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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels

Panel discussion on equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels

Summary submitted by the moderator, Szilvia Szabo (Hungary)

1. At its fiftieth session, on 28 February 2006, the Commission on the Status of Women held a panel discussion on the equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels. The panelists were: Nesreen Barwari, Minister of Municipalities and Public Works, Iraq; Vida Kanopiene, Professor and Head of the Department of Social Policy at Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania; Anders Johnsson, Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union; Françoise Gaspard, expert member of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and senior lecturer at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris; Amy Mazur, professor in the Department of Political Science at Washington State University, United States of America, and member of the expert group convened by the Division for the Advancement of Women in Addis Ababa from 24 to 27 October 2005.

2. The participation of women in decision-making processes is a necessary condition for the full realization of women’s human rights. Achieving equal participation of women and men in decision-making at all levels and in all spheres of public life, including participation in political affairs, the economy, the judiciary and the media, is a question of justice and democracy. It is not possible to speak of democratic governance in societies where one half of the population is excluded from or marginalized in decision-making. Equal participation of women and men in

decision-making is a necessary condition for the achievement of sustainable development and peace.

3. Participants acknowledged the critical role of international instruments in promoting women's participation in decision-making processes at all levels, in particular the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has adopted general recommendations on women and decision-making covering public life, including administrative and diplomatic services.

4. The importance of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security, which outlines the role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding, was underscored. Participants stressed the need for women's equal participation in decision-making in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

5. Participants highlighted that decision-making takes place in a wide variety of contexts, including in public bodies such as parliaments, national and local government, global social and economic institutions, social movements, non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, political parties, trade unions and private sector organizations. They shared information on good practices and lessons learned in promoting women's participation in decision-making, including examples of educational and training programmes and public campaigns, to increase awareness of the importance of women in decision-making at all levels.

6. Progress has been made in increasing women's participation in public life in the past decades, although the pace of change has been slow and uneven. For example, an overall increase in the proportion of women members of parliament was noted, from 11.3 per cent in 1995 to 16.3 per cent in early 2006. A total of 20 countries have reached the so-called critical mass of 30 per cent of women in parliament. Available statistics testify to the persistent gap between the legal framework, which in most countries provides equal rights for women and men, and the implementation of policies to achieve de facto gender equality.

7. The positive impact of increasing the involvement of women in decision-making at the local level was discussed. Women's participation at that level could contribute to the dismantling of traditional stereotypes about the role of women in society.

8. Participants emphasized the need to take into account the close links between the political and economic empowerment of women. Increasing women's access to political decision-making can enhance women's economic opportunities. The enhancement of women's economic status can create better conditions for women's effective participation in decision-making. Access to education, the labour market and health services constitutes an essential prerequisite for women's participation in decision-making.

9. Women's participation in the economy varies across regions. Both horizontal and vertical segregation in the labour market persists. Women continue to hold jobs in the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy and tend to be concentrated in certain sectors and marginalized in others, with a resulting gender wage gap. The gender bias persists despite the fact that women's enrolment at universities has surpassed that of men in many countries. While mechanisms exist in many countries

to promote women's participation in political life, few policies and mechanisms exist to promote women's advancement in decision-making positions in the economy, particularly in the private sector. The need to promote training and career development programmes for women in order to close the existing gaps and achieve gender balance in economic decision-making was emphasized.

10. Participants highlighted that women's participation in decision-making can enhance gender equality in policy outcomes. Women in decision-making positions at all levels have contributed to gender equality and the empowerment of women through their contributions to drafting and amending constitutions, removing discriminatory provisions from legal codes and promoting women's rights, establishing national machineries for the advancement of women, formulating and implementing gender equality policies and mainstreaming gender perspectives into policies and programmes. Women in decision-making positions contribute to the development of gender-sensitive language and enabling working environments, including flexible working hours and meeting times. Further research is needed to assess the impact of the presence of women in decision-making positions on transforming institutions.

11. The increased presence of women in decision-making bodies does not, however, automatically ensure attention to gender equality in political processes. An increase in the numerical representation of women in decision-making bodies has to be complemented by increased substantive representation and the capacity to influence decision-making. It is important to increase the number of women in leadership positions in order to ensure a positive impact on policy formulation and implementation.

12. Participants emphasized the importance of political will and accountability for both ensuring equal participation of women in decision-making and transforming policy outcomes through gender mainstreaming. Pressure from women's organizations was seen as an effective mechanism for galvanizing political will. There was broad agreement that adequate resource allocation, both financial and human, is required to fulfil the commitments made by Governments to promote gender equality in decision-making. Greater investments are required, inter alia, in education, training and capacity-building for women wishing to run for elective office, as well as for successful candidates.

13. Among the major obstacles that hinder the effective representation and participation and leadership of women are: their exclusion from sectors such as macroeconomic policy, diplomacy and foreign policy formulation; the absence of an enabling environment in political institutions, such as parliaments and legislatures; the unequal sharing of household responsibilities and the lack of work/life balance policies, including paternity leave and flexible work arrangements; poverty; and the persistence of stereotypes.

14. Gender stereotypes perpetuate discrimination against women in access to decision-making positions. They contribute to the so-called glass ceiling phenomenon, which prevents women from reaching senior decision-making positions. In some countries, indirect rather than direct discrimination of women hinders their participation in decision-making. The promotion of women leaders as positive role models through the media and public awareness campaigns could provide explicit encouragement for women to compete for public office or top-level positions in both the public and private sectors. The concept of building a critical

mass of women leaders has proven to be an effective mobilization tool in some contexts. There have been instances where a few strong women leaders have had a large impact on policy.

15. Factors that have contributed to the increase in the number of women in decision-making bodies include an enabling legislative and political environment, advocacy from the women's movement, the adoption of electoral quotas and reserved seats, and the impact of international instruments, such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

16. Many participants acknowledged that quotas, defined as a mandatory percentage of women candidates for public elections, have become the most widely used mechanism for facilitating women's entry into decision-making at all levels. At present, approximately 80 countries employ some type of electoral quota, including reserved seats, candidate quotas or quotas adopted voluntarily by political parties. Quotas were successfully used in many post-conflict states to increase women's political representation. Quotas should be supplemented with other measures, however, such as awareness-raising, the training of women and the creation of enabling, gender-sensitive environments. Some participants expressed concern that the introduction of quotas might result in tokenism.

17. Political parties were perceived as crucial in determining progress in the advancement of women in politics. Legislative provisions can lead to an increase in the number of women candidates but might not result in the election of women candidates. Women generally receive less funding, have less time for their campaigns and are hindered by stereotypes, which puts them at a disadvantage in competing for office. The funding of women's electoral campaigns should be increased and other measures implemented to ensure an increase in the representation of women.

18. Participants stressed the need to strengthen the capacity of national mechanisms for gender equality and to enhance their collaboration with women in decision-making positions in Governments and legislative bodies. Such collaboration would contribute to defining socio-economic and political priorities from a gender perspective and placing new issues on the political agenda that reflect and address women's gender-specific concerns, values and experiences. Participants agreed that it is important to strengthen strategic alliances among all stakeholders, including civil society and women's groups and networks, and to implement advocacy campaigns to further increase women's participation in decision-making processes at all levels.

19. Progress can be greatly enhanced and promoted by the involvement of men, in particular in relation to questioning gender stereotypes, including those concerning men's and women's roles in the family and in professional life.

20. Participants emphasized the need to enhance the knowledge base on the situation of women in decision-making processes at all levels and in all areas through improved data collection, including sex disaggregated statistics, and greater investments in research.