Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

All of us here in New York for this particular week of the Commission on the Status of Women know how fundamental gender equality is for democracy.

We know that women are woefully underrepresented in democratic politics, in parliaments, executives, judiciaries, the media and in political parties.

And we know that until this is rectified, until women and men enjoy equality when it comes to political leadership and decision-making, real democracy will not be achieved.

There is also no shortage of international and national commitments to gender equality and women’s political participation. Yet until we move beyond paying lip service to these principles, real progress will remain elusive.

We need to consider creative approaches. We should take a leaf from the book of Liberian 2011 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Leymah Gbowee, who pursued innovative approaches to the inclusion of women in peace-building in her country. Rocking the boat is sometimes the only way to get things done when attitudes are ensnared and discrimination is deeply embedded in cultures.
International IDEA’s work on gender equality and women’s participation in politics is situated in this context. We have identified the way political parties operate as one of the key obstacles to the equal participation of women in democratic politics. Our analysis of 39 countries in Africa and Asia pinpoints exactly where the problems lie:

- Although national frameworks for gender equality might exist, political parties have not incorporated these into their intra-party processes and systems;
- Political parties are very good at making statements about gender equality – but they are sadly lacking in the identification, selection and nomination of female candidates for leadership positions;
- Internal party cultures reflect unwritten rules on male privilege and the use of power as a tool for domination by one gender.

In essence, political parties are failing the electorates of their countries. And these results are not limited to the 39 countries of this study, but would undoubtedly be replicated on a global with remarkable consistency.

So, what is International IDEA doing about this?

- We are working to strengthen the capacity of political parties to have policies and processes which integrate national and international commitments on women’s empowerment
- We are promoting women’s influence within democracy building processes and public decision making
- We are developing knowledge tools and resources to inform the design of national and regional strategies to address the under-representation of women in politics.
In our work in Liberia, Ghana, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Kenya, International IDEA has worked with women’s caucuses in parliaments and with political parties on their internal party processes. In Nepal, we are supporting the women’s caucus of the constituent assembly and across Latin America we are working with increasing the equal participation of women including by taking a critical look at how the media portrays female candidates in elections.

Enormous challenges remain, not least in the Arab world, where women have suffered disproportionately from an autocratic culture at all levels of society. At the same time, that region has several bright spots in terms of women’s participation: in Libya the newly adopted electoral law guarantees women at least 40 out of 200 seats in the constituent assembly that will draft the new constitution for the country. And in Tunisia, women won 27% of seats in the 2011 elections as a result of party quotas – although far from perfect, this was far above the regional average.

Experience from Scandinavia, with which I am personally familiar, has shown that gender equality in politics can come about not because it is a value or principle to which we are attached. But rather because it just makes sense. The need for female participation in the workforce in Scandinavia and the measures set up to facilitate this – such as state-arranged childcare and family-friendly working hours – was a powerful motivator for change. And it is at this intersection between economic policy and politics that political parties, through their programmes, can also play a role in ensuring the equal participation of women.

Conversely, increasing gender equality in political processes can also be an incubator for gender equality in the rest of society.

I look forward to the discussion and to your perspectives on this critical issue.

END