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

IPU Global Conference of Women Parliamentarians  
From Mexico to the world: Let's mobilize for gender parity!  
Strategies to engage men to advance gender equality

Mexico City, 15 March 2025

Honourable Parliamentarians, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour to stand before you this morning to kick off a discussion on something that is very crucial to the cause that we are all pursuing, and that is gender equality. How can men, especially male leaders, contribute to the global campaign to achieve gender equality and ensure the rights of men and women in equal measure?

I wish to thank our Mexican hosts for their wonderful hospitality and let me put in a special word of thanks and gratitude to Senator Cynthia López Castro. I want to pay tribute to her for her tireless efforts to bring this conference to Mexico, but also to ensure that it actually takes place.

I stand before this audience today, not only as Secretary General of the IPU, but more importantly, as a man who is concerned and distraught over the backlash that we are witnessing across the world against the rights of women—our common shared rights. As I address you, I want to go back to my own childhood. I grew up in then very conservative Cameroon, and I had the good fortune of growing up in a family that I would say was very progressive, very much ahead of its time. My parents made no distinction between boys and girls; all children were entitled to the same privileges and rights, went to the same schools, did the same home chores, and we did not see any difference amongst us as children. I think this is something that shaped my outlook on life when it came to promoting gender equality. At that young age, I was able to witness examples of inclusivity, respect, and equality in our own family circles.

Not so if I look at what is happening today. We see many young boys and girls not having that opportunity early on in life. They are so captured by everything else going on that they fail to discover the world through an empowering, gender-sensitive lens, and they do not think that this is very appealing to them. So, we cannot leave the promotion of gender equality in the hands of young people just as a matter of luck—we have to work strongly for it.

My work in the Parliament of Cameroon gave me a front-row seat to the realities of inequality, not as an abstract concept but as a tangible force that robs societies of progress. This came as a rude shock to me, having grown up in a gender-equal family environment. I have seen what inequality means in terms of lost opportunities when a woman is denied education, and I want to thank the Honourable Speaker of the Senate of Côte d'Ivoire for spearheading the campaign for health education in Côte d'Ivoire. I think it is very important. I have also seen evidence of a leader being silenced because of her gender, when entire communities operate under unspeakable truths that no one dares to bring to light, let alone solve—such as violence and the damage it causes to people's lives.

These experiences have shaped my ambition and commitment to drive change when it comes to gender equality. This is why I firmly believe that gender equality is not a women's issue—it is a human rights issue, and it demands the commitment of all, especially men in leadership.

It is not a battle of the sexes. It is about justice, as several speakers emphasised yesterday during the discussions at this conference, it is about ensuring that the next generation—our sons and daughters, our grandchildren—grow up in a world where they are not confined by outdated roles or prejudices.

That is why I believe that the youth of today—I look at Dan Carden, the President of the Forum of Young Parliamentarians in the IPU—hold the key to true transformation. Young people are vocal, fearless, and driven by a sense of justice that challenges long-standing inequalities. Across the world, we see young men and women standing together, demanding policies that foster inclusion and representation.

The next generation of leaders must be nurtured to champion the cause of gender equality—not as an optional commitment, but as an essential cornerstone of democratic governance. But how do we prepare them to spark a fire within the necessary conditions? We must ask ourselves: what kind of environment are we creating for men to engage in gender equality? Too often, we demand their involvement while failing to dismantle the very structures that discourage it.

Divisive language that pits men and women against each other. Education systems that neglect to teach respect and equality. Patriarchal norms that dictate rigid gender roles, and institutions that support those norms through impunity and the glorification of power. These are the obstacles we must confront. If we expect young men to grow into advocates for gender equality, we must challenge the outdated narratives of masculinity and cultivate an environment where empathy, inclusion, and justice are celebrated rather than undermined.

When young men see gender equality as a shared responsibility, we will have taken a significant step towards lasting transformation. Only then can we expect sustainable change. Next to youth, we also have immense responsibility. We need to dismantle the stereotype of the patriarchal male leader and transform it into a model of leadership that works for equality.

