These structures are ‘organized above the national level that unite women from three or more countries around a common agenda, such as women’s human rights, violence against women, peace and antimilitarism, or feminist economics’ (Moghadam 2005: 4).

Gender Equality

As this research will look to explore how important policy is as an activity of parliamentary diplomacy used by women parliamentarians involved in CWP to achieve gender equality, it is important to have a definition of what and how the concept of gender equality is perceived to mean. This will be done in two parts by firstly understanding the term ‘gender’ and then the concept gender equality.

Mikkola argues that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon where ideas around masculinity and femininity are ‘products of nurture or how individuals are brought up’ (2022). However, feminist scholars like Kimmel offer a slightly different perspective on the meaning of gender which builds on Mikkola’s view that gender is constructed as a result of social interaction, but it is about ‘the power that men as a group may have over women as a group’ (2012). Kimmel also adds that this type of control and dominance can also be about the ‘power that some men have over other men’ (2012). It is worth noting that with the view that gender is socially constructed, Lindqvist, Gustafsson and Renström like many scholars make the point that the term gender is ‘non-binary’ meaning that ‘there are many other gender identities’ that are ‘beyond the ‘traditional’ gender dichotomy’ of male or female’ which excludes individuals who do not fall in the binary category (2021:335). Meyerson and Kolb describe gender as an ‘axis of power, an organizing principle that shapes social structure, identities, and knowledge’ and argue that gender inequality is “sustained through formal and informal social processes institutionalized in organizations” that were created by men and were historically for men, therefore, reproducing masculine experiences, views and ideals (2000: 563). This dissertation will recognise and understand the term gender as defined by Meyerson and Kolb.

As understood by Abendroth, gender equality is understood as ‘the equal participation of women and men in different life domains (e.g., the economy, social life, politics, education)’ (2014: 2427 – 2428). UN Women similarly outlines gender equality to be ‘the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys’ which ‘implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men’ (UN Women 2001). Hazel and Keyman expand this and identify that gender equality means tackling inequalities that may widen the existing gender in persisting problems such as ‘economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment (2020: 281). Sen argues that despite the fact that gender equality has been mobilised throughout the decades by influential feminist networks and movements in the global north and south, she argues that UN Women plays an ‘institutional role’ in pushing forward the attainment of gender equality in that it has created and sustained ‘long-term linkages with member states or civil society’ who are key actors to realise gender equality in all its forms (2019: 34). Charlesworth and Chinkin also endorse this line of reasoning and assert that UN Women ‘unifies the patchwork of international structures dealing with women and offers the opportunity for greater institutional visibility of women’s lives’ with the view of prioritising global ‘institutional coherence’ as a strategy (2013: 2).

Specifically speaking, Eden and Wagstaff claim that UN Women has been ‘actively leading the process for SDG 5’ (2021: 44) by supporting ‘UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide’ (UN Women No Date b). Regarding the attainment of gender equality in the global sphere, Connell makes the argument that ‘men are the “gatekeepers’ as ‘they have access to resources, authority, and skills that may all be important in social change’ (2005: 362 – 363). This view is understood to be the basis and foundation of Sustainable Development Goal 5 which is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by ending all forms of discrimination, violence in all its forms and any harmful practices against women and girls in the public and private spheres (European Union 2022; UN Women No Date b). It also calls for the full participation of women and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of political and economic decision-making and universal access to sexual and reproductive health (European Union 2022; UN Women No Date b). This dissertation will understand gender equality to be efforts made to realise the goals and targets set out in Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Women parliamentarians in parliamentary diplomacy

As mentioned in the section on parliamentary diplomacy, it has been argued by many scholars that parliamentary diplomacy is still a relatively new area of study and that there is very limited literature available on the concept and this type of classification of diplomacy scholars (Götz 2005: 265; Weisglas and de Boer 2007:93; Sayfullaev 2016: 53; Stavridis 2006). Unlike diplomacy more broadly where scholars argue that women have ‘acted as agents of cross-state and cross-cultural information-gathering, alliance-building and networking and as political negotiators’ from as early as the fifteenth century (James and Sluga 2016:1), there is a large amount of academic literature on parliamentary diplomacy that addresses the role of men and has very little to no attention on the role and activities of women undertaken by women (Götz 2005: 265; Nuttin 2016: 326; Weisglas and de Boer 2007:93; Fonck 2018; Masters 2015). However, an extensive study conducted by Jančić et al sheds informative insight into the roles, activities, practices and involvement of women parliamentarians across international and inter-parliamentary institutions to advance gender equality (2021). Literature highlights that women parliamentarians have held roles as Chairpersons and Presidents of inter-parliamentary bodies (CPA No Date b; IPU No date d). According to the IPU, women started engaging in parliament as early as 1907 (IPU No Date a). Although both contributions help determine that women have and do play part in parliament and parliamentary diplomacy, there remains a gap in the research about when exactly women parliamentarians began engaging in parliamentary diplomacy. It is hoped that as literature on parliamentary diplomacy emerges, this will be addressed.

However according to the IPU’s Forum of Women Parliamentarians which leads ‘political work to redress the gender imbalance in political representation in national parliaments, within IPU bodies and at IPU Assemblies’ was formed by among a small but active group’ of women parliamentarians in 1978 (IPU No date b). Astwood offers a similar account of the formation of CWP which was created in 1989 the margins of an annual conference held in Barbados were ‘twelve of the four hundred delegates representing countries across the Commonwealth were women’ (2019: 329).

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians

Palmieri claims that 'relatively little is known about the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) network as it is a 'less-researched network' (2020: 637). As a result of this, there is limited literature available outside of what the network or the CPA publishes which will be used in this literature review. However, Palmieri does recognise that scholars developing literature on specialised parliamentary bodies have supported the network in the production of toolkits and research for the network's membership which has fed into their own research and thus increased information available about the network (2020: 637- 639; Celis, Childs and Curtin 2016: 18 – 21). CWP is a voluntary network of women parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth that represent women parliamentarians from all political parties (Celis, Childs and Curtin 2016: 19). Comparable to the women parliamentarians who created the Forum of Women Parliamentarians, CWP was formed as women parliamentarians wished to 'to increase the number of women parliamentarians in parliaments across the Commonwealth; to increase attention to issues facing countries because of a lack of understanding about how the paucity of women in parliaments presents difficulties to the general population; and to show how that lack of women negatively contributed to less effective service to each country's female population' and to 'bring attention to issues facing women across the Commonwealth and to implement legislation that assisted in bringing about appropriate change' (Astwood 2019: 329). Childs asserts that CWP as a network seeks to ensure that issues impacting women are brought to the forefront of parliamentary debate and legislation (2020). Palmieri highlights that any women member of the wider membership of the CPA 'is entitled to become a member of CWP' (2020: 641).

