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Reports on recent IPU specialized meetings

(e) Parliamentary meeting on the occasion of the 60th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (New York, 15 March 2016)

1. The IPU and UN-Women organized a one-day parliamentary event entitled *The power of legislation for women's empowerment and sustainable development*. The meeting took place on 15 March 2016 at UN Headquarters in New York on the occasion of the 60th session of the Commission on the Status of Women.
2. The meeting was opened by Ms. M. Mensah-Williams, President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians and Chairperson of the National Council of the Parliament of Namibia, and by Mr. Y. Glemarec, Deputy Executive Director of UN-Women. Ms. P. Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN-Women also addressed the meeting during the day. Other speakers included members of parliament, permanent representatives to the UN, experts and representatives of international organizations.
3. The event brought together some 177 participants, 116 of whom were parliamentarians from 37 national and regional parliaments, as well as government officials, representatives of international organizations and representatives of non-governmental organizations.
4. The meeting focused on three main themes as it sought to make a parliamentary contribution to the debates of the Commission on the Status of Women. The first theme focused on the status of discriminatory laws worldwide. The discussion took stock of progress being made towards eliminating laws that formalize inequalities and discrimination on the basis of sex. The second theme focused on the power of parliaments to implement reforms and adopt strategies for repealing discriminatory laws and developing a gender-responsive legal framework. The third theme explored the opportunities that parliaments' oversight role could provide in securing the effective enforcement of laws on gender equality and on ending violence against women.
5. The salient points of the debate are outlined below.
 - A key element in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is the full realization of their fundamental rights. However, multiple forms of legal discrimination against women and girls persist around the world today. These are a major impediment to the development of our societies.

- Today, more than half of the discriminatory laws that were identified in 1979 have been addressed. But while change is underway, it is progressing slowly. Major gaps remain, particularly in laws relating to the economic and personal status of women. More action is also needed to address violence against women and harmful practices. Family laws continue to be the hardest to reform.
- Ensuring that women's rights are respected in practice is one of the most important challenges for members of parliament. It is a responsibility that goes hand-in-hand with their power to legislate. They are responsible for ensuring that women's and girls' rights are promoted and protected by law, and that no law formalizes inequality or discrimination. That can be achieved by building legal frameworks that are in line with the requirements of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The momentum for real change can only come from within individual countries, and local movements are needed to see that change through to the very end. Parliamentarians must work closely with civil society organizations to ensure that ending discrimination remains a priority. Parliamentarians have many tools at their disposal: women's parliamentary caucuses, standing committees and other parliamentary mechanisms all help members of parliament to collaborate with governments and grassroots movements. In order to legislate adequately, MPs also need access to information and data.
- Ending discriminatory laws is not only the responsibility of women's parliamentary caucuses or gender equality committees. Rather, it is the responsibility of all parliamentary bodies, and all MPs – male and female – to bring gender perspectives into the mainstream of all legislation. More women need to participate in decision-making. But equally, the questions of ending discrimination, achieving equality, and ensuring a sustainable future are not just the preserve of women. Resolving those questions are relevant issues that affect the credibility of all of society.
- Putting laws and policies into practice remains the greatest challenge. For any policy or law to be implemented in reality, MPs must ensure that those laws and policies have adequate financial resources and that they are fully monitored. Success depends a great deal on the capacity of State institutions, and on political will. The use of tools like gender-responsive budgeting should be considered to strengthen accountability.
- It is necessary to clearly communicate that, when gender equality is achieved, it will benefit everyone. Education is an important element that will help achieve gender equality and end discrimination. Parliamentarians can make a difference by making women more aware of their rights, and by sending a clear message to everyone that discrimination and violence on the basis of sex will not be tolerated. In each of their countries, MPs must press for an early start to education on equal gender roles and relations between boys and girls. MPs also need to amplify their message about the benefits for men of achieving gender equality, and to reduce fears about what might happen if power relations between women and men change.
- Parliamentarians must remember that, even when change is achieved, progress can be reversed, and the road to implementation can be long and difficult. There is a strong need for parliaments to monitor the implementation of laws on gender equality and the protection of women's rights. Parliament must also be prepared to address any unintended consequences of new laws. Parliamentarians can facilitate oversight by regularly questioning governments about the progress of implementation and by seeking feedback from civil society and constituents. They must also regularly request access to implementation reports and data, including gender impact analyses. A requirement for parliamentary monitoring of implementation could also be included in the legislation itself.
- Building partnerships and alliances: the importance of partnerships between men and women MPs was highlighted. Partnerships among women MPs from across the political spectrum and partnerships with civil society and the media are equally important.
- The IPU and UN-Women have been cooperating for many years, and are currently aiming to launch a joint multi-year project to support parliaments, as they amend and repeal existing discriminatory laws. This is a partnership that must involve members of parliament, as they are the key drivers of change.