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Chemin du Pommier 5
Case postale 330
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Geneva – Switzerland
www.ipu.org

Keynote address

Mr. Martin Chungong
Secretary General

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I am extremely gratified to be here today on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union – the global organization of national parliaments. I am so pleased to see so many of you here today. This substantial attendance bears testimony to the important agenda that is being addressed here in Nairobi during these days.

Much has been said about the 25 years since the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). But let us not forget that this year is also the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). I would like to congratulate our partner organization on this auspicious occasion and wish it more success as it promotes the noble goal of protecting and securing women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

I would add, if you would allow me, that the IPU is also celebrating its 130 years of existence, making it the oldest multilateral political organization in the world. The IPU continues to be an open forum for parliamentary dialogue and diplomacy to resolve differences and help build bridges between nations.

I would therefore like to thank the European Parliamentary Forum for convening this parliamentary gathering. Parliaments and parliamentarians must be at the table when matters of global import are being discussed and decided upon. Cooperation and exchanges among parliamentarians are instrumental in building commitment and promoting more effective parliamentary action for the health and well-being of the people.

Anniversaries give us the opportunity to do some profound soul-searching. We use the opportunity to look back and appreciate the long way we have come. Indeed, since the establishment of UNFPA and the first ICPD conference, substantial progress has been achieved worldwide, with lower rates of maternal mortality, declining adolescent births, and higher rates of contraceptive prevalence, to cite a few examples.

But anniversaries are also made to look ahead. The future right now is just a vision: a world in which reproductive health and rights can truly be enjoyed by everyone; where all women and girls are empowered to make choices about their health and development; where they will no longer die or suffer from preventable causes during pregnancy or delivery. Unfortunately, our current reality is still very far from that vision.

As I speak, I am reminded of some sobering figures published by *The Lancet*, which indicate that the chances of a woman dying from childbirth are about one in 4,900 in high-income countries while for women in sub-Saharan Africa the figure is one in 36.

This is shocking and totally unacceptable.

The only way we can tackle unjust disparities such as this is through promoting sexual and reproductive rights and delivering on the ICPD Agenda.

This is why anniversaries are a unique opportunity to look at the present time, so that we can recommit to a vision – and so that we can see what it will take to achieve it. That vision is to have a world wherein the full range of women’s rights is respected, including their right to have full control of their bodies and access to a full gamut of sexual and reproductive health services that ensure a decent life for them and contribute to their empowerment, which is beneficial to society as a whole.

Indeed, guaranteeing a woman’s sexual and reproductive health and rights can not only save her life, but also provide the basis for her empowerment. Empowering women to pursue a good education leads to more skilled people for the workforce, which, in turn, generates economic growth. Women spend 90 per cent of their income on their families in purchasing things like food and medicine. They also spend it on education for their children. Educated women are twice as likely to send their children to school compared to mothers who have not received an education.

But in order for the world to reap these benefits, women must have control over their own bodies and lives.

A young woman’s ability to attend formal education and secure quality employment will be impeded unless she has the power to decide the number of children she has, at what stage in life she has them and the spacing between her pregnancies. She must be able to choose freely whom she marries – no girl should be forced into a marriage that deprives her of her human rights.

And, as another study from *The Lancet* points out, countries where good contraceptives are easily accessible have lower rates of abortion. It also showed clearly that laws that criminalize abortion do not reduce the number of abortions; it only makes them dangerous for women.

Having full and easy access to family planning supplies and services and laws that protect and empower women to lead autonomous, healthy lives is therefore essential.

That vision challenges parliaments and parliamentarians worldwide to step up efforts, using their constitutionally ordained powers, to make a difference. That vision requires renewed political commitment that is within the realm of the possible for parliaments and parliamentarians.

I am proud today to say that the global parliamentary community has heard that clarion call.

Only a few weeks ago, the IPU adopted [a resolution on universal health coverage](#) (UHC) and the right to health. This landmark resolution provides a roadmap for parliaments to accelerate progress towards UHC. Fulfilling the promise of UHC has the potential to have a real impact on the lives of people, in particular women, adolescents and children.

I am heartened by the strong emphasis this resolution lays on parliaments’ resolve to strengthen sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn and adolescent health services, including by providing information on and access to modern methods of family planning.

The resolution also urges parliaments to respond to the specific health needs of women and girls, and recognizes the importance of protecting sexual and reproductive health and rights through a multisectoral approach that tackles the gender determinants of health.

The resolution urges parliaments to put in place effective UHC legislation to ensure that the right to public health and medical care is guaranteed for all in law and in practice, without discrimination. It also calls on parliaments to remove legal barriers preventing access to health services.

As we know, the law can sometimes stand in the way of access to health services, as criminalization leads to stigmatization, discrimination and even violence. We need evidence and information to empower parliamentarians to legislate for groups that are most disadvantaged and confront the laws that criminalize them. The full realization of health as a human right will not otherwise be possible.

The resolution also calls on parliaments to allocate adequate domestic resources for the progressive realization of UHC through sustainable health financing.

Indeed, for the realization of our vision, not only must the global and national commitment to health translate into resources for the implementation of laws, plans and strategies, but these resources must prioritize the needs and rights of women and girls, and specifically target those who are furthest behind. Health, reproductive rights and women's empowerment are intertwined, and our budgets must reflect that.

And, of course, the resolution calls on parliaments to use all their power to hold their respective national governments accountable and monitor the impact of UHC policies and programmes.

Effective oversight must be guided by the principles of equity and human rights to encourage effective corrective action. It must therefore focus especially on the remaining barriers that keep preventing women, girls and other groups from accessing the health services they need, including sexual and reproductive health services.

There is no gainsaying that efforts to achieve the ICPD agenda should be fully embedded in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agenda. Engaging with SDG implementation provides an important opportunity for parliamentarians to demonstrate political leadership in support of this groundbreaking global agenda.

It is their duty to the people they represent. It is in their hands and mandate to help ensure that SDG implementation most efficiently directs resources to ensuring achievement of the SDGs, with particular attention paid to making sure that the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society are not left behind.

Whether your government is a donor or a recipient of development assistance, the decisions it takes in prioritizing and directing spending to women's sexual and reproductive health and rights stand to affect huge numbers of people.

As representatives of your electorate, you can make the voice of citizens heard and define the fiscal and budgetary regimes needed to mobilize the necessary resources.

But parliaments are not alone. All other stakeholders have their role to play. I am therefore extremely pleased to be here today with my friends from UNFPA and the World Health Organization (WHO) – there is no doubt that their engagement and their commitment are putting us on the right path. I look forward to continuing our

cooperation with them and other health partners to support parliaments in achieving our common vision.

Let us therefore celebrate our anniversaries, but only as a way to commit even more strongly to do all that is in our power to realize the world we want for all women and girls and for future generations. You will always find in the IPU a committed partner.