Additionally, CWP has a membership of 'over 3,000 women parliamentarians, in over 180 Commonwealth national and sub-national Parliaments, across all 9 Regions of the CPA: Asia; Australia; Africa; Canada; British Isles and Mediterranean; Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic; India; Pacific and South-East Asia – all which represent countries from all continents of the world (CWP No Date a). Palmieri highlights a strength of the network which is unlike the IPU and its Forum of Women Parliamentarians that only operate on an international level (IPU No Date c), is that CWP as a network 'brings women members together on an international platform but also allows women to work within 'regional' contexts, at a supranational level network' (2020: 637). On a regional level women parliamentarians meet, design and implement activities and programmes that are reflective of the unique needs and priorities of its regional membership (National Assembly of Belize 2021; Commonwealth Parliamentary Association British Islands and Mediterranean Region 2020). On an international level, women parliamentarians hold a business meeting which is held annually in the margins of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference that deals with pertinent issues to the CWP membership and also holds a Triennial Conference of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians also delivered on the margins of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference which is considered as being 'one of the largest gatherings of women parliamentarians from the Commonwealth' (CWP No Date a). The network's key areas of activities in the span of its current strategic plan are focused on delivering work that will enable women parliamentarians to be effective political leaders. They address the following gender inequality issues: women in leadership which include combating the bullying and harassment of both women parliamentarians and staff and the empowerment of women with disabilities and mental health issues, the elimination of gender-based violence in all its forms and harmful practices directed at women and young girls, the economic empowerment of women and, equal access to national resources such as health and nutrition and sexual and reproductive services (CWP 2020). In Palmieri's review of the network, she makes the claim that as a result of the networks 'very focused set of policy priorities and voluntary membership mean that it only attracts women who are committed to the goal of ensuring greater representation of women in elected politics' (2020: 645).



CWP Membership at the Triennial Conference of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians in Halifax, Nova Scotia 2022.



Members of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians International Steering Committee

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Advocacy Coalition Framework

Given the focus of this dissertation is on women parliamentarians as both individual actors and part of a network, the type of policy learning that will be explored is that which transpires at both a micro-level and macro level which can be clearly described and analysed through the Advocacy Coalition Framework which Moyson argues describes an amalgamation of individual and collective processes of learning (2017: 321-2). The Advocacy Coalition Framework answers the questions 'How do people mobilize, maintain, and act in advocacy coalitions? To what extent do people learn, especially from allies and from opponents?' (Weible et al 2011: 349). Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith point out that 'an advocacy coalition consists of actors from a variety of institutions', in the case of this dissertation it will be parliaments 'who share a set of basic beliefs (policy goals plus casual and other perceptions) and who seek to manipulate the rules, budgets and personnel of governmental institutions in order to achieve these goals over time' (1993: 215). It must be noted that 'beliefs provide the glue to hold actors together, cooperate, and learn how to respond to new information and events' (Cairney 2019). The Advocacy Coalition Framework argues that 'policy participants hold strong beliefs and are motivated to transfer those beliefs into actual policy ... before their opponents can do the same' (Sabatier and Weible, 2007: 192; 196). According to the framework, actors are understood to be 'self-serving' and only participate in the policymaking process 'in order to use the government machinery' to pursue and realise their goals' (Howlet, Ramesh and Perl 2009: 83). It must be made clear that policy learning is conducted to enable policy change and successful policy may occur as a result of 'wide external changes or shocks to the political system and the success of the ideas in the coalitions' (Cerna 2013). Despite the framework's ability to analyse policy learning, policy change and the attitude of actors who are behind this policy process, there are two important critiques of the framework. Firstly, there is 'no understanding of how advocacy coalition uses recourses' (Sabatier and Weible 2007:133) and secondly, it has 'generally been applied in a domestic context' which raises questions regarding its application to a global policy subsystem (Liftin 2000: 236). With a view of the scope of the study, this dissertation will serve as a way to explore these previously two unexamined questions raised regarding the framework.

Public Choice Theory

Public Choice Theory focus on the 'micro-level behaviour of individuals' as political actors involved in policymaking (Howlet, Ramesh and Perl 2009: 31). Similar to the Advocacy Coalitions Framework, policymaking is perceived to be a complex process that is compounded with 'competing, often conflicting, demands and priorities' (Neiman and Stambough 1998:450). Akin to the liberalist view that individuals and social groups, who are both 'rational and risk averse' and who 'organize exchange and collective action to promote differentiated interests under constraints imposed by material scarcity, conflicting values, and variations in societal influence' are key actors in international politics (Moravcsik 1997: 516), Public Choice Theory is 'devoted to designing ways to ensure that politics is minimized and does not vulgarize decision-making' (Neiman and Stambough 1998:451). Additionally, like the Advocacy Coalition Framework's view of actors, Public Choice Theory understands political actors to act 'like economic ones...in a calculating fashion to maximize their 'utility' or 'satisfaction' (Howlet, Ramesh and Perl 2009: 32). Therefore, the theory tells us that politicians 'offer policies that will win them voters' support' and 'will be willing to supply programs that have been demanded by voters 'because of their self-interest in power, prestige, and popularity' (Howlet, Ramesh and Perl 2009: 33). From this point of view, it can be understood that women parliamentarians act in an intentional calculating manner to obtain their goals in a highly competitive and complex world and policy system.

Feminism

Ackerly and True define feminism as 'a critical perspective on social and political life' that 'draws our attention to the ways in which social, political, economic norm, practices, and structures create injustices that are experienced differently, or uniquely by women, and people who are challenging the gender binary and its hierarchy' (2020: 1). Gender is understood to be defined by an individual's social interaction (Viotti and Kauppi 2010: 378) which is a similar point made by constructivism theory which argues that 'ideas, norms and institutions shape state identity and interests' and are a result of social interaction, therefore, the argument could be made that this influences the identity and interest of a population within a state (Mingst and Arreguín-Toft 2011: A18; Wendt 1992: 394). Despite multiple variations of feminism, all feminist theories have a 'strong normative commitment to enhancing the prospects of peace and reducing violence and conflict' suffered by women (Viotti and Kauppi 2010: 376). Additionally, gender permeates social life, it has profound and largely unnoticed effects on the actions of states, international organizations, and transnational actors (Viotti and Kauppi 2010: 378). According to this view, feminism as a theory seeks to 'regulate the power derived from (or denied on the basis of) an individual's gender' through the method of 'tracking political and social developments' in international relations that 'inhibit success' marginalised populations (Singh 2021: 16). The experiences of women and other genders that are excluded by the male patriarchy are key to feminism as they offer unique and 'valid insight into the complex realities of world politics' (Keohane 1989: 245). Through the application of a feminist lens in this study, the activities women parliamentarians choose to engage in at a global level through CWP are highly related to the current global injustices and the impact they may have on them directly or the goals they are trying to achieve. Gender norms, rules and standards direct their actions so feminism as a lens will offer insight into the impact and effect these norms have in fulfilling their goals as women parliamentarians but and also in the pursuit of achieving gender equality more broadly.

METHODOLOGY

As stated in the introduction, there is limited literature on both CWP and the opinions, views and behaviours of women parliamentarians who belong to its membership. Therefore, as a method to add to the already limited information available, this dissertation sourced and analysed primary data. The primary data was gathered using a mixed-methods approach which scholars have argued can give 'added value by increasing validity in the findings, informing the collection of the second data source, and assisting with knowledge creation' (McKim 2017: 203). Particularly in political science, mixed method research is useful as it can 'increase the 'reliability of outcomes' and 'offers the opportunity to emerge details about subjects' experiences, a fact that is not possible to be revealed only through quantitative research tools' (Tzagkarakis and Kritas 2022: 13).

