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Message from Jennifer Simons, President of the Group of Women Parliamentarians

Jennifer Simons is the Speaker of the National Assembly of Suriname and President of the Group of Women Parliamentarians.

On behalf of the Group of Women Parliamentarians, I am delighted to inform you that our Annual Gathering will be held in Mexico City, from June 24 to 25, 2014, thanks to the support of the Senate of Mexico.

The theme of the Gathering, *Moving from Formal to Substantive Equality*, is central to our concerns as legislators advocating for gender-sensitive legislative agendas in our countries.

Formal equality is a fundamental assumption in democratic societies. Its principles have been used to remedy some of the most explicit forms of discrimination against women. Yet formal equality does not recognize difference as a source of disadvantage, and it can be used to dismiss the negative effects of power relations.

Substantive or real gender equality, meanwhile, ensures that the application of laws and policies, as well as their outcomes, are not discriminatory. By pursuing substantive equality, we recognize the importance of context, including historical disadvantage, and how it impacts women's lived experiences in our diverse countries.

When we meet in Mexico, we will discuss what real equality looks like and the obstacles to achieving it. We will share strategies that can be adapted to our realities in order to make tangible gains for women.

At last year's Gathering in Suriname, I closed my remarks saying, "The discussions are important but when we return to our countries, we have to translate the ideas into action plans and implement the actions we have marked as important for each of our countries." To this end, we have incorporated a strategic planning session during this year's Gathering, in which we will define our priorities in moving forward as a group and the tools necessary to do so in a coordinated way.

I look forward to welcoming my colleagues from across the Americas to the Gathering in Mexico City.

Message from Marcela Guerra, member of the Board of Directors

Senator Marcela Guerra is member of the Board of Directors of ParlAmericas and host of the upcoming Gathering of the Group of Women Parliamentarians.

As a member of the Board of Directors, I recently had the opportunity to represent ParlAmericas at a conference titled "*Good Governance and Environmental Justice: Toward an Inclusive Sustainable Development Agenda for the Americas.*" This side event of the 44th General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) took place on June 3, 2014, in Asuncion, Paraguay.

The conference revolved around the follow-up of the Declaration of Santo Domingo for the Sustainable Development of the Americas, signed in 2010, which recognized the need to work jointly on a continental level to safeguard the richness and diversity of American ecosystems, while strategies aimed at promoting sustainable development, and eradicating hunger and poverty are developed.

During the session in which I participated, “*Equality and a law-based approach: Environmental justice and the rule of law as a guarantee of sustainable development*,” I placed special emphasis on the need for the states of the American continent to find a balanced approach to including sustainable development in their legislative agendas. I illustrated my arguments with the recommendations concerning sustainable development drafted during the last Plenary Assembly of ParlAmericas, which were submitted to the presidents of each legislative chamber of the hemisphere.

I also underscored our obligation to work towards gender equality –one of the cornerstones of any sustainable society– in order to achieve not only laws that guarantee formal gender equality, but also political commitments to achieve the real equality towards which we strive. This is the core theme of the next Gathering of the Group of Women Parliamentarians (Mexico City, Mexico, June 24-25, 2014), which I will host.

During my presentation I reviewed the quota systems, the most widespread way to ensure that women are not left on the margins of political life or limited to a secondary role. I presented the current situation of Latin America in this area using data published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. I shared data about Argentina, the first country to include these policies in its legal system, through the Women's Quota Act of 1991; and the visible representation of women we see nowadays in Cuba, Ecuador, and Costa Rica.

My participation in the event was a pleasant experience because I had the privilege of taking in the opinions of fellow participants, as well as having shared ParlAmericas' point of view.

I want to especially thank ParlAmericas for inviting me to participate and for the opportunity for me to represent them; as well as the Ministry of Justice, the Government, and the people of Paraguay for their excellence as hosts and for their warm hospitality.

On a different note, timing could not have been better because the topics to be discussed at the next Plenary Assembly of ParlAmericas (Santiago, Chile, September 25-27, 2014) will include the post-2015 legislative agenda in the Americas, access to information and the digital exchange economy, and health care for women, all foundations for the sustainable development of our hemisphere.

Interview with María Jeannette Ruiz Delgado

Maria Jeannette Ruiz Delgado was a member of the Board of Directors of ParlAmericas between 2011 and 2014.

Due to her close relation with the organization, we took the opportunity to speak with her about her time with us.

During her mandate with ParlAmericas, she hosted the 10th Plenary Assembly of the organization and attended numerous meetings. As a board member, Ms. Ruiz Delgado was known for her participatory spirit and her leadership in the discussion of important matters related to the governance of ParlAmericas, such as the drafting of the regulations that entered into force in 2013.

She was an elected member of the Chamber of Deputies of Costa Rica between 2010 and 2014. Her party, *Acción Ciudadana*, is the main opposition party, known for promoting committed citizens to political decision-making spaces. As a legislator, she was the president of the International Relations and Foreign Trade Permanent Commission, which approves treaties and agreements and is responsible for the relationship between parliament and the diplomatic corps in Costa Rica.

Ms. Ruiz Delgado's main interests include management of the national budget, electoral law, Costa Rica's municipal system and legislation, the pension system, and national macroeconomic policy.

How did your time with ParlAmericas impact your work as a legislator?

My work as a legislator was enriched by the experience of being part of ParlAmericas. This forum allowed me to become familiar with the realities of other countries, through exchanges with their representatives.

How do you see the role of the organization on the international scene over the next five years?

