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**At the Meeting of Women Speakers of Parliament
organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
on the occasion of the Second World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments**

**on
"Parliaments and the United Nations:
Cooperation for the promotion of gender equality"
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I am very pleased to have the opportunity to take part in this meeting of Women Speakers of Parliament organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the occasion of the Second World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments. The holding of this event prior to the 2005 World Summit is an indication of the importance the IPU gives to gender equality and empowerment of women. I wish to commend the distinguished Speakers of Parliament for their commitment to this important topic.

Next week, world leaders will gather here in New York at the 2005 World Summit to reach agreement on critical issues of development, security and human rights. Women are disproportionately affected by many of the problems demanding world attention, including poverty and conflict, and make major contributions to solving these problems. A strong focus on women's needs, contributions and priorities is critical to ensuring effective and enduring solutions to the huge challenges facing the world today.

In the context of the focus of this meeting: "Parliaments and the United Nations: Cooperation for the promotion of gender equality", I wish to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the excellent, long-standing collaboration the Division for the Advancement of Women has had with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). This has included the development of the Handbook for Parliamentarians on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, as well as training for parliamentarians on reporting and implementation of the Convention. Very recently, our collaboration involved the development of a "*Map of Women in Politics*", which highlights the current status of women in parliaments and in the executive around the world. I am certain that IPU and the Division will continue to collaborate in new innovative ways.

The **ten-year review and appraisal** of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was carried out recently in the context of the 49th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The focus of the review was on implementation at national level and sharing of experiences and good practice, to assess achievements, highlight gaps and challenges and identify effective and sustainable ways forward.

The high profile of the session, with over 80 Ministers attending, and significant levels of participation, was an indication of the continued importance attached to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as the global policy framework. It also highlighted the continued important role of the United Nations, particularly through bringing together key stakeholders on promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women. IPU, for example, organized an important Parliamentary Event: *"Beyond Beijing: Towards Gender Equality in Politics"* during the session of the Commission.

In assessing achievements, as a result of reviews carried out at national level, many Member States noted progress over the past decade in terms of policy reforms, legislative change, and institutional development. Positive developments included the establishment of national policies and strategies for gender equality in almost all countries. Countries also reported increased diversity in the mechanisms promoting and monitoring attention to gender equality, such as gender equality commissions and ombudspersons offices, and including parliamentary networks and caucuses.

Government responses indicated clearly, however, that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action remained far from being fully achieved. Progress had been uneven within and across regions. While some gains had been seen in relation to each of the 12 Critical Areas of Concern in all regions, serious obstacles and challenges were also reported in every area.

Persistent gaps in all regions included low levels of women's representation in decision-making positions; stereotypical attitudes and discriminatory practices; and discrimination in employment, including occupational segregation and wage gaps. Violence against women was noted as a major challenge worldwide. Countries reported high prevalence of HIV/AIDS among women, and trafficking in women and girls was of concern to many Governments. In many countries, women's health, in particular lack of access to reproductive health services and high levels of maternal mortality, continued to give cause for concern. Some Governments noted disproportionately high poverty levels among women, and their insufficient access to economic resources.

Three important learnings emerged from the review and appraisal. Firstly, the huge gap between policy and practice which needs to be explicitly addressed as an urgent priority; secondly, the fact that attitudes towards the gender equality and empowerment of women - among the general public and within Government bureaucracies - have not changed at the same pace as policy, legal and institutional frameworks, which hinders effective implementation; and thirdly, the failure to commit adequate resources for systematic and effective implementation of the positive legislative and policy changes.

The outcome of the review and appraisal was a Declaration adopted by Member States and forwarded to the General Assembly and the 2005 World Summit. In addition to unequivocally reaffirming the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Declaration emphasized that the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is essential to achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration. It also

stressed the need to ensure the integration of a gender perspective in the 2005 World Summit. Importantly, the Declaration also recognized that the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are mutually reinforcing in achieving gender equality and empowerment of women.

The Declaration made a strong call for accelerated action for full implementation. A priority focus in the United Nations over the coming years will therefore be on enhancing implementation and accountability and reporting on progress. I would like to briefly highlight some of the key areas of future United Nations efforts, and ways in which Parliaments could play a role in supporting this work.

One critical element of the focus on implementation should be enhancing the linkages between the Platform for Action with the **Millennium Declaration and the MDGs**, and building more effectively on the synergies between these important instruments. The Millennium Declaration and the MDGs provide a unifying framework for the development activities of Member States and entities of the United Nations system. Non-governmental organizations and civil society groups around the world have also embraced the opportunity the MDG framework provides to address critical development goals. The process of developing the MDGs created a broad debate on strategies for development, involving many stakeholders, and the commitment to implementation of the MDGs is perceived as an important opportunity to leverage new support for improving the situation of women and girls.