Research methods for studying elites were identified and used as the most appropriate method as 'by virtue of the position they hold, elites may have access to information that not otherwise be available to a researcher' (Halperin and Heath 2017 :299). Additionally, results obtained from elite interviews can not only help researchers 'confirm the accuracy of information that has previously been collected' (Halperin and Heath 2017 :299) but can also 'enable researchers to make inferences about the beliefs, or actions of a wider population of political elites (Halperin and Heath 2017 :299; Semenova 2018: 72). Elite interview methods were used in this dissertation to also tackle challenges which include the fact that 'they are busy people' with highly packed schedules (Cowley 2022: 237) 'difficult to access' (European Consortium for Political Research 2017). Best practices shared by scholars who suggest that a mixed method approach to gathering information may be 'optimal' when researching elites (Vis and Stolwijk 2021: 290), the need to be flexible and specific with 'why you and who you want to speak to' (Cowley 2022: 238) were used to counteract the difficulty this type of research presents.

The first phase of the research began with a survey that sought 'to harness data that could be used for a 'nuanced, in depth and sometimes new understandings of social issues (Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey and McEvoy 2021: 642-643). The survey was also used as a means to gain 'accurate information about what people think' (Halperin and Heath 2017 :262). The survey questions were taken and inspired by De Fouloy's list of various activities categorised as 'institutionalised, 'informal' and 'multilateral' that could be considered as activities that fall under the banner of parliamentary diplomacy (2019). The survey featured Likert scale questions where respondents were asked to respond to four questions by rating their views on four particular aspects: their opinion on the importance of policy learning, the most important activities they engage in through CWP, their ability to implement policies they learn in their respective parliaments and, the importance of policy learning in comparison to raising awareness of an issue. The term implement used in this dissertation refers to the ability women parliamentarians have to realise or put into effect policies they have learnt during their involvement with CWP in their respective parliament. The means to do this would require the export of policy in one country which will then be imported to another. This is best defined as policy transfer which Dolowitz and Marsh define as 'the process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system' (2000: 5). Responses captured in this type of Likert scale questionnaire was used 'to create a more reliable and accurate measure of their overall attitude', belief or opinion on the importance of policy learning (Gracyalny 2017: 1555). The questionnaires were designed and published online via Microsoft Dynamics which allowed for the continuous tracking of survey results. Questionnaires were also sent via email to members of CWP who were unable to access the questionnaire online. A total of 69 responses were received.

Data reduction was utilised as a process to analyse the data gathered from the survey. Data reduction not only simplifies and condenses the data that appears in research but also makes data 'manageable' and 'intelligible in terms of the issues being addressed' by 'discarding all but the most interesting and compelling' information that is concerned in this research' (Halperin and Heath 2017: 304).

The second and final phase of research featured interviews which were conducted to build on the information gained through the survey and were used as an additional 'exploratory strategy for the analysis of areas that have not been previously researched'. Importantly, the interviews were also undertaken to provide what Bailer calls 'a fascinating opportunity of getting an insight into the mindset, the ideas and, the subjective analysis of an event by an actor who has contributed to a political process' (2014: 167). The interviews were conducted with four women parliamentarians who belong to the CWP membership representing diverse national and sub-national legislatures across the commonwealth. The interviewees included women parliamentarians with the following profiles: Minister of Equality; Speaker of a legislature; Former Chairperson of a gender-focused select committee, and Chairperson of a CWP regional chapter. The interviews conducted were semi-structured and included themes that were identified from the survey findings. Using this flexible interview style with elites such as the women parliamentarians who 'do not like being put in a strait-jacket of closed questions' as evidence shows that 'they prefer to articulate their views, explaining why they think what they think' (Halperin and Heath 2017: 298; Johnson, Reynolds and Mycoff 2008: 340 – 343) therefore open-ended questions that allow for probing when if necessary. In all four interviews conducted, interviewees raised issues and topics that were not addressed in the interview questions so asking follow-up questions to explore deeper into their beliefs and experiences on the matters they raised was beneficial (Halperin and Heath 2017 :289 - 295). The interviews were held both online over Microsoft Teams and in person lasting between thirty to forty-five minutes. All interviews were recorded and used as a means of corroborating notes taken during the interview. The recordings also supported the production of interview transcriptions. All transcripts were produced using incorporated best practices and advice provided in transcribing guidelines created by the University of Leicester (No Date) and Baylor University's Institute of Oral History (2018). Complete coding was utilised as a process to analyse the data gathered from the interviews. Clarke and Braun argue that 'codes are building blocks of analysis' (2013: 207) which Nowell, Norris, White and Moules state allows 'for identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set' (2017:2).

Despite the scholarly recommendation that you 'approach far more people than you need to speak' to better the chances of getting a decent sample size (Cowley 2022: 238), the reality is that a small sample size is common for elite research, particularly research that seeks to explore experiences, understandings, and perceptions (Braun and Clarke 2013: 55 – 50). However, it should be noted that the aim of the research is not to generalise findings but to increase and enhance the already limited information and to generate 'insight and in-depth understanding' of the views of the interviewees to fully analyse the topic of research and answer the research question (Braun and Clarke 2013: 55 – 57).

Representative sampling was used in both stages of the research to provide 'strong external validity in relationship to the target population the sample is meant to represent' meaning that the findings from the survey and interviews can be used 'with confidence' (Davern 2008: 721- 722). Purposive sampling was also utilised in the interviews to identify and select 'information-rich ... individuals that are proficient and well-informed with a phenomenon of interest...and in addition to knowledge and experience have ... the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner' (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim 2015: 2).

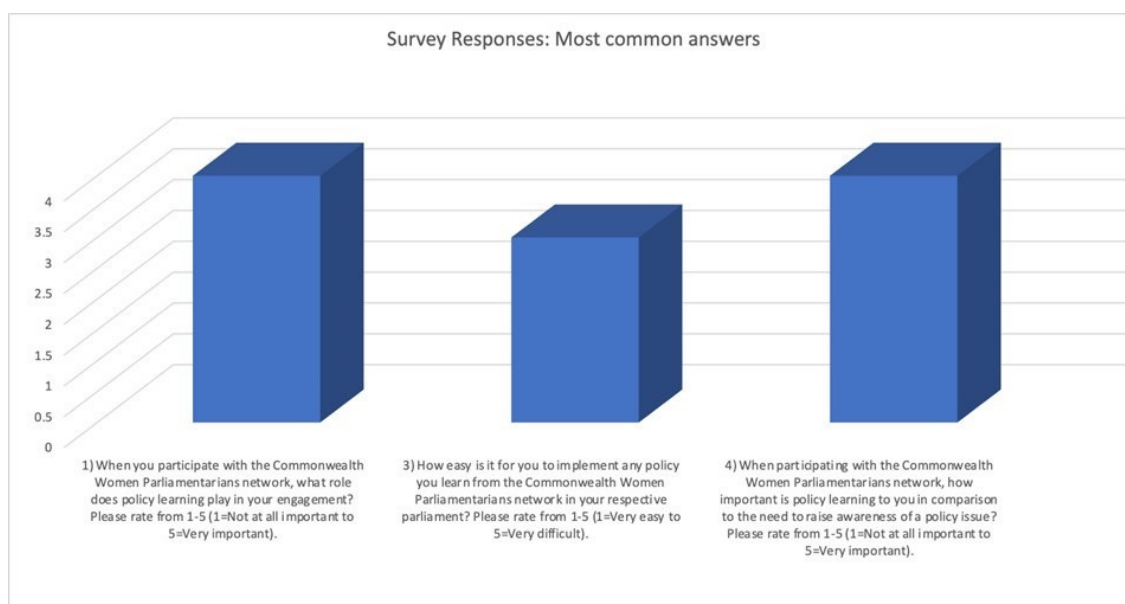
FINDINGS

The below section will provide an overview of the main findings from the survey and interviews in two separate sections. Each section will also provide a discussion of the findings in relation to pertinent literature.

