



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

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Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

Capacity-building workshop for MPs to advance women's political participation in Bhutan

16 March 2026

Mr. Chairperson of the National Council,
Mr. Speaker of the National Assembly,
Esteemed Members of Parliament,
Dear Secretaries General of the National Council and National Assembly,
Dear participants,

It is a real pleasure to share this message with you as you convene to discuss how to advance women's political participation.

Supporting our Member Parliaments and fostering dialogue are at the very core of the mission of the IPU. This is why we are pleased to accompany the Parliament of Bhutan in its efforts towards building a more inclusive institution. As you aim to chart a way forward, rest assured that our support will both be grounded on international standards and tailored to Bhutan's national context.

Today's discussion is part of that wider journey. Its value lies precisely in creating a space to listen, to reflect together, and to explore what can help strengthen inclusive representation in parliament.

Because when we speak about equal representation in parliament, we are speaking about the quality of democracy itself. Gender parity is, of course, a matter of rights and fairness. But it is also the smart path to follow. Institutions are stronger when they bring together the experience, perspectives and leadership of the whole of society.

At the same time, this is an area in which all countries are still learning. No country has yet achieved full equality. Everywhere, progress has come through leadership, reflection, commitment and practical action. That is why exercises such as this one are so important.

There are, however, encouraging signs. In 2025, Asia recorded the highest regional increase in women's representation in parliament. This is worth recognizing and celebrating. It reminds us that progress is possible, and that change can happen in different ways and in different contexts.

As we reflect on the way forward, it is also important to look not only at outcomes, but also at obstacles. If we want to make progress, we need to understand what barriers continue to limit women's entry into political life, their full participation once elected, and their ability to remain and lead. These barriers are often structural. And some take the form of discrimination, harassment and violence.

Here too, evidence matters. The IPU's recent study in the Asia-Pacific region found that 76% of women MPs interviewed said they had experienced psychological violence during their parliamentary term. This is an important reminder that increasing women's representation is not only about opening doors. It is also about ensuring that the environment inside politics allows women to participate fully and safely.

This is why the international conversation is increasingly focused not only on principles, but also on practical steps. In 2025, the IPU adopted a Plan of Action for Gender Parity in Parliament. This is now part of the IPU acquis, and it offers a practical framework for thinking about progress: parity in numbers, certainly, but also parity in influence, in leadership, and in parliamentary culture.

The same spirit is reflected in guidance from the CEDAW Committee. As you know, CEDAW is a binding treaty ratified by most countries, including Bhutan. Its General Recommendation No. 40 on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems, developed in partnership with the IPU, highlights that women's equal representation is not a secondary issue. It lies at the heart of the protection of human rights.

And that brings me to one final thought.

Gender equality is not just a women's issue. It is a societal issue, at the heart of democracy and human development. That is why progress depends on partnership. It depends on dialogue across political lines. And it depends very much on the engagement of men. Our role is essential in helping create the conditions for change.

This conviction is also rooted in my own life. I had the good fortune of being raised in a feminist environment. From an early age, I came to see equality not as something that divides us, but as something that allows societies to draw on the full contribution of all their people.

I hope this workshop will offer exactly that kind of space: a space for open discussion, practical reflection and shared responsibility; a space to consider what barriers remain, what can be done to address them, and how to continue strengthening a parliament that fully reflects the society it serves.

Please rest assured that the IPU will remain by your side in this effort.

I wish you a fruitful and forward-looking workshop.