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REPORTS ON RECENT IPU SPECIALIZED CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS

(h) PARLIAMENTARY MEETING ON THE OCCASION OF THE 58th SESSION OF THE UN COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

(New York, 11 March 2014)

1. The IPU and UN Women organized a one-day parliamentary event entitled *At the crossroads of sustainable development and gender equality: the role of parliaments*. The meeting took place on 11 March 2014 at UN Headquarters in New York on the occasion of the 58th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).
2. The meeting was opened by Mr. A.B. Johnsson, Secretary General of the IPU, and Ms. P. Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women. It was chaired by Ms. M. Mensah-Williams, Deputy-Chairperson of the National Council of the Parliament of Namibia. Other speakers included members of parliament, permanent representatives to the UN, experts and representatives of international organizations.
3. The event brought together some 200 participants, 140 of whom were parliamentarians from 45 national and regional parliaments, as well as government officials, representatives of international organizations and representatives of non-governmental organizations.
4. The meeting sought to provide a parliamentary contribution to the debates of the CSW. It focussed on three main themes: (1) achievements and remaining challenges for women in decision-making positions, not only in politics but also in the corporate sector and the media; (2) the role of parliaments in efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and lessons learnt; (3) the place of gender equality in the new generation of sustainable development goals.
5. The salient points of the debate are outlined below.
 - The participation of women in political decision-making has increased considerably in recent years. Today, 21.8% of parliamentarians are women, compared with 17.5% 10 years ago. The number of women ministers, Speakers of parliament, and heads of State or government is also increasing. Change is therefore possible and is occurring.
 - In other sectors, however, such as the corporate world or the media, women remain widely underrepresented. Initiatives are being taken in several countries to redress that situation, including the introduction of quotas.
 - Many challenges remain to women's participation in all fields. These include difficulties reconciling work and family life, and the fact that many women still do not have access to the financial, educational and capacity development opportunities that are needed in politics and in other sectors. In many countries, the constitutional and legal frameworks required to ensure equal participation of men and women are still either lacking or poorly enforced. The corridors of power can be an unfriendly, if not violent, environment for women. In many countries, the political will to include women in decision-making is still lacking.

- Quotas remain a strong and efficient tool to overcome the multitude of challenges to women's participation, provided they are properly enforced. Political parties need to become more accessible to women; innovative incentives should be used to encourage political parties to include women, such as enhanced media time for parties with more female representation). Parliamentary institutions need to become more gender-sensitive in the way they function and are organized. Alliances between women, such as women's caucuses and partnerships with men can help in enhancing women's participation and more broadly in advancing women's rights and gender equality. Encouraging women's participation at the local level could be an effective stepping stone to entry into parliament or government. The opportunity to raise awareness among the younger population could be used to change attitudes and encourage a broader acceptance of women in decision-making.
- In order to strengthen the role of parliaments in the implementation of the UN post-2015 development agenda, several lessons can be drawn from their contribution to efforts to meet the MDGs. Institutional adjustments in parliament will become even more necessary with the launch of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the SDGs will be few and simply formulated, they will be more complex, integrating economic, social and environmental considerations into a single set of policy prescriptions for sustainable development. Furthermore, the SDGs will encapsulate change not only in the developing part of the world but also in developed countries. Parliaments need to organize their internal structures to ensure that the SDGs, are mainstreamed throughout the legislative and oversight processes, including the budget. To that end, they need to consider appropriate deliberative mechanisms, such as a specialized committee or caucus. Those mechanisms should play a coordinating role, in order for their expertise to contribute to the development of more effective policies.
- The role of parliaments will be key to ensuring gender equality throughout the SDGs. Parliaments can ensure that international commitments are upheld, with the appropriate allocation of resources and taking account of the national context. Laws should provide for the protection of equal social and economic rights in the public and private spheres alike, such as guaranteeing equal economic rights of men and women in the family context. Furthermore, parliaments can ensure that relevant data are collected, are accurate, and are used for better policy decisions. Last but not least, parliamentarians can give civil society a voice to hold government to account.

6. In addition to the parliamentary day, two informal side events were organized by the IPU on 10 and 12 March. The first was on "Legal enforcement of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women as a key for sustainable development" and the second, organized with the Permanent Mission of Ireland, was on "The challenging world of women in politics". Both events gathered members of parliament and representatives of non-governmental organizations. The IPU-UN Women Map on Women in Politics: 2014 was also launched during the 58th session of the CSW.