Survey findings

Women parliamentarians opinion on the importance of policy learning

Respondents were invited to rate from a scale of 1 to 5 (1 viewed as not at all important and 5 very important) what role policy learning plays when they engage with CWP. As shown below in Figure 1, the most common response received from respondents to this question was that policy learning plays an 'important' role when they participate in CWP activities. Scaling this to the 5-point Likert scale of importance, this response was a level 4.



Most important activities of parliamentary diplomacy

Respondents were asked to select what they believed to be the three most important activities that motivates their engagement with CWP from the following seven activities: bilateral meetings, establishing friendship groups or alliances, policy learning, media engagement (this could include radio, television, newspaper interviews and comments), negotiations on behalf of your country, exchanging ideas and values and, conflict resolution. Respondents were also given the opportunity to select 'other' as an option to list any other activities that were not included in the list that they believed to be the most. Only two respondents selected 'other' to list an additional activity. One respondent shared that 'advancing gender, diversity, and equality' issues was an important activity that drives their engagement with CWP and the other respondent stated that 'strategies to encourage more women to seek public office' was an activity that motivated their participation in the network. As shown in Figure 2, establishing friendship groups or alliances, policy learning and exchange best practices were the most common responses received by the survey respondents.

Survey response to Question 3
<p>From the following list, what are the three most important activities that drive your engagement when you participate with the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians network?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bilateral meetings - Establishing friendship groups or alliances - Policy learning - Media engagement (radio, television, newspaper interviews and comments) - Negotiations on behalf of your country - Exchanging ideas and values - Conflict resolution
1. Establishing friendship groups/alliances
2. Policy Learning
3. Exchanging ideas and values

The ability to implement policy they learn in their respective parliaments

Respondents were invited to rate from a scale of 1 to 5 (1 viewed as very easy and not 5 very difficult) how easy it was for them to implement policies they learnt during their engagement with the CWP in their own parliaments. As indicated above in Figure 1 the most common answer obtained from respondents to this question was that they rated the ease and ability to implement CWP gender equality related policies as 'neutral'. Using the 5-point Likert scale of ease, this response ranked to a level 3.

The importance of policy learning in comparison to raising an awareness of an issue

Respondents were invited to rate from a scale of 1 to 5 (1 viewed as not at all important and 5 very important) how policy learning as an activity is to them in comparison to their need to highlight and increase the visibility of a particular policy issue. As shown in Figure 1 the most common response received from respondents to this question was that policy learning is 'important' in comparison to raising the awareness of a policy issue. Using the 5-point Likert scale of importance, this response ranked to a level 4.

Analysis of survey results

Is policy learning important?

The purpose of the survey was to gather data that would contribute to research to answer the research question: How important is policy learning as a parliamentary diplomacy activity to achieve gender for women parliamentarians engaged in CWP?

Based on the responses received from women parliamentarians of the CWP network in the survey, it is evident that policy learning is important. This is reinforced by Dunlop and Radaelli's view who understand policy learning to be a political effort considered to be a 'mechanism of social problem-solving under conditions of uncertainty' (Dunlop and Radaelli). The 'Shadow Pandemic' which is the rise in violence against women and girls that has emerged from the recent global COVID-19 crisis, and the rise of populist movements that have increasingly adopted strategies to oppose gender equality are just a few conditions that present great uncertainty to the realisation of gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo 2021: 566). When put against the activity of raising awareness of a policy issue, the results indicate policy learning was deemed to be the more important activity. This was not a result that was expected especially given the fact that as politicians, women parliamentarians can raise and discuss issues by bringing attention to the issues to government, target audiences and the wider public (Kingdon 1984:3-4). Cobb and Elder assert that 'pre-political, or at least pre-decisional processes often play the most critical role on determining what issues and alternatives are to be considered by the polity and the probable choices that will be made' (1972: 12).

The Chairperson of CWP stated that the network has played what she describes to be an 'active role' in raising international awareness on issues such as gender-based violence (Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Annual Review 2020) which has been a topic of both discussion and concern expressed by women parliamentarians at many of the networks annual and regional conferences, workshops and meetings (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association 2019). Women parliamentarians in their participation in CWP activities have placed important value on raising awareness of gender-related issues through inter-parliamentary engagement where they have been able to inform and bring to attention what they believe to be barriers to protecting women from violence or 'deficiencies' and limitations in their parliament's current policies (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK 2021). This is what Allwood calls framing which is the intentional process of 'selecting for attention a few salient features and relations and organising them in a coherent manner to describe what is wrong with the current situation and what should be done about it' (2018:127). Framing is important as members of CWP could use it as a method to highlight 'causes [that] can be assigned to the deliberate action of identifiable individuals' such as 'issues involving bodily harm to vulnerable individuals, especially when there is a short and clear casual chain assigning responsibility' (Keck and Sikkink 1998:27). A tactical way to raise the profile of an issue and bring issues on the political agenda internationally that many international organisations and transnational advocacy networks use. Yet, the survey reveals that although an important activity, it is not important in comparison to policy learning which could be interpreted to be more of an important priority. This could be attributed to the understanding that while raising awareness of an issue is important, there is no guarantee that this issue will be heard or considered as important and worthy of attention. Also, the fact that as parliamentarians, they already have access to the media which is considered to be an instrumental instrument adding 'momentum around specific issues' (Carpenter 2007: 104). With this view in mind, it could therefore be understood as to why policymaking is the preferred activity out of the two raising the awareness as an activity can be done in other venues that are perhaps better suited to what is needed.

