

STATEMENT BY

MARIA AMELIA PAIVA

PRESIDENT OF THE COMMISSION FOR EQUALITY AND
WOMEN'S RIGHTS

TO THE 49th SESSION
OF THE
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

**Madam Chairperson,
Ladies and Gentlemen**

Portugal aligns itself and fully supports the statement made by the Presidency of the European Union.

The Delegation of Portugal would like to reaffirm its strong support for and commitment to the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome document of the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly.

Portugal considers that one of the main strategies to achieve the full enjoyment of human rights by women, gender equality and development is the empowerment of women.

In fact, considering that Portuguese women have equal rights by law since 1976, our experience tells us that if you give women tools, skills and equal opportunities, they will achieve their rightful place in society and will bring on the corresponding sustainable development for all.

The three major national plans, the Second National Plan Against Domestic Violence, the Second National Plan for Equality and the Second National Plan for Employment, approved by the Portuguese Government in the last two years, have contributed to achieve some progress in gender equality. The last two plans foresee specific measures in the areas of employment, education and women entrepreneurship.

In what concerns education for all, between 1991 and today the general illiteracy rate decreased from 11% to 8%, the majority of which are among senior citizens given that mandatory education only exists in Portugal since 1974. One of the Millennium Development Goals has long been achieved, since secondary education is guaranteed for all, adults included.

Equal access at all levels of education has allowed women in Portugal to obtain higher levels of educational achievement and a diversification of choices. Women have managed to be the majority in university degrees and their number is growing each year, even in areas traditionally not associated to women.

For example in Computer Sciences, although 36.4% of the graduates are women, which seem to be an encouraging number, the rate of women taking these courses is not optimistic: they are only 25.6%, which represents no evolution since 1996.

The number of women in vocational training, has also been increasing steadily for the last ten years, now being about one half of vocational trainees, due to special programs and projects and a large investment made by the Portuguese Government and the European Commission through its Economic Cohesion Funds.

In the labor market women represent 45.6% of the employees and, even without taking into account their informal work within the family, the Portuguese economy today would not survive without their important contribution.

In the field of ICT women were 38% of the total workers, showing an increase of 16.8% compared to 1995. Among qualified workers with university degrees women now constitute 31.8% of the total number.

Unemployment is becoming a rather worrying problem in Portugal. Nevertheless, even among the unemployed, the gap between women and men is decreasing and the same is happening with the salary gap which is now 22.6%.

It is a fact, that even with higher qualifications women face more difficulties in finding appropriate jobs. However, special programs and projects in the field of professional training and support for women planning to start their own business, also funded by the Portuguese Government and the EU, in the area of entrepreneurship, had positive results for women. Women are now the majority of the new entrepreneurs and own 29% of the medium and small enterprises, and the trend shows that this number will continue to grow. Also, their success rate is comparatively high.

We believe we are going in the right direction, although we consider there is still a long way to go.

There still remains a major setback: in 2004, among the 50 largest public firms, women's leadership was minor — only 6% of women hold decision making positions. We think this has to do with cultures within the organizations and the society as a whole, but the highest qualification of women will prevail in the end.

The empowerment of women through their education and economic independence, employment and/or entrepreneurship, are fundamental ways to fight poverty and are the basis for gender equality in other areas. We believe so, and although we share with other countries the same problems in areas like health or violence, women are actually taking their own future in their hands more and more often.

We acknowledge there still is a long way to go in order to achieve some goals such as the promotion and protection of women's rights, the eradication of poverty, and the achievement of gender equality in all fields of economical, political and social life. But some signs are also very positive — for example, in the last campaign for the Parliament, and for the first time in Portugal, the media discussed women issues, like reproductive rights, women decision making positions in politics and in the economy. The candidates were faced with questions they were not used to answer. People in Portugal are giving more relevance to gender issues and we believe it will have positive consequences in the near future.

Madam Chairperson

The Beijing Declaration, the Platform for Action and the outcome document of Beijing+5 remain very important and relevant guides for action until today. Their value, as tools to achieve gender equality at national and regional level is still unquestionable. We would like to thank this Assembly and all the United Nations member countries that contributed to make these documents possible, for their work and good will.

Thank you for your attention.