



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.

Chemin du Pommier 5
Case postale 330
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Geneva – Switzerland
www.ipu.org

Opening speech to the 131st IPU Assembly by the IPU President, Mr. Abdelwahad Radi

Geneva

13 October 2014

Mr. Secretary General,
Mr. Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva,
Honourable Speakers of Parliament,
Fellow parliamentarians,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to address you here today at our 131st IPU Assembly in Geneva. As you know, this year we are celebrating our Organization's 125th anniversary so this is no ordinary Assembly - far from it. On a more personal note, this will be the last time I address you at the opening ceremony as IPU President since my term of office comes to an end at this Assembly. I am quite sure it will be a very memorable one for all of us.

As an Organization we have much to be proud of since our inception in 1889. We have endeavoured to keep the vision of our Founding Fathers alive and bright. For starters, we have grown from a handful of European parliamentarians to a membership of 164 national parliaments from every continent. At this Assembly, we will be welcoming two new Members among our midst: Guinea and Madagascar. Our goal of universal membership seems more within reach today than ever.

We have promoted democracy – the home-grown and locally cultivated variety – throughout the world. We have done this by promoting parliaments and democracy nationally and internationally. We have worked to strengthen the capacity of parliaments by developing support and capacity-building programmes nationally, accompanying progress and democratic change. We have also developed a number of tools for parliaments, such as handbooks for MPs and other toolkits, to assist members in their bid to respond in a more effective way to the concerns of their constituents. The development by the IPU of criteria for democratic parliaments, self-assessments and toolkits on parliamentary performance and gender sensitivity all aim to support reform and progress for stronger and more effective parliamentary institutions.

We crafted our very first Strategy for 2012-2017, which we are implementing in every strategic area. The IPU published with UNDP the first *Global Parliamentary Report*, examining one of parliament's most pressing challenges today – the relationship between parliament and the people and how to remain relevant and in-tune to citizens. It also adopted a *Plan of Action for Gender-Sensitive Parliaments* – an innovative concept - and the *Quito Communiqué*, premised on the notion that economic development in and of itself is not the answer and that greater focus must be placed

on well-being in the broadest sense, with strong democratic governance as a critical foundation.

We are developing a robust strategic partnership with the United Nations, and working on a new Cooperation Agreement to place our institutional relationship on a stronger footing. I acknowledge once again the presence here of UNOG Director-General, Michael Møller, who for many years has been a strong supporter of the IPU. He has been engaging closely with us as we prepare for the Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament next year, and we are looking for new and exciting developments as we move ahead.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We need to recognize that, despite our best efforts to foster dialogue and the peaceful settlement of conflicts, democracy is clearly ailing. We need just look around us: war, conflict and terror rage on in Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Ukraine, Central African Republic, and the list goes on There is a good chance that you will select one of these issues as an emergency item to debate during our Assembly.

So although we have accomplished many laudable things as an Organization, we must never become complacent and take democracy for granted. It is very much a work in progress and even with the best of intentions, we all falter and stumble at times. Yet we must abide steadfastly by our ideals and principles and never compromise on our core values. Even when all hope seems lost and the situation may appear desperate, negotiation must always remain a viable option.

I am particularly pleased with the choice of theme of the General Debate at this Assembly: ***Achieving gender equality and ending violence against women***. This is a topic that has been close to my heart throughout my mandate as IPU President. I hope that together we will shine the spotlight on this scourge that spares no country and through our debates devise ways and means of effectively tackling it on the parliamentary front.

The question we need to ask ourselves today is why are we debating gender equality in 2014 at an IPU Assembly when images of terror and war are splashed across our TV screens? Is this really a priority on the global agenda? The answer is fairly simple: yes, because gender equality is not an isolated topic. If we are serious about achieving peace and security in the world, about ending hunger and poverty and achieving sustainable development, then we have to tackle this issue head-on.

