



## **A parliamentary perspective on discrimination and violence against the girl child**

New York, 1 March 2007



A parliamentary event organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union  
and the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women  
on the occasion of the 51st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

ECOSOC Chamber – UN Headquarters, New York

### **Inaugural address**

**The Hon. Mensah Williams**  
**Vice President of the IPU Executive Committee**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to be here on behalf of the IPU President, Mr Pier Ferdinando Casini of Italy, who unfortunately could not attend due to unforeseen commitments in Italy. He would have loved to be here in your company in the spirit of partnership between men and women that the IPU as an organization has been promoting for a long time now. He has asked me to share with you his very best wishes for a constructive debate and successful meeting.

I would like to begin by expressing deep appreciation to the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women for their collaboration and support. The Inter-Parliamentary Union enjoys a very good partnership with the Division. Allow me to mention as well the excellent cooperation the IPU has with UNICEF and to thank UNICEF for the support it has lent in preparing this meeting. In a short while we will have the pleasure of hearing Ms Rima Salah, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF. Ms Salah will soon be leaving UNICEF, and I would like to say that she has been a wonderful ally in strengthening cooperation with Parliaments and the IPU. We will miss you and wish you all the very best in your future endeavours.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you know the IPU aims to bring a parliamentary dimension to the proceedings of intergovernmental organisations. This event today provides a forum for debate between parliamentarians from all over the world. It will also enrich the deliberations of the 51st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women which is looking at the question of the "Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl-child".

Our intention is to highlight the specific part that parliaments can play in bringing forward the day when this lofty objective can actually become reality. Our task is to pinpoint the difference parliaments can make, not only in protecting the girl child, but also in empowering her so that the protection ultimately becomes unnecessary. And this has to be done by combating the discrimination and violence that is the daily lot for so many of these children. I would therefore invite you all to share your experiences and reflections as parliamentarians in resisting one of the gravest of human rights violations - violence against children and in particular the girl child.

This meeting comes at a timely moment. It follows the publication of the United Nations reports on Violence against Children and Violence against Women which contain a wealth of information and recommendations for us parliamentarians to take back home and act upon.

I know you will hear many facts about the different types of discrimination and violence that girl children endure. Despite international legal instruments and wide international mobilisation, girls continue to endure *de facto* and *de jure* inequalities in all societies of the world. International reviews and monitoring in the past ten years have cast a harsh light on this discrimination and fundamental inequality. Girls have less access than boys to food, physical and mental health care, and education - though this has improved in the past years. They enjoy fewer rights and opportunities. They are less confident and given less support than boys. Girls are more vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Many are subjected to harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation, for

which there is no possible excuse. They endure marriage while they are still children, sexual violence, trafficking, and HIV/AIDS. These appalling facts must not be allowed to continue.

Child protection has been a priority for the Inter-Parliamentary Union for many years now. Since the parliamentary meeting organised with UNICEF at the UN Special session on children in 2002, the IPU has worked side by side with UNICEF to develop a fully fledged strategy to help parliamentarians do more to protect children's rights. The strategy consists of a series of activities: we hold training seminars for MPs on child protection issues such as trafficking of children, female genital mutilation, and sexual exploitation. We also work to provide MPs with tools to enhance their work such as the joint IPU/UNICEF Handbook for parliamentarians on child protection, or the more specific one on child trafficking, which provides MPs with parliamentary best practices and recommendations on action to take. We carry out research on current legislation on problems such as Female Genital Mutilation.

Dear friends,

You have before you today a significant agenda and some remarkable speakers. The subject is a challenging one. I hope that we will conclude our meetings with some precise ideas about what we need to do when we return to our national parliaments.

Combating and putting an end to discrimination is a first step which requires a holistic approach and the commitment of all components of our societies. Legislation is a prerequisite but it is not enough - it needs to be implemented, monitored and adapted as changes occur. Institutional mechanisms need to be in place to guarantee protection and justice for the girl child. Protecting is one thing. Empowering is the way to the future. We need to ensure that girls' capacities are strengthened, that they have access to education, opportunities, and benefits. We need to change entrenched thinking, build self confidence and engage men and boys in this endeavour.

The protection of children and more particularly the girl child is a cause that concerns us all. Children are the greatest wealth we have; they represent future and hope. Children also have the right to be happy now and enjoy their childhood in a secure environment. The fulfilment of children's rights is an obligation for all of us and it can only be achieved if everybody understands and respects their duties to children, and acts upon them. Action is indeed what is needed and we parliamentarians can make the difference. We have the power to legislate, we have the power to oversee proper implementation of laws, and we have the power to allocate the necessary financial resources to make a change. As leaders, we must raise awareness, combat discrimination, tackle stereotypes, protect and provide support to children. What is more, we must also listen to them.

I am sure your debates will be vibrant and forward-looking. They must result in practical recommendations that will serve all parliamentarians, men and women, in their action to promote the protection and empowerment of the girl child.

I wish you a very successful meeting.