



Inter-Parliamentary Union  
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T +41 22 919 41 50  
F +41 22 919 41 60  
E [postbox@ipu.org](mailto:postbox@ipu.org)  
[www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)

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

## Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

On the occasion of being announced as an Honoree at the Vital Voices Solidarity Awards

New York, 9 December 2024

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, fellow guests,

I stand before you here today, in all humility to accept the distinguished and prestigious award being bestowed on me by Vital Voices. I say humility, because there are many people – many institutions and entities – out there doing amazing work when it comes to protecting and promoting the rights of women. So, I consider myself privileged to have been chosen to be recognized for the work that I do in raising gender equality to the highest level of political commitments.

My thanks go to Vital Voices for deciding to honour me in this way, alongside such a distinguished cohort of fellow honorees, whom I would also like to congratulate warmly. I admire your efforts in robustly calling out injustice and fighting so hard to fix it. I am deeply proud to belong to your community.

Let me offer my warmest thanks to our hosts for tonight, Diane von Furstenberg and her spouse Barry Diller, for displaying their commitment to global gender equality.

Let me also express my thanks and appreciation to my very good friend Dr. Natalia Kanem, Executive Director of the UN Population Fund. Natalia, I know you have just arrived from a long and exhausting journey. You have made the effort to be here tonight to hand over this award to me. I deeply appreciate it, as I do the very valuable work we do together to protect women and their rights across the globe.

As I stand before you here today, let me give a shout out to my parents, Joseph and Regina Chungong. My father passed on several years ago. My mother had been scheduled to be with us tonight, but because of some unforeseen circumstances, she cannot be here. But I want to pay tribute to them for bringing me up in a very gender-equal home.

I come from Cameroon, and I spent my childhood in a community that was conservative to the core. At the time, gender equality was not something that was very prevalent. Indeed, we were made to understand that girls and women were to be seen but not heard. There were communities in Cameroon that also espoused the false belief among women that violence against them by their partners was a sign of love. At our very tender age we would look at each other in bemusement and we would make a mockery of people from such communities. How could we fathom that inflicting physical hurt and pain on someone, especially a spouse, could be a sign of love?

But my parents brought us up to feel that boys and girls were equal in every way. In a way, I grew up on an island of Gender Equality in a Sea of inequalities of all sorts. This strengthened my resolve to contribute my quota to global efforts for a more gender-balanced and equitable world.

We grew up in a home where boys and girls were required to do the same household chores. It is true that the boys invariably had blue toys, and toy guns for Christmas, and the girls would have baby dolls, pink preferably, with a little comb in tow. At the end of the day, however, we were given the same opportunities. We went to the same schools, and we were all given the same opportunities. So this, in a way, fashioned my own outlook when it comes to gender equality.

I stand here today because I believe strongly that the vulnerable in society need protection, and that women and girls in particular should be given the chance to thrive in and contribute to society.

I think of what the IPU recently did in the Gambia, where we successfully stymied efforts to overturn the ban on female genital mutilation. You cannot fathom how elated I was when the Parliament threw out the bill to do this. In this way, we were able to save thousands, if not millions, of girls from the horrible and inhumane act of cutting, with all the health and other consequences.

Currently, we are engaged in a dialogue with the Iraqi parliament, where there is a bill to lower the age of consent, which opens up the possibility of girls being sent off to marry from as young as nine years of age. I hope that we can prevail on the Iraqi parliamentary authorities to do something to protect the integrity – physical, psychological and otherwise – of these young members of society.

Also, let me use this opportunity to pay special tribute to all those women politicians around the world who are victims of violence simply on account of having dared to venture into the male-dominated world of politics. I am thinking of those 84% of women parliamentarians globally who have reported having been victims of psychological violence, physical violence, sexual assault, sexism, you name it.

We cannot stand by and ignore such practices, as they go against the core values of human rights, of the right of women to live in dignity and good health, and of their right, especially, to participate in the governance of their societies.

So, I want to call out all those perpetrators of violence against women in politics. We must continue to do our level best to stem the tide and to bring those perpetrators to justice and make sure that they can no longer act with impunity. That is why I am dedicated to the work we do in the International Gender Champions, whose Global Board I am honoured to chair. As global leaders, we are committed, each in our own sphere of influence, to move the gender equality needle. I am glad that among prominent world leaders such as UN Secretary General Guterres and you Natalia, we can also now count as our newest Champion, my fellow countryman, Philemon Yang, President of the 79th session of the UN General Assembly.

I wish to conclude by reiterating my profound thanks to Vital Voices. Thank you, Alyse, for believing in me. I thank Vital Voices for recognizing the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which I have the privilege of serving and leading. I thank the IPU for giving me the opportunity to serve humanity. The award tonight is an added stimulus for me to continue to ensure that this global organization of parliaments remains a preeminent platform for articulating human rights, especially gender equality, in accordance with the wishes of our founding fathers in 1889. We will also remain steadfast in our commitment to fight gender-based violence in all its manifestations.

With allies such as Vital Voices, we will surely make a difference.

I have a special thought for my dear friend Amanda Ellis, former Ambassador of New Zealand in Geneva, who has over the past few years supported me and the IPU, not only in promoting gender equality, but increasingly on climate-related issues. Thank you, Amanda.

I, of course, want to pay special tribute to my family, and my dear wife, Stella Chungong, who is present here with me tonight. Over the course of our close to 40 years of marriage, she has been my staunch ally in the noble cause of fighting for women's equal rights. I thank her for her support, and I hope that we can continue to be supportive of each other as we work together in support of people who are more vulnerable than ourselves.

I am deeply indebted to her, as I am to the other members of my family who are here tonight with us to celebrate this moment: Bonie, alias Pa Joe, the heir of the patriarch of our family, Antonia, Belinda, my siblings who can testify to what I have said tonight. Then, we have the younger generation; Aku,

Atabong and Tyra, who I would characterize as the fruits of gender equality and whom, I am sure, are taking on the baton. And of course, there are the others who are watching this ceremony intently from afar, our daughters Manka and Cindy and our sons Martin and Sam back in Geneva. And how could I forget the mother of my wonderful grandsons Theo and Darius. Claire-Lynne, alias Mami Theo, I love you all.