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Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

8th International Parliamentarians' Conference on the
Implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action

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Dear Natalia Kanem – The Executive Director of UNFPA,
Honorable parliamentarians,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to address this distinguished gathering on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the global organization of national parliaments. I wish to congratulate the Norwegian Parliament, UNFPA, the Norwegian All-Party Parliamentary Group on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, and the Global Parliamentary Alliance for Health, Rights and Development for organizing this very important Conference. I thank you for inviting me. The 148th IPU Assembly, held just two weeks ago with 700 parliamentarians in attendance, is still vivid in my memory. Seeing so many of you here today again reminds me of the power of parliaments and parliamentarians. 46'000 parliamentarians globally can be and must be agents of change and it is through platforms such as this one that they can join forces, exchange, build solidarity, and mobilize political will.

Speaker Gharahkhani and the previous speakers alluded to the fact that we are all witnessing an alarming backlash against women's rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights, threatening the hard-won progress achieved over decades of advocacy and struggle. This disturbing trend is regressing fundamental areas of human and women's rights, with far-reaching consequences for society as a whole. When women are denied control over their bodies and reproductive choices, they are stripped of their autonomy and dignity. This not only perpetuates gender inequality but also undermines efforts to achieve sustainable development and social justice. We cannot afford to be complacent.

I have recently had the pleasure and honour to serve as member of the High-Level Global Commission on the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25, and in that capacity I have worked with fellow Commissioners to put forward a justice framework for SRHR. This framework recognizes the many factors that combine to create unique situations of vulnerability, marginalization and discrimination. In a world that is increasingly polarized and witnessing increasing levels of intolerance and restrictions to rights and freedoms, the call for justice is a call for dignity, human rights and well-being. Tackling multiple forms of discrimination and barriers to rights can expedite progress across the ICPD agenda and the SDGs – which we know are badly off-track. SRHR justice is an avenue to mobilize collective action and keep ambition on track.

As you know, law can be a powerful instrument. We have seen France becoming the first country to include the right to abortion in its Constitution, while other countries such as Colombia, Benin, the Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone have been taking steps to broaden access to abortion care.

However, legislation is also subject to power and political dynamics, and hard-won rights are sometimes withdrawn without considering the significant impact on people's lives and well-being. The IPU has expended considerable effort in supporting parliamentary engagement to eliminate harmful practices, protect women's rights and address barriers to access to health. And we are fully aware that, beyond legislation, SRHR remains a sensitive subject that requires political courage, continuous hard work on the part of all those involved in implementation of protective legislation, and adequate time for changes in attitude to take root and become widespread.

With that in mind, allow me to take a moment to hereby appeal to the Gambian Parliament to not repeal the ban on Female Genital Mutilation. This would be a major step backward for women, their health and rights.

A couple of years ago, an IPU-supported workshop in Rwanda identified legal barriers, including age of consent, preventing adolescents from accessing reproductive health services. A legislative proposal lowering the age of consent formulated as a result of the workshop was not adopted by the Parliament, but further consultations are underway. Building on the Minister of Culture and Education, Ms Jaffery's words, I will also mention that at the 146th IPU Assembly last year, the IPU also provided a platform to discuss comprehensive sexuality education, where promising examples such as the sexuality education law in Argentina were presented. It is important to continue opening these spaces for dialogue and exchange. We need to continue advocacy and outreach efforts to challenge harmful stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes that perpetuate the marginalization of women and girls. By fostering dialogue and raising awareness, we can change hearts and minds and create a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

The IPU Advisory Group on Health, who spearheads IPU's health work, is addressing these issues head-on, and will conduct a series of awareness raising and outreach activities to address the political space for SRHR. The Group and the IPU are committed to engage with parliamentarians and to increase efforts to communicate on SRHR with the support of our partners, including UNFPA, and the World Health Organization. We will be reaching parliamentarians in new ways, such as through a podcast series, to make the voices of SRHR champions and experts heard.

I hope that over these three days you will be re-energized to accelerate progress on the ICPD agenda. You are not powerless – on the contrary: you can make a difference in changing laws, behaviours and perceptions. Echoing Petra Bayer, President of EPF, you hold the budget, and you can hold your governments to account for commitments made. And you can be assured of my personal, and IPU's, continued commitment to support your tireless efforts.