



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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

Address by the IPU Secretary General, Mr. Martin Chungong, on the occasion of the High Level Event

“Women in power and decision-making: Building a different world

Santiago, 28 February 2015

Session 4: Creating Opportunities: Good practices to ensure women’s full and equal participation in decision-making
Co-chairs: Isabel Allende, President of the Senate of Chile and Rebecca Grynspan Secretary General of SEGIB.

Thank you Madam Co-Chairs,

I am very pleased to be here today and to address this important gathering of women leaders. I stand here as a male ally and friend, representative of an organization that has been a leader in promoting women’s political participation worldwide: the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Let me start by thanking the Government of Chile, especially the President, Ms. Bachelet, and UNWomen for inviting the IPU to this High Level Event.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On the plane to Santiago a couple of days ago, I was reviewing a publication the IPU is issuing on the occasion of Beijing +20. It analyses the evolution of women's parliamentary representation over the past twenty years. I must admit I was impressed by the tremendous progress that has been achieved. Twenty years ago, when the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, women accounted for a mere 11.3 per cent of the world’s parliamentary seats. Today, that percentage has almost doubled to reach a record 22 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 41 single or lower houses of parliament with more than 30 per cent women parliamentarians, compared to only 12 twenty years ago. Their share has surpassed 50 per cent, for the first time ever, in three houses of parliament and 60 per cent in one (Rwanda). The world’s highest ranking countries

have become more diverse: the top 10, dominated by eight European countries in 1995, now include four in this region, the Americas, and three each from Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe.

All of this is well and good. But the pace of progress remains too slow if our objective is to achieve equality.

Today we are discussing opportunities – creating opportunities for progress. This is a key question as progress requires constant, pro-active and conscious action from all of us. It entails all of us being creative, seizing opportunities and working together. We cannot afford to be complacent.

The rosy picture I have just painted is tempered by some more sober facts. In 2014, women parliamentarians increased their share of parliamentary seats by just 0.2 percentage points – basically nothing. Which leads us to ask the dreaded question: Have we reached the glass ceiling?

It may be time to think afresh, building on what works and finding new opportunities to speed up change. 2015 will be the perfect year to do that: the new sustainable development goals (SDG) framework and the Beijing +20 review offer unique opportunities to examine women's rights and gender equality concerns and address the challenges being encountered.

So let me start by joining your voices in saying that the question of women's rights and gender equality must remain on the political agendas of countries nationally and internationally.

Turning more particularly to the question of women's political empowerment and in particular parliaments, I will not dwell on the obstacles women continue to face in attempting to enter parliament. IPU research has consistently highlighted several: the difficulty of managing public and private life responsibilities, weak party support, inadequate funding and lack of experience, to name a few. Let me talk instead about **solutions** to those problems in three priority areas, as identified by IPU.

The first priority, building on existing good practice, is to determine where a country's legal and political framework can be reformed to address discrimination, bottlenecks and challenges. Countries with more than 30 per cent women in parliament have certain features in common:

- The great majority have proportional list systems.
- The great majority have implemented some sort of special measure for the advancement of women in politics, including legislated or voluntary quotas.
- Many have undergone recent transitions, permitting reforms to address discrimination and facilitate women's political participation.

In short, electoral systems matter, special temporary measures are key and political momentum and transitions can bring opportunities for change.

I believe we need to be more ambitious though than we have been so far, both in terms of numbers and process. Our target should no longer be 30 per cent but parity. That has increasingly been the goal over these last five years in multiple regions – Europe, the Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab states. Most recently, Chile has reformed its electoral law to establish 'flexible parity,' with no more than 60 per cent and no less than 40 per cent of candidates of each sex.

A second objective of legal reform, after parity, should be inclusivity: the representation of women from all walks of life. As recent IPU studies have shown, women belonging to ethnic minorities are almost completely marginalized from the political process. Political participation by men belonging to ethnic minorities, on the other hand, tends to be largely proportional to their share of the population. Similarly, according to an IPU report in 2014, on youth participation in national parliaments, women under the age of 45 were far less represented in national parliaments, at 8 per cent, than either young men or older women, at 16 per cent each. A process more inclusive towards different subgroups will enable societies to benefit from such untapped potential.

