

AUSTRIA

**STATEMENT BY THE FEDERAL MINISTER
FOR WOMEN'S AFFAIRS**

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4TH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN

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Madam Chair,

We are meeting at a time which demands that we join forces in a renewed bid for the empowerment of women.

To be sure, the specific circumstances of women in the countries on our planet are different. While in some countries women have to struggle for their physical survival, in Austria basic provision for women is guaranteed.

And yet there is a consistent pattern characterising gender relations everywhere: the inequality of women and men. Discrimination against women takes many forms, but overall it is the expression of the worldwide dominance of male, patriarchal policies.

Notwithstanding the commitment of countless women throughout the world to feminist and women-related policies, men - who account for half of the world's population - control 90 % of the world income in terms of money. And there is no denying the fact that there are strong, political, societal and cultural trends towards depriving women of what they have achieved and towards reversing the progress made on the road to their de-facto equality. In concrete terms this means that women are again to be ousted from the labour market or to be content with the worst-paid jobs. They are once more supposed to assume the sole responsibility for the entire reproductive work, that is to say for attending to the needs of their husbands, for taking care of their children and for caring for old and infirm family members.

Because the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work between men and women and the resulting power differential is the main obstacle to the equality of women in all parts of the world, the 4th World Conference on Women must make it its principal objective to put a stop to these situations.

Building on existing commitments, the Platform for Action must give a strong impetus to the empowerment of women. In this context I should like to refer in particular to the

UN-Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the Vienna Human-Rights Conference in 1993, the Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 and the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen this year. Human rights are not fully implemented until the human rights of women are protected and strengthened, until women are given the right to self-determination and until the social and economic autonomy of women is guaranteed. A large part of the worlds population is tortured, humiliated, terrorized and killed for one reason alone: because they are women. Many violations of the human rights of women are directly connected with their being female.

Women's human rights are an unalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. They are not subject to any restrictions imposed by religion, culture or tradition. Violence against women is a violation of human rights. Austria strongly condemns genital mutilation, female infanticide, forced sterilizations, forced abortion, rape of women and abuse of women in refugee camps wherever these crimes are committed and with whatever reason they may be justified. Furthermore, Austria emphasizes the principle of the freedom of speech and free access to information. With respect to the Platform for Action, Austria does not merely wish to repeat the agreements and achievements of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. In a joint effort we must take a step forward and develop strategies to eradicate violence against women and violations of their human rights. The different forms of violence against women have to be fought with the tools employed in punishing human-rights violations. An initiative to advance this aim is the drafting of an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against women to establish the right of petition and an inquiry procedure for women.

A demand as fundamental as promoting the human rights of women, is the right of women to self-determination in choosing their life style. Women have the right to decide whether and how many children they wish to have and when they want to have them. In this context I consider it important to endorse the Programme of Action of the

International Conference on Population and Development. Sexual and reproductive rights of women mean equality in areas to which men have never had to give a thought: it is the right of women to a satisfactory sexual life. It's the sexual rights of women that need to be guaranteed; it is their right to physical integrity; it is their right of access to contraceptives and information about safe methods of family planning. Austria has committed herself to ensure the full enjoyment of these rights by women.

I welcome the fact that the demand for continued mainstreaming is raised in all chapters of the Platform for Action. The demands of women must become standard in mainstream political and social life. The impact of political actions on the lives of women must be considered in the decision-making process. At the same time provisions must be made for governmental and non-governmental national machineries to be strengthened and expanded, so that the mainstreaming can be promoted and monitored. The qualitative leap from the de jure to the de-facto equality of women can only be taken if women are adequately represented at all decision-making levels.

Madam Chair,

The women-related policies of the Austrian government are designed to achieve as soon as possible the de-facto equality of women in all spheres of society. In Austria, too, much remains to be done before this aim can be reached, and we, too, are exposed to the threat of a backlash.

To illustrate the situation, I should like to mention that the income of employed women in our country is by 30% lower than that of men; that 50% of unemployed women receive unemployment benefits that are below subsistence level; that the average retirement pension of women is by about 35% lower than that of men.

These examples go to show that the current situation is still a far cry from de-facto gender equality. Nevertheless, women-related policies in Austria have achieved

substantial progress for women over the past decades. Especially so, since a State-Secretariat for Women's Issues was set up in 1979, and since a Minister for Women's Issues has been a cabinet member since 1989.

Despite the fundamental political and economic changes in our region, which have also had negative effects, particularly on working women, important improvements in the situation of women have been achieved in Austria. A crucial factor in this development has been the irreversibly high level of socio-political awareness that has been reached by women in Austria.

