



Organization of
American States



INTER-AMERICAN COMMISSION OF WOMEN

OEA/Ser.L
CIM/INF. 19/11
18 February 2011
Original: Spanish

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES, JOSÉ MIGUEL INSULZA, ON THE OCCASION OF THE DAY OF WOMEN OF THE AMERICAS

(Washington, DC, February 18, 2011)

Over the last decade, democracy and governance in the countries of the hemisphere have seen both progress and setbacks. The democratic system has grown stronger, but the challenges of resolving the social and gender inequalities that limit the potential for development, peace and governance in the region persist.

The demand of citizens for a democracy of quality and transparency, which guarantees justice and well-being for all, is growing. The debate on democracy has expanded its horizons, bringing new meaning to citizen participation, cultural diversity and the role of indigenous groups, and has advanced towards a notion of development oriented towards human rights and respect for the environment. These regional and national dialogues still lack a profound reflection on and recognition of women's citizenship and parity in political representation, in order to respond to the 52% of the regional population that women represent.

In commemorating the Day of Women of the Americas, which is framed by our celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, we must reflect on the urgent need to eliminate gender inequalities in the public sphere and achieve the exercise of women's substantive political citizenship in our democracies.

The election of women Presidents in Argentina, Brazil and Costa Rica, and of a woman Prime Minister in Trinidad & Tobago is an unprecedented milestone in the history of democracy in the hemisphere. Several countries of the region are working their way towards parity in their legislative bodies. In spite of this, we have a long way to go: women are four of thirty-five Heads of State or Government; they represent 22.7% of parliamentarians; only eleven countries of the region have quota laws that mandate women's inclusion among elected political officials; and though women are

present in significant numbers as members of political parties, they are largely invisible in their leadership.

The barriers to the full exercise of women's political rights have been widely analyzed in the ten years since the adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter; they include the challenge of balancing a political career with traditional household work, the norms and dynamics of political parties and institutions, and limited opportunities for capacity-building in political leadership, including specific skills such as negotiation, work with the media or incidence in public policy formulation.

The Inter-American Democratic Charter establishes that "States shall promote the full and equal participation of women in the political structures of their countries as a fundamental element in the promotion and exercise of a democratic culture" (article 28). Nevertheless, women continue to be absent from the leadership of the region's democracies. The invisibility of their rights and priorities in policy agendas is a deficit that must be addressed if these democracies are to be considered "representative."

To that end, the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) has launched a hemispheric policy dialogue on the implications of the exercise of women's full citizenship for democratic systems and development and the challenges for the State and for democratic institutions of guaranteeing and protecting human rights. Beginning with a high-level policy forum, to be held in Washington, DC from April 4th to 6th 2011, this dialogue aims to place women's voices, visions and rights at the centre of political reform, democratization and State modernization processes and to strengthen understanding of the current challenges facing democratic systems in guaranteeing the exercise of women's substantive political citizenship.

As we reflect on the nature and exercise of democracy in the Americas and look back on ten years of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, I ask you to join me in ensuring that women's political rights are a constant part of this debate and of our efforts to perfect democracy in the region.