



YWiL Belize consisted of three parts:

- A series of foundational training sessions on the program's core themes
- A workshop to further enhance participants' understanding, skills, and ability to engage in different forms of leadership through the sharing of good practices with other women leaders
- Simulated parliamentary debates in the House of Representatives and the Senate

YOUNG WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP BELIZE

Throughout February and March 2026, young women leaders from across Belize took part in Young Women in Leadership – Belize (YWiL Belize). Convened by ParlAmericas, Caribbean Women in Leadership (CIWiL), the Women's Parliamentary Caucus of Belize, the CIWiL Belize National Chapter, and the Belize Youth Department, and with the support of the National Assembly of Belize, the program facilitated capacity-building and learning on parliamentary decision-making, gender equality, and inclusive, transformational leadership through expert guidance, dialogue, and exchange between participants and parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, government representatives, civil society, and other youth advocates. It then created a historic avenue to put this knowledge into practice through the all-women parliamentary sittings.

YWiL Belize was the sixth in a series of national-level initiatives implemented in the Caribbean by ParlAmericas and CIWiL to strengthen women's political leadership. YWiL programs have previously been hosted in partnership with the national legislatures of [Trinidad and Tobago](#) (February-March 2020); [Antigua and Barbuda](#) (October-November 2020); [Saint Lucia](#) (May-June 2022); [Jamaica](#) (December 2022-February 2023); and [Grenada](#) (May-July 2024). YWiL has also been hosted by CIWiL national chapters and parliaments in [Trinidad and Tobago](#) in November 2021 and [Antigua and Barbuda](#) in March 2026.

#YWiL

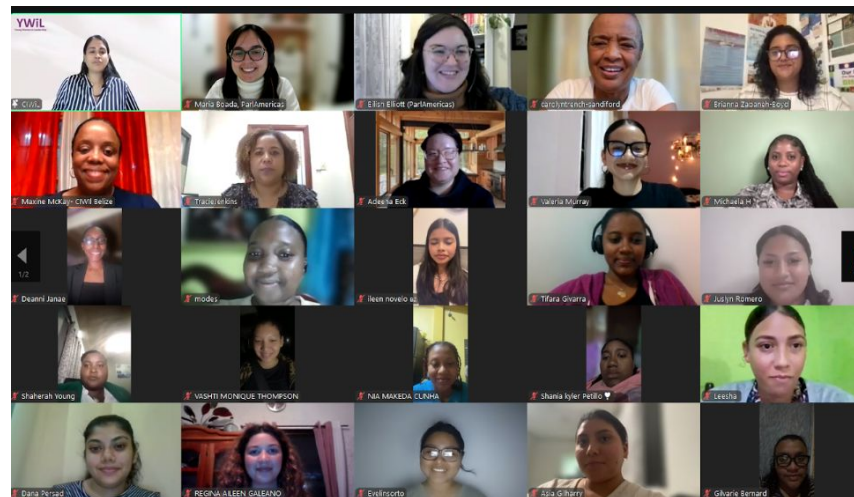


ORIENTATION SESSIONS

The cohort's YWiL journey began with orientation sessions that brought participants together for their first shared engagement and laid the groundwork for the program.

Participants were welcomed through opening remarks delivered by the Honourable **Carolyn Trench-Sandiford**, President of the Senate and Member of the ParlAmericas Council; **Tracie Jenkins**, CIWiL Treasurer and Regional Board Member; **Katie Jones**, Chairperson of CIWiL Belize (Day 1), and Dr. **Maxine McKay**, Vice-Chairperson of CIWiL Belize (Day 2). The speakers underscored both the urgency and opportunity of advancing young women's leadership in Belize, encouraging participants to envision their future roles in national development while highlighting the need for bold, collaborative leadership to increase women's representation in decision-making spaces.

The orientation sessions guided participants through the program structure, expectations, and upcoming engagements, and facilitated opportunities for participants to get to know one another. **Indira Loague**, Director of the Belize Youth Department, closed the sessions by encouraging participants to voice their opinions, support one another, and step confidently into their leadership journeys.



The Honourable Carolyn Trench-Sandiford, President of the Senate and Member of the ParlAmericas Council

"As a Member of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus of the National Assembly, we embrace the YWiL program as we see it as an opportunity for you to network, to foster productive dialogue on issues of women's rights and gender equality, and to promote actions to positively impact the inclusiveness of women's issues in the legislature and national discourse. There is strength in numbers."