Whilst the results can tell us that policy learning is important, it is unable to tell us how easy Commonwealth women parliamentarians can implement the policies they learn from the network back in their respective parliaments. As mentioned above, respondents rated the ease and their ability to implement CWP gender equality-related policies as 'neutral'. According to Croasmun and Ostrom, the neutral response option, does not require respondents to decide one way or another on the issue in question as they are not forced to have an opinion if they do not have one or have limited knowledge of the issue (2011:20). However, Moors and other scholars who have explored the effects of a middle response in questionnaires argue that respondents who chose this option do not necessarily answer the question in the same manner as other respondents if they are forced to pick a side on the issue in question (2008: 783). Edwards and Smith take this further and reveal that there are three main reasons why respondents choose the neutral response as an option in a questionnaire. This may firstly be because of the inclination respondents may have to satisfice, or avoid the rational effort needed to select a suitable answer when providing their opinion or view (2014). Secondly, this could be due to ambivalence, meaning a respondent may have mixed feelings or contradictory ideas on an issue (Edwards and Smith 2014). Edwards and Smith's third reason as to why respondents select the neutral option as a response is as a result of social desirability, specifically the tendency to present themselves in a favourable manner which research indicates happens when respondents are unwilling or hesitant to express a socially undesirable opinion (2014). As Cowley puts it, 'Politicians are used to evading difficult questions. It is one of their core skills' (2022: 237). Therefore, the results to this particular question were not interpreted to mean that the respondent have no opinion, but it was rather understood to mean that their response to the question was not straightforward, nor could it be easily summed up in the response options provided and is therefore worth exploring in much more detail. To obtain an actual response to the question posed, respondents would require some flexibility and more time to further express their beliefs and views on the question which was of course limited in this particular research method as the survey was used as an exploratory tool to gather data to gain insight into the attitude and opinions of the women parliamentarians in CWP. A further open-ended question that requires respondents to answer in their own words and further elaborate on their point could be used to gain further clarity and information on their experience implementing gender equality policies. This, therefore, supported the case to proceed and conduct interviews where respondents were able to 'talk openly' and further elaborate on the answers they provided (Creswell 2009: 32). The interview findings will be addressed later in this section.

However, whilst it may be true that policy learning is considered to be an important activity, results reveal that policy learning is not the only activity that women parliamentarians of the network find to be significant. In addition to policy learning, establishing friendship groups or alliances and exchanging best practices were selected as the top three activities women parliamentarians considered to be important. This result reinforces the point made by Lipps who states that international parliamentary institutions serve the role of being places that facilitate the exchange of knowledge and where parliamentarians can gain access to information (2021: 505). This is clearly emphasised in the purpose and goals of many inter-parliamentary institutions that pride themselves on offering parliamentarians the opportunity to 'collaborate on issues of mutual interest', 'promote knowledge', 'share good practice' and 'acquire the latest information' needed to begin the process of implementing change (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association 2021; Commonwealth Parliamentary Association No Date; IPU No Date e). Relating to women parliamentarians involved in parliamentary diplomacy, the IPU's women forum serves to provide an opportunity for women parliamentarians to 'learn about how other countries are addressing gender inequality' (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2019). Specifically related to the focus of this research CWP, the same could be said as the network seeks to be 'recognised as a leading centre for women parliamentarians in the Commonwealth' (Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians 2020).

Specifically in its strategic plan for the years 2020 to 2022, the network commits itself to be 'a support mechanism and network for ... knowledge sharing' whilst also providing women parliamentarians with a platform to 'network and share good practices' and access to 'comprehensive research and high-quality materials' that women can be used for 'mutual learning' on issues such as women in leadership, the elimination of gender-based violence, economic empowerment of women and ensuring women have equal access to national recourses (Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians 2020). Therefore, although different to policy learning, these two activities are just as important in parliamentary diplomacy for women parliamentarians.

The survey was used as a method to gain insight into the views of women parliamentarians of the CWP network and was successful in providing an overview of trends in the opinions received. However, using a survey as the only research method has the danger of enabling the 'oversimplification of social reality' (Pedersen 1992) as it does not allow adequate room for research to gain an understating of the respondents' sentiments behind some of the answers provided which will allow for further in-depth analysis. Although helpful, the survey only generated more questions such as why is policy learning important? Is policy implementation important? Is it even feasible? Why is the exchange of best practices and ideas important? Is there an activity more important than policy learning? With this need in mind and to ensure that the views of women parliamentarians are accurately represented, interviews were conducted to complement and strengthen the data collated from the survey.

Interview findings

This section of the results will present main the findings from the interviews as quotes.

Why is policy learning important?

Firstly, when asked why policy learning is an important activity to advance gender equality, interviewees argued that policy learning is necessary for the overall advancement of gender equality:

'Fundamentally because we all earn from each other. The issues that face women, actively the issue of gender equality are similar in countries around the world' (Former Chairperson of a gender-focused select committee).

Another interviewee reflected on their experience in governance and leadership highlighting that women parliamentarians have a duty to engage in policy learning to develop meaningful laws:

'It had taught me what I should follow and what makes a good policy and an implementable policy but also broadly speaking, as parliamentarians if we do not take an interest in learning about policy, we will always be hindered in achieving our own targets by the very same policy that we are part of making' (Speaker).

One interviewee raised the challenges women parliamentarians face trying to engage in policy learning through CWP:

'It's not about the importance of policy learning because learning is always important, it's about making the time because when you are so busy with delivering on so many levels you tend to put policy learning last' (Minister of Equality).

The importance of policy learning in relation to other activities

When asked if policy learning is more important than other parliamentary diplomacy activities they may engage in through CWP that respondents in the survey identified as being important such as establishing friendship groups or alliances and exchanging best practices, interviewees were of the view that others are just as important as policy learning:

'I find that they [activities] should move together the network part and also the informal discussions and benchmarking must also not be taken as if they supersede policy learning because what do you then compare? What are you conferring with? So for me I think that we should not deal with them in isolation ...as they are complementary to each other' (Speaker).

Most interviewees in particular argued that networking activities and opportunities are important activities afforded to women parliamentarians through CWP:

[CWP] also gives me a network personally and a focus where I can find inspiration motivation that I don't necessarily get elsewhere'...I cannot overemphasise the importance of the networks that CWP provides specially for a lone woman in government' (Minister of Equality).

The interviewees also emphasised the importance of sharing best practices as an activity women parliamentarians can engage in through CWP:

'the ability to discuss what is happening in our individual countries, it does help with forming best practices and understanding challenges that we may be experiencing that other countries may have already gone through' (Chairperson of a CWP regional chapter).

The same was also said about the importance of establishing friendship groups and alliances or as one interviewee preferred to call 'an interest group'. In this interviewee's experience of establishing an interest group through CWP:

'It's to support try and actually support each other and to support other women to stand for election' and certainly actually having common shared experiences given that we are still the minority in almost all parliaments in the Commonwealth to know that what you are experiencing is not unique can be an important part' (Former Chairperson of a gender-focused select committee).

The ability to implementation of policies learnt at CWP into respective parliaments

When asked about the ability to implement gender policies that were learnt through CWP, most interviewees were able to give examples of the types of policies they sought to implement in their parliaments. This included gender related policies that were proposed and used to address gender societal issues like *'marrying off of young girls to older men'* (Speaker), *'online harassment'* and *'Modern day slavery'* (Former Chairperson of a gender-focused select committee) and policies that were proposed to address gender issues within the running and management of parliament such as *'gender sensitive parliament'* (Former Chairperson of a gender-focused select committee), *'gender sensitive budgeting'* (Chairperson of a CWP regional chapter) and, *'parental leave for parliamentarians'* (Minister of Equality).

Interviewees pointed out constraints from male parliamentarians as impeding their ability to implement gender-related policies they learnt from their engagement in CWP in their respective parliaments:

'when we do try and push new ideas or innovation, we kind of get stonewalled by them saying, well, we don't do it that way'.... 'sometimes men think that women are just in a corner trying to over overrule them or overrun them' (Chairperson of a CWP regional chapter).

Another interviewee supported this view:

'we also need strong principles men in parliament that would not only stand with a matter because it is coming from them' (Speaker).

