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The Political Commitment towards Food Security and Women's Rights: A Parliamentary Challenge

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Economic Development is the theme of this ParlAmericas 10th Plenary Assembly. Thus, the crucial role played by women in food security within a development plan is essential for the economic and political development of our countries. For this reason, I will focus on **Food Security and Women's Rights: A Parliamentary Challenge**.

According to FAO Gender and Development Plan of Action (2002-2007), "*Sustainable agriculture and rural development and food security cannot be achieved by efforts that ignore or exclude more than half of the rural population,*" i.e., if they exclude women and their rights.

Women are key players in the struggle to achieve food security, since they are often the primary food producers, they are involved in the labour market and, due to the power distribution within the household and historically assigned roles, they are unequally responsible for the nutritional status and general welfare of their families. These tasks can not be successfully performed if women are not part of a society that considers them as subjects of law.

Sharing among us, women parliamentarians, the insight we are developing at the Parliamentary Front against Hunger in Latin America and the Caribbean opens the door for us to create synergies and strategic alliances in the fight against hunger and to realize the human right to food.

The issue of inequality in politics is a consequence of a more serious problem: inequality within society, within families themselves; inequality in culture in general; inequality in terms of attitudes. Hunger is not simply a result of the lack of food. Often, it stems from the lack of income and of adequate education to access healthy and balanced food and, particularly, from the unequal distribution of resources.

This leads us to wonder: What economic model do we wish in place for our legal frameworks and policies against hunger? What is the use of our States? What is the use of our legal frameworks? What is the use of public policies in our countries? Answers must be given in the light of the changes that the world is currently facing, while never losing our determination to regain human dignity, and women's dignity.

This has to be considered from a perspective that recognizes the discrimination and inequality women have suffered for centuries, as well as their roles, contributions and achievements. Only then will we be in a position to speak of common good. Equal rights for all human beings require not only having a written guarantee, but also paying special attention (through appropriate measures) to those subjects of law whose rights are violated the most on account of historical and political —as well as socioeconomic— discrimination.

It should be borne in mind that most women-led households are usually found in the poorest layers of society, where they have little access to productive resources and services, in addition to bearing a heavy, unpaid workload, which prevents them from devoting time to their training and to income-generating activities. This dimension of poverty leads to food insecurity and needs to be seriously taken into account

when it comes to law- and policy-making so that, once and for all, we can break the vicious circle of "hunger-woman-poverty-exclusion."

This situation then requires that legal frameworks in our countries initially acknowledge the right to food and contribute to the development of suitable institutions to eradicate hunger; in turn, these institutions must be conceived taking into consideration the need to guarantee women's rights and equal opportunities. We can only think of food and nutrition security and the environment in the context of that insight; this calls for a clear political commitment that must be accompanied by ethics where common good prevails.

The institutionalization of the fight against hunger involves a series of key steps which we wish to include in the framework of this ParlAmericas 10th Plenary Assembly, since we need coordination and cooperation among the various players, the different levels of government, Congress, women's movements, social organizations, and citizens in general.

It is crucial that we, as women, as parliamentarians, think how we may best become involved in this fight. This calls for a political culture change in our countries, i.e., shifting from a patriarchal political culture, which is currently tinged with patronage and welfare policies, to one which builds citizenship on the basis of equality, where women can play their rightful role as key pieces in the construction of the Rule of Law, and, which builds real citizenship.

That leads us to argue that there are players with whom we, men and women parliamentarians at our individual Congresses, need to coordinate efforts. In Latin America, women account for 20% of parliamentarians, on average. This percentage reflects the degree of women's political participation and it correlates with the results of the fight against hunger and the struggle for women's rights, and for rural women's rights in particular. This struggle should be reflected on this agenda, including our cause for political participation, sexual and reproductive rights, the reproductive role imposed upon us and which must be analyzed in the light of global changes, the insertion of women in the workforce, the balance between work and family life, and the access to factors of production, etc. In conclusion, we should carry out a comprehensive analysis of society on the basis of women as subjects of law, as players and allies to achieve food security and development in our societies.