FIRST VIRTUAL SESSION

An introduction to gender equality: Theory and practice

The first YWiL Belize virtual training session guided participants through discussions and exercises focused on applying a gender lens in decision-making. The session opened with welcoming remarks by the Honourable **Tracy Panton**, Leader of the Opposition in the House of Representatives of Belize, who noted the importance of youth leadership and gender equality and highlighted the critical role that parliaments play in advancing inclusive and equitable societies.

Eilish Elliott, ParlAmericas Deputy Director for Program Management and M&E, and **Sasha Sahadeo**, Gender Officer for the CIWiL Regional Secretariat, presented core concepts related to gender and diversity, highlighting how gender shapes all aspects of life and examples of how these inequalities are evident in today's society.

A panel discussion then followed with interventions by Senator the Honourable **Brittney Galvez**, Vice-President for Central America of the ParlAmericas Parliamentary Network for Gender Equality; Senator the Honourable **Janelle Chanona**; and **Anita Zetina**, gender equality and social development practitioner and member of the CIWiL Belize National Chapter. The dialogue brought together current leaders from Belize to explore real-world experiences of political advocacy from both within and outside the parliamentary sphere, with the objective of enabling participants to gain a deeper understanding of strategies to effectively contribute to advancing equality and women's leadership.



Adopting an inclusive approach to the consideration of legislative and policy issues – and the preparation of subsequent responses – is critical for decision-makers. Applying a gender perspective in developing solutions will help to ensure that these are responsive to the unique experiences of all individuals, avoiding “one-size-fits-all” thinking, and are particularly sensitive to the needs of under-represented or historically marginalised groups. When applied by legislators, this contributes to creating a legal framework that works in favour of as many people as possible and the implementation of actions that proactively respond to and redress inequalities. Learn more in this handout on [gender sensitivity in legislation](#) and this [publication on key gender equality concepts and issues](#).

SECOND VIRTUAL SESSION

Transformational Leadership

The second virtual training session, undertaken jointly with the YWiL Antigua and Barbuda 2026 cohort, focused on transformational leadership. This leadership model forms the basis of CIWiL's flagship training program and underlies the YWiL program.

The session was facilitated by Dr. **Maxine McKay**, Vice Chair of the CIWiL Belize National Chapter, with presentations by **Sheila Roseau**, women's rights advocate from Antigua and Barbuda and founding member of CIWiL, as well as **Annetta Jackson**, Attorney-at-Law, Gender Policy Advisor, and Member of the CIWiL Antigua and Barbuda National Chapter. These experts, alongside opening speakers the Honourable **Valerie Woods**, Speaker of the House of Representatives of Belize, and the Honourable **Alincia Williams Grant**, President of the Senate of Antigua and Barbuda, provided participants with an introduction to the principles of the transformational leadership approach, its importance in the context of women's leadership, and how this form of leadership helps to achieve positive change for, and in service of, all of society through its focus on restructuring harmful systems that create and uphold inequalities.

[Transformational leadership](#) is defined as a leadership approach that contributes to change in individuals and social systems. In its ideal form, it creates valuable and positive change and enhances the motivation, morale, and performance of followers through a variety of mechanisms. The model of transformational leadership starts at the level of individual transformation, before moving on to the group and institutional levels. It fosters a culture of accountability, justice, and transparency.

When applied to gender and leadership, this process leads to the redefinition of gender and power relations, and the strengthening of leadership that is bold and innovative and builds on the skills of women and men in society thereby enhancing gender equality.

Learn more on [CIWiL's website](#).



The Honourable Valerie Woods, Speaker of the House of Representatives of Belize

"Transformational leadership is not about titles. It is not about sitting in a high-back chair, talking from a microphone, or talking from a podium; it is about changing systems – economic systems, political systems, and social systems – so that they reflect justice, they reflect equity, and democracy. But I can say, at least from the lessons I've learned, that this kind of leadership really began long before you entered any chamber and long before you signed up for the program. It begins with you; it begins the moment you decide, or decided, that your voice and perspective matter, and that you will not shrink to make others feel comfortable."



the Honourable Alincia Williams Grant, President of the Senate of Antigua and Barbuda

"Transformational leadership not only changes systems, it changes peoples. I think that this is what the YWiL Program is about. The YWiL program begins with your own transformation and then it expands outwardly into your family, community, groups, institutions that you work at or study at, and ultimately your nation...Transformational leadership is not about holding office, it's about using your position to expand opportunity for others...it's multiplication because the empirical evidence is that when women rise, we do not rise alone, we take everyone with us."