Looking back on my own career, I can tell you that nothing is enough. It is the extra mile that brings results, and as male leaders, we have many extra miles to go. This is my call to men to unite. Those men that are in this room—I am glad to see many of them here—but also those out there in the world. I call on them to unite in the conviction that we need to do more for the cause of equality because it concerns us too. This is also why I have put so much energy and determination into initiatives that build upon conviction rather than gender lines.

The International Gender Champions, a global network of leaders committed to breaking down gender equality barriers, is a testament to what bringing together male and female leadership can achieve. Having the honour to serve as the Chair of the International Gender Champions, I learn every day that for progress to accelerate, gender equality needs to be an issue championed by both men and women, girls and boys all over the world.

The International Gender Champions now connects 326 champions globally, including the UN Secretary-General himself and the President of the General Assembly. These champions are bound not merely by words but by concrete commitments to bring transformational change within their organizations, setting an example for equality and non-violence and sending a powerful message.

I point out that the network is driven by two core pledges. The gender parity pledge means that when any of the Champions is invited to a panel or is organizing a panel or meeting, if there are not equal numbers of men and women on the panels, they are entitled and mandated to say no to those panels. That is what my office does when I am invited to events. The first thing they ask is, how many men and women are going to be there? This sends a strong message that gender inequality at the table cannot be condoned.

The second core pledge is to fight against gender-based violence. This is something we have seen wreaking havoc in our societies, and we are committed to fighting it today by joining global efforts. Our engagement does not end there. As leaders, we need to define a common approach towards equality and commit to an action plan. We must pledge to a road map towards equal pay—I believe reference has been made to the Equal Pay International Coalition campaign, which works in the direction of promoting equal pay for equal work. The same applies to sexual and reproductive health and rights. We need to defend achievements, redouble our efforts, and draw inspiration from victories.

Last year, for instance, the ban on female genital mutilation was defended against attempts to reverse it in The Gambia. The IPU was at the forefront of this effort, mobilising resources and energy within our realms. We want to make sure that these examples of good practice can be emulated, and they are a testament to the fact that when men and women leaders work together with conviction, we can achieve hard-won gains and build upon them. I therefore embrace every opportunity where, as a man, I can contribute to moving the gender equality needle. We have many such examples, such as the Vital Voices Solidarity Council I sit on, a unique endeavour bringing together men who are allies in the fight to raise global awareness on behalf of women and girls around the world.

I would also like to doff my hat to those outstanding male parliamentarians in countries such as Rwanda and Uganda who are joining the women's parliamentary caucuses to articulate gender equality and help transform parliament into an ever more gender-equal, gender-sensitive institution.

As I conclude my address, I want to bring to your attention something that has taken on disquieting proportions in the last few weeks—the situation of the global effort to fight HIV/AIDS. We have witnessed over the past several days, a cessation or a squeeze on funding for HIV efforts worldwide. This has the potential to cost millions of lives and undo progress that has been made in fighting HIV/AIDS. Today, we know that HIV/AIDS claims one life per minute across the world. This is likely to worsen if the funding gap that has been created is not addressed appropriately. Yet, we know that this is a scourge that is preventable and treatable, but we still have 9.2 million people living with HIV/AIDS without proper access to treatment. This matter is going to worsen as a result of the funding squeeze. I want to use this opportunity to launch a clarion call to you, as parliamentary leaders, to bring to bear your influence as legislators and ensure that the necessary resources required to alleviate the scourge of HIV/AIDS across the continent are allocated in our budget and mobilised in different ways, so that we can provide access to those who truly need it. This is a call I wish to make through you and to the rest of the global parliamentary community.

Let me now call on every man in this room and beyond to listen to my call. Do not wait to be invited to fight for gender equality. Step into it with resolve. Engage in initiatives, engage in dialogue, and engage in cooperation. If conditions do not exist in your constituency, create those conditions. Co-sponsor efforts with women and other men. Support grassroots movements. Mentor young women and men alike to become gender equality champions, and above all, never let inequalities, discrimination, negative social norms, and stereotypes go unchallenged. Speak out and combat them, wherever and whenever you see them. Silence is not neutrality; it is complicity.

I encourage all of you to take these discussions beyond this conference. Let us commit to action. Let us move from words to action. The future is in our hands, and the legacy we leave behind will be measured by our ability to create a world where gender equality and gender parity are no longer goals but realities.

Thank you very much.