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“Enhancing women’s participation in electoral processes in post-conflict countries”

Side-event Wednesday 3 March 2004

Ms Laila Dávøy, Minister of Children and Family Affairs

Ladies and gentlemen,

Norway is very pleased to be co-sponsoring this side-event together with the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Angela King and her dedicated staff for helping us prepare for this event.

I would also like to say how happy I am to be on the same podium as a member of parliament from a country, Rwanda, which has now achieved first place on the prestigious list of countries with the highest percentages of women in parliament.

As Minister of Children and Family Affairs, I am responsible for gender issues in Norway, although obviously my mandate does not cover post-conflict situations. Nevertheless, experience has shown that even though post-conflict situations increase the challenges when it comes to gender and elections, the same question can be asked in both peaceful and post-conflict situations: How can we increase women’s participation in politics and thus make elected bodies more representative and democratic?

To answer this, I will begin with a few words about our experiences in Norway and then touch on the kind of support my government has been offering post-conflict countries. I would also like to briefly comment on the role that my country would like to see the UN play when it assists the election process in post-conflict situations.

Based on my own country’s experiences, I fully concur with the conclusions of the Glen Cove expert group and Ms. Amal Sabbagh’s report: the electoral system does play a significant role in increasing the number of elected women, and so do the nomination processes of political parties. There is clear evidence that where quotas are applied, either voluntarily or by law, they are an effective way of securing women’s representation. In Norway, most political parties have adopted voluntary internal quotas. Still, we are struggling to maintain enough women’s names at the top of party lists. For this reason, all the political parties’ women’s groups launched an initiative before last year’s local elections, where they encouraged voters to cast additional votes in favour of women by putting a mark besides their names on the ballot. This

is fully in line with Norwegian electoral law. My government is now evaluating the results of this move.

I would also like to underscore the importance of achieving a critical mass. Once women's representation has reached a certain level, it is almost impossible to turn back. Since Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland appointed women to 8 out of 18 government positions in 1986, it is hard to imagine that any new government could consist of anything less than 40 per cent of either sex.

Let me now turn to post-conflict situations. Countries emerging from conflict are in many ways windows of opportunity, and this also applies to promoting gender equality. Of course, the fight for gender equality is seldom at the top of any warring faction's list of priorities. In order not to lose this unique opportunity, there seems to be a strong case for supporting measures to also promote gender equality in parallel with the peace negotiations. I am thinking of measures that can enhance women's possibilities to organise themselves and thus prepare them for participation in elections. Support for women's networks combined with electoral quotas has worked well in many countries.

Statistics from Mozambique, Timor Leste, Rwanda and many other post conflict countries seem to support what I have just been saying. Their percentages of women parliamentarians are significantly above the world average. They have made advances in women's participation that many established democracies in developed countries can only dream of.

Over the last couple of years Norway, as a committed donor to democratic processes, has contributed financially to several projects that support women's participation in elections. We have supported women's networks and the development of training material and programmes in South Africa, Mozambique, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. We have supported the development of "gender check lists" that have been used by electoral authorities, gender activists, political parties and election observers. We have supported similar programmes in the Balkans: in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Kosovo, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania. In these countries emphasis has been put on training women who already are already active in local NGOs, political parties, labour unions, youth groups and the media. In Guatemala we have supported the Organisation of American States in its efforts to strengthen the internal democratisation of political parties. We have also supported a wide range of women's networks. One such network in Guatemala consists of women representatives from all political parties, and it is our understanding that the network has proven to be a useful forum for the exchange of views.

The UN is widely recognised for its electoral assistance efforts in general. Norway believes that the organisation should be perceived to an even greater extent as being at the cutting edge in the area of promoting women's

participation in electoral processes. While we do not have any international standards requiring quotas or targets for representation for each gender, we have come to expect the UN to “do the right thing”, and the right thing in our view is to enhance women’s political participation.

A real and well functioning democracy cannot be build without the participation of half of its population – its women.

Thank you for your attention.