



Inter-Parliamentary Union  
For democracy. For everyone.

## Opening speech

**Ms. Margaret Mensah-Williams**

**Chairperson of the National Council of Namibia  
President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of  
Women Parliamentarians**

Mr. Deputy Executive Director of UN Women,  
Distinguished colleague members of parliament,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to open this meeting, jointly organized by the IPU and UN Women to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

I am also very pleased that we can welcome among us Mr. Yannick Glemarec, Deputy Executive Director of UN Women. I would like to reiterate our appreciation for the great partnership we have developed over the years with UN Women. Organizing this parliamentary meeting at the CSW is a particularly good example of our joint work. The IPU and UN Women share common goals and objectives. And if we join our global and national-level resources, we can achieve the progress we want for women.

This year's CSW focuses on women's empowerment and its link to sustainable development. Let me start by saying something that might seem obvious: empowering women and girls starts by recognizing and fully realizing all their fundamental rights.

Even if that is an obvious thing to say, it may sometimes be worth repeating. Because we all know that, despite the progress we have made, women and girls still face numerous challenges: their rights are still not fully respected, their autonomy is often limited, their personal development not secured. Recent global research has found that legal frameworks in a very large number of countries still contain provisions that discriminate against women and girls. According to the World Bank, over 150 countries have at least one law that is discriminatory towards women. This is a major impediment to the development of our societies.

Ensuring that women's rights are respected is one of our key challenges, and the main topic of our meeting today. The overall title of our debates today is *The Power of Legislation for Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development*. I know our deliberations will be rich and constructive. But before getting to the heart of today's work, let me share with you four key messages.

- **First, parliamentarians are accountable for women and girls' rights.**

As parliamentarians, we have the power to legislate and to oversee the implementation of laws. This power comes with the responsibility of ensuring that women and girls' rights are promoted and protected by law. The law sets out common rules for how we live as a society. It must guarantee equality and should never formalize inequality or discrimination. As parliamentarians, we must promote and safeguard legal and policy frameworks that prevent and combat all forms of discrimination and violence on the basis of sex. That is an immense responsibility, because without good and well-implemented laws, women and girls have no formal way to remedy any violations of their rights. They cannot take ownership of their lives, their bodies and their destinies and will not be able to fully participate in the development of our societies.

The citizens we represent expect us to deliver on gender equality and development. To accomplish that task, a number of international instruments provide us with essential benchmarks, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Sustainable Development Goals. They must be an integral part of our work. More than ever before, we have strong, clear targets to achieve before 2030, including ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls, and all forms of violence and harmful practices against them. We should see our commitment to development as a moral and political imperative.

- **Second, we need strong parliaments that guarantee respect for women's rights**

Today, we will focus on strategies and methods that will enable parliaments not only to eliminate discriminatory laws and but also to legislate for gender equality in a positive way. Laws form an important foundation for guaranteeing women's and girls' rights. But putting laws and policies into practice remains the most important challenge. Our aim must be to create appropriate mechanisms and to provide adequate

financial and human resources for all aspects of a gender responsive legal framework that can be implemented in reality. Success on those fronts depends a great deal on the capacity of State institutions and political will. That is why it is so important to have structures in place such as a well-functioning justice system that is accessible to all women and girls, or law enforcement officers that know how to respond to violence and who can reassure women that it is safe for them to seek protection.

Parliaments that have the knowledge, support and resources that allow their members to fully fulfil their core functions can work towards the effective implementation of women's rights. Here, I think that we should really emphasize our powers both in terms of oversight and our in agreeing budget allocations. And we must give ourselves the means to be able to fully exercise those powers. Our oversight and budgetary roles are also the core of our contribution to strengthening democratic governance, the rule of law and access to justice, all of which are included in Goal 16 of the Sustainable Developments Goals on peace, justice and strong institutions.

We also need to ensure that parliaments become gender-sensitive institutions. I am firmly convinced that parliaments should make active efforts to improve the way in which they address gender equality issues, and the way in which they embody and represent gender-sensitive behaviour to the communities they represent.

Leadership, rules, procedures, working hours and all of what makes a parliament a place of work must be made to suit the needs and expectations of both men and women. The IPU Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments sets benchmarks for introducing reform and strengthening parliaments worldwide on this very topic.

- **Third, partnership is a key word.**

Gender equality is the responsibility of both men and women parliamentarians. We will achieve a more sustainable level of equality if it is accepted and championed by both women and men.

I salute the *HeforShe campaign* organized by UN Women and fully support its objectives. Men politicians are the majority of decision-makers in today's world. Without their engagement on women's rights and gender equality, we will hinder all our efforts to equalize opportunities for women to build up their capabilities. And talking of partnership between

men and women, I hope you won't mind if I digress and thank Canada for its recent support to the IPU Gender Partnership Programme. Canada's young feminist Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was right when he said on the 8 March: *"Equality is not a threat, it is an opportunity."* This should be our leitmotiv and should guide our coming discussions.

Partnership is also necessary between women. It helps to develop common positions and work in concert on gender issues, particularly through parliamentary committees and caucuses on gender issues, but also through forums outside parliament.

If we want to advance gender equality, we must also remember that partnership between parliamentarians and representatives of women's organizations and civil society groups is very valuable.

And in addition, we need to forge strong partnerships between organizations that support parliaments. The IPU and UN Women have been cooperating for many years now, and we are currently aiming to launch a joint multi-year project to support parliaments as they amend and repeal existing discriminatory laws. This initiative aims to ensure that national frameworks are in line with the requirements of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform. It is a project that will contribute to the implementation of Goal 5 of the Sustainable Developments Goals, so as to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. We look forward to starting this exciting project.

- **The final point I want to share with you is that achieving gender equality is a prerequisite to ending other forms of inequality**

Gender inequalities remain widespread and persistent across the world. Women and girls are disproportionately present amongst the poorest and most marginalised people as a result.

However, there is strong evidence that, if we succeed in achieving gender equality, this will accelerate progress towards other development goals. Dealing with low-level discrimination against women and girls is linked to better outcomes in several areas of the development agenda, including educational attainment, child health, food security and economic development. There are many examples of this link. For instance, countries where there are high levels of violence against women and where women lack the power to make choices about their sexual and reproductive lives have an average infant mortality rate of

more than three times the rate of countries with low levels of restrictions on women's physical integrity. Similarly, countries where women lack any right to own land have on average 60% more malnourished children. We also know that higher education for girls is correlated with fewer early marriages and increased well-being for families and society as a whole.

Challenging the underlying gender inequalities that impede women's progress will have a multiplier effect on narrowing the gaps in other forms of inequality.

Colleagues,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let's accomplish the "unfinished business" of women's empowerment across all countries, and let's accomplish it together. Let's strongly commit to achieve gender equality and to end all forms of inequality. I look forward to today's discussions and to identifying common strategies to make our goals a reality.