

Joint Parliamentary Event of the Inter-Parliamentary Union  
and the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women  
on  
The Role of Parliaments in Enforcing Gender Equality and Women's Rights

Statement  
by  
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Ms. Mensah-Williams,  
Distinguished parliamentarians,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you to the United Nations for the 54<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women and to this meeting which focuses on the role of parliamentarians in enforcing gender equality and women's rights.

This is the sixth parliamentary event organized jointly by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women. The Division's collaboration with the IPU has grown over the years, and the constructive discussions and exchange of information has always been valuable to our work. The focus of these annual meetings on the main theme under consideration by the Commission provides a unique opportunity for parliamentarians to contribute to and influence the work of the Commission. The development of the Handbook for Parliamentarians on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, as well as our collaboration on the popular wall chart, the Map of Women in Politics 2010, are further examples of our constructive collaboration in the past.

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A number of intergovernmental activities this year offer strategic opportunities to move the discourse on gender equality from the margins to the center of policy-making.

The Commission on the Status of Women will conduct the 15-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action with a focus on sharing of experiences and good practices, overcoming remaining obstacles and new challenges including those related to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This morning the Commission is expected to adopt a Declaration which will reaffirm the centrality of the Platform for

Action for the achievement of gender equality and women's human rights. In June/July, the Annual Ministerial Review of the Economic and Social Council will focus on implementing internationally agreed goals on gender equality and the empowerment of women. In September, the General Assembly will hold a high-level plenary meeting on accelerating progress towards the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. During the Fall, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), a high-level ministerial meeting will examine ways to further enhance implementation and accountability on all issues related to women, peace and security.

These events will provide opportunities for senior Government officials to revisit the commitments that the global community made in Beijing Platform for Action, in the Millennium Declaration, and in other key intergovernmental fora. These will be opportunities to assess what has been achieved, what obstacles have been encountered and how further progresses can be made.

I would like to focus my remarks today on providing a synopsis of these questions based on the findings from the 15-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

The five regional commissions of the United Nations have held regional review processes and produced regional reports based on submissions from Member States in response to a common questionnaire. These responses formed the basis for the global report on the review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, which is before the Commission. These four regional review meetings took place in October and November 2009 and identified a number of areas of progress and of action for moving forward.

What did these reviews suggest about areas in which significant progress has been made?

- Significant gains have been made in education, particularly primary education. In some countries, women's enrollment at the tertiary level exceeds that of men. We also have a good understanding of the measures that support girls' access and retention in schools, such as abolishing school fees, providing scholarships and establishing school feeding programmes.
- It is increasingly recognized that women's access to economic and financial resources has positive multiplier effects for a range of development goals.
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has reached almost universal ratification, with 186 States being party to the treaty. There has been progress in legal reforms resulting in improved de jure equality between women and men.
- Eliminating violence against women is increasingly addressed by many States through comprehensive legal, policy and institutional frameworks.

- In terms of approaches at the national level, gender mainstreaming strategies are being refined and applied in many sectors, supported by new tools, capacity-building and training, monitoring and evaluation.
- Budgetary processes are increasingly scrutinized to ensure that resources are made available to fund gender equality programmes.
- An increased participation of women parliamentarians has led to a shift in agendas and allowed women to have a voice in policy-making in a wide range of areas.
- Gender equality committees and women's caucuses in the parliament play a key role in advocating for, supporting, monitoring and evaluating the implementation of gender equality legislation, plans and programmes.
- Women parliamentarians have promoted laws to end discrimination against women.

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Despite this progress, the global review processes have shown that progress in improving women's lives, eliminating discrimination and achieving equality has been uneven across regions and within countries. Specific groups of women, such as widows, older women, indigenous women, women in rural and remote areas, face particular challenges that often remain unaddressed.

- Every year, 536,000 women and girls die as a result of pregnancy or childbirth. Almost all of these deaths could be prevented. MDG 5 on improving maternal health is the one goal where the least progress has been made.
- Women are more likely than men to be living in poverty, but we still do not have sufficient information on the extent and depth of women's poverty.
- Women account for nearly two thirds of the 776 million illiterate adults in the world, a proportion that has not changed in 20 years.
- Many women work in vulnerable and low paid jobs without social protection. Occupational segregation and the gender wage-gaps persist in all parts of the world.
- Violence against women and girls remains a global pandemic. Impunity for perpetrators persists. The deliberate targeting of civilians and the use of sexual violence against women continues on a large scale in ongoing conflicts.
- Discrimination in law has not been eliminated. In most countries, gaps remain between legislation and its effective implementation. While the outcome of the 23<sup>rd</sup> special session of the General Assembly set a target for the removal of laws that discriminate against women by 2005, many such laws still exist in different countries.
- The global economic and financial crisis has created new hurdles to women's employment. The manner in which countries respond to the crisis can have disproportionate impacts on women and girls, possibly reversing gains made, particularly through cuts in public spending on health and education and through inequitably-designed safety nets.

