

PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE BLACK SEA ECONOMIC COOPERATION

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**THE NINETEENTH PLENARY SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

REPORT

ON

**“WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC,
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE”**

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. In the last decades of XX century important progress has been made towards achieving equality between women and men. Legislation that promises equal opportunities for women and respect for their human rights has been adopted, as well as national machineries to ensure mainstreaming of gender perspective in all spheres of society have been established in many countries. Yet women's equal access to resources is still restricted and their opportunities for higher education, training and employment are concentrated in limited fields. A "glass ceiling" continues to bar women's advancement in business, government and politics.

2. Full and equal participation of women in political, economic, social and cultural life, at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex are priority objectives of the international community and on the agenda of many international and local organisations. Recognising that the achievement of equal and full participation of women in all spheres of activity constitutes an inseparable part of political, economic, social and cultural development of all countries, taking into consideration that social progress requires active participation of women in promoting international peace and cooperation, the PABSEC has decided to take up the subject on "Women's Participation in Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Life".

3. Within this context, the Parliamentary Assembly notes with satisfaction, that it is for the first time during its nine years history that the PABSEC is discussing this major issue at a time when two women chair two National Parliaments: Mrs. Nino Burdjanadze, the Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia, and Mrs. Eugeniya Ostapchuk, the Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova.

4. Contributions for the Report and Recommendation have been received from the national delegations of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece and Romania. Reference materials and statistical data used for the preparation of the Report was obtained by the International Secretariat mainly through the Internet.

II. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

5. Issues of women's empowerment and their full and equal participation in public life are human rights issues. Every woman is entitled to the realisation of all human rights - civil, political, economic, social and cultural - on equal terms with men, free from discrimination. Women also enjoy certain human rights specifically linked to their status as women.

6. **The Council of Europe** has taken steps at different levels in order to promote equality between women and men. *The European Convention on Human Rights* prohibits any distinction based on grounds of sex. *The European Social Charter* provides a number of specific rights for women, namely equal remuneration, protection of mothers and working women and the social and economic protection of women and children. *The Additional Protocol of 1988* included the right to equal opportunities and treatment with regard to employment and careers, without discrimination based on sex. Furthermore, the

revised Social Charter contains a specific non-discrimination clause on a variety of grounds, one of which is sex. Apart from these legal instruments the Council of Europe is committed to a whole range of other measures and activities to promote equality between women and men.

7. Since the entry into force of the *Treaty of Amsterdam* (1999), the promotion of gender equality figures among the tasks of **the European Union**. Article 13 of the Treaty entitles to combat discrimination based, among other grounds, on sex. Article 141 is the legal basis for measures for equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment. Comprehensive gender equality legislation has been elaborated relating to the application of the principle of equal pay for men and women, on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions etc.

8. A number international documents, partially or completely, are devoted to the human rights of women: *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), the *UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (1969), the *UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1976), the *UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1976), the *UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (1981), the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (2000), the *UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education* (1960), the *ILO Equal Remuneration Convention* (No. 100), the *ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention* (No. 111), the *ILO Employment Policy Convention* (No. 122).

9. The most important international document in the field of women's rights is the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women* of the **United Nations**. It contained principles and standards relating to the rights of women in all spheres of family life and of society, and aimed to end the discrimination that denies or limits women's equality in political, economic, social, cultural and civic fields.

10. *The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action*, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women by representatives from 189 countries, reflect a new international commitment to the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere. The Platform defines strategic objectives and spells out actions to be taken by Governments, the international community, non-governmental organisations and the private sector for the removal of the existing obstacles.

III. LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK ON GENDER EQUALITY IN THE BSEC MEMBER STATES

11. Legislation of all the BSEC Member Countries, as it is shown in the examples below, on the whole, guarantees equal rights for men and women and non-discrimination in all spheres of society. The principle of equality is enshrined first of all in the Constitutions of the Member States. Major reforms have already been implemented in the Civil, Penal and Labour Codes and in other legal acts of many Member Countries during the recent years.

12. Despite legislation, that is traditionally gender neutral, in practice, the issue of gender equality has not been resolved satisfactory, and there are still various areas requiring revision or updating. In many countries there is currently no specific domestic

law addressing non-discrimination between women and men and the concept of equal opportunities.

13. All the BSEC Member States had ratified *the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Woman* (CEDAW) in the period of 1980-1995. A number of other international documents, having provisions for women's rights had been also ratified by the Member Countries.

Albania

14. The new Albanian Constitution of 1998 foresees equal rights for all citizens under the law and the principle of non-discrimination. Reforms have already been implemented in the Civil Code and Procedure, the Penal Code and Procedure, the Labour Code and the Family Code. Albania has ratified the CEDAW and other principal international human rights instruments. Albanian legislation, in general, does not discriminate against women, but according to 1999 UNDP report there are different areas needing improvement. It foresees the concept of equality between men and women, but not yet the concept of equal opportunities.

15. In Albania "Women and Youth" was established as a sub-committee of the Parliamentary Commission on Social Issues with the purpose of protecting and promoting women's rights in the legislative field. The Governmental institutional mechanism working for the advancement of women is the Committee "Women and Family", which is implementing governmental policies for women.

Armenia

16. Under the new Constitution (1995) the equality of men and women is guaranteed by several provisions. Men and women enjoy the same rights at work, in both public and private enterprises. However, Armenian legislation, on the whole, does not contain any specific provisions on discrimination against women. After ratification of the CEDAW in 1993, in Armenia there have been no major changes in legislation to promote women's rights and its principles, and the Equal Remuneration Convention have not been incorporated in the Labour Code. Although it prohibits gender discrimination in payment of wages, the Code fails to stipulate equal pay for work of equal value. On 8 July 1991, Parliament adopted a resolution "on urgent measures for the protection of women, maternity and childhood, and the strengthening of the family". Under the resolution, women and mothers have been granted supplementary rights in the fields of work and social security.

17. In 1998, the Armenian Government adopted national program on the "Improvement of Women's Situation and the Enhancement of their role in Society in 1998-2000", which is in line with the equality guaranteed in the Constitution, CEDAW and the Beijing Conference. But the Government didn't take necessary measures to implement the program and the national machinery on improvement of the plight of women is not set up yet. There is no special governmental or parliamentary structure dealing with discrimination against women.

Azerbaijan

18. Domestic legislation in Azerbaijan reflects the main provisions of the CEDAW, ratified by the Parliament in 1995. The Constitution of Azerbaijan guarantees equal rights and freedoms irrespective of sex. The Criminal Code punishes prohibiting a woman from participation in political, social and cultural activity. The Labour Code states that it is prohibited to refuse to employ women because they are pregnant or have children under 3

years of age. Women in Azerbaijan, according to legislation, enjoy the same rights as men, including the right to participate in all aspects of economic and social life.

19. In 1998, a national institution on women's issues called "The State Commission on Women's Issues" was established according to the Decree of the President of Azerbaijan. Within the Cabinet of Ministers, there are gender focal points in the Departments of Science, Culture, Education and Social Problems. The President issued a special decree "On Measures to Reinforce Women's Role in Azerbaijan" in 1998 and the Prime Minister assigned National Plan of Action. Another Decree was issued in March 2000 on "Implementation of the State Policy on Women in the Republic of Azerbaijan", which foresees equal participation of women and men in the high level decision-making positions in all the State bodies.

Bulgaria

20. The basic provisions of non-discrimination law between women and men are covered by the