From my perspective of Austrian Minister for Women's Issues de-facto equality requires first of all the following political measures, which are consequently at the top of my agenda:

- Ensuring the economic and social independence of women. Women must no longer depend on men in the way they lead their lives.
- Giving both men and women the chance to reconcile job and family. This means jobs and working times for men and women which permit a combination of gainful employment and domestic commitments, and consequently it means a sufficient number of adequate kindergarten places. Inextricably linked with this objective is the re-distribution of paid and unpaid work which is indispensable to our societies.
- Securing the right for women to decide freely on their life styles and to have full control over their bodies (that is to say free choice of the number of children, satisfactory sex education and access to contraceptives, provisions for the termination of pregnancies). In Austria, abortion during the first three months of pregnancy has been legal since 1974. However, conservative circles have again and again argued against this essential right of women. Committed Austrian women will do everything in their power to preserve it.
- Securing the right to physical and mental integrity - or in other words fighting against any form of violence towards women, which is another focal point in my

political work and has for years been a priority issue in our women-related policies. We have organized anti-violence campaigns and numerous anti-violence projects for the protection of victims as well as nationwide information campaigns, and we have enacted a new law for the protection of women against violence. Previously women had no right to be protected from violent men in their own homes. Hence, many women fled with their children to women's refuges, which are permanently overcrowded. An important innovation in this new law is the right of women to obtain an exclusion order, which will keep the perpetrator away from the victim's home and immediate sphere of life.

The two last-named provisions also include the nationwide establishment of counselling centres for women, which are to be anchored in Austrian law in the foreseeable future. It is unacceptable that women's projects must, year upon year, be newly submitted for funding, because it relegates the people who run these projects to the level of petitioners and makes them prone to self-exploitation.

Other measures taken to achieve equality in Austria were the enactment of equal treatment laws governing the private sector (1979) and federal employment (1992). Equality ombuds offices are to be set up throughout the country within the foreseeable future. Women who are discriminated against in their working life will be able to turn to these regional offices in all the Austrian Länder.

In order to reach the aim of de-facto equality, a variety of affirmative action programmes for women will have to be introduced in all spheres of social life. Pertinent laws will be as important as consciousness-building measures and the promotion of NGOs.

Madam Chair,

I have already mentioned that the fight against violence is a priority in Austria's women-related policies. I am happy to note that the willingness to take measures against this violation of the human rights of women has grown worldwide. This most dramatic effect of patriarchal social systems must be combatted with a combination of national and international actions. I appeal to all of us to join in a worldwide campaign against violence against women. This campaign should encompass all sectors of society - politicians, the media, the civic society, international organisations, women and men. The outcome of this worldwide campaign should be tangible changes in the lives of women.

The great number of women who are working in non-governmental organisations have done an outstanding job in combatting violence towards women. In 1993, the Vienna Human-Rights Tribunal of the NGOs demonstrated impressively that the human rights of women are an integral part of the universal human rights. In a number of activities which lead up to the present conference and again included a tribunal, the NGO Forum has again raised important demands to those in government. It is for us to take these appeals seriously and to make them part of the policies we pursue. We must lend our support to networks and mutual assistance mechanisms of women, if we wish this conference to be a success.

Madam Chair,

To prevent „empowerment“ from remaining an empty catchphrase, we need binding commitments concerning national women-related policies. Australia has attracted attention by demanding that the national commitments should be laid down at this conference. I fully endorse this proposal and should like to comment on the plans I have made for implementing the final document of the World Conference on Women:

First: we shall lead a relentless fight to eliminate violence against women. We are going to enact a law against violence in the family and we are going to set up intervention agencies which will coordinate the competent and effective cooperation of the authorities and take care of and advise the victims of violence. Furthermore, we shall lend our support to a worldwide campaign against violence towards women and launch pertinent initiatives in Austria.

Second: the right to equal treatment is laid down in Article 7 of the Austrian Constitution. This Article is to be extended to include the right to equality of and affirmative action for women. The idea is to anchor the existing equal treatment and affirmative action laws in constitutional law, leaving no doubt that equality is a declared objective of our state and a fundamental element of the Austrian democracy. What we want is to DE-PRIVILEGE men and to DE-DISCRIMINATE women - what we want is de-facto gender democracy.

Third: the lengthy process of re-distributing paid and unpaid work must be speeded up. For this purpose the obligation to share household, childrearing and caring tasks in a spirit of partnership shall become part of the marriage and family law, and non-compliance shall be a matrimonial offence.

Fourth: Austria will step up her efforts to earmark a defined part of the funds budgeted for development cooperation for women's projects. Moreover, we intend to take measures that will facilitate and assist the setting-up of women's projects in the individual countries.

Fifth: I am proud to say that we have already fulfilled one of the recommendations in the Platform for Action. Austria will grant asylum to women who have been the victims of sexual violence. This is particularly important in view of the atrocities currently committed in the former Yugoslavia.

Madam Chair,

Through our joint efforts this 4th World Conference on Women shall result in the empowerment of women throughout the world. Even though the prevailing situations will differ, all governments ought to feel committed to safeguarding the right of women to equality in all spheres of life. We must join forces in the fight against violence towards women, because violence is the worst form of discrimination. As a consequence of this conference the power of male-dominated governments to mould societies into patriarchal systems ought to be further weakened. Women account for half of humankind or - as we have learned in China - „women hold up half of the sky“ - it is high time for them to get what they are entitled to.

Thank you very much for your attention.