While it is a major achievement to have one MDG specifically focused on gender equality and empowerment of women - with a target on gender disparities in education and indicators on education, wage employment and representation in parliaments - it is critical to ensure that gender perspectives are incorporated into all other MDGs. Where the MDGs have not given explicit attention to gender equality it will be necessary to work to ensure that gender perspectives are clearly outlined in concrete plans for the implementation. Gender perspectives must be given explicit attention if the MDGs are to be fully implemented.

The recently published report of the Millennium Project Taskforce 3: *"Taking action: Achieving gender equality and empowering women"* (2005) identified seven priority areas for action. These priority areas are not new or comprehensive. However, they do represent a step forward in identifying some key areas not already taken up in the MDGs. These included strengthening opportunities for post-primary education for girls while simultaneously meeting commitments to universal primary education; guaranteeing sexual and reproductive health and rights; investing in infrastructure to reduce women's and girls' time burdens; guaranteeing women's and girls' property and inheritance rights; eliminating gender inequality in employment by decreasing women's reliance on informal employment, closing gender gaps in earnings, and reducing occupational segregation; increasing women's share of seats in national parliaments and local governmental bodies; and combating violence against women and girls.

Parliaments could monitor the implementation of MDG3 on gender equality and empowerment of women and ensure that gender perspectives are incorporated into implementation plans and monitoring and reporting for all other other MDGs. Gender Equality advocates in many different fora – within Governments, in NGOs and within the United Nations, have been able to mobilize effectively around the 7 priority areas identified by the Millennium Taskforce 3. Parliaments could undertake to also monitor and ensure effective reporting on these critical areas, as well as the target and indicators under MDG3.

The increased focus on human rights in the 2005 World Summit provides an important opportunity to enhance attention to women's human rights, through both enhancing the focus and specificity of the **Convention** on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women within the human rights system, and incorporating gender perspectives in all work on human rights throughout the United Nations system. The relevance and effectiveness of CEDAW as an accountability mechanism for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women should be strengthened and new strategies developed to promote, facilitate and monitor its full implementation. The valuable and unique links between the normative processes in the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the policy processes in the Commission on the Status of Women for promoting gender equality should be enhanced.

While constraints to the full and effective implementation of the Convention exist, the Convention and the Committee have gained significantly in credibility over the past decade. States parties take reporting obligations seriously and increasingly bring strong delegations with representatives from a range of stakeholders, including the legislature, the executive and civil society, for the one-day long constructive dialogue on progress on gender equality at national level with the Committee. The fact that the reports of States parties and the concluding comments of the Committee are available on the Division's website; that the constructive dialogue with States parties are open meetings (with significant levels of attendance); and that the Committee also meets with non-governmental organizations and United Nations entities on the situation in the countries reporting and receives shadow reports from NGOs, makes the Convention a powerful accountability mechanism, complementing the work of the Commission on the Status of Women in a very positive and constructive manner.

Gender equality advocates at national level have been able to effectively utilize the Convention as an important advocacy and monitoring tool at national level. However greater attention will be given by the United Nations in the coming decade to enhancing implementation of the Convention. In addition to ensuring wide dissemination and utilization of the Handbook on the Convention produced jointly by the Division for the Advancement of Women and IPU – ensuring in particular that male Parliamentarians are aware of the Convention and its implications for the work of Parliaments - action could also be taken to ensure that reports to the Committee are presented to Parliament, that the concluding comments of the Committee are broadly disseminated at national level, and that there is systematic reporting on progress in implementation to the Parliament.

Gender mainstreaming remains an essential strategy for ensuring full implementation of the Platform for Action as it is the means by which critical policies, strategies, plans, and resource allocations in all areas of development – political, economic, social, cultural and environmental - can be influenced from a gender equality perspective. Like any other strategy, gender mainstreaming can, however, only be as good as the efforts made to implement it. There is clearly a need to invest greater resources to ensure enhanced understanding of the strategy and the ways in which it should be implemented.

A major problem has been the continued “separateness” or marginalization of work to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment. Too often, the otherwise excellent specific gender equality policies, strategies, action plans, guidelines, training programmes and monitoring and reporting strategies have not been well integrated into, or had sufficient impact on, existing mainstream policies, processes and mechanisms.