Another interviewee also reinforced this idea but also claimed that the way gender equality policies are viewed hinders the ability to implement gender policies learnt through CWP:

'Things that relate to women always seem to go in the back burner. So it's like an example of again in theory everything that can be done but then how in practice here always seems to be a stumbling block in the way in and how these things always seem to go to the bottom of the pile and then if you are having the debate with the people in the room who do not understand it, do not understand what it's for, are not as enlightened as those of us who are exposed to this learning then it makes it all the more difficult.' (Minister of Equality).

When asked if they thought that the position of women in terms of numbers and position in leadership in parliament impacts their ability to implement gender equality policies learnt through CWP, some interviewees said that it did:

'What I am seeing now is that we have sort of a crucial mass in [the parliament] when I first joined it was about twenty percent female members of parliament we are now at a third and what I have noticed is that issues like online harassment which would have been very marginalised not marginal but marginalised by parliamentarians seventeen years ago is now much more of an accepted issue to talk about even through online harassment affects both men and women. Women find it much more easier to talk about their experience and it does tend to be more greater and more broader of an issue but it is now more accepted to talk about those sort of things and I do think that its directly to do with the number of women in parliament' (Former Chairperson of a gender-focused select committee).

Another interviewee said that it did not however inter-party politics amongst women was a constraint:

'What then hinders me is the issue of party politics'.. 'You would find that there's still some form of disunity amongst women of a particular party and when you are to propose something it is not taken as if it's empowering women, but it is taken on the context of which woman [from the political party] would benefit from that which woman is proposing it' (Speaker).

Another interviewee pointed out resource and financial constraints as a reason that hinders their ability to implement policies they learnt:

'Our statistics department is woefully understaffed, and I don't think they know what they're doing to be honest with you. So, there's still a lot of restructuring in the public service for [the jurisdiction] that needs to be done and will be done over time' (Chairperson of a CWP regional chapter).

The role of CWP

Interviewees brought to light their view of what they understood the role of CWP to be as an inter-parliamentary diplomacy network dedicated to gender equality. This was not something that was raised during questions but rather emerged during interviews:

'the beauty about CWP is that it's a network to show us how those who have achieved the success they have and see how we can learn from them...'We are friends outside and we are then facilitators for other things and for other reasons through CWP but not necessarily for CWP matters because we connect our jurisdictions through each other through the content and friendships we have established through CWP' (Minister of Equality).

'I think that the membership of that group would feel that being able to share their experiences as women parliamentarians is probably as important as sharing experiences or undertaking policy activity' (Former Chairperson of a gender-focused select committee).

'just the ability to pick up the phone and kind of schedule time and have that dialogue I think is equally important' ... 'to network and engage with our sister parliamentarians around the world' (Chairperson of a CWP regional chapter).

Analysis of interviews

Similar to the data gathered in the survey, the purpose of the interviews were to gather data that would contribute to research on the engagement of women parliamentarians in CWP but importantly to strengthen existing data collected through the survey to answer the research question: How important is policy learning as a parliamentary diplomacy activity to achieve gender for women parliamentarians engaged in CWP?

The discussion will aim to unpack key themes and topics that emerged from the interviews. In deploying these themes, we begin to see the position policy learning takes as an activity to achieve gender equality in the realm of parliamentary diplomacy.

The importance of policy learning versus the feasibility to implement learnt policies

The interview findings on why policy learning is considered to be an important activity to advance gender equality might suggest that policy learning is significant in women parliamentarians' engagement with CWP however, when these results are looked at in correlation with findings on the ability women parliamentarians have to implement any of the gender related policies they have learnt in their respective parliaments, there is a significant contradiction. One interviewee described their efforts to try and implement policies learnt as being 'stonewalled' (Chairperson of a CWP regional chapter) meaning that their proposals have received a non-committal from their parliaments. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, common challenges that exist in implementing gender equality plans include but are not limited to the inability to engage or mobilise stakeholders, the absence of getting men involved and participating in the implementation process, insufficient awareness or understanding of gender equality and mechanisms to realise it, lack of gender knowledge and expertise and the scarcity of both human and financial resources (No Date). Interviewees highlighted challenges such as women parliamentarians with ministerial roles given feminine portfolios 'associated with "soft" issues, as opposed to "hard," masculine ones such as Minister of Defence, Minister of International Trade or Minister of Finance and are often provided with 'little resources, personnel, and media attention – all factors that enhance ministerial careers' and advance gender equality (Kroeber and Hüffelmann 2021: 9). This is also further supported by research conducted by the IPU which reveals that 'the most commonly held portfolios by women ministers are: Family/children/youth/elderly/disabled; followed by Social affairs; Environment/natural resources/energy; Employment/labour/vocational training, and Women affairs/gender equality' (UN Women 2021).

Another challenge presented in the interviews was the absence of support and involvement of male parliamentarians which could be in response to the fact that parliaments are still considered to be 'male-dominated institutional settings' permeated by a culture of masculinity and when women parliamentarians are confronted by this they are regarded as 'space invaders' and constrained in various ways by rules, norms and practices that obstruct their political work' (Erikson and Josefsson 2022: 20). These findings were significant as they provided critical clarity to the very limited data the survey found of how easy women parliamentarians were able to implement the policies, they learnt in their engagement with CWP in their respective parliaments. As mentioned in the section on survey findings on the impact of a neutral response, there are multiple reasons as to why women parliamentarians could have rated their ease to implement policies learnt from CWP as 'neutral'. However, the possible reasons that stood out were that respondents may give a neutral response if they 'have mixed feelings or contradictory ideas and on an issue' and when they are unwilling or hesitant to express a socially undesirable opinion (Edwards and Smith 2014). The interviews both validated the two reasons but also fortified existing research on institutional sexism such as discrimination in parliament in the form of teasing for reasons such as being of childbearing age and not married which is disagreement with the dominant view that 'a woman isn't a full woman or hasn't reached her full potential until she has formed her family' (Erikson and Josefsson 2022: 23 – 33; Chairperson of a CWP regional chapter).

It should be noted that not all reasons for the limited participation of male parliamentarians is as a result of this however, the example is used given the increase attention to combating male-dominated culture by inter-parliamentary organisations (International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics 2017; ParlAmericas No Date).

Relating the findings more generally to attaining gender equality through the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 5 by 2030, Razavi highlights that goals refuse to 'narrow down' the challenges the world is facing to a few 'manageable' goals and targets' needed to attend to basic needs (2016: 29). Razavi takes it further to argue that the goals are 'relatively silent' on giving both states and parliaments guidance on what sort of policies are needed to achieve the desirable goals and targets set out in the agenda and the how to mobilise sufficient resources in an equitable manner 'according to each jurisdiction specific means' needs (2016: 27 - 35). It could therefore be argued from these contributions that the responsibility placed on women parliamentarians to firstly to 'respect, protect and promote' a 'broad and ambitious agenda' needs (Razavi 2016: 29) in conjunctions with trying to address the constraints that exist in parliaments makes the practicality of implementing gender-related policies all the more difficult. Howlett, Ramesh and Perl also highlight that gender inequality problems such as domestic violence are 'rooted in so many causes that programs designed to address single or multiple causes can normally be expected to fall short of their objectives (2009: 164). The interviewees confirmed this point in reflecting on the work they have supported championing on gender sensitive policies and strategies in their parliaments. The CWP like many inter-parliamentary bodies is focused on encouraging parliaments to adopt gender sensitive policies and approaches across all of its operations.