THIRD VIRTUAL SESSION

Introduction to parliament and how it functions

The third YWiL Belize virtual training session focused on the role, operation, and standing orders of parliament to support participants in their preparations for the YWiL Parliamentary Sitting from a procedural perspective. The session was opened with opening remarks from Senator **the honourable Rozel Arana**, and moderated by Senator the honourable **Janelle Chanona**. Members of staff from the National Assembly of Belize – **Manuel Grant**, Parliamentary Officer of the House of Representatives, and **Eudice Gibson**, Senior Clerk Assistant – then provided guidance on the functioning of both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The session provided a comprehensive introduction to the work of the legislature and the critical role of the parliament and parliamentarians in a democracy and in national development. Its content included an overview of the structure of the Parliament of Belize, discussion of the role of parliamentary debate, and a summary of key elements of parliamentary procedure and processes. **Clarita Pech**, Clerk to the National Assembly, emphasised the relevance of the session, highlighting that parliamentary rules serve as a tool to protect participation and how respectful dialogue allows for differences to be expressed.



Ms. Clarita Pech, Clerk to the National Assembly

“Parliament can appear complex from the outside. When we watch the debates, we often notice the exchanges, the disagreements, and sometimes the formality of the setting; but what you have seen today is that the Chamber does not operate on personality. It operates on structure. The Standing Orders, the rules, are there not to make Parliament rigid; they exist to make it fair, to ensure that no one person dominates, that each Member of Parliament is heard in turn, and that decisions are taken deliberately and in order.”



FOURTH VIRTUAL SESSION

Preparing and delivering a parliamentary intervention

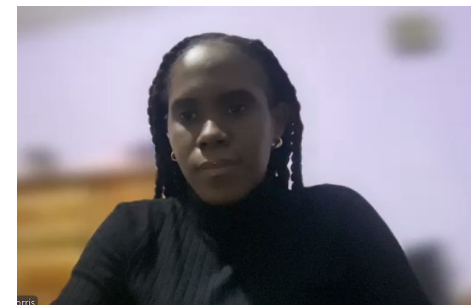
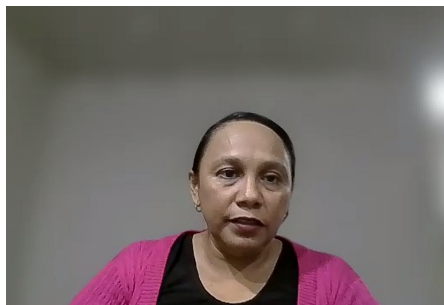
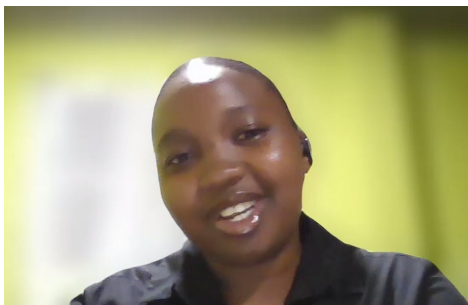
The fourth session of YWiL Belize focused on supporting participants in preparing for their participation in the YWiL parliamentary sitting. Senator the Honourable **Brittney Galvez**, Vice-President for Central America of the ParlAmericas Parliamentary Network for Gender Equality, opening the session by emphasising the value of collaboration in parliamentary spaces and sharing practical advice on writing impactful interventions and overcoming nerves in high-level forums.

The session, moderated by peer mentor and YWiL Grenada participant **Krystel Williams**, centred on a dialogue which included **Annie Carrillo**, Coordinator of the Children's Parliament of Belize with the National Commission for Families and Children; **Eilish Elliott**, ParlAmericas' Deputy Director for Program Management and M&E; and **Sandrine Morris**, attorney-at-Law and YWiL Jamaica participant. The presentations provided concrete guidance on delivering effective intervention in parliament. Speakers provided recommendations for how to conduct research and deliver a contribution, how to apply a gender lens in the drafting of a parliamentary speech, and how to make the most of available time through prioritisation of content and coordination with other colleagues.



