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Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

Asian Women's Forum

“Regional approach in issues of women’s economic, social and political empowerment”

Samarkand, 13 May 2024

Madam Chairwoman of the Senate, Ms. Tanzila Narbaeva,
Madam Executive Director of UN Women, Ms. Sima Sami Bahous,
Madam Director-General of the UN Office at Geneva, Ms. Tatiana Valovaya,
Madam Deputy Prime Minister, Ms. Zulaykho Makhkamova,
Distinguished guests,
Speakers of Parliament, friend, Ms. Sahiba Gafarova,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to deliver these opening remarks next to esteemed partners and friends. I am honoured to be here in Samarkand again on this very timely occasion and I would like to thank the hosts for the invitation and hospitality.

Let me congratulate President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on the great strides this country has made along the path of women’s empowerment. It is encouraging to witness such level of engagement from the global community, gathered here to raise the voice of women and girls. In the IPU, we strongly believe that working together is the only way to effectively tackle our shared challenges. Working together means all hands—male and female—need to be on deck. I salute, therefore, the presence of a host of male participants within this room.

I am pleased that the deliberations of this Forum will serve not only to share common concerns but also to inspire and strengthen our individual and collective commitments as inequality, violence, and discrimination against women and girls continue to threaten democracy, sustainable development, and peace. Worryingly, progress achieved across various fronts is being reversed and women continue to be threatened by widespread sexism and violence and are deprived of quality education, healthcare, social protection, and economic opportunities.

The costs of such discriminations and inequalities are extremely high individually, for women and girls first and foremost, but also for families, communities, nations, and, ultimately, for the whole of humanity. Gender disparities hinder economic development and sustainability and as Sima has said. It has been stated that closing the gender gap could raise global gross domestic product by more than 20% – essentially doubling the global growth rate over the next decade.

The younger generation, with their inherent orientation to sustainability as a vital aim, recognizes that true progress cannot be achieved without meaningfully addressing gender inequalities. Their aspirations extend beyond mere economic gains; they envision a future where sustainability is the cornerstone, built upon the foundation of equality. I cannot agree more with Ms. Tatiana Valovaya, as I am also convinced that sustainability thrives on equality—it’s not just about preserving resources for future generations, but also ensuring that everyone, regardless of gender, has equal access to opportunities, resources, and rights.

Nevertheless, discriminatory laws and practices, such as child marriage, unpaid care work and unequal inheritance rights, deprive women of economic opportunities from a young age, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependence. Patriarchal norms and structures, maintain and reinforce discrimination, limit women’s access to education and employment and block prospects for empowerment. Gender-based violence, an abhorrent phenomenon, is an omnipresent barrier to women’s empowerment.

Models of economic growth that reinforce inequalities further exacerbate gender disparities. Prioritizing market efficiency and profit maximization at the expense of social welfare and equitable development disproportionately affect women and girls already facing systemic barriers to their empowerment.

At the IPU we believe in the centrality of parliaments as representative institutions to drive social change. This is why we came up with the concept of Gender-sensitive parliaments more than a decade ago, calling for institutions to be more representative, better adapted and more efficient in embodying gender equality and in delivering on it for society.

Ahead of our discussions, I am pleased to share 3 main elements of gender-sensitive parliaments which we consider key in creating the conditions for women's empowerment and leadership.

First, parity between men and women in politics should be the norm rather than the exception. Setting a target of 50/50 political representation is the only way to ensure genuine equality in representation. However, IPU's latest data on women in parliament shows that only 27% of parliamentarians today are women. Our data also shows that progress is too slow. It was limited to a mere 0.5 percentage point increase from early 2023 to early 2024. But we know parity is possible. Six parliaments have achieved it. So, we need to draw lessons from these countries, and apply measures that work in this direction sooner rather than later. Quotas are key measures to ensure true equality in parliament.

Second, we need parliaments that are safe and inclusive workplaces. Parliaments have been male dominated for too long. This means that existing formal and informal norms, and the working culture need to change to cater to the needs of men and women alike. This includes adopting family-friendly policies. But also tackling an environment that can be toxic and discriminatory.

Sexism in parliament is an every-day reality. IPU studies have revealed that across the globe more than 80% of women MPs face gender-based psychological violence including intimidation, threats of death, rape, beating or abduction during their parliamentary term. We have launched a regional study on sexism and sexual harassment in parliaments in Asia and the Pacific, which will shed light on the living realities of women MPs in the region. I encourage women parliamentarians and women parliamentary staff from the whole region to take part in this study. It will be the third regional study on this topic, after the ones in Europe and Africa. The previous studies have revealed the prevalence and forms of violence against women in parliaments, but they have also uncovered solutions and good policies and practices. We hope to learn as much from the parliaments in the Asia-Pacific region.

Violence must end now, and our individual and collective commitments are essential in this cause. Crafting and applying zero tolerance policies towards sexism, harassment, and violence against women is an essential component of gender-sensitive parliaments and we need all, men, and women colleagues, united in this cause.

Third, we need to develop dedicated structures and mechanisms in parliament so we can advance gender equality legislation, monitor its implementation, and prioritize gender-responsive budgeting and financing. It is the only way to ensure that resources are allocated equitably, and that women can thrive and uplift their communities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Fora such as this serve as multipliers of our individual capacities. We have a lot to learn, a lot to share and an opportunity to draw inspiration from each other.

I look forward to the deliberations of our debates.

Thank you.