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Concept note for the General Debate on *Achieving gender equality, ending violence against women*

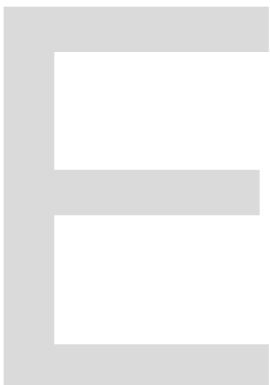
Making gender equality a reality and ending violence against women are growing concerns throughout the world. They affect all sectors of society and call for robust political action.

These two societal issues, which will be the theme of the General Debate, are very topical. They are also closely linked and deserve to be addressed in parallel. One cannot claim to achieve gender equality without first putting an end to violence against women. By the same token, the unbalanced power relations between men and women heighten women's vulnerability to violence.

2015 will mark a turning point, with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action review 20 years after its adoption at the Fourth World Conference on Women. This visionary roadmap for gender equality and women's empowerment contains comprehensive commitments, including in the area of violence against women. The review (Beijing +20) will provide an opportunity for States and the wider public to gauge progress and concrete improvements made to the lives of women and girls over the past 20 years. It will also take stock of those commitments that have not been honoured and the reasons why in order to rekindle the political will needed to achieve the set objectives.

In addition, gender equality – recognized as a factor of sustainable development and a benchmark of progress – will certainly be at the centre of discussions on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is worth recalling that the MDGs, adopted in 2000, did not contain quantifiable targets for combating violence against women - the famous "missing goal". There is no doubt today that this goal must also feature as a strategic development priority.

One in every three women will be a victim of gender-based violence at some point in her life. This type of violence spares no country and is even more rampant in States prone to conflict. Such violence deprives women and girls of their dignity, violates their fundamental rights, reduces their productivity and prevents them from realizing their full potential. Violence against women has serious consequences for peace and security and hampers economic development and poverty-reduction efforts.



Legislation and public policy play a pivotal role in any action aimed at achieving gender equality and ending the various forms of violence against women. Parliaments and parliamentarians must be at the centre of such action. As lawmakers, they have a responsibility to weed out discriminatory provisions and identify loopholes in existing laws. The adoption of a wide range of measures can help foster women's economic empowerment and participation in decision-making - whether in the public or private sphere - starting in the family.

Members of parliament also have a responsibility to ensure that prevailing legislation and policies are in line with applicable international standards. Two thirds of all countries have passed domestic violence and sexual assault laws. This is a relatively recent development that still requires some fine-tuning, but a number of promising practices are already emerging. In fact, some of the best laws and policies in this area will be recognized at the 2014 Future Policy Award prize-giving ceremony, jointly organized by the World Future Council, the IPU and UN Women, during the 131st IPU Assembly.

It goes without saying that laws and policies on their own are not enough. They have to be implemented, which requires the allocation of adequate resources. The onus is on governments and parliaments to ensure that all laws and policies are effectively followed up and enforced. Parliamentarians can play a meaningful role here by exercising their oversight and budgetary powers.

As opinion shapers, members of parliament can also make a difference in terms of preventing inequality and gender-based violence. This will require sensitization policies and campaigns aimed at transforming society, notably with a view to breaking stereotypes and social and cultural patterns, and creating an environment that is conducive to gender equality. Prevention must also be premised on State and civil society initiatives. These include inter alia: organizing media campaigns or targeted sensitization programmes; promoting gender equality among young people, in particular through school curricula and social media campaigns; involving men and boys in these initiatives to bring about a change in behaviour and mentality; and showcasing a new social construct of non-violent men and relationships built on respect.

While some progress has been made on this front a lot still remains to be done. Preventive measures – although several and varied – tend to be taken only occasionally and on a small scale. We must be able to evaluate their effectiveness and single out the most promising ones that can be adapted and implemented on a larger scale. As we know, gains remain very fragile and are jeopardized by conservative trends that advocate for maintaining the status quo.

All of these issues must occupy a central place in political action at the local and national levels in order to make gender equality a reality and end violence against women. They will also feature prominently in forthcoming major events on gender equality and sustainable development. The General Debate at the 131st Assembly will offer parliamentarians an opportunity to exchange their views on these fundamental issues with a view to strengthening their action at home and crafting together a message from parliaments and the IPU that will feed into international processes and forums.

Leading questions for the debate:

- On what types of gender equality and violence against women should we focus, as a matter of priority, in the coming years?
- What priority actions should be taken to achieve gender equality and put an end to violence against women?
- How can effective and lasting implementation of laws and policies in this area be guaranteed?
- How can MPs, as opinion shapers, help change social and cultural patterns and redress gender inequality?
- What innovative partnerships can be envisaged to achieve gender equality and end violence against women?
What initiatives and strategies have proved successful or have the potential to effect real change? What are the obstacles and how to overcome them?