Gender mainstreaming has mainly been utilized as a strategy at the level of programmes. There is a need to enhance the focus on gender mainstreaming in policy formulation, particularly because gender perspectives are still not seen as essential for achieving the goals of all policy areas. Many Governments and organizations continue to maintain the assumption that certain policy areas, for example macro-economics and technical areas, are “gender-neutral”. Gender analysis should be the basis for policy development and decision-making in all policy areas, and capacity to effectively utilize this analysis must be developed as a required competence at all levels in organizations. Accountability for implementation and outcomes must be strengthened.

I would like to highlight in particular the potential of one area of good practice established over the past decade, that is, the increased awareness of the importance of resource allocations and budgets at different levels for promotion of gender equality. In a growing number of countries gender perspectives have been incorporated into national, regional and local budget processes. At the basis of all these initiatives is the objective to make national budget processes more accountable – to ensure that policy, programme and budget decisions take gender perspectives into account, and that policies on gender equality are matched with adequate resource allocations. A related objective is to increase women’s participation in economic processes. In some countries, Parliaments have played a role in these processes and I believe this is an area where Parliaments could make an expanded contribution of great significance.

Moving forward on gender mainstreaming will also require galvanizing new broad-based coalitions which can strengthen women's voices, provide access to new resources, and lead to policy change. Parliamentarians can develop strategic alliances and build common strategies with key stakeholders. There is a need, for example, to initiate increased interaction with gender equality experts in academia, particularly since the constraints to effective policy formulation include lack of data and under-researched areas where anecdotal evidence is not sufficient basis for policy discussions.

I would now like to say a few words on two critical areas which will be given significant attention in the coming year in the inter-governmental process in the United Nations. The first current priority area is **violence against women**. In December 2003, the General Assembly of the United Nations requested the Secretary-General to prepare an in-depth study on violence against women. The study will be completed by June 2006, and submitted to the General Assembly for consideration. The goals of the study are: to highlight the persistence of all forms of violence against women in all parts of the world, and the unacceptability of such violence; to strengthen political commitment and joint efforts of all stakeholders to prevent and eliminate violence against women; and to identify ways and means for more sustained and effective implementation of Government commitments and obligations to combat all forms of violence against women, and increase accountability.

The process of preparation of the study is as important as the product. It is an opportunity to raise visibility of and political commitment to tackling the issue of violence against women, enhance accountability and strengthen monitoring mechanisms in the study's follow-up phase. For this reason, efforts are being made to establish broad consultation within the United Nations and with Member States, NGOs and experts in academia. Briefings and consultations have been held, for example, in conjunction with ECOSOC and the General Assembly. Further initiatives are planned in the context of the Commission on the Status of Women and the sessions of other functional commissions in 2006. These consultations serve as opportunities to discuss key issues and strategic recommendations to be addressed by the study. *(Further information on the study is available at the back of the room).*

The Division has also initiated collaboration with the IPU Secretariat since one of the topics for the IPU Assembly in 2006 is : "How parliaments can and must promote effective ways of combating violence against women in all fields." It is heartening that IPU and parliamentarians are committed to this critical area of work. Two appointed rapporteurs will produce a report and draft a resolution for the Assembly. One key area of focus for the work of parliaments in this area should be the development/improvement of legislation on violence against women. The outcome of the IPU process will make an important contribution to the Secretary-General's study. It would be extremely useful if the work being done in preparation for the IPU Assembly and the preparations of the United Nations study could be disseminated by Parliamentarians as broadly as possible at national level.

The second area to be given priority attention by the United Nations – **women's political participation** – is of particular concern to Parliamentarians. The opportunity for women as well as men to develop capabilities and participate in all aspects of economic, social and political decision-making is fundamental to the promotion of gender equality. Women in decision-making positions in legislative and executive bodies contribute to redefining socio-economic and political priorities; placing new items on the political agenda that reflect and address women's specific concerns, values and experiences; and providing new perspectives on mainstream political issues. The broader the base of

participation in power structures and decision-making processes, the greater the transparency and accountability of these structures and processes.

The ten-year review and appraisal of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action clearly shows that, despite political recognition of the fundamental right of women and men to participate in political and public life, the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality in the area of power and decision-making remains wide. While the proportion of seats held by women in legislative bodies is the highest world average reached to date, and continues a trend of gradual but sustained growth, the pace of change is clearly far too slow. Only 14 countries have at least 30 percent representation of women in parliament, which had been established as a target for 1995, and is still not achieved ten years later.

One encouraging development is the fact that a number of post-conflict countries have highlighted and addressed the importance of including women in reconstruction processes, and of their participation in new democratic institutions. Rwanda, for example, currently has the highest proportion of women in parliament in the world.

