



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY
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**STATEMENT by the Hon. M. Mensah-Williams,
Vice-President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians
Deputy Speaker of the National Council of Namibia**

It is a great honour for me to take the floor on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. I am the Deputy Speaker of the National Council of Namibia and Vice-President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians.

Last week, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women organized a parliamentary meeting on the occasion of the 55th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Before sharing with you the outcome of that event, allow me to say that we began our proceedings with a dialogue session and exchange with Ms. Bachelet, the Executive Director of UN Women. I would like to reiterate our thanks to her for having taken the time to discuss with parliamentarians UN Women's objectives and strategies. We were pleased to hear that parliaments were considered as one of the key actors in the work of UN Women. Allow me to reiterate, Mr. Chairman, the IPU's and its Members' full support for the work of the new women's entity. We look forward to strengthening our cooperation with them.

Now, let me turn to the outcome of the annual parliamentary meeting on the occasion of the CSW. The purpose of this meeting is to ensure that parliamentarians participate in the work of the Commission, that they contribute to its debates and that they learn from the information, exchanges and meetings that take place. The meeting also serves to mobilize parliamentarians with a view to ensuring that they are well-informed and committed to monitoring national follow-up of the decisions that have been taken here.

Our meeting focused on *The role of parliaments in promoting access to and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology*. It was a very interactive and constructive event, with more than 100 MPs from 36 countries participating.

The debates centred on three main issues: education as a prerequisite for girls to access science and technology; how to facilitate women's access to the science and technology labour market; and how information and communication technology (ICT) can support the work of women parliamentarians.

Mr. Chairman, allow me to highlight some of the main outcomes of that meeting:

- The first point that was made was the need to address gender stereotypes as a key cross-cutting issue to support women's education and access to the science and technology labour market. We need to look at the school curricula very closely and weed out images and examples that perpetuate stereotypical roles. We also need to look at the language we use, in particular we members of parliament, and eliminate any sexist and stereotypical expressions. As opinion leaders, we need to make a greater effort to change mentalities. It is important for us to serve as role models for girls, bring about a change of mentality and encourage girls to be ambitious and break through traditionally male bastions, if that is their dream and ambition.
- In terms of education, the one word that kept cropping up was "quality" education. The question is not only to facilitate access to education for girls but also to ensure that the education provided to them is of a high calibre. This, for us parliamentarians, means ensuring free access to primary and if possible secondary education; providing incentives to send girls to school and sufficient funding for schools to deliver quality services for both girls and boys. This is all within our sphere of influence as MPs, in particular as concerns budgets and oversight of executive action. In discussing the education of girls, we also highlighted all of the indirect challenges that can limit their access. The purchase of text books, school uniforms, transport - all of these costs impact on a family's capacities to send their children to school. We should, therefore, look not only at schools themselves but at the environment in which girls evolve.
- The third point was how to facilitate equal access of women to the science and technology labour market. We all know that even when girls graduate with a science diploma, they are less likely to find work in that field. The gap between education and labour market remains very wide. We, as parliamentarians, need to ensure that our countries respect international labour standards, in particular those related to discrimination and equal pay. We also need to be creative and devise incentives to facilitate women's access to science and technology work. Several countries have adopted quotas or affirmative action measures in that area. Although this question is often surrounded by controversy, the situation warrants the consideration of quotas as a possible option. Quotas have made a remarkable difference to women's participation in politics. Last but not least, we should look into developing measures aimed at striking a better balance between work and family life, which are applicable to both men and women. It is important to bring about a change in culture in the labour market.

- The last point concerns the use of ICT to support parliaments and women MPs. Our discussions clearly highlighted how ICT made for better functioning parliaments and facilitated our work as MPs. With regard to women parliamentarians, ICT allows for a level playing field with men; it is a tool that facilitates exchanges and links with our constituents. It enhances accountability and transparency. It also has the potential to increase women's visibility, which is crucial. We did note, however, that not all members of parliament have the same access to ICT and that some women, in particular those in rural areas, still lacked basic access. This remains a concern that we need to address.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me end by highlighting the interest expressed by the many parliamentarians present at our meeting to continue to be involved in the work of the United Nations. They undertook to follow up some of the debates and conclusions held during our meeting in their respective countries. We are convinced that if each of us plays our part, significant progress can be achieved.

Thank you.