Senator the Honourable Brittney Galvez, Vice-President for Central America of the ParlAmericas Parliamentary Network for Gender Equality

"There was a time when policies affecting women and girls were debated without even having a woman in these chambers, and now, on the 20th of this month, you will stand, speak, and shape a debate in that very space, a space where advocacy meets policy, where conversations become commitment, and where collaboration, even among people who sometimes disagree, helps to shape law, policy, and progress for our nation. And in these living spaces of our democracy, I want you to remember that collaboration is essential, because no single voice, no matter how passionate, can transform a country alone."



FIFTH VIRTUAL SESSION

The women's movement and feminist advocacy in Belize

The fifth YWiL Belize virtual training session recognised the role of Belizean women in shaping Caribbean feminist thought and advocacy, built understanding of the historical evolution of feminism and the women's movement in Belize, and analysed current gender equality challenges in the country and related institutional responses.

The session opened with remarks by the Honourable **Thea Garcia-Ramirez**, Belize's Minister of Human Development, Family Support & Gender Affairs, before moving into a distinguished panel moderated by Dr.

Maxine McKay, Vice Chair of the CIWiL Belize National Chapter.



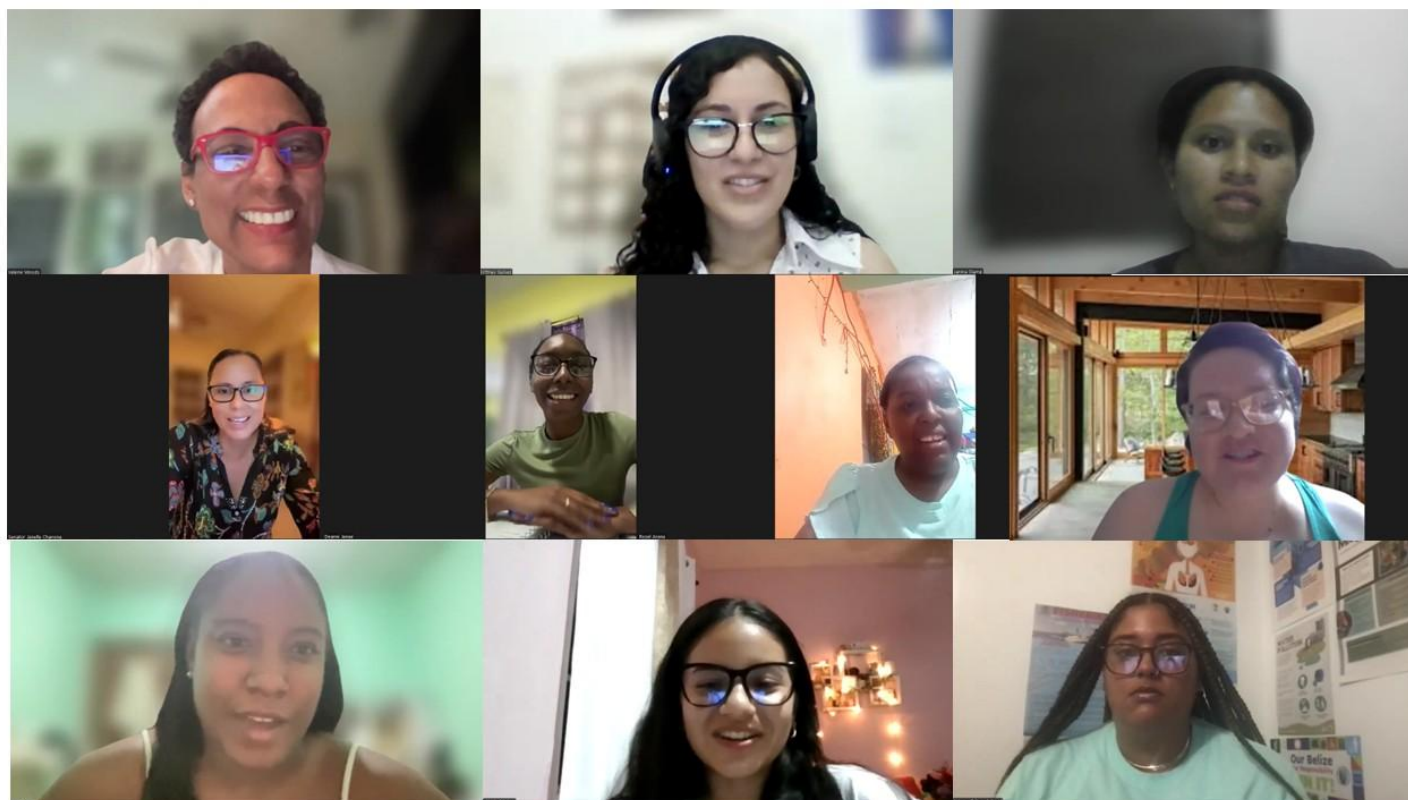
The session enabled exchange with and between panellists **Cristina Coc**, co-spokesperson for the Maya Leadership Alliance and Founder and Executive director of the Julian Cho Society; Dr. **Sharmayne Saunders**, CIWiL Belize Co-Founder and former Chairperson of the CIWiL Belize National Chapter; **Michele Irving**, Founder and President of the Productive Organization for Women in Action; and **Eleanor Murillo**, Executive Director of the National Women's Commission of Belize. Together, the speakers and discussion provided a comprehensive introduction to the history of the women's movement in Belize and the Caribbean, explored the relationship between power and gender, and facilitated the sharing of key resources to support actions that young women leaders can take to advance gender justice today.