Two articles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women deal with women's participation in political and public life, i.e. articles 7 and 8. Article 7 obliges States parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life and to ensure that they enjoy equality with men in the political and public life of the country. Article 8 obliges States parties ensure to women on equal terms with men opportunity to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations. In order to provide further guidance to States parties, the Committee adopted general recommendation 23 (1997) on political and public life reflecting its authoritative understanding of the content of the articles, and related States obligations.

Between 2001 and 2004 the Committee considered the reports of 58 States parties and raised the issue of women's participation in political and public life and in the international realm in all but three constructive dialogues with States parties. The concluding comments indicate that the Committee had few opportunities to highlight positive aspects of implementation of these articles, but instead had to identify areas of concern.

Legislative measures recommended by the Committee range from constitutional amendments that guarantee the balanced participation of women and men in political life; laws to promote balanced representation of men and women in electoral candidate lists; and election laws aimed increasing the representation of women in elected and appointed bodies. At the same time, the Committee has stressed that the effectiveness of legislative measures will be enhanced when these are accompanied by practical measures, such as special training programmes geared at women, and awareness raising campaigns.

Women's political participation will be the focus of attention in the 50th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2006. The Commission will consider the two

themes: “Enhanced participation of women in development; an enabling environment for achieving gender equality and for the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia, the fields of education, health and work”, and “Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels”.

This provides an opportunity to further develop recommendations to ensure full and accelerated implementation of this critical area of concern, moving beyond the issues of numbers – since the representation of women in different bodies and processes does not necessarily ensure their effective participation – to addressing the constraints that inhibit their effective contributions and hinder attention to gender equality issues. I am certain that IPU will organize a Parliamentary Event during the 50th session of the Commission.

Although I have already taken up some possible opportunities for **Parliaments** to support the work being undertaken by the United Nations, I would like to make some brief general comments on the role of Parliaments in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women. The Inter-parliamentary Union already plays a critical role at national, regional and global levels by promoting women's increased participation in parliaments and in providing much needed statistics on women's representation in parliaments.

The importance of parliaments in the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women at national level was recognized in an Expert Group Meeting organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women last year, as part of preparations for the ten-year review and appraisal. The experts highlighted the increased diversity of mechanisms at national level and stressed the importance of Parliaments - including through standing committees on gender equality or caucuses of women parliamentarian - in promoting gender equality perspectives, reviewing legislative proposals for gender impact, and monitoring government performance in meeting gender equality goals.

Among their recommendations, the experts called for more effective partnerships between all mechanisms at national level, including parliamentary bodies, as well as more effective utilization of the expertise of non-governmental organizations and other individuals, groups and networks. They also recommended that sex-disaggregated statistics and information on gender equality indicators should be included in all government reporting to parliaments, including budgetary reporting. A further recommendation was that periodic reports to CEDAW should be tabled in national parliaments before submission to the CEDAW Committee and the concluding comments of the Committee presented to parliament.

Ultimately, parliaments themselves need also to become more gender-sensitive to ensure women's equal political participation with men and increased potential for the development of gender sensitive policies. The structure, rules and regulations, and the attitudes of Members of Parliament can impact on the capacity of women parliamentarians to participate and contribute. The extent to which women are appointed to positions of power within the Parliament, such as presiding officers, leaders of parliamentary parties, chairs of committees - and not only in portfolios such as health and family - is also critical.

It is important to ensure that responsibility to promote gender equality and empowerment of women is not relegated to women parliamentarians, as individuals or in caucuses. Parliamentary caucuses - of women, or of both women and men - can play an important role to promote and monitor increased attention to women's contributions and needs and priorities, but real progress requires that all parliamentarians, both men and women, work to ensure that gender perspectives are identified and explicitly addressed in all policy areas.

In **conclusion**, the important issues for gender equality have been well known for some time – the challenge is effectively addressing them. This requires accelerated action from a diverse group of actors, including Parliaments. There are a number of critical questions which it would be important for Parliaments to consider: What underlies the pervasiveness of gender-based discrimination in all its forms? In what ways are gender inequalities reproduced within societies - through which norms, practices and institutions and how can these be addressed? Why is attention to gender inequality in public policy and programmes ad hoc and selective, and how can more systematic and effective implementation across all areas of public policy be achieved? How can accountability, leading to adequate levels of political commitment and resource allocations, be secured at all levels?

There is a need for strong and explicit leadership on gender equality in the decade to come, within Governments, in Parliaments, in the United Nations and other international and regional organizations as well as in civil society - to ensure the needed political will and allocation of resources. Speakers of Parliaments could provide critical strategic leadership to ensure that Parliaments play a key role in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women.

This parliamentary event provides an important opportunity to address some of the critical issues around the role of Parliaments. I am sure that the discussions today will be stimulating and fruitful.

Thank you