



## INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY  
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### 56<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women United Nations

#### Statement by the Hon. M. Mensah-Williams Vice-President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians Deputy Speaker of the National Council of Namibia

Madam Chair,

It is a great honour for me to take the floor on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. I am the Deputy Speaker of the National Council of Namibia and Vice-President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians.

Last week, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UNWomen organized their annual parliamentary meeting on the occasion of the 56<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Our meeting focused on *Empowering rural women: what role for parliaments?* Allow me to take this opportunity to thank you, Madam Chair, for having taken time from your busy schedule to address our meeting. This was greatly appreciated by all the participants.

I would also like to reiterate our thanks to UNWomen for its ongoing cooperation, and stress once again how useful it is for us parliamentarians to participate in the work of the Commission, follow its debates and learn from the wealth of information, exchanges and meetings that the CSW generates. This also allows us to go back home with a much better understanding of the overall UN process and the commitment to help ensure national follow-up to the decisions that have been taken here.

Now, let me turn to the outcome of the annual parliamentary meeting held last week. It was a very interactive and constructive event, with more than 140 MPs from some 50 countries participating. Our parliamentary meeting centred on two main issues: the first related to rural women's political empowerment, focusing on how to ensure stronger participation of rural women in local and national politics. We also discussed parliament's role in better reflecting the needs and interests of rural women. The second issue focused on two key rights-related priorities for rural women: addressing discrimination against women in law, including access to land, inheritance and credit, and access to health

Madam Chair, I will report now on some of the main results of our meeting:

The first point that emerged clearly was that women played a pivotal role in development, and particularly women in rural areas. Their development potential, however, remains hampered by the multiple forms of discrimination that they face as rural women. Discriminatory laws and practices limit their access to land, credit, and other important assets. Parliaments must review and amend these discriminatory laws and ensure that new legislation complies with international commitments, such as CEDAW.

Legal frameworks to eliminate discrimination against rural women exist, but they are often underutilized. There is a need to strengthen implementation and heighten awareness

among rural women of their rights. In addressing discrimination against rural women it is also important to take into account their specific socio-economic needs. Rural women are not a homogenous group: they have diverse experiences and different needs.

This brings me to my second point: research and access to disaggregated data. Without accurate information and a clear picture of on-the-ground reality, we risk developing policies that will not meet our objective of empowering rural women.

Our third point is linked to the representation of rural women in politics. Adequate representation of rural women decision-making at all levels - from local to national - is key to their empowerment. Our debates highlighted the low representation of rural women. We paid particular attention to local government and discussed the reasons why women are inadequately represented at that level. Some solutions that were highlighted included the adoption of special measures, such as quotas, to promote rural women's participation at the local level. We also stressed the role of political parties that need to do more to include women on electoral lists, and particularly those from rural districts.

The meeting ended with a special debate on rural women's access to health, and with a particular focus on maternal and child health support. Parliaments are well-placed to find innovative and appropriate solutions to the specific health care problems of individual societies. Rural women can only be empowered if they can hold decision-makers to account, and it is parliamentarians who can create such a bridge. I would also like to add that a resolution on this particular topic will be adopted at IPU's next Assembly in Kampala next month. This will certainly pave the way for more parliamentary action in that field.

Madam Chair,

Let me end by highlighting the interest expressed by the many parliamentarians present yesterday to continue to be involved in the work of the UN. They expressed their commitment to follow up on some of the debates and conclusions held during our meeting in their respective countries. We are convinced that if each of us plays our part, progress can be achieved.

Last but not least, I would like to mention that last week we presented a new Map of Women in Politics, which provides an overview of the situation of women in parliament and in government across the world as of 1 January 2012. The Map shows that we are still far from achieving parity. Only 19.5 per cent of parliamentarians and 16.7 per cent of ministers are women. Not to mention the low level of women in the highest decision-making positions, such as head of State (5.3%) or head of parliaments (15.1%).

The inequality illustrated by these figures is closely linked to an inequality of resources allocated to combating discrimination against women and a lack of political will. In conclusion, we need to strengthen our efforts and action to achieve genuine equality for men and women.