SIXTH VIRTUAL SESSION

Virtual exchange with women parliamentarians

The final YWiL Belize virtual session brought together participants and parliamentarians from the Belize Women's Parliamentary Caucus for an interactive dialogue. The Honourable Speaker **Valerie Woods**, Senator the Honourable **Brittney Galvez**, Senator the Honourable **Janelle Chanona**, and Senator the Honourable **Rozel Arana** shared insights from their leadership journeys and offered practical advice to young women navigating spaces of public leadership. Participants also shared their own work, highlighting the transformations they hope to lead within their communities and exchanging with parliamentarians on strategies for collective action to advance gender equality and women's leadership.

This final virtual session served to celebrate the participants' journey thus far through the YWiL program, built excitement for the in-person programming, and highlighted opportunities for continued collaboration beyond the initiative's conclusion.



IN-PERSON ACTIVITIES

Practice Parliamentary Sitting

The practice session at the National Assembly of Belize on March 18, 2026, served as a key avenue for supporting participants' preparation for the YWiL Parliamentary Sittings. After a welcome and orientation from **Clarita Pech**, Clerk to the National Assembly, parliamentary staff **Manuel Grant**, Parliamentary Officer, and **Eudice Gibson**, Senior Clerk Assistant, provided an overview of what to expect during the Sittings and presented a refresher on relevant parliamentary procedures.

Following the presentations, participants took part in run-throughs of the Sittings, marking their first experience participating in parliamentary proceedings, and had their first opportunity to caucus in-person with fellow participants. During the caucusing sessions, participants collaborated with one another, with support from peer mentors, based on their assigned roles for the sittings.

Peer mentors are one of the key supports that participants benefit from during the YWiL program. Past YWiL participants contribute to each program by serving as a mentor to a designated group of participants in the new cohort, offering guidance to their group of mentees as they prepare for the YWiL Sitting based on their prior experience and respective expertise in their own fields. These individuals support various other aspects of programming and greatly enrich YWiL's offering.





LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP

The in-person leadership workshop on March 19, 2026, created space for participants to exchange on the persistent barriers shaping women's underrepresentation as well as practical strategies to navigate and challenge these realities. The workshop opened with welcoming remarks by Senator the Honourable **Janelle Chanona**; **L. Nana Oye Hesse Bayne**, CIWiL President; **Katie Jones**, CIWiL Belize Chairperson; and **Najwa Cadle**, Development Officer for the Department of Youth.

The remarks were followed with exercises that enabled participants to get to know one another more personally by engaging in brief but meaningful conversations that promoted mutual understanding, empathy, and trust.



Senator the Honourable Janelle Chanona (Belize), Chair of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus

"Young people have a lot to say. It's your future, but also our present. This presents an exciting opportunity to make your presence felt in parliament, the corridors of power, on how we are governed and the critical role women must embrace by stepping into leadership roles."



Overcoming challenges on your leadership journey

This session convened a panel enabled an exploration of the gender-based challenges that can hinder and undermine women leaders across sectors, with particular attention to intersectional identities and lived experiences. The discussion included consideration of diverse leadership settings, reflecting the practical realities of leadership both in national decision-making and at the grassroots level. Moderated by **Sabrina Bryan**, peer mentor and YWiL Jamaica participant, the discussion offered practical and inspiring guidance. Key insights included the importance of leading with respect, amplifying the voices of others, and grounding one's mission and goals in service. Dialogues further emphasized the value of cultural awareness and the need for women leaders to resist pressure to conform, remaining authentic to their values and purpose.