- The global average of women parliamentarians is still low, with 18.8 per cent women in parliament, a far cry from our goal. At the level of women heads of state or government, we have barely made progress since 1995. At the United Nations in New York, 24 out of 192 Permanent Representatives of Missions are currently women. Senior levels of the UN reflect similar slow progress, with only 27.7 per cent women.

So what factors hinder progress? The review process identified a number of cross-cutting issues areas.

First, gender stereotypes constrain the opportunities and choices of women and men. They lead to occupational segregation and the gender wage gap, while the stereotypical view of men as breadwinners limits their involvement in family life.

Second, violence against women is an obstacle to women's ability to participate fully in all areas.

Third, women are still underrepresented in decision-making processes. This limits their ability to influence decisions on priorities to be taken and resources to be allocated.

Fourth, women continue to bear a large burden of unpaid work. This limits their participation in the labour market.

Finally, a major constraint to progress is that the pursuit of the Beijing agenda has progressed with little engagement of men.

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What works? What strategies need to be adopted to ensure progress in the future?

The regional reviews have indicated that comprehensive legal frameworks, national policies and action plans on gender equality, and the integration of gender equality perspectives in critical national instruments such as national development or poverty reduction strategies have worked well.

We also know that gender equality and diversity strategies and plans work to enhance the role of women in government. Quotas and other temporary special measures; changes in selection and recruitment systems; transforming gender stereotypes; and wide-ranging awareness-raising campaigns are essential. The IPU itself has taken some innovative measures to ensure women's participation in your statutory meetings.

An important finding of the review process is the crucial role of dialogue and multi-stakeholder partnerships. This is where the role of parliamentarians is so important. At the national level, parliamentarians play a key role in developing legislation and allocating resources in order to promote the implementation of the Platform for Action, as well as the gender-sensitive implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

How can progress be made to complete the unfinished agenda?

We should remember that the participation of women – whether in parliaments or the United Nations – increases the effectiveness of those institutions, as well as their legitimacy. There is no democracy without women, and progress in development, peace and security and the realization of human rights is only possible if there is equality between women and men.

Laws, policies and practices that discriminate against women and girls need to be urgently repealed. National policies should systematically integrate gender issues in all sectors. This can be done through a mix of mandatory measures, incentives and awareness-raising measures. Financing mechanisms for gender equality should be strengthened. The economic empowerment of women requires action for decent employment, and increase in women's access to economic and financial resources and social protection systems.

Collaboration between international, national, civil society and private sector actors will be essential to completing the unfinished business. In this regard, I would like to commend the IPU for joining the Secretary-General's Unite to end violence against women campaign with its own campaign to end violence against women. Both campaigns will benefit from *Handbook for legislation on violence against women developed by the Division for the Advancement of Women*. The Handbook presents recommendations on the content of legislation, together with explanatory commentaries and good practice examples.

Within the United Nations, the prospect of creating a new gender equality entity holds great promise for strengthening gender work at the national levels. The proposed consolidation of four gender-specific UN entities – Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues, Division for the Advancement of Women, INSTRAW and UNIFEM -- into one strong composite entity would support a stronger voice for women in global governance and policy-making processes for gender equality. A strengthened United Nations capacity on gender equality will significantly enhance the United Nations ability to assist countries in implementing the global gender equality goals and commitments. The Secretary-General is committed to moving forward expeditiously with the establishment of the new entity as soon as the General Assembly makes a decision.

In our different roles in parliaments, international organizations, and civil society, we can demonstrate strong and visible leadership and forge strategic partnerships at national, regional and global levels to make the promotion of gender equality and women's enjoyment of human rights a central focus in all our endeavours – for the benefit of all, women and men.

I wish you every success in this meeting and trust that your work will be another important step forward towards our common goal – the realization of gender equality and empowerment of women.

Thank you very much.