



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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Opening speech by the Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

Mr. Martin Chungong

Madam Executive Director of UN Women,
Madam President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians,
Distinguished members of parliament,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to open this meeting, which has been jointly organized by the IPU and UN Women on the occasion of the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, and to see so many of you in attendance - this shows the importance that the parliamentary community attaches to the Commission and to gender equality.

I am also very pleased to welcome you all in the presence of Ms Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women. Over the years the IPU has developed a close partnership with the United Nations, and in particular with UN Women. I am delighted, Madam Executive Director, that our two organizations can offer this meeting as a platform to engage parliamentarians in the Commission's work.

This year, the Commission is focusing on *Implementing the Beijing Platform for Action*, a visionary roadmap for gender equality and women's empowerment. Twenty years on, the time has come to take stock of the progress made in implementing the Beijing Platform, identify what remains to be done and reaffirm our determination to make gender equality a reality at all levels. The world parliamentary community is pleased to be part of that discussion.

Last night, I had the good fortune of attending what I consider a memorable event: the Planet 50-50 by 2030 event organized by UN Women to mark the twenty years since Beijing. I was struck by what a number of speakers, including you Phumzile, said: No country today can claim that it has achieved gender equality. Whether in terms of equal rights or equal opportunities, whether in the field of politics, the economy, labour, wealth or health, not one country has met that goal. But we understand more than ever that gender equality and women's empowerment are crucial to achieving inclusive development and a more equal society. If we are serious about achieving peace and security, about ending hunger and poverty and ensuring sustainable development, then we have to tackle gender inequality head on.

In recent months, the IPU has given parliamentarians many opportunities to prepare for the 2015 review of the Beijing Platform. The theme of the most recent IPU Assembly was *Achieving gender equality and ending violence against women*. On that occasion, at the end of a lively debate, IPU Members adopted a bold and forward-looking statement in which they committed to eliminate violence against women and achieve gender equality by 2030 – in one generation.

This may appear to be a very ambitious goal. I agree. But I am also firmly convinced that change is on its way. We now know what we have to do to accelerate change, and where there's a will, there's a way.

But it will not be an easy task – there are many challenges on the road to gender equality, and success is by no means guaranteed.

I am confident that today's meeting, entitled *Parliaments for gender equality: Priorities for Beijing +20 and beyond*, will help us travel a good way down that road.

As we embark on this discussion, allow me to share three priorities with you. Achieving gender equality will require full respect for women's rights, equal participation by women in leadership positions, and strong parliaments and democratic governance.

- Women's rights are non-negotiable – respect for them is at the heart of progress.

Despite the progress achieved over the years, women still face numerous challenges, their rights are still not respected, and their autonomy is often limited. How can we achieve gender equality when women continue to earn systematically less and over 31 million girls are prevented from attending primary school? How can we achieve gender equality if women are subjected to violence and denied access to health care and reproductive health? How can we achieve gender equality if women do not have land rights and cannot get loans because they are women?

I share therefore the view that women's empowerment lies in the full realization of all their fundamental rights. It requires transforming power relations and addressing structural inequalities. It also means enabling women to take ownership of their lives, their bodies and their destinies. These rights have to be enshrined in properly enforced laws. This is where parliaments and you, members of parliament, have a key role to play.

- Women's equal participation in decision-making is a must

Worldwide, 78 per cent of parliamentarians, 93 per cent of elected Heads of State, 82 per cent of government ministers and 95 per cent of corporate executives are men. Enough said.

We obviously need more women in leadership positions and decision-making bodies in all sectors – in politics and in the economic and social spheres. Women's

contributions must be supported and secured at all levels, from the local to the highest international spheres. Women in leadership positions have the power to make decisions and take specific action in response to the interests of and challenges faced by other women whose voices go unheard.

The IPU has long recognized the close link between the equal participation of men and women in parliament and democracy and a more equal society. We have worked to increase the number of women in parliament and to enable women, once they are in parliament, to count as decision makers and contribute effectively to policymaking.

