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**REPORTS ON RECENT IPU SPECIALIZED CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS**

**(f) PARLIAMENTARY MEETING ON THE OCCASION OF THE 56<sup>th</sup> SESSION  
OF THE UN COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

(New York, 29 February 2012)

1. The IPU and UN Women organized a one-day parliamentary event on *Empowering rural women: What role for parliament?* The meeting took place in New York on 29 February 2012 at UN Headquarters on the occasion of the 56<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).
2. The meeting was presided over by Ms. N. Ali Assegaf, President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians. Other speakers included members of parliament, experts and representatives of international organizations.
3. It provided a forum for more than 120 parliamentarians<sup>1</sup> from 41 countries and representatives of governments and international organizations to take stock of the situation, identify challenges faced by rural women and showcase parliamentary mechanisms and actions to overcome these barriers. The meeting also sought to provide a parliamentary contribution to the debates of the CSW.
4. The meeting was opened by Mr. A. Radi, President of the IPU and by Ms. M. Bachelet, Executive Director of UN Women. The Chair of the CSW, Ms M.V. Kamara, Permanent Representative of Liberia to the United Nations, opened the afternoon sitting.
5. The debates centred on two main issues: the first was related to rural women's political empowerment, focusing on how to ensure greater participation of rural women in local and national politics. Discussions also included parliament's role in better reflecting the needs and interests of rural women. The second issue dealt with two key rights-related priorities for rural women: addressing discrimination against women in the law, including access to land, inheritance and credit, and access to health.

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<sup>1</sup> Participants included representatives from Bahrain, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Canada, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, Colombia, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Ecuador, Gambia, Georgia, Ghana, Indonesia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Maldives, Mali, Mexico, Morocco, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Spain, Sudan, Suriname, Sweden, Togo, Turkey, Uganda, United Kingdom, Zambia, Zimbabwe. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe also took part.

6. The salient points of the debate are as follows:
- (a) Women play a pivotal role in development, particularly women in rural areas. Their development potential, however, remains hampered by the multiple forms of discrimination they face. Discriminatory laws and practices limit their access to land, credit, and other important assets. Parliaments must review and amend these discriminatory laws and ensure that new legislation complies with international commitments, such as CEDAW. Legal frameworks to eliminate discrimination against rural women exist, but they are often underutilized. There is a need to strengthen implementation and heighten awareness among rural women of their rights. In addressing discrimination against rural women, it is also important to take into account their specific socio-economic needs. Rural women are not a homogenous group: they have diverse experiences and different needs.
  - (b) Research and access to disaggregated data: without accurate information and a clear picture of on-the-ground reality, there is a risk of developing policies that will not meet the objective of empowering rural women.
  - (c) The representation of rural women in politics: adequate representation of rural women in decision-making at all levels - from local to national - is key to their empowerment. Debates highlighted the low representation of rural women, in particular at the local government level. Some solutions proposed included the adoption of special measures, such as quotas, to promote rural women's participation at the local level. Political parties were also called upon to do more to include women on electoral lists, particularly those from rural districts.

The meeting ended with a special debate on rural women's access to health, with a special focus on support for maternal and child health. Parliaments are well-placed to find innovative and appropriate solutions to the specific health care problems of individual societies. Rural women can only be empowered if they can hold decision-makers to account, and parliamentarians can provide that bridge.

Two informal meetings took place during the CSW session on 1 March. The first focused on Women in Politics: The ICT dimension, and the second on Gender-sensitive parliaments. The Map on Women in Politics 2012 and the analysis of progress and setbacks of women in parliament in 2011 were also launched on the occasion of the 56<sup>th</sup> session of the CSW.