



## **Caring for future generations: Women in leadership positions and the girl child**

Third Annual Meeting of Women Speakers of Parliament organised by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the occasion of the 51st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

New York, 2 March 2007

United Nations Headquarters, Room 8

### **Session two**

#### **Making Parliament more responsive to the needs of children and in particular the girl child**

**Remarks by Ms. Christine Egerszegi-Obrist,  
President of the National Council, Switzerland**

Madam Vice President of the Governing Council,  
Fellow women Speakers of Parliament,  
Mr. Secretary General,  
Excellencies,  
Fellow parliamentarians,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

We meet here today to reflect on ways to heighten parliamentary awareness about the needs of our young people, the girl child in particular, and to increase their participation in parliamentary life.

To open the discussion, permit me to present a few ideas and reflections based on experience in my own country, Switzerland.

In Switzerland, as is probably the case in all countries, the Speaker of Parliament does not vote, unless it is to break a tie. The Speaker does participate, however, in committee discussions where the dossiers for parliamentary deliberation are prepared. In setting parliamentary agendas, in consultation with their bureaux, Speakers are also in a position to schedule items they consider important, including those that pertain to children. Speakers, in short, are ideally situated for the purpose of heightening a parliament's awareness about or focusing its attention on specific issues. This means that as women Speakers, we have the ability to improve the intergenerational dialogue and attune our politicians to the needs of our youth.

#### **How can women Speakers provide a voice for children in parliament?**

We can and must commit to addressing needs at various levels:

1. *At the level of education*
  - All children—regardless of sex, origin, or financial means—should have the right to a good education. It is education that enables children to develop, providing capital with which to build satisfying lives and the best weapon against unemployment and poverty. What constitutes a good education must be continually adapted to current and future demands. We also need extra-scholastic structures to provide childcare for mothers who need, or wish, to keep their jobs.
  - Boys and girls should have the same rights and opportunities for personal development—at school, in their daily lives, and in their access to professional careers. These are issues we will be addressing during a special parliamentary discussion on 8 March of this year.

2. *At the level of legislation and law enforcement: we must commit to promoting the health and welfare of our children by combating:*
- Violence against mothers and children: a new law entered into force on 1 January.
  - Forced marriage: in Switzerland, marriage can be denied in cases where one of the partners is being forced. When marriages are arranged abroad, however, we have no official influence. Discussions are currently underway on possibilities for a broader definition of forced marriage in our civil and penal codes.
  - Child pornography: we have established a national centre for coordinating efforts to combat pornography and protect children. A contract between Internet providers and the Association for the Protection of Children has enabled us to block 2,500 child pornography websites. A bill to this effect is under consideration, but we should be frank: much more remains to be done, especially with respect to the Internet.
  - Trafficking in human beings, particularly children: the new Council of Europe Convention on this subject should be ratified. The law exists.
  - Victim protection: existing law is being reviewed.
  - Parental child abduction: penal code amendments are being prepared; the welfare of the child should be the central focus.
  - Genital mutilation: This is an issue affecting approximately 6000 – 7000 girls in Switzerland. The Swiss civil and penal codes punish genital mutilation, which is also legally recognized as grounds for asylum.
  - The greatest danger for our children is that abuses like these often occur in multiples with cumulative effect.
3. *At the economic level.*
- Combating poverty is essential, particularly when it affects children, and this issue is currently receiving considerable attention in my country. While we provide very good social protection programmes in support of the elderly, the disabled, and the victims of accidents, illness, etc., the benefits provided are partially financed by employee contributions. Given current demographic trends (an aging population, fewer children) the burden of this financing weighs the heaviest on young families. Last Monday we discussed the possibility of additional benefits for families living on inadequate wages.

### **What mechanisms exist or can be developed to strengthen the involvement of children in parliament?**

Several provisions of the Swiss Constitution refer to or take account of the role of youth—starting with the Preamble, which alludes to our responsibility toward future generations. Article 41 provides that children and young people should be encouraged to become independent and socially responsible members of society and that support should be provided for their social, cultural, and political integration.

In order to benefit from these constitutional rights in their daily lives children and young people must be actively involved in all matters that directly affect them.

It was for this reason that in 1991 Switzerland initiated the first of its federal youth parliamentary sessions at federal level. Each year, these sessions bring together some 200 young people from throughout the country and provide a rich source of contacts between different linguistic regions. Now a significant element of Switzerland's youth policy, these sessions give young people access to the political process and encourage them to engage in civic life.

Some of our nongovernmental organizations, and in particular the Swiss Council for Youth Activities (CSAJ), have made particular efforts to involve young women in political life. The CSAJ's "*femme puissance deux*" (women to the power of two) mentoring project has been supporting the political engagement and civic involvement of young women since 1999.

The "*femme puissance deux*" project consists of establishing special individual relationships between young women and women experienced in specialized economic, administrative or political fields. The project

promotes knowledge sharing, networking and personal development. Several women parliamentarians have participated in this project, allowing young women to gain first-hand exposure to the daily activity and responsibilities of a seasoned politician.

In the short term, this project gives young women access to the public affairs arena as well as motivation and opportunity to develop and gain in self-confidence. Over the longer term, its main objective is to promote equal access for women to positions of high responsibility, enable women to participate more in political life, and ensure balanced, if not equal, representation of the two sexes within our political decision making bodies.

To conclude, I should like to speak not only as President of the Swiss National Council but also as a mother and grandmother. I am convinced that initiating young people into political life is a matter of long-term significance—as a means not only for them to help shape society and realize their own full potential, but also to preserve the vitality of our national democratic traditions. The measures taken to this end, I would stress, should give particular attention to the participation of young women, whose visibility in political spheres is even lower than that of young men. Efforts in support of this cause in Switzerland are essential to our future and will continue.

Our theme for today is “making Parliament more responsive to the needs of children and in particular the girl child”. Permit me to propose a slight change of wording. In my view it is not enough to make parliaments “responsive”. When it comes to the welfare of our children, and particularly the daily lives of our girl children, we must make them proactive as well. Nearly all parliamentary decisions will have consequences for our children—positive as well as negative. Let us bear that in mind; our responsibility is great.

I thank you for your attention.