The following panellists shared their knowledge and experiences with participants on these themes:

- The Honourable **Valerie Woods**, Speaker of the House of Belize
- The Honourable **Tracy Panton**, Leader of the Opposition in the House of Representatives of Belize
- **L. Nana Oye Hesse Bayne**, President of CIWiL and Executive Director of Shidaa Sustainable Development Solutions Ltd.
- **Amira Teul**, community leader and Project Coordinator with the Toledo Maya Women's Council



Roundtable exercise: Inclusive and transformational leadership in practice

In the roundtable exercise moderated by **Karyl Thorpe**, peer mentor and YWiL Jamaica participant, participants undertook a simulated community hearing on the development of a new public park to assess how this space could be designed to meet diverse individuals' needs for the space. This practical exercise enabled the exploration of how intersectional identities influence access to public spaces and how leadership decisions can either reinforce or dismantle exclusion. The session ultimately emphasised how meaningful progress requires intentional action, including public education, advocacy, and inclusive decision-making practices to achieve more equitable and responsive outcomes.





Building supportive communities and partnerships

A core focus of the YWiL program is transformational leadership, inclusive decision-making, and leadership grounded in service. Reflecting these guiding principles, the session created a dynamic space for dialogue among women leaders to share strategies they have used to build, strengthen, and sustain effective partnerships in their leadership work. Moderated by **K'Areece Rogers**, peer mentor and YWiL Trinidad and Tobago participant, and featuring women leaders from diverse contexts, the discussion underscored the importance of leading with purpose, confidence, and service, while highlighting the value of mentorship, solidarity, holding oneself accountable, and strong support networks. Participants also explored effective communication, active listening, and inclusive approaches to leadership in addressing barriers to engagement, such as access to childcare, resistance and advancing gender equality.

The following panellists shared their knowledge and experiences with participants on these themes:

- The Honourable **Carolyn Trench-Sandiford**, President of the Senate of Belize and Member of the ParlAmericas Council
- Senator The Honourable **Janelle Chanona**, Chair of the Belize Women's Parliamentary Caucus
- **Ronelli Requena**, Founder and Owner of Zayvha Sarai and Co-Founder of the International Network of Women in Business Inc.
- Dr. **Golda Mejia**, Founder of Progressive Education Assistance Team Organization and Primary Care & Public Health Coordinator at the Ministry of Health and Wellness
- **Tisa Grant**, Head of Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator Office





CLOSING REMARKS

To close the workshop, participants heard final reflections from **Sasha Sahadeo**, CIWiL Gender Officer, and closing remarks from His Excellency **Olivier Jacques**, Ambassador of Canada to Guatemala and High Commissioner of Canada to Belize.



YWIL SITTINGS

On March 20, 2026, the National Assembly of Belize hosted the YWiL Parliamentary Sittings, representing the first all-women sittings in the country's history. YWiL participants served as parliamentarians and officers of the parliament for a debate on a motion.

The simulated motion proposed that the National Assembly support the development of Temporary Special Measures to accelerate young women's leadership in public, political, and economic spheres as a core strategy to fulfil Belize's commitments under the Beijing Platform for Action and related international obligations, through the following:

- a. Establishing mechanisms such as candidate quotas, reserved opportunities, or other affirmative measures to increase women's and young women's participation in political and public leadership;
- b. Implementing national leadership development and mentorship programmes to strengthen pipelines for young women entering political, civic, and economic leadership;
- c. Supporting inclusive policies and institutional reforms that reduce barriers faced by rural, marginalized, and economically vulnerable young women in accessing leadership opportunities;
- d. Developing public education and advocacy campaigns to challenge harmful gender norms and promote shared leadership across generations and genders; and
- e. Strengthening partnerships between government, parliament, civil society, educational institutions, and youth networks to sustain long-term leadership development and inclusive decision-making structures.



The UNICEF Belize 2023 Gender Analysis highlights that although legal frameworks exist, women's representation in decision-making remains very low, despite women accounting for a significant percentage of the population. The gender gap in political empowerment in Belize remains among the largest in the region. It is estimated that women are 93% less likely than men to have equal opportunities in political participation.

