
Remarks by Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, at the 13th Summit of Women Speakers.

17 August 2020

Dr. Andrea Eder-Gitschthaler, President of the Federal Council of Austria,
Doris Bures, Vice-President of the National Council of Austria,
Gabriela Cuevas Barron, President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union
Honourable Speakers and Members of Parliament,
Distinguished guests and participants,

It is my pleasure to join you today.

Thank you to the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Parliament of Austria for organizing this Summit in such challenging circumstances. UN Women truly appreciates the longstanding partnership with the IPU and our regular engagement with the parliamentary community.

25 years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, we can say with certainty that progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls has been made. But it has been slow and uneven. The COVID-19 crisis has only underlined how far we still need to go.

We know that there is no such thing as a gender-neutral pandemic. And that women are affected not just by the virus or the disease, but by the circumstances surrounding it. We have seen how the virus and accompanying mitigation measures, have led to a dramatic increase in a **shadow pandemic** of violence against women. Unfortunately, there are likely to be many other **long-term negative consequences of COVID-19 on women and girls**:

- as women drop out of **school and employment**,
- lose access to medical and **sexual and reproductive services**,
- and do not receive equal **social protection and assistance** as men.

If this pandemic has shown us anything, it is that: we need to continue working hard to create a world where all women and girls enjoy their rights.

Today, I would like to share with you a forward-looking vision of how this journey could look. **First, we need to involve more women in decision-making at all levels.** In many countries, it seems like women cannot get more than 25 per cent of seats or positions in elected office or government. This is insufficient. More women should be at the decision-making table for them to be able to have a significant impact on policies and laws.

So far during the pandemic, the handful of women who lead states and governments have **demonstrated how women in power can effectively respond to crisis.** They have been lauded for their swift action, compassion and science-based decision-making. As in every crisis, women

delivered and showed why more women should be leading. Yet women remain underrepresented in public and political life.

We already know that legislation that advances women's participation through **temporary special measures** can quickly bring more women into parliament, government and boardrooms. This is why in the COVID-19 response we need to ensure that national coordination bodies and emergency response groups include a balanced representation of women.

Second, honorable Speakers, you can drive change by amending, repealing and eliminating discriminatory laws so that we can build a better future for women and girls. Over 2.5 billion women and girls around the world are affected by discriminatory laws and lack of legal protections, often in multiple ways.

Honorable Speakers, you are in positions of power and can contribute to making the change. Today, I urge you to **work to pass legislation that facilitates gender equality**, but also to make sure that any legislation that discriminates against women no longer exists. I urge you to look into your laws and assess how they can better protect and empower women and girls.

Ending **early marriage**, enacting laws that protect women against **gender-based violence and FGM**, and putting in place legislation that allows **equal rights to inheritance, finance, employment and property** for women, may not always seem like immediate priorities – but they are critical to women's empowerment. Addressing these now is also important because **during the pandemic the negative effects of discriminatory laws on women and girls will only be multiplied**. But laws are only as good as the institutions that are mandated to implement them, particularly during a crisis. As parliamentarians you can also **scrutinize institutions and provide oversight** to support them to implement legislation that helps women access their rights and full potential.

Third, we need to build a world where, ultimately, the gender pay gap does not exist. To do so, we need a coordinated, multi-stakeholder and people-centered approach that takes gender equality and women's economic empowerment into account. Even before the pandemic, there was a lifetime of income inequality between women and men. Women make on average only 77 cents for every dollar earned by men. And that gap can further widen based on race and ethnicity.

In addition, women tend to be involved in the service sector and non-essential businesses have been ordered to close due to the crisis. As we face the prospect of a global recession, these existing gender inequalities in the global economy leave women more vulnerable. It is necessary to establish long-term recovery plans with a strong gender lens to reduce this gendered impact and ensure that women are not left further behind in progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.

The key drivers to make this vision a reality are all of you. Parliaments are critical for advancing women's leadership and endorsing the legislation, policies and budgets to serve women and men equally, during the pandemic and beyond. All parliamentarians, both women and men, are well-placed **to advocate for women's voices to be included** in discussions and decision-making. By sharing ideas and good practices in spaces like this one, we can move the wheel for a change we all desire to see.

On this note, I would like to commend IPU's efforts to share information about parliamentary responses to the pandemic and to promote their practices through their new repository. To further support MPs and parliamentary staff in ensuring COVID-19 response and recovery address women's needs, UN Women published [A primer for parliamentary action: Gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19](#). It highlights practical ways in which MPs and parliamentary staff can take action to tackle the crisis.

UN Women stands ready to continue the successful collaboration with the Inter-Parliamentary Union and to support parliaments around the world to make the lives of women and girls better. We are very pleased that the IPU, and in essence all of you, have joined UN Women, the governments of Mexico and France, and civil society, as a [leader of the Beijing +25 Action Coalition](#) on **Women's Leadership and Feminist movements**. Together with other **Action Coalition** leaders in the coming months we will co-design game-changing **Blueprints** of key actions to fast-track the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and gender equality by 2030. We look forward to having an ongoing dialogue with you on the Blueprints, as their implementation will require strong leadership, legislative change, financing and sustained monitoring to measure transformative change.

Challenges, like this pandemic, strengthen our resolve to face adversity and come out braver and more decisive to continue the fight for women's rights and equality around the world. COVID-19 shows us that delaying will only compound the obstacles to gender equality, and that we need more women in power now to have an effective response and to build back better.

Thank you.