In the coming years, ParlAmericas should promote awareness of the reality of the countries in the Americas, in order to improve legislation.

Could you share with our readers one situation during your time with ParlAmericas that is particularly memorable?

My best experience with ParlAmericas was the forum about the impact of the global economic crisis; what I learned there became very useful when I represented my country in other international organizations.

Interview with Alisha Todd, new Director General

Alisha Todd, the Director General of ParlAmericas, reflects on her vision and the future of the organization.

What's your vision as new Director General of ParlAmericas?

My vision is to further engage the membership of ParlAmericas to make the organization a more vibrant, dynamic, and sustainable network by developing practical, hands-on programming that benefits legislators and the legislatures of the Americas. Together, we will build on the wonderful achievements of ParlAmericas over the last 13 years in promoting increased dialogue, cooperation and interconnectivity of the legislative bodies across the Americas. ParlAmericas has fostered a stronger understanding of the political, economic and social issues affecting our shared hemisphere. This has enabled parliamentarians to better serve the common interests and aspirations of our populations.

What attracted you to ParlAmericas?

I was drawn to ParlAmericas by what it has done and what it can do. Our member parliaments –the legislative branch of government– are critical institutions if governments are to take into account the popular will of citizens when developing the laws that govern our countries. As the policy challenges we face become increasingly interconnected, it is critical that the tools, knowledge and experiences our legislative institutions have at their disposal keep pace. This has been a strength of ParlAmericas since it launched in 2001.

ParlAmericas offers a unique forum to promote a peer-to-peer sharing of experiences as equals. It has provided legislators from throughout the region and across the political spectrum a space to achieve compromise and develop joint solutions that address common challenges in the hemisphere. It also provides a venue to build the capacity of our politicians as they engage with the varied and complex issues facing the countries of the Americas, be they economic, social or environmental.

What can we expect from ParlAmericas in the coming year?

It is my goal to further strengthen ParlAmericas' engagement with the Inter-American agenda through new partnerships and new, practical programming that help legislators carry out their responsibilities as elected representatives and law makers. We are working with our members and donors to identify and develop projects that equip legislators to be better able to respond to the needs of their electorate in an informed, inclusive and transparent manner. There is also enormous opportunity for greater collaboration between ParlAmericas and the local, regional and international stakeholders committed to promoting the values and principals enshrined in the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Report on Budget Oversight Workshop

The report on the workshop Strengthening Parliamentary Budget Oversight in the Caribbean - Phase 2 is available on the ParlAmericas website.

This workshop, held in February, covered the challenges and best practices regarding Public Accounts Committees (PACs), cooperation between parliaments and Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs), and key audit outcomes such as financial statements and performance audits.

More than 25 parliamentarians as well as six Auditors General from the Caribbean participated in the discussions, which also addressed issues related to small and large legislatures.

The report includes summaries of the points made by the workshop facilitator and the discussions within each working group, in addition to a review of the recommendations from the first phase of the workshop held in January 2012, which led to the publication of Strengthening Parliamentary Oversight in the Caribbean: A Roadmap for Developing and Implementing Initiatives in the Region.

What follows are the key issues outlined by this year's workshop participants, which should be reviewed and used to update past recommendations:

- *In small parliaments, the inclusion of independent senators on the PAC should be examined.*
- *Further consideration should be given to forming a regional oversight body, housed by an existing regional parliamentary body such as the OECS. Terms of reference will need to be drafted and the relationship between the regional oversight body and the country-level PACs would need to be established. Political support will need to be developed as well.*
- *Resources should be allocated towards working with country-level governments to ensure the production of timely financial statements.*
- *ParlAmericas should engage the advisory group established at the 2014 workshop to coordinate communication between parliamentarians and donors, in order to relay the priorities outlined in the point above, and to emphasize the need for funding to support PACs and PAC-SAI cooperation.*
- *Participant feedback at the workshop indicated the desire for more practical hands on training on budgetary oversight for parliamentarians. This should include understanding financial statements and performance audit reports, as well as effective questioning techniques for seeking clarification on these reports.*

WHERE: Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

WHEN: February 5-6, 2014

About us: Join the Group of Women Parliamentarians

The rules of governance of ParlAmericas were completed and approved by the Board of Directors at the 31st board meeting in Paramaribo, Suriname, on May 15, 2013.

According to these regulations, the Group of Women Parliamentarians is governed by an Executive Committee comprised of a President (who also serves as 2nd Vice-President on ParlAmericas' Board of Directors), a Vice-President, and a Secretary.

The President of the Group is to be elected by the delegates of member parliaments attending the Plenary Assembly for a term of two years with the opportunity for one renewal. The positions of Vice-President and of Secretary are to be filled by election at the Group's annual Meeting, held in conjunction with the Plenary Assembly, for terms of two years respectively, with the opportunity for one renewal.

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The current President of the Group is the Speaker of the National Assembly of Suriname, Dr. Jennifer Simons. The current Vice-President is Martha González Dávila, Member of the National Assembly of Nicaragua. The position of Secretary is open to election during the next Plenary Assembly. We welcome all parliamentarians interested in running for this position to attend ParlAmericas' 11th Plenary Assembly in Chile in September of this year.

Stay in Touch!

In light of new Canadian legislation on electronic communications, staff at the International Secretariat of ParlAmericas has begun reviewing our emailing lists. If you have not already done so, please confirm that you wish to continue receiving this newsletter and other occasional emails, such as event invitations and publications.