In 2015, we will turn the page on the Millennium Development Goals and celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action. The time will have come to take stock of the progress made, identify what remains to be done and reaffirm our determination to make gender equality a reality. We must remain committed, dear colleagues, because, unfortunately, no country today, not one, 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.

The fact that today women account for only 21.8 per cent parliamentarians worldwide attests to what little progress we have made. The fact that women continue to be systematically less well paid than men in the same job is unacceptable. Nor can we accept the fact that women do not enjoy the same rights as men. Gender inequality holds our countries back. Preventing half of the population from finding fulfilment and well-being is tantamount to amputating a leg. The fight for gender equality must

therefore be a priority for each and every one of us – men and women – and I invite you to join that struggle. I call in particular on my male colleagues to work harder and become part of the United Nations *He for she* campaign.

Underlying gender equality are uneven power relations between men and women, which provide a fertile breeding ground for the second part of the theme: violence against women.

The figures are alarming. Worldwide, six out of every ten women are reported to be victims of physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives, one out of every five women of rape or attempted rape; 35 per cent of the women killed around the world are in fact murdered by their partners; one third of girls in developing countries will be married before they turn 18 and 3.3 million risk genital mutilation. Last but not least, in 50 per cent of cases, sexual attacks target girls aged 15 or even younger. These figures represent human lives, the lives of women and girls who will never be the same again.

This is a global problem from which no country is spared and that we can no longer tolerate.

Sexual violence against women is very clearly a violation of women's most basic human rights and I urge all of you – women and men – to speak out and take a firm stance against it. We must accept no less than zero tolerance for such violence. Every girl or woman out there is somebody's daughter, sister or mother. Let us cherish and protect each and every one of them.

We can start by changing mentalities. It falls to us as parliamentarians to do this and make sure that there is zero tolerance for this violence. We – men and women – must unite against the inequality dividing us and against violence against girls. We must be agents of change and transform our respective societies by addressing the issue in our parliaments and making our electors aware of the problem.

As parliamentarians, we have the power to set up a robust legal framework for preventing violence, protecting women, ensuring that their assailants are prosecuted and providing the victims with the services they need to rebuild their lives. We must enact legislation to stop violence against women, expand the definition of "rape", criminalize the infamous "honour killings" and child marriages, impose heavy penalties on rapists and ensure that the victims obtain justice and compensation.

And, of course, we must make sure that these laws are implemented, and to that end allocate sufficient funds. I look forward to listening to all of you tell us about the strategies adopted by your countries to combat violence against women. I invite all of you to attend the World Future Policy Award ceremony, which will take place during the Assembly and will recognize the policies that have proven most effective in combating violence against women and girls.

Turning back to the matter of equality, at the IPU, we practise what we preach. We have not only achieved gender equality within our own structures, I am proud to say that women outnumber men at all levels and all areas at the IPU Secretariat – in general services, professional and management posts. And it is no secret that two of the four contenders for the post of IPU President are women. In purely mathematical terms, this means that there is a 50-50 chance that my successor will be a woman. At the IPU, we shattered that glass ceiling a long time ago.

I am also proud to say that we have established the Forum of Young Parliamentarians of the IPU as a statutory body. This is part of our efforts to promote inclusive parliaments that are representative of all sectors of society, including minority groups such as indigenous peoples, disabled persons and youth. We have just concluded the First Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians, which took place just a few days ago in this very Conference Centre. Some of the younger members of parliament out there will have attended and can tell you what a success and source of pride that event was.

My fellow parliamentarians,

2014 has been a year of change for our Organization. It marked the end of an era for one Secretary General and the beginning of another for the man sitting beside me, Martin Chungong, who made history in more ways than one upon his election at the previous Assembly. These winds of change are still blowing and I look forward to passing the baton to another IPU President on 16 October. I am sure that with your support, my successor will guide the IPU to even greater heights. Despite our limitations, the sky is the only limit for us at the IPU.

I wish you fruitful deliberations and hereby declare the 131st IPU Assembly open.

Thank you.