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REPORTS ON RECENT IPU SPECIALIZED CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS

**(g) FOURTH CONFERENCE OF WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS AND WOMEN IN
DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS IN THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL STATES**

(Manama, Bahrain, 9-10 December 2009)

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Under the patronage of Her Royal Highness Princess Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa, consort of the King of Bahrain and Chairperson of the Supreme Council for Women, the Parliament of Bahrain and the Inter-Parliamentary Union organized the Fourth Regional Conference of Women Parliamentarians and Women in Political Decision-making Positions of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States, in Manama on 9 and 10 December 2009, under the theme of *National plans on gender equality: The role of women parliamentarians*.

Women parliamentarians and women ministers from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen participated in the Conference. Also in attendance were women representatives of the Arab Transitional Parliament, the League of Arab States and the Arab Women's Organization (AWO), as well as the Secretary-General of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, women parliamentarians and experts from Italy, Jordan, Sweden and Switzerland, academics, and UN representatives.

The participants acknowledged that national strategies and plans for women in the Gulf States are based on national constitutions, development objectives and human rights and women's rights principles and conventions, all of which call for women's empowerment and equality in all sectors. Such strategies and plans constitute a national framework to achieve progress in meeting these principles and development goals. They serve as fundamental tools for the establishment of genuine equality, in accordance with Sharia, whereby all citizens - both women and men - have the right to enjoy all human rights equally. Participants stressed that such plans should be distinctly based on the specificities and priorities of each society and State.

The development of political, economic and social life impacts directly on the responsibility of parliamentarians to represent all their constituents equally through their legislative and oversight functions. Women parliamentarians in particular are called on to devote greater attention and care to women's needs with a view to realizing the principle of equal rights for both sexes. Their belief in the important role they can play at this level must be accompanied by concrete steps to ensure that the necessary attention is devoted to the establishment and implementation of national strategies and plans for women.

Therefore, the number of women members in parliament is a fundamental matter; if women parliamentarians are to effect the required change in terms of ensuring that women's needs are taken sufficiently into account and that equality and decision-making are enhanced, they must constitute an adequate proportion of parliaments.

Also vital is the involvement of women parliamentarians in the elaboration of strategies and plans for women to find sustainable solutions to the problems and challenges facing them, both in general on issues such as discrimination in the area of social and economic rights and in particular on challenges such as increasing the number of women in politics. It is equally important for women in general and young women in particular to participate in designing plans and strategies which affect them.

The task does not end with the establishment of national strategies and plans; action must be taken to turn them into reality. At this level, parliamentary work provides an opportunity to enhance the implementation of such plans through the enactment of requisite legislation, overseeing its implementation, monitoring and evaluation of related policies and programmes, and ensuring that sufficient resources are allocated.

The participants agreed that in order for women parliamentarians to enhance the way they make use of their functions, the following tools, skills and actions are needed:

1. Information

Knowing and understanding the constitutions, laws and regulations in force is key for women parliamentarians. Such knowledge can be acquired through the assistance of constitutional and legal experts. Women parliamentarians also need to have access to up-to-date statistics supplied by governments, international institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), study centres and universities. Support from the secretariats of parliaments is thus fundamental. Special units can be established in legislative assemblies to provide information and technical support in all areas. The use of electronic tools, such as the International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (iKNOW Politics) and the Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Gulf, is key. The participants stressed the need for training in gender analysis and specific studies for women parliamentarians, including comparative research.

2. Legislation

With regard to the laws in force, women parliamentarians must essentially work for the elimination of provisions that are discriminatory or incompatible with the strategic objectives set forth in national plans. Requisite legislation must be enacted to ensure the implementation of strategic objectives and due regard must be paid to equality when debating bills in general.

3. Making equality a priority in parliament

A parliamentary plan of action can be useful to enhance the role played by legislative assemblies in the implementation of national strategies and plans. In order for women parliamentarians to influence the setting of priorities in parliament, it is important to identify the areas of legislation to be addressed as prime concerns, which include labour, nationality and protection against violence. Work on these areas should also be promoted in all parliamentary committees.

4. Oversight of government activities

One of the most important constitutional powers at the disposal of women parliamentarians is that of overseeing the elaboration and implementation of strategies, plans and policies for women and equality. Women parliamentarians must therefore examine ministry programmes and express their views on them from an equality perspective. Questions may also be put to the relevant ministers, questioning being an effective means for parliamentarians to oversee the executive. In discussions of draft budgets, greater emphasis must be placed on ensuring that sufficient budgets are allocated for the implementation of national strategies and plans for women.

5. Sensitization and educational activities

Women parliamentarians can play an important role in sensitizing the population about women's rights and needs. They are also important vectors for educating other women about their rights. Men parliamentarians must be aware of women's issues and these must be included in the related discussions and debates.

To implement the foregoing, the participants highlighted the need for women parliamentarians to make the following strategic alliances:

- Alliances and cooperation among women parliamentarians in their respective parliaments and at the inter-parliamentary level;
- Partnership with male parliamentarians;
- Support of Speakers and secretariats of parliaments;
- Cooperation with relevant government bodies;
- Cooperation with national women's institutions;
- Networking with NGOs;
- Cooperation with AWO and its Legal Group;
- Use of the media.

The participants adopted the following recommendations:

- Develop a cooperation programme to implement the recommendations made at the conferences;
- Convene future meetings to address important subjects such as the implementation of monitoring tools and laws that require priority attention;
- Increase meetings of women parliamentarians in order to improve communication effectiveness;
- Build the capacities of women parliamentarians through conferences and workshops;
- Invite young women to attend similar conferences;
- Establish a committee to follow up implementation of the Conference's recommendations and report back to the next conference.