



**INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION**

**OFFICE OF THE PERMANENT OBSERVER TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

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**Statement**  
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49<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

March 7th, 2005

It is a great pleasure for me to take the floor today on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). I am Margaret Mensah Williams, Deputy Speaker of the Namibian upper House and member of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians.

We have finished a first week of debates reviewing progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It is sad to note that today we cannot account for significant progress - discrimination and inequality are persistent. There remains a lot to do on the legal, political, economic, social and cultural fronts.

In the necessary collective effort that is needed to meet the Beijing objectives and the Millennium Development Goals, and more specifically Goal 3 on gender equality, I wish to highlight here the specific role of parliaments. As you know, the question of gender equality has long been one of the IPU's priorities. Our organisation has followed and contributed to all the World Conferences on Women, placing particular emphasis on parliamentary action and follow-up. On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Beijing Conference, the 140 Member Parliaments of the IPU reviewed progress and setbacks, and adopted a resolution on this topic at the IPU's last Statutory Assembly, held in Geneva in September and October of last year. I had the privilege of being one of the co-Rapporteurs of this debate, and I invite all of you to have a look at the resolution. Allow me to share with you some of the main points:

- Firstly, the parliamentary community reaffirmed its full commitment to the objectives set out in the Beijing Platform for Action. It furthermore stressed the fact that the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action was an essential prerequisite for meeting the Millennium Development Goals.
- Secondly, the resolution highlights the fact that 10 years after the Beijing Conference, effective gender equality is still far from being a reality: women continue to be paid less for work of equal value; they are more often victims of poverty and unemployment; and they are more frequently subjected to violence. Discrimination faced by the girl child remains every bit as alarming.
- Thirdly, the resolution sets out a series of measures for the advancement of women in the political, economic, and social fields, placing a specific focus on human security, conflict resolution and the situation of the girl child.

Underpinning this resolution is the fundamental role of parliaments in the fight for gender equality. We need strong parliaments and sustained parliamentary action to ensure respect for women's rights. Two issues must be addressed: the very low presence of women in decision-making bodies, and the enhancement of parliaments' capacities to address gender issues.

This very topic was the subject of the parliamentary forum organised on 3 March here at the United Nations by the IPU and the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (UNDAW). More than 200 women and men parliamentarians got together to discuss women's access to the political process and ways and means of enhancing parliaments' capacities to facilitate women's contributions and to meet the Beijing objectives.

The debates were lively. They started by taking stock of the situation of women in politics today. We had the pleasure of launching the new IPU-United Nations map, *Women in Politics: 2005*, which you will find in the room. This map provides a snapshot of the situation of women in both the legislative and executive branches of government. With only 15.7 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide now women, and with just 16 per cent of people in ministerial positions women, we are far from having achieved parity! Despite significant progress in many parts of the world, women still face tremendous difficulties in acceding to power. Women in the highest decision-making positions (presidents, prime ministers and speakers of parliaments) remain scarce, and more often than not, women ministers head social portfolios rather than those dealing with "hard" issues such as defence, foreign affairs and the budget or finance.

Against this background, the parliamentarians present on 3 March, who came from some 70 countries, shared their experiences regarding mechanisms aimed at facilitating women's access to parliament. Needless to say, the question of affirmative action measures was greatly debated, as a lot of the recent progress made around the world can be attributed to the introduction of quota mechanisms, whether at the parliamentary level or within political parties. But it was also made clear that quotas were not a panacea, and that other measures were necessary - ranging from changing mentalities, to enhancing women's capacities, to providing financial support to women candidates. It was also clear that improving women's participation in politics would entail improving a far larger framework of rights and combating poverty, HIV/AIDS and violence of many kinds.

While the question of increasing women's presence in parliaments remains essential, it is just as important to ensure that parliaments have the capacity to address gender issues. On that subject, recommendations were made regarding the establishment of parliamentary committees on gender equality and the development of an environment supportive of women in parliaments, with gender-sensitive standing orders, rules and codes of conduct, and with the development of family-friendly working hours. It was extremely interesting to note the results of a survey carried out in Sweden on measures to develop a gender-sensitive parliament. These are questions that all parliaments need to address. And I wish to stress here again that these issues concern both men and women. It was extremely heartening to hear several male parliamentarians take the floor during our debate. Men accounted for some 30 per cent of participants, and it is precisely through dialogue and with such constructive mutual support that we can move ahead.

As we concluded our debate, the role of parliaments came back to the forefront. We agreed that parliaments need to play a more active role in international debates relating to women and, through their oversight function, to monitor government action in meeting the commitments made internationally. It is crucial that the reports submitted to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), in particular those relating to the Beijing review process, be discussed, if not tabled for adoption, in parliaments. Furthermore, the results of the CSW need to be taken back home and presented to the national parliaments. Parliamentarians undertook to ensure national follow-up to the results the 49<sup>th</sup> session of the CSW, and expressed the hope to meet again soon, this time with more progress to report.