

Opening Remarks during the 13th Summit of Women Speakers of Parliament President Wolfgang Sobotka, President of the Austrian National Council

[transcript of English translation]

Madam President,
Speakers of Parliament,
President Pacheco,
Director General Waly,
President Cederfelt,
Special Representative from the UN Madam Patten,
And the IPU Secretary General,

Before the pandemic broke out, the Austrian Parliament was chosen to host the 13th Women's Summit and 5th World Conference of Speakers of Parliament. Austria in the past, and even today, is an ideal spot to have conferences and dialogue. Austria wants to support dialogue between nations. The country wants to live up to its role as a builder of bridges as it has in the past and will continue to in the future.

Now because of the pandemic, we have only been able to meet virtually in this past year. But for parliaments, it's important to be able to meet face-to-face. Not just to get together, but also to have these side discussions. This way we can find a common path forward. Therefore I am very pleased to see that you have taken the step to come to Vienna despite the pandemic, despite the restrictions that unfortunately we are still facing, and despite the current environment that we're in. I would like to say thank you from the bottom of my heart to IPU President Pacheco. We're been working to prepare for this Summit for months, so thank you very much.

I would like to give regards from the Second President of our National Council. She would have liked to be here today, but is dealing with the long-term effects of COVID-19 and is currently undergoing rehabilitation. You can see how serious this disease is. The Second President Bures would like to give her deepest regards to our colleagues today. She's written and said that she would have loved to be with us today, and next time she will definitely be with us.

So the pandemic is not yet over. The effects are things we're going to be feeling for a long time in the future. Parliaments will be talking about it for a long time in the future. We'll be talking about the social and the economic effects of it, as well as the political ones. There's a lot that we've learned from it—good things and bad

things. But, something that is certainly very positive to come out of this is the fact that we've been able to develop a vaccine so quickly. It's through global efforts and we've been able to distribute it out to people as well. It's because the global community was able to pull together for this that it was possible; and that is the way we will be able to tackle future problems as well. And that is why inter-parliamentary dialogue, dialogue between MPs, is indispensable.

There's always pressing issues that need to be discussed and to make decisions about. An age-old question that is still current is gender equality. That is also the case in our parliaments. If you look back over the last hundred years, you can see that there's been some progress made. Here in Austria, women didn't used to have the right to vote but nowadays 40% of our MPs are women. But we still haven't reached parity to fully represent our society. As has already been mentioned, about one quarter of MPs are women. Although there have been some setbacks, we are still taking steps forward.

Now as a member of the male gender, I can't really share your personal experiences or know about those. But I think it's also important for men to pay attention to this, to understand what is necessary and to understand why gender parity is necessary. That's especially true when it comes to the issues that we face today. You can see about half of our female members of parliament have been threatened with violence, rape or death. And this is because of their sex. They are reduced to their appearance. They are subject to sexual harassment, and if we look at that then we know that there is still much to be done. It is from the male segment of society that this work needs to be done. We have to do that. We can't just condemn it. We have to say that it's our behavior; behavior from men towards women.

That is what needs to change. We need to look into the future, we need to work on these changes together, and we need to come up with legislation to punish that type of behavior. We need to promote and protect women the world over. That is one of our biggest tasks as parliamentarians.

Now, we also need to counter violence against women and girls. We need to pay credence to the fact that we need to offer protection to women and girls. This is something that has already been mentioned, but we even see that inequality through the pandemic has increased. 70% of care workers are women.

Homeschooling who did that during the pandemic? Who was taking care of the house? Who was taking care of all those responsibilities? It was mostly women. Who was taking care of people at home? Who was doing all of this work at home and therefore had less time to devote to their paid job? It's women. So it is therefore up to us to stop this development in its tracks and then to also undo it.

Despite the pandemic, parliaments can take steps here. We know that the Istanbul Convention is something that not only has to be signed, but we have to live it. That

means we have to work to prevent, we have to work to protect victims, we have to have effective punitive punishments for perpetrators. And that can really only happen if we change our behavior.

So thank you for coming today. Thank you, despite these major challenges, for coming today. We hope that you have fruitful discussions, that you take away great memories of Austria and Vienna, and especially that you have these discussions about equality in your parliaments. We're not going to tire of it, of having these discussions and living them as well.