



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 Dr. Tulia Ackson, IPU President

IPU-UNW Parliamentary Meeting of occasion of the 70th Session of the Commission
on the Status of Women – Opening ceremony

New York, 11 March 2026

Madam Deputy Executive Director of UN Women
Madam President of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians,
Distinguished colleagues and guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to open this year's Parliamentary Meeting on the occasion of the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

I am honoured to be here with all of you, alongside UN Women, a key partner of the IPU, with whom we share the common objective of advancing women's empowerment and gender equality.

Madam Deputy Executive Director, I wish to thank you for this collaboration. It is a great pleasure to have you with us today.

Distinguished participants and guests, welcome.

It is encouraging to see such strong participation from our global community of parliamentarians, coming together to amplify the voice of parliaments in the discussions of this CSW.

Our meeting takes place at a moment of profound global uncertainty. Armed conflicts are multiplying, and with them come displacement, fear, deprivation and violence affecting millions. In this context, I would like to use this moment to express our deepest solidarity with all those who are suffering.

At times like these, the role of our organization becomes even more vital. The spaces we create for dialogue help ensure that communication remains open when divisions deepen. They help keep alive the possibility of understanding, cooperation and, ultimately, peace.

This was the very purpose for which our organization was founded in 1889: to foster dialogue among parliamentarians and help prevent conflict through cooperation. Today, more than ever, that mission remains essential.

In many places, inequalities are deepening, institutions are under strain, and hard-won gains are being contested. Your presence here is a sign of commitment, and it matters.

It matters because the themes before us go to the heart of democratic legitimacy. Access to justice for women and girls, and women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, free from violence, are not separate agendas. They are deeply interconnected.

When women are denied justice and excluded from public decision-making, democracies fall short of their promise. Laws and institutions cannot be fair, credible or effective when half of humanity is silenced or pushed out of the spaces where decisions are made.

Inequality in law stands at the crossroads of the social contract itself. It shapes who is protected, who is heard, who can claim rights, and who remains invisible. Today, no country has fully closed its legal gaps. Women still have only 64 per cent of the legal rights of men. In many parts of the world, legal frameworks continue to disadvantage women and girls directly or indirectly in matters that determine dignity, security and opportunity: nationality, inheritance, marriage, divorce, custody, property and access to finance.

Their impact is profound. When a woman cannot inherit on equal terms, cannot pass her nationality to her children, or cannot secure fair rights in marriage and divorce, the consequences are not only legal. They are social and economic. They can lock women and their families into a vicious circle of risk, dependence, violence and poverty.

Too often, rights are recognized in principle, then narrowed in practice. Even where legal protections exist, they depend on the institutions that apply the law, the resources available to enforce it, and the norms and attitudes that shape how women are treated when they seek justice.

As parliamentarians, we know very well that the challenge is not only discriminatory laws. It is also the space around the law: the norms, attitudes, power relations and institutional habits that determine whether a woman is believed, whether a complaint is registered, whether a case moves, and whether protection arrives in time. In many cases, the policies and institutions needed to make rights real for women remain far too weak or are simply not in place.

That is why women's rights can be challenged even where formal protections exist. A law may promise equality, but family pressure, stigma or fear may prevent reporting. A remedy may exist, but transport costs, legal fees, lost wages, care responsibilities or language barriers can make it unreachable. A protection order may be available, but if institutions are slow, fragmented or biased, the promise of justice becomes another delay.

And too often, patriarchy hides in plain sight. It appears in the assumption that women should remain silent, that leadership is naturally male, or that "tradition" must prevail over rights. The gap between law and practice is therefore not merely a technical gap. It is a political and institutional gap, and, very often, a power gap.

We see this clearly in harmful practices such as female genital mutilation. Even where laws prohibit them, enforcement is often constrained when such practices continue to be supported or are shielded by silence, stigma or pressure within communities and families. The lesson is clear: legal reform is essential, but it must be matched by institutional capacity, political will and sustained efforts to transform norms.

This brings me to the role of parliaments.

Parliaments are uniquely placed to close the distance between formal and substantive equality. We are not only lawmakers; we are institutions of representation, oversight and accountability. We can see where rights exist on paper but fail in practice. We see where implementation does not reach women and girls. And through legislation, oversight, gender-responsive budgeting, monitoring and accountability, we

can act while also confronting the institutional tolerance of discrimination and violence within our parliamentary structures.

This is why women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, and the elimination of violence, are not only goals in themselves. They are conditions for justice.

When women are deliberately excluded from political life, the institutions that shape law and justice become less representative, less responsive and less trusted. They are more likely to reproduce blind spots, and unable to correct injustice. Exclusion is not only a consequence of inequality; it is one of the ways inequality is sustained.

That is the central point before us today: we cannot close justice gaps without changing who is present, who is heard, and who holds power in the institutions that make, interpret and apply the law.

To do that, we must invest in transforming our parliaments into gender-sensitive institutions. And we must be guided by aiming at parity in representation, not as a symbolic aspiration, but as a democratic standard.

This means not only more women in parliamentary chambers, but more women in leadership, in committees, in negotiating tables, and across the board. It means creating environments in which women can participate fully, safely and effectively, free from violence, intimidation and exclusion. And it means ensuring that women from all backgrounds are not simply present, but heard, respected and able to shape outcomes.

This lies at the core of the Plan of Action on Gender Parity in Parliaments, adopted at the Global Conference of Women Parliamentarians in Mexico a year ago. Endorsed by the IPU Governing Council, the plan now serves as a guiding framework for our work and deliberations.

Dear colleagues,

This is the work before us today. It is urgent, and it is achievable if we act together with clarity, courage and persistence.

Let us use this meeting to strengthen our resolve and turn that commitment into action.

I look forward to our discussions.