



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

Statement by the Hon. Margaret Mensah-Williams

Vice-Chairperson of the National Council of Namibia, President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians

Commission on the Status of Women 59th session United Nations

Chair,

It is a great pleasure for me to take the floor on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

On 11 March, the IPU and UN Women organized a parliamentary event on the occasion of the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The event was entitled Parliaments for gender equality: Priorities for Beijing+20 and beyond.

Before sharing the outcome with you, allow me to renew our thanks to UN Women for its ongoing cooperation, and to stress once again how important it is for parliamentarians to participate in the work of the Commission, follow its debates and learn from the wealth of information, exchanges and meetings that it generates. Parliamentary participation is crucial if we are to ensure national follow-up of the decisions that have been taken here.

I regret that the Declaration adopted by the Commission on Beijing+20 does not highlight parliaments as key to achieving the goals set. I sincerely hope that the document on the Commission's working methods gives more weight to the results of the parliamentary meeting we have been organizing for more than 10 years now, jointly with the United Nations, in tandem with each session.

Let me turn now to the outcome of the annual parliamentary event held a few days ago. Close to 200 members of parliament from 44 countries participated in our very interactive and constructive event. The discussions focused on parliamentary strategies for making progress towards gender equality.

Chair,

Allow me to highlight the three main recommendations and priority outcomes of that meeting.

For us, achieving gender equality will require: (1) full respect for women's rights and therefore strong legislative action; (2) equal participation by women in leadership positions; and (3) strong parliaments and democratic governance.

Our first recommendation is that respect for women's rights should be parliament's first priority. These rights are non-negotiable and are at the heart of progress.

We share the view that women's empowerment lies in the full realization of all their fundamental rights. This requires transforming power relations and addressing structural inequalities. It also means enabling women to take ownership of their lives, their bodies and their destinies.

For progress to be achieved, these rights have to be enshrined in properly enforced laws. This means building a legal framework that eliminates discrimination and is in line with international commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

It also requires allocation of sufficient funds and means to ensure adequate implementation and enforcement. Needless to say, all of this is at the heart of parliament's work and mandate, and where we have a key role to play. Parliaments need to continue to use their power to legislate, adopt budgets and generate revenues to achieve gender equality.

However, laws alone are not enough to achieve truly transformative change. Our discussions emphasized the challenges of moving from formal to substantive equality, which leads me to our second recommendation – transforming decision-making processes by ensuring gender equality in leadership positions.

The IPU has just released its latest data on women in parliament and the executive. It has also launched the Map on Women in Politics: 2015, which it produced jointly with UN Women.

Chair,

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. We are far, far from equality.

There has been some progress though. 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.

Today women hold 17.7 percent of ministerial positions and in 30 countries, more than 30 per cent of ministers are women.

This is all well and good. But the pace of progress remains too slow. 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. We, members of parliament, need to commit to taking action to ensure a more inclusive decision-making process.

But how do we sustain change? This brings me to our third recommendation: building gender-sensitive parliaments and bolstering democratic governance.

Gender equality will most likely be achieved if a balance is struck between an autonomous feminist civil society, a strong State, and an effective parliament.

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.

Secondly, 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.

Parliaments need to be gender-sensitive, that is to say, they need to embody – and have the power to defend – 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. In this regard, the IPU Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments sets benchmarks for introducing reform and strengthening parliaments worldwide.

Chair,

The road may seem endless – but if we act as one, we will go a long way.

Progress will be made thanks to strong and sustainable partnerships: partnerships between men and women; partnerships between women, across parties, across social groups; partnerships between stakeholders and organizations that support progress towards gender equality.

Finally, let me reiterate the interest expressed by IPU members to continue to be involved in the work of the United Nations. Parliamentarians undertook to follow up in their respective countries on the discussions from our meeting this week.

We are convinced that if we all play our part, we can make significant progress.

Thank you.