The second priority in our view is to empower women. Empowerment is key to facilitating their access to the political arena and increasing their impact once there. Politics require personal knowledge and skill, but also funding and a network of mentors and supporters that are often unavailable to women. Training, financial incentives for women candidates, access to media ahead of elections and well thought-out electoral processes that facilitate the election of women are all essential to empowering women politically.

Key to the empowerment of women is mentorship and solidarity which must be further facilitated. I see the substantial increase of number of female candidates in recent years as a hopeful sign that political life is attracting more women. So many women politicians, including all of you here today, have played a pivotal part as role models in opening the way for women's participation. Women's parliamentary caucuses and similar platforms have also enhanced solidarity among women, enriching their experience and strengthening their political influence. We need to invest more in such exchanges, at national and international levels. The IPU Meeting of Women Parliamentarians, a body created thirty years ago, brings together women MPs from around the world every six months in pursuit of common goals. We know the value of such a forum. For 30 years now, women parliamentarians have had their space of influence and have changed our organization by introducing internal quotas, taking up many decision-making positions and raising women's rights and gender equality on the international parliamentary agenda.

The third priority relates to processes and institutions. We need to ensure that these are gender-sensitive. By that we mean that they are premised on the principle of gender equality – that is, that both men and women have an equal right to participate without discrimination and without recrimination.

Particular attention has been given in recent years to the issue of violence against women as both candidates and elected politicians – this includes physical violence, intimidation, threats, harassment, etc. Violence of this kind that hinders women's political participation must be combatted by all means available, including legislation, as recently enacted in Bolivia and other Latin American States.

When women become members of political institutions, such as parliaments, they enter a man's world. They enter institutions that were created and led by men for centuries. Political institutions, including parliaments are not neutral places. They need to genuinely open up to women. Leadership, rules, procedures, working hours and all aspects of parliamentary work must be commensurate with the needs and expectations of both men and women. We must build gender-sensitive parliaments that respect and deliver on women's rights and gender equality. This is a priority for our organisation and I invite you all to make use of IPU's Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments, adopted in 2012, to help lead change in these areas.

Parliaments need not only to improve how they address gender equality issues but also to consider what example they set, in terms of gender sensitive behaviour, for the communities they represent.

In encouraging women's participation, parliaments need to guarantee a work space where women MPs can carry out their mandate and serve their constituents in full freedom and security, without being harassed, threatened or subjected to sexist or degrading remarks.

Parliaments also need an internal culture that enables MPs, both men and women, to balance their work and family responsibilities. This means offering facilities, such as day care centres, and flexible work arrangements, such as limits on late night meetings. It also means championing more balanced sharing of family responsibilities in society at large, through paternal as well as maternal leave entitlements, child care arrangements, maternity protection, and investments in infrastructure and services. Greater visibility also needs to be given unpaid care and domestic work in society, which contributes to the economy but also deprives women of time needed to develop leadership skills and participate in decision-making.

The **fourth priority** relates to partnerships. Responsibility for change should not rest on women's shoulders only. Gender equality is the responsibility of all and progress will only be achieved if we all play our part. We need to challenge those who have not been playing theirs.

Here, political parties come first to mind. Like other institutions, parties need to be more gender-sensitive in their composition, functioning and programmes. They need to ensure women's full and equal participation in decision-making and must be held accountable for achieving gender equality.

As a strategy for achieving women's full and equal participation, partnership with men politicians has been something of a lost opportunity. Let me salute UNWomen's *HeforShe* campaign and say I fully support its objectives. Most of the world's decision-makers are still men politicians. Their non-engagement on women's rights and gender equality will ultimately hinder all efforts to enhance women's participation. We need to encourage men and boys to find a new social construct of relationships built on respect and equality.

I will end by reiterating the IPU's strong commitment to supporting progress for women in politics. Equality in parliaments is a pre-condition for effective, strong and modern parliaments - we cannot afford to ignore that fact.