When we talk about a human rights approach and the right to food, there are principles to be considered, such as **equality or non-discrimination**. We women, who are discriminated against everyday in politics, in political parties, in organizations, in the media, even in our own societies, need to speak up, demand transparency in the decision-making process and make sure our participation in decision making is guaranteed, not as a token of goodwill, but as fundamental rights.

Although in many of our countries most decisions are made by cabinets, not all of them have gender parity and, therefore, some decisions affecting women's rights are mostly made by men. In these cases we have to speak of accountability too. Yet another important principle is **compliance with the Law**. By way of example, out of 124 countries, 115 have legislation in favour of equality in land tenure, but if we look at the enforcement of such legislation, equality does not work as expected, and we come across multiple measures, some of them stemming from customary law (such as cultural or family practices that exist in our territories), which ultimately affect women's right to non-discrimination. This is of particular importance in a region where women are responsible for 8% (Belize) to 30% (Chile) of farms, and where, although they devote most of their time to their children's welfare and household income generation, only 40% of rural women over 15 years of age have their own income (both are recent data from FAO, 2013).

The four challenges we are addressing at the Parliamentary Front against Hunger in Latin America and the Caribbean are the following:

First challenge: Provide inclusive and pluralistic spaces for political dialogue where women can participate and are suitably represented, thus preventing decisions from being made by men parliamentarians alone. Only by analyzing the various players, from civil society to the private sector, can a set of policies be developed which represents society; to this end, it is necessary to build consensus and mobilize all agents towards the materialization of a hunger-free world. This public-private dialogue should involve governments and civil, social and community organizations, as well as first nations, young men and women, and rural wage earners, so that State proposals may be developed.

Second challenge: Sustainability of the regulations included in legal frameworks, which means reviewing and adjusting our countries' budget structure (and sometimes the fiscal structure, too). We need to determine how to adapt general budgets to make room for public policies that will render women, especially those in rural areas, more visible, since currently such issues as land, water, biodiversity, training, technology and decent jobs in most of our countries are rendering them invisible.

Third challenge: Provide a forum for dialogue among the Executive and Ministries, develop oversight processes for Congress itself, and supervise compliance with public policies that incorporate human rights and equal opportunities for men and women in the fight against hunger in order to secure the right to adequate food.

Fourth challenge: Address the above issue, and the current issue of food and nutritional security and sovereignty, using a multisectoral approach that not only deals with food production, but also with access to and availability of food, women's right to health, education, a healthy environment, Social Security, decent jobs, respect and the revival of our cultures.

Moreover, this issue should be a fundamental part of women's cause, our cause, and we should pay particular attention to the situation facing rural women because of the special role they play in the development of our peoples.

Parliamentary women benches are being created in several Latin American Parliaments for us to embrace the cause for women's rights. Against this backdrop, the encouragement of an agenda on food security and women's rights is extremely important for democracy and for the development of our countries.

A fight against hunger with a rights-based approach requires a strong political will and it is up to us to undertake that commitment, a challenge that should involve as many women as possible, so that our nations break the barriers that prevent access to technology, to literacy, as is the case with our country, and others that prevent us from developing and establishing partnerships with key players in our countries and in the entire continent.

We cannot, however, focus only on Latin America; we must also consider the Caribbean, i.e., the Americas as a whole, and also extend our links to other continents, such as Africa, where women are also severely discriminated against.

You are aware that, with the current rate of women's political participation, it would take us years to achieve equal opportunities. The enormous challenge we are facing is to get a firm commitment and political will, not only from each of us and from every woman in the world who fights for and demands her rights, but also from our fellow men, to realize our goal of living in a region where equality in political participation and resource distribution is the foundation for a sustainable and lasting development with a human rights-based perspective.