The contributions of YWiL parliamentarians demonstrated thoughtful engagement with the measures and priorities outlined in the motion, grounded in the realities of their respective constituencies and portfolio responsibilities. Their interventions consistently applied a gender-responsive and intersectional lens, informed by research and enriched by guidance from peers and subject matter experts. The young parliamentarians emphasized the interconnectedness of women's leadership with climate resilience, food security, digital innovation, and economic sustainability, among other sectors. They further underscored that wellness is integral to effective leadership and cautioned against promoting empowerment without adequate protection for women who choose to raise their voices. Collectively, they affirmed that investing in young women is both a strategic priority and a catalyst for stronger communities and sustainable national development.

Following the votes in each chamber, participants received their certificate of completion for program and heard congratulatory remarks from:

- The Honourable **Carolyn Trench-Sandiford**, President of the Senate of Belize and Member of the ParlAmericas Council
- The Honourable **Valerie Woods**, Speaker of the House of Representatives of Belize
- Senator the Honourable **Brittney Galvez**, Vice-President for Central America of the ParlAmericas Parliamentary Network for Gender Equality
- **L. Nana Oye Hesse Bayne**, President of the CIWiL Regional Board of Directors
- **Najwa Cadle**, Youth Development Officer, Belize Department of Youth







PARTICIPANTS' NEXT STEPS

Inspired by their participation in YWiL Belize, the young women leaders planned next steps for taking positive action in their communities, sharing their learning, and continuing their leadership development. Some of the commitments adopted included:

- Promoting inclusive and representative leadership by prioritizing inclusive dialogue, stakeholder collaboration, and advocating for women, especially the most marginalised, in policy, legislative, and strategic spaces.
- Engaging in governance and civic participation through youth councils, policy reform processes, village elections, and public service at the local and national levels.
- Expanding mentorship and leadership development for girls and youth by launching school-based mentorship programs, leadership and public-speaking workshops, debate teams, and youth groups.
- Strengthening community empowerment and service initiatives including women-led volunteer groups, hospital and senior support services, collective service projects, and NGO-driven community outreach.
- Advancing education, economic empowerment, and wellbeing through financial literacy programs, mental health services, and community education campaigns, particularly in rural and underserved areas.
- Sharing knowledge and building networks by exchanging YWiL learning with peers and colleagues, using social media to promote youth leadership, and collaborating across communities to transform local talent into future leaders.



Acknowledgements

This activity was made possible with the generous support of the National Assembly of Belize, the Women's Parliamentary Caucus of Belize, the CIWiL Belize National Chapter, and the Belize Youth Department, and with the support of the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada.

CIWiL and ParlAmericas also wish to recognise and extend thanks to the selection committee members, peer mentors from past YWiL cohorts, the panellists and facilitators who shared their knowledge and time, and the numerous parliamentary representatives and non-governmental organisations who contributed to the activity. Each of these contributions was essential to help make this historic event such a success



About CIWiL and ParlAmericas



Caribbean Women in Leadership

Caribbean Women in Leadership (CIWiL) is a non-political, multi-partisan, and independent NGO established to monitor, strengthen and increase women's political participation and leadership in the region through advocacy, networking, research and capacity building initiatives.

CIWiL aims to create a sustainable, effective, and efficient women's leadership base, and to achieve gender equality, through advocacy, networking, research and capacity building.

CIWiL is about creating a space of sharing, nurturing, and solidarity among women across the many gaps that divide us.

The mission of CIWiL is to be a flagship organization to support efforts to increase the number of women in politics, leadership and decision-making at all levels in the Caribbean through high-quality training, networking, research, analysis and advocacy.

CIWiL acts as a coordinating and implementing mechanism for a regional programme of work developed and delivered by a network of organizations and individuals, to advance women's transformational leadership.



ParlAmericas is the institution that promotes parliamentary diplomacy in the inter-American system. Composed of the 35 national legislatures in North, Central and South America, and the Caribbean, ParlAmericas promotes cooperative political dialogue, facilitates the exchange of good legislative practices, and produces tailored resources to support parliamentarians in their work. The International Secretariat of ParlAmericas is headquartered in Ottawa, Canada.

Through its gender equality programming, ParlAmericas promotes gender mainstreaming in parliamentary agendas and operations and, in close collaboration with civil society partners, advances women's political leadership, including that of the next generation of empowered women leaders