

Opening statement
Hon. Barbara Prammer
President of the Austrian National Council

Mr. Under-Secretary-General,
Mr. Vice-President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Members of the Development Cooperation Forum,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to welcome you to Vienna and to open the Vienna Policy Dialogue.

Gender Equality – the topic of the coming two days – is of special personal significance to me. As some of you may know, I have been active in equality policy throughout my entire political life.

What we all do know is that Gender Equality is one of the UN's Millennium Development Goals. Because it is an important end in itself. Because it is fundamental to reducing poverty. And because Gender Equality is fundamental to achieving other development goals.

Allow me to start with a general statement concerning development cooperation: We are aware of the fact that worldwide the multiple crises present challenges for development cooperation; And we all know that the global development community finds itself at an important crossroad. We also know that some people, some politicians, use the crises as justification to reduce development cooperation contributions. Or even worse: Some use it to question the very role of development cooperation.

Therefore the path we now take has serious implications for the world we will inhabit in the years to come. Now is not the time to disengage. It is the time to make sure we actually deliver on the Millennium Development Goals: Give children and pregnant women a chance at survival. Make sure children are in school. Make sure women have the same opportunities as men; Protect the environment – and ultimately, end poverty.

But let me now come back to the concrete title of today's agenda and ask: What are the challenges facing Gender Equality? Let me name just several examples -The World Development Report 2012 draws attention to these facts. There are still 35 million girls worldwide not in school. There are almost 4 million "newly missing" women annually that means that millions of girls and women go "missing" each year due to pre-natal discrimination or excess postnatal mortality. Almost all of them (85% or 3.3 million) in China, Sub-Saharan Africa and India.

There are wage gaps that average 20 per cent, along with gaps in labour force participation. And there are an estimated 510 million women who will be abused by their partners in their lifetime

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These issues are fundamental. They matter intrinsically. What's more, addressing these issues is the smart thing to do, because inequality is costly, and in a globalizing world increasingly so. Disparities in gender equality come with economic costs, short-change the next generation and lead to suboptimal institutions and policies. Studies show that progress in this area benefits everyone, not just women and girls.

So I think we agree that despite important progress already made, much work remains to be done to achieve gender equality. The Beijing Platform for Action was adopted 17 years ago, and the Millennium Declaration 12 years ago. As of today, the countdown to the beginning of 2015 stands at merely 2 years and 18 days.

In my capacity as Speaker of the National Council of the Republic of Austria I will continuously promote one certain indicator of the third MDG. It is the participation of women in political decision-making committees at all levels, from the informal and local level to the highest levels of parliament and government. Concerning the representation of women in politics, the Austrian lower house with 27.9% and the Federal Council with 31,1 % is in place 35 out of 162 in the ranking of the Interparliamentary Union. This is relatively good but still not satisfactory.

Worldwide, women accounted for 20.3 per cent of parliamentarians at the end of October 2012. This amounted to nearly a 75 per cent increase since 1995 and a 44 per cent increase over the 2000 level. While trends point to an increase in women's parliamentary representation, the rate of representation remains low overall, and progress is spread unevenly.

The highest level of women's representation is found in the Nordic countries. Among developing regions, Latin America and the Caribbean continue to rank the highest, with a 23 per cent average. Women are elected in greater numbers in systems of proportional representation than they are in majority electoral systems. The use of special measures or quotas is also an important factor. Of the 59 countries that held elections in 2011 for lower or single houses, 2 had implemented special measures favouring women, and electoral quotas were used in 17 of those countries. Where quotas were used, women took 27.4 per cent of seats, as opposed to 15.7 per cent of seats in countries without any form of quota.

That is why I never tire of emphasizing that quotas are tried, tested and useful instruments to ensure women's participation in politics. Our participation has to be

ensured because I am convinced that the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments is a key factor for women's involvement in decision-making.

The simple presence of women within these traditional male institutions presents an important opportunity to assess the role of women within the political system and the status of women throughout society. Male and female legislators must work together to solve the problems in their countries. And women must be encouraged, empowered and supported to become strong leaders to successfully address those problems and to build strong, sustainable democracies.

As a staunch parliamentarian, I would like to emphasize here that achieving the MDGs is not the responsibility of the executive branch of government alone. A part of parliament's crucial function is to hold the executive accountable and to ensure that the executive fulfils its mandate. The fulfilment of these functions is imperative to the achievement of the MDGs. In this context, I would like to highlight also the importance of Gender Budgeting. I am proud of the fact that Austria has written this principle in its constitution, and I am glad that you will hear about this more at tomorrow's panel.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The sessions on your agenda for the next two days are all equally important, but above all there is one common objective: It is to explore ways to anchor gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at the centre of a future post-2015 UN development agenda.

Gender equality has long been recognized both as a human right and a core development goal; therefore the post-2015 global development agenda must not only address the elimination of specific gender gaps, but also transform the structural factors that underpin the widespread persistence of gender inequalities, gender-based violence, discrimination and unequal development progress between women and men.

I wish you all the best in reaching these important objectives. They are our common objectives. And they are fundamental.

Thank you for your attention.