



**INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION**  
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Statement by:

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**Check against delivery**

It is a great pleasure and honor for me to be here with you on the occasion of International Women's Day which we are celebrating today. I am pleased to contribute to this celebration as a woman member of parliament – the first woman legislator in Namibia elected in a decision-making capacity, as a woman Deputy Speaker of the National Council – the Upper House of Parliament in Namibia, and as Vice President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

International women's day is a day of celebration: it is a time for taking stock of progress made, assessing challenges ahead, identifying objectives and pursuing the struggle for gender equality worldwide. As a woman in a decision making position, I would like to share with you some thoughts on the situation of women in politics and the road ahead.

Being a member of parliament is no easy job, but it is a calling that we women are fully prepared to heed. Unfortunately, in much of the world, for women to assume leadership roles, we must face obstacles that often men can altogether dispense with. There are cultural as well as social and economic factors at play that make it difficult for women to enter politics and climb up to the top echelons of government. Whether it's local traditions, lack of gender-sensitive policies or inflexible fund-raising and political party mechanisms, women's political empowerment is invariably fraught with challenges and difficulties.

At the same time, it is fair to say today that the picture is beginning to show some positive signs. Let me give you some highlights of progress made in the past ten years in the field of women's participation in politics:

- In 1995, women accounted for 11.3% of legislators in the world's parliaments, including both chambers. In 2005, they represented 16.3% of legislators: a small five-percentage point increase over ten years.
- In 1995, Sweden topped the ranking of women in parliament with 40.4 per cent. Ten years later, political developments in other parts of the world – most notably Africa and Latin America – brought Rwanda to the top of the world classification, with 48.8% women in elected office.
- In 1995, women accounted for less than 10% of the members in a large majority -63% - of the world's parliaments. By 2005, this figure went down by half, with 32 per cent of the world's parliaments today having less than 10% women's representation in parliament..
- In 2005, some 20 countries had reached or surpassed the Beijing Platform for Action target of 30% of women in parliament.
- It is also encouraging to note that 20% (one fifth) of all MPs who were elected in 2005 elections were women.

All in all, one might say that the situation is moderately encouraging. But we need more than a “moderate” progress! We need to be more ambitious than that: indeed if current incremental rates continue, an average of 30 per cent of women in parliament will not be reached until 2025. As for true parity, that would have to wait till 2040!

I am convinced that both men and women are not ready to wait that long in order to have truly representative, inclusive and participative parliaments, which are the cornerstone of any democracy. So our first objective should be to increase the number of women in political life, most notably in parliament, and to speed up the process of their access to politics.

This is a first quantitative goal that requires the contribution of all. I call on all of you here to enhance national and international support for women who wish to enter politics. I call on national authorities, governments, parliaments, political parties and civil society to encourage women to run, to support them in their endeavour and to take all necessary measures to facilitate their involvement in politics. Women need to feel fully confident in their capacity to contribute in a constructive way to the management of our societies. Women need to know that their contribution is awaited and that this is for the good of all. We need to change the political culture of our countries that still discriminates against women and the girl-child, and we must work together to establish a true partnership between men and women in politics. An important foundation for this process, evidently, resides in ensuring equal access to education for girls and boys, and from this perspective parliaments are called upon to play a key role in shaping an enabling environment.

As I said, this is but one first objective. Our attention also has to focus on enhancing women’s input into decision-making. What happens to women once they make it to parliament?

I would like to first address a question that I have often heard: what does it change to have women in politics? Some of the answers to this question came just last week, on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> session of the CSW, when the IPU organized a meeting of women Speakers of Parliament to discuss the specific role of these women leaders in furthering gender equality. Twelve women Speakers, representing just about half of the legislatures presided over by a woman, met here in New York and debated **HOW** women are making a difference.

The short answer is that the mere presence of women has changed politics. As my friend the Speaker from Jamaica stated, “women transform parliaments by being themselves.” Indeed, changes brought by women parliamentarians to the institution of parliament operate on different levels. I will mention 4 points:

First, and at a very practical level, women are instrumental in transforming the actual **physical** premises to make them more gender friendly and better adapted to the needs of working women with families, but also of physically challenged people.

Second, they bring about changes in the **institutional culture**, using their influence to instill working methods and procedures – including meeting schedules - to make parliaments better adapted to the needs of women members.

Third, they **change the institutional discourse** to make it reflect their values. This often entails changes in language and vocabulary that had originated in patriarchal thinking.

Finally, they are in a position to **influence the legislative agenda** and ensure that issues of particular importance to women - be they poverty reduction, health and education, domestic violence, trafficking in women and children, HIV-AIDS, female genital mutilation, democracy and human rights in general - are allowed a more prominent place in the debate and decision-making process.

With regard to women Speakers of parliament, their potential as **role models** was also emphasized. Statistics have shown that, with women Speakers, the authority and credibility of parliament are elevated in the public eye. Within parliament, having women in leadership positions is an incentive to a more proactive engagement by other women parliamentarians in the legislative process. Women Speakers can also wield influence outside the parliament because their position gives opportunities to voice and shape opinions within the broader society.

These are some of the changes brought about by women. In a nutshell, women's presence make parliament more humane, more sensitive to the real concerns of the citizens, and thus better equipped to respond to the needs of all sectors of society. We need to make this contribution visible and value it.

In this connection, please allow me to share a bit of my personal experience, here at the UN and subsequently as a Namibian member of Parliament. Eleven years ago, I sat in this very room as a girl-child of Southern Africa, part of my country's delegation and as a representative of civil society, lobbying and negotiating on behalf of girl-children. I was fortunate to find understanding and support in many of you, and I vowed to try and follow in the footsteps of outstanding women such as Gertrude Mongella, whom I remember back then arguing that women hold half the world, but not half the power. Back home in my own country, I and other women politicians have fought an up-hill battle to bring stringert issues of society for action before Parliament. Recent initiatives include the Married Persons Equality Act, the Domestic Violence Act, the Rape Act, as well a much needed and long-awaited Children's Status Bill.

Finally I would like to end by stressing the opportunity that was given to me to take part in this international debate. This is not a given to all women and we still struggle to make our voice heard at the international level. I believe that if Parliaments need to be more inclusive and gender-sensitive, the international institutions must be as well. At the IPU we have committed ourselves to this objective and have established mechanisms to ensure that at least 30% of our participating members of parliament are women; voting rights are also affected if delegations are not gender-balanced.

Decisions which impact upon the lives of all cannot be taken without women and men participating on an equal footing. This is why I welcome such an event today – it is important to highlight women's role in decision making, it is also important to stress that women's participation in politics is a fundamental element of any democratic functioning. Today our voices are heard at the UN. We will take back with us the message of solidarity expressed here in this Hall.

In Namibia we have a saying, "*Aluta Continua, Victoria Eserta*". Looking back at developments in these past years, I am confident that our efforts were not in vain and that indeed, though the struggle continues, victory will not elude us.

Thank you for your attention.