As defined by the IPU:

'A gender-sensitive parliament is a parliament that responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its composition, structures, operations, methods and work. Gender-sensitive parliaments remove the barriers to women's full participation and offer a positive example or model to society at large. They ensure that their operations and resources are used effectively towards promoting gender equality' (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2012).

As stated by the former Chairperson of CWP, the CWP's Gender Sensitive Guidelines: Standards and a Checklist for Parliamentary Change seeks to provide its membership and parliaments across the Commonwealth with 'an outline of gender sensitising standards that they should look to achieve identifying priority areas that need to be strengthened to help parliaments become gender sensitive institutions' (Childs 2020). However, an interviewee highlighted that once such policy is implemented, a practical challenge is that 'there is no way of monitoring progress against it or holding people to account if it does not happen' and recommends that an organ or body be created which is accountable to parliament (Former Chairperson of a gender focused select committee). This could be due to the fact that the implementation of such policies is complex as it covers issues such as social mobility, harassment and bullying, parental rights and would require the support and action of actors outside of responsible for running and implementing policies in government ministries and departments, bureaus, commissions and administrative and parliamentary units, departments and offices (Childs 2020). Howlett, Ramesh and Perl again reinforce some of the views expressed by interviews that implementing policies to address such issues are often an 'expensive, multi-year effort meaning that continued funding for the programs and projects is usually neither permanent nor guaranteed but rather requires continual negotiation and discussions within and between the political and administrative arms of the state' (2009: 160 - 161).

When analysing the effect of the increased representation of women in the parliament of Rwanda which is a Commonwealth parliament, Delvin and Elgie highlight that whilst women parliamentarians add new dimensions to the policy agenda, 'there is little evidence that increased women's representation changes policy outputs... or altered policy outcomes' and that there is a general 'scarcity of knowledge about the consequences of women's parliamentary presence' on policy (2008: 237-238). This view is also supported by Annesley and Gains who state that there is 'empirical difficulties' with connecting the number of women in parliaments with their ability to accelerate or facilitate policy change (Annesley and Gains 2010: 911). This is significant as it shows that implementation is not as simple as it may be perceived to be and requires the consideration of multiple factors including the formulation and creation of multiple organs and the provision of resources. All of these decisions can be done however, they are beyond the control of women parliamentarians alone.

Motivations behind exchanging best practices

The interview results suggest that members of CWP view activities, specifically establishing friendship groups or alliances and exchanging best practices which were the most common activities identified as important in the survey results to be complementary and just as important than policy learning. Interviewees also applied a lot of emphasis on the benefits of undertaking networking as an activity which could be best understood as 'the action or process of interacting with others to exchange information and develop professional or social contacts' (Oxford English Dictionary 2022). With this definition, it could therefore be understood that networking could be understood as a process that facilitates exchanging best practices and the establishment of friendship groups and alliances. As mentioned in the literature review, parliamentary diplomacy offers parliamentarians the opportunity to engage in a wide range of activities from informal exchanges of opinions and views through the exchange of information to formalised activities to such as adopting decisions and collective strategies to advocate for certain causes that they might not have the ability to do so in other settings (De Fouloy 2019). Therefore, it is not surprising that these activities are viewed as equally important.

Whilst identifying some of the weakness of networking in parliamentary diplomacy, Fiott highlights how in reality it is difficult for parliamentarians to effectively manage their interests and objectives when they engage in parliamentary diplomacy. He argues that parliamentarians 'face the added difficulty of having to wrestle between the needs of the constituents they represent and their own personal interests and moral conscious. This entanglement of interests greatly impacts on the ability and reach of parlomacy' (Fiott 2011). From this point made, it is clear that the interests of women parliamentarians must be questioned in their engagement with CWP. The interview results do not explicitly provide us with specific information needed to find out why exactly Commonwealth women parliamentarians want to engage in these activities as this was not a question that was asked. However, the results do give the ability to identify one common interest which was to 'increase the representation of women in parliament' (Minsiter of Equality; Former Chairperson of a gender focused select committee). Additionally, CWP has a mandate to 'promote the representation of women' in Commonwealth parliaments and promote 'women's full and equal participation in all political and parliamentary leadership at all levels' (CWP 2020). Although an important cause, this causes us to ask the question: what is the motivation behind this interest? Referring to what Fiott contends to be the goals of interest, increasing the representation of women in parliament could be viewed as 'moral conscious' women parliamentarians have as women where Gender equality is viewed as a universal 'fundamental human right' and a 'necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world' and being an issue that has historically been championed by women (Fiott 2011; United Nations No Date).

However, it could also be argued that this interest is a 'personal interest' (Fiott 2011) fulfilling objectives and targets they would like in their role as parliamentarians. According to the nature and characteristic of both policymaking and politics, it is argued that the motivations of parliamentarians as politicians are to vie for elections 'in order to promote the interests in the income, power and prestige derived from holding office, and thus offer policies that will win voters' support' (Howlett, Ramesh and Perl 2009: 33). Politicians are also 'willing to supply programs because of their own self-interest in power, prestige and popularity' (Howlett, Ramesh and Perl 2009: 33). Therefore, is the interest to increase the representation of women to further solidify the role and position of women parliamentarians in parliament or is it a benefit to the cause. As a result of this, Fiott makes the argument that parliamentary diplomacy as a venue where politicians can engage activities 'should perhaps self-consciously disavow itself of pursuing "interests" in the traditional reasons of state guise' (Fiott 2011). Exploring and analysing the reason behind the motivations attached to the interest pursued by women parliamentarians and of course parliamentarians is of course beyond the scope of the research which only looks at how important policy learning is as an activity of parliamentary diplomacy. However, the reasons behind engaging in such activities like exchanging best practices and establish friendship groups should not be ignored. It is crucial to question the reason behind why these activities are important and if participation will contribute to efforts towards attaining gender equality as it can get blurry when activities that promote the advancement of the interest of women parliamentarians are undertaken.

Establishing friendship groups and alliances and peer to peer support

Interview findings did offer what could be argued as great insight into what women parliamentarians perceive to be one of the functions of a gender-focused inter-parliamentary body like CWP which is to be a venue that facilitates peer to peer support. One interviewee referred to their participation in CWP as them having the ability to 'engage with our sister parliamentarians around the world' (Chairperson of a CWP regional chapter). Another said that CWP is 'beyond networking it is real genuine friendship' (Minister of Equality) and another specifically claimed that 'the role of CWP is that of a support organisation' (Former Chairperson of a gender-focused select committee). This data is significant as it validates research conducted by many inter-parliamentary bodies, inter-governmental and international organisation on the reasons and benefits of women parliamentarians having access to gender-focused bodies and networks outside of their respective parliaments. The ParlAmericas Multi-Party Caucuses for Gender Equality Handbook that was designed for parliamentarians as a guide on how they can establish their own gender equality group in parliament makes the claim that the specific purpose of a gender focused caucus varies according to the specific needs across jurisdictions but could include:

'building solidarity among women members of the legislature, promoting women's representation in politics, mainstreaming gender in parliamentary institutions and procedures, drafting and reforming laws with a gender perspective, facilitating dialogue and raising awareness on gender issues in political parties and in communities, and/or providing training, information, or other support to members' (ParlAmericas 2017).

