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Fifth Meeting of Women Speakers of Parliament Vienna, July 13-14 2009

CONCLUSIONS

Mrs Barbara Prammer, Speaker of the National Council of Austria

The Fifth Meeting of Women Speakers of Parliament concluded successfully after two days of interesting exchanges, enabling participants to learn much from the experiences of their colleagues. Fourteen Women Speakers and Deputy Speakers of Parliament attended the meeting as well as the Speaker of a regional Parliament. The meeting was opened in the presence of the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Dr Theo Ben Gurirab, Speaker of the Namibian National Assembly. The key note address was delivered by the Executive Director of UNIFEM, Ms Ines Alberdi.

The spirit of the meeting demonstrated that women Speakers of parliament can push issues forward and make a difference. Two main issues of particular importance to women Speakers were identified: violence against women and the financial crisis.

Though addressed separately, it was clear from the beginning that these two issues are interlinked. Our discussions highlighted how the financial crisis has increased the vulnerability of women to violence, and that one of the best prevention mechanisms is to ensure that women are economically independent.

Violence against women (VAW) is a flagrant human rights violation and can take many forms, as evidenced in a series of interesting statements from women Speakers on this item. VAW hampers the development of society and poses a serious threat to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and achievement of the internationally agreed Millennium Development Goals.

VAW is widespread in the public as well as private spheres and can take many different forms. And yet, while its forms may differ from country to country, the solutions, as one Speaker mentioned, are in many ways similar.

Progress has been made. At the international level, campaigns have been launched by the UN Secretary General, UNIFEM ("*Say NO to Violence against Women*") and most recently IPU, focused in this latter case on how parliaments can contribute to making VAW a priority on the international and national agenda.

It became clear that VAW requires a comprehensive response. As one Speaker put it, gender equality is the best prevention against VAW. Some Speakers mentioned the need to mainstream the issue of violence against women as part of all policy and programmatic work; others stressed the need for coordination—for instance by centralizing all services for women and children who are victims of violence.

Violence against women is an issue that transcends party lines, as some Speakers suggested in mentioning for example the role of cross party caucuses of women parliamentarians. It also transcends gender: male parliamentarians also need to be involved as active partners.

Legislation is the first element of a comprehensive response to violence. We discussed the need to ensure that our national laws are in conformity with international commitments taken by our countries, especially the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

After legislation comes **implementation**. Some of us mentioned the importance of developing national policies and plans of action. Several highlighted the need to raise public awareness and keep implementation actors informed about the content of legislation. Specific attention was given to the justice, police, and healthcare systems. Many of you pointed to the importance of helping victims report to the police and obtain healthcare.

Budgets are crucial for implementation, which requires adequate funding. One speaker outlined how gender-responsive budgets could improve the allocation of resources.

For each of these issues, parliamentarians, and Speakers in particular, have a specific responsibility.

All women should be entitled to the protection of the law. Several Speakers highlighted multiple forms of discrimination against particular groups of women—women of particular ethnic or racial identities; women migrants and refugees; and women who have been victims of trafficking.

We heard many references to the particular situation of women in conflict situations and their vulnerability to violence. Participants described how internal conflict and terrorism can affect specific population segments, such as internally displaced persons. Attention was drawn to the terrible plight of Pakistan's 2 million displaced persons, and the unacceptable hardships borne by women and children among them. These vulnerable groups require specific forms of support, such as the rebuilding of schools for children and the generation of economic opportunities for women who have lost everything.

We also turned our attention to the **financial crisis and its impact on women**. We heard about the devastation produced in all of our societies, developed as well as developing. As our keynote speaker observed, the UN estimates that global economic production will fall by 2.6 per cent in 2009. The World Bank warns that as many as 53 million more people could be trapped in poverty, added to the more than 100 million impoverished by the food and energy crisis of 2008.

We need to recognize that the global financial crisis affects women and men differently—and hits women hardest. As one Speaker warned this morning, we need to be careful that the economic crisis does not lead to an increase in discrimination against women.

Women are a driving force of our economies, formally and informally. Solutions to the current crisis must therefore involve women as key actors—building on their potential, recognizing their contributions, and promoting gender equality.

Training was mentioned as a means to support women affected by the crisis—and a contribution as well to lasting recovery.

A number of Speakers referred to the systemic nature of the global crisis and the role played by financial and regulatory systems; but the economic marginalisation of women has also been systemic. We need to address this.

The central message of our discussion was that gender equality and the empowerment of women represent key elements in our efforts to contend with the crisis.

The way forward after the Fifth Meeting of Women Speakers of Parliament:

We should not be timid: as Speakers, as parliamentarians, and as women, we have a responsibility to lead the way in empowering women. We need to show political will and involve our institutions more closely in this battle.

We must treat both subjects of our meeting with the highest priority. As several of you mentioned, this debate must reach a wider audience and be part of a broader platform. We invite the **Third Conference of Speakers of Parliament**, to be held in 2010, to consider following up on this year's conference and keep violence against women on the agenda.

Let us also commemorate in our Parliaments the International Day of Violence Against Women, on 25 Nov. and report back on the progress observed.

Parliamentarians should play a role in encouraging positive action. As we have heard, the experiences of Rwanda and Norway provide illuminating examples of successful action for the advancement of women's causes.

We must also turn our attention to the Inter-Parliamentary Union itself—to support IPU in its efforts to promote gender equality and empowerment in the world's parliaments, but to do so within the organization as well. In this context we encourage close attention to considerations of gender balance in selecting the keynote panellists for next year's Speakers Conference.

Overall, this meeting has shown the exercise of **separate meetings for women Speakers to be productive, useful, and inspiring!** We recommend continuing with this meeting format and ask IPU to organize another meeting of women Speakers next year, if possible prior to the broader Conference of Speakers of Parliament.