



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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T +41 22 919 41 50
F +41 22 919 41 60
E postbox@ipu.org
www.ipu.org

Chemin du Pommier 5
Case postale 330
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Geneva – Switzerland

Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

Workshop on health: Can parliaments tip the balance for sexual and reproductive health and rights?

Geneva, 15 October 2024

Honourable members of parliaments,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this important workshop on sexual and reproductive health and rights. These are fundamental to health, well-being and human rights – but they are also deeply personal, remaining a taboo topic for many people. They have also become increasingly polarizing in the media, social and political spheres. In the past years we have been witnessing a structured and organized pushback on SRHR and women's rights.

The IPU Advisory Group on Health has been spearheading IPU's work in this area. This year, the Group further strengthened its focus on vulnerable and marginalized groups in SRHR. We have to recognise the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and vulnerability that still prevent too many individuals from accessing SRHR. However, the definition of these groups is also political. The recognition of some groups may overshadow other vulnerable and marginalised groups, and the politics of the day may determine which populations' needs are ultimately addressed.

I am very pleased that we are organizing today's workshop with our long-standing partners of the World Health Organization and the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, testifying to our joint efforts to provide a space for dialogue and for building an inclusive SRHR agenda.

Together, we are promoting human rights-based approaches and encouraging the creation of an evidence-based culture, so that parliaments can be effective agents of change for women and girls. Let me highlight the example of The Gambia, where the Parliament recently voted to uphold the national ban on Female Genital Mutilation. Prior to the vote, the IPU and other partners supported the participation of Gambian parliamentarians in a study tour in Egypt to understand strategies and legislative frameworks against FGM. The Gambia's decision underscores the importance of political will in upholding women's rights, but also the necessity of sustained vigilance to prevent regression on these critical issues.

While these successes are encouraging, we cannot overlook that the pushback on women's rights and gender equality is also a threat to democracy. We are witnessing not only attacks on SRHR but also backsliding in women's representation in many countries across the world.

Strengthening women's voices within and outside of parliament can create a space that is conducive to women's rights-affirming legislation and action. We want to achieve gender parity in numbers but also a wider cultural and structural change. We must create environments where women can lead with influence and purpose, and where feminist perspectives are valued in shaping national policies.

I am therefore pleased that this is the first of two important panels dedicated to these issues during this IPU Assembly. Tomorrow, the Parity Debate will discuss how men and women parliamentarians can preserve and advance gender equality. I invite you to use both these avenues to engage in a constructive dialogue, share your commitment and inspire your peers.

I call on all of us to join forces to protect the gains we have made on SRHR and women's rights and ensure that the promise of health for all is achieved. Thank you.