While many parliaments including those in Commonwealth nations such as Sri Lanka, Botswana and more recently Belize have been able to establish gender focused caucuses (IPU Union 2022; National Assembly of Belize 2022b) , data released by the IPU and CWP to gather and publish data on the number of women that are in parliaments across the world shows that there continues to be a drastically low representation of women in parliaments well under the international goal of 30 percent that was set at the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 (UN Women 1995). There are as many as fourteen Commonwealth parliaments with zero women representation in parliament and another ten with under five percent (CWP International Steering Committee Meeting 2022: 3 -5; IPU 2022). Research commissioned by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) reveals that some parliaments do not have women's parliamentary bodies such as women's caucuses or groups for reasons such as 'there were too few women elected to the parliament following elections to justify the continuation of the structure, or too few women MPs were interested in re-establishing the body which is particularly problematic where the women who created the body are not re-elected...a lack of support from political parties, a lack of sufficient resources, or changes in the parliamentary environment that rendered a women's parliamentary body less relevant' (OSCE ODIHR 2013). This is significant as the existing only correlates and adds weight to the experience shared by one interviewee who said that:

'I'm the only woman in government in my parliament and there is one more woman in opposition and historically, we have always had low representation of women but there has never actually been a focus on increasing representation of women in parliament I am the only woman in government in my parliament and there is one woman in opposition and historically, we have always had low representation ... I cannot overemphasise the importance of the networks that CWP provides specially for a lone woman in government, the comfort, and the rapport' (Minister of Equality).

In Palmieri's review of CWP, she also highlights a quote from a women member from an Australia parliament who further highlights the value of peer-to-peer support and shares that:

'So can you imagine if you're a woman, and you are the only female in your parliament, it's a very isolating experience. So that's one week in the year that those women can come and just engage with other women and share some of the stories, the coping strategies, and successes and it's a really inspiring time' (Palmieri 2021: 644).

All the above evidence points to the important fact that CWP provides women parliamentarians with a unique and safe space that they may not be able to access anywhere else. Women parliamentarians are encouraged to 'Be unafraid' and 'Build the personal support you need to make this easier (UK Parliament 2018). In the words of Palmieri, 'this cross jurisdictional mechanism provides women MPs a safe space to share their intersectionality across sexuality, age, party, and geographic region, when other – national – mechanisms fail' (Palmieri 2020: 637). This is clearly something that CWP recognises as an important offering to its membership as it commits to being a venue that will produce a 'safe space for support and guidance for women parliamentarians' (Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians 2020).

Limitations

It should be noted that the selection of interviewees may have affected the results of the research. Firstly, by using a purposive sampling method, the views and opinions shared by the four interviewees may not be representative of the views represented by all women parliamentarians across the Commonwealth (Andrade 2021: 88). However, the selection of interviewees was not something that could have been easily controlled given the fact that parliamentarians are considered to be a 'hard-to-reach population' for the fact that they are busy and extremely difficult to access so agreeing to participate in a survey or an interview often places important time constraint on them as subjects (Ellinas 2021: 8). Referring his experience conducting over one thousand interviews with parliamentarians, Philip Cowley fittingly explains how challenging interviewing parliamentarians is as a task by stressing that: 'You are asking them to do you a favour, in return for which they will likely get nothing. They don't have to do this; you're not a constituent. You're not part of their core business, or even their peripheral business. You almost certainly can't give them anything useful in return' (2021: 237).

Indeed, a more appropriate methodology could have been applied which would have been to interview former Commonwealth women parliamentarians who were engaged with CWP. Former women parliamentarians of Commonwealth parliaments would have further enriched the data that was gathered but by no longer being connected to a parliament and now as actors in civil society, they would have also offered a different but interesting perspective on the topic.

Regarding the survey that was developed, the use of closed questions may not have allowed respondents to give the answers that they would have preferred to give. However, this did not appear to be a considerable issue as the four interviewees were selected from the list of survey respondents and were given the opportunity to further elaborate on the themes that emerged from the survey results. Given the difficulty engaging with women parliamentarians in this research as a result of their understandably busy schedules, I was unable to pilot the survey nor interviews to. However, as a method to overcome this challenge, the survey and interview questions were shared with a former women parliamentarian and member of CWP for their review and comments. All feedback and advice received was taken into account and questions were modified where applicable (Ferguson and Jacob 2012: 5 – 6).

Regarding restrictions faced during the discussions held in the interview, the question inquired about some topics that were not addressed as a result of both resource and time constraints. This dissertation was limited to an exploration on the views and opinions of women parliamentarians more broadly but did not specifically delve into the views of women parliamentarians who also serve as government ministers. It is expected that women parliamentarians who fall into this category may have a different experiences and approach to engaging in CWP especially given the fact that they not only attend CWP as a women parliamentarian but as a representative of attending of government so the type of activities they may participate in might be affected by this.

CONCLUSION

The increasing number of women who engage in parliament make it possible for discussions and actions needed to tackle gender inequality to be heard in inter-parliamentary bodies. It is evident from the above discussion that policy learning is a regarded, deliberate and purpose driven activity members of CWP engage in to obtain new knowledge from one another and is instrumental to learning and finding solutions to pertinent issues that affect women (Cairney 2019: 208-209). However, this dissertation has also revealed that Commonwealth women parliamentarians do hold other activities to an equal regard specifically, sharing best practices and establishing friendships groups and alliances. These activities are in alignment with by Keck and Sikkink observation that 'building new links ... multiply the opportunities for dialogue and exchange' (1999:89). However, these opportunities in the case of women parliamentarians may be hard to distinguish or separate from political opportunities they may have. This discussion was also insightful in highlighting what members of CWP believed to be the purpose of the network which is one that members can lean into for support in their day-to-day activities as parliamentarians but also as women navigating a world where inequalities are still far reaching.

Nevertheless, there are clearly some challenges and obstacles Commonwealth women parliamentarian face when trying to transfer policies in their respective parliament. It is worth highlighting that an interviewee asked:

'what lever do you pull to affect change so the other question I put out there is the collaborative working so in those situations where you are trying to take your policy learning and you don't know how to resolve it within your current parliamentary structures, is there a way we can be better working with third party organisations like UN Women [United Nations Women] to try and affect change if there are instances where the structures within our own parliaments don't allow that to happen?' (Former Chairperson of a gender-focused select committee).

This is beyond the scope and remit of this study as it does not answer the research question which focuses on activities women parliamentarians engage in within CWP and not in their own parliament. Additionally, exploring this question would require a larger interview sample size of women parliamentarians, specifically those who have held ministerial positions as they are directly involved in the implementation of policy which was not the methodological choice of this research which was not limited to ministers. However, it would be important for future work on CWP to consider the wider question between the network, policy learning and policy implementation. In short, Can CWP help bridge the gap between women parliamentarians, policy learning and policy implementation? A valuable area of interest for such study could be to evaluate the implementation of gender mainstreaming policies such as gender sensitisation as a practice to advance gender equality given its relevance, promotion and endorsement by inter-parliamentary organisations and the United Nations as a strategies and policies worth adopting in parliaments (UN Women 2021b).

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