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Chemin du Pommier 5  
Case postale 330  
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex  
Geneva – Switzerland  
www.ipu.org

# Opening of the General Debate

## *Rejuvenating democracy, giving voice to youth*

Ms Margaret Mensah-Williams  
President of the IPU Coordinating  
Committee of Women  
Parliamentarians

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Mr. Speaker of the National Assembly of Zambia,  
Mr. President of the IPU,  
Mr. Youth Envoy of the UN Secretary General,  
Madam Chaka Chaka,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

I am very pleased to be here today at the opening of this important general debate on rejuvenating democracy, giving a voice to young people.

I am all the more pleased as we are meeting this time in Africa. I wish to thank wholeheartedly our Zambian hosts for welcoming us here for the 134<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the IPU.

Africa is a young and vibrant continent, with such a great number of young democracies that still need to grow stronger and stronger. What better place could there be for us to discuss how to rejuvenate democracy and give voice and hope to our young people?

Democracy is never a given. If it is to remain relevant, it needs to be constantly renewed, reinvented and rejuvenated. All of us here bear the responsibility of keeping democracy alive and in tune with our times.

Democracy and youth go hand in hand and reinforce one another. Democracy must build on the energy of youth. Our young people must be able to place their hopes in democracy.

Rejuvenating democracy means first and foremost making democracy more inclusive and representative. We have to make sure everyone is on board. But women, and young women in particular, are still a minority in most of our parliaments. As you know, women constitute 22.6 per cent of MPs across the world today. With respect to youth, less than two per cent of MPs are under 30. Women do tend to be better represented among younger MPs. But across all age categories, we are falling short of reaching equal representation for women and men. Young women are the least represented group in politics today and often fall between the cracks.

Yesterday we had a very lively and rich debate at the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians on how to empower young women in politics. We focused both on the particular challenges young women face and how to create favourable conditions for their participation in our parliaments. I want to share with you some of the main ideas that came out from our discussions.

We heard accounts from young women saying that their engagement in politics was made possible only by sacrificing their private life. Others highlighted that in their political parties, in parliament and in public discourse more generally, the culture tended to dissuade women from breaking through and finding a meaningful role in politics.

Multiple challenges lie in our way as we seek to improve politics for women in general, and young women in particular. These challenges include gender stereotypes and discriminatory norms that tend to confine women to the private sphere. Inequality between men and women clearly exists on a number of fronts. It is a matter of accessing resources; inequality also lies in balancing the division of work among family, household and professional responsibilities; and often, there is a lack of commitment among leaders and political parties to open up to women, especially young women.

So how do we make sure that women, and young women in particular, see politics as an option for them? How do we make parliament both accessible and an amenable place for women? How can we address this double discrimination that young women face, both as young people and as women?

We must challenge the status quo of the way we do politics, question our processes and procedures, and make sure that they are open to all. We must lift all the barriers preventing young people and women from participating in the political life of our countries. We must also change the image of politics and send the message that there is room for everyone. Politics is as much for young women as it is for young men, older women or older men. We must

plant the seeds of leadership early in our societies and in the heads of our girls and boys, so that they are not afraid of taking part in politics and democracy.

Rejuvenating democracy also means changing the way parliaments work. Here again, we need to critically look at our institutions and make sure that they are truly gender sensitive. Gender-sensitive institutions are ones that abide by gender equality in the way they work and deliver on gender equality as a *result* of their work. The concept of a gender-sensitive parliament is a very powerful one. The IPU adopted an ambitious plan of action on gender-sensitive parliaments in 2012. It called on parliaments to review their processes, infrastructure, working culture, and operational environment. Parliaments must respond to the needs of the men and women of today and those of tomorrow. Gender sensitive parliaments mean more modern and effective parliaments that contribute to stronger democracies.

Today we live in challenging times, with many uncertainties and unanswered questions. Some might be tempted to set democracy aside to respond to today's challenges. This is not the way to go. Democracy is an answer to exclusion and extremism. It is an answer to reducing poverty. It is an answer to preserving our planet; and it is an answer to securing the well-being of men and women. We need more democracy – democracy that has the capacity to learn, grow and look towards the future.