Here's just one example of what was accomplished since 1995. Twenty years ago, when the Beijing Platform was adopted, women held a mere 11.3 per cent of the world's parliamentary seats. Today, that percentage has almost doubled, to 22.1 per cent.

We have come a long way. Progress has been made in almost 90 per cent of the world's countries. Today there are 42 single or lower houses of parliament where women occupy more than 30 per cent of the seats, compared to only 12 twenty years ago. The share of women has surpassed 50 per cent, for the first time ever, in three houses of parliament, and exceeds 60 per cent in one (Rwanda). The world's highest ranking countries have become a more diverse group: the top 10, of which eight were European countries in 1995, now comprise four in sub-Saharan Africa, three in Europe and three in the Americas.

This is all well and good. But the pace of progress remains too slow. In 2014, women parliamentarians increased their share of parliamentary seats by just 0.3 percentage points – basically nothing.

I ask myself, twenty years after Beijing, have we hit the glass ceiling?

It is clear that both political commitment and robust policies, such as quotas and electoral systems that facilitate the election of women, are needed for change to happen. When these policies set ambitious targets, are stringently enforced and are accompanied by measures to remove barriers to campaign funding, curb violence against women in politics, eliminate negative stereotypes or gain support from political parties, their impact is even stronger. The good practices established by several countries to establish parity in politics as a target should be widely applied and extended across economic and social sectors.

- Strong parliaments and democratic governance are key for effective implementation and change.

There is now international consensus that gender equality requires strong, comprehensive legislation and public policies that are non-discriminatory, support women's empowerment and address all forms of discrimination. Putting laws into practice remains the key challenge. Domestic legislation must provide for appropriate mechanisms, and budgets must be scrutinized to ensure that adequate financial and human resources are allocated to the effective implementation of policies.

In other words, the full involvement of parliaments is essential to ensure that the main priorities for Beijing+20 and beyond are mainstreamed throughout the legislative and oversight processes. Parliaments must also, critically, hold their government to account for attaining the goals they have agreed.

For parliaments to meet these challenges and actively play their part, they should first be better associated in both international and national decision-making processes regarding Beijing+20 and beyond. Parliaments need to be at the discussion table internationally and nationally, when goals, objectives and plans are set.

Second, parliaments need to build their capacity and power. Unless parliaments are functioning well, fully representative of society and gender-sensitive, it will be impossible to address the remaining obstacles and implement the priority actions required to achieve gender equality.

The IPU will continue to work side by side with parliaments and provide them with support, paying particular attention to the way they function and their capacity and political will to be accountable for achieving gender equality. Parliaments need to facilitate women's participation, guarantee a work space free of harassment, and offer facilities and flexibility to allow women and men lawmakers reconcile family and work obligations. In this regard, the IPU Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments sets benchmarks for introducing reform and strengthening parliaments worldwide.

The road may seem endless – but if we act as one, we will go a long way. And I will end with that last priority – progress will be made thanks to strong and sustainable partnerships, by which I mean:

- Partnership between men and women parliamentarians for gender equality – I cannot overemphasize the responsibility and role of men in contributing to change.
- Partnership between women parliamentarians. This is essential. I am very proud of the IPU's ground-breaking decision 30 years ago to enhance solidarity between women by establishing the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians. I invite you all to our next Assembly in Viet Nam, on 28 March, to celebrate the Meeting's 30th anniversary and solidarity between women.
- Partnership between political parties to develop common positions and work in concert both within and outside parliaments, in particular through parliamentary committees and caucuses on gender issues.
- Partnership between parliaments and civil society and grassroots women's organizations.
- Partnership with the media, to educate and raise awareness, and to stop perpetuating stereotypes and gender inequalities.

- Partnership between organizations that support parliaments, such as the IPU and UN Women.

Before I conclude, let me reiterate one wish: that the proceedings of this parliamentary session at the CSW be better integrated in the proceedings of the latter. This would be a significant recognition of the importance of the representatives of the people.

I look forward to today's discussions and to identifying common strategies that parliaments can implement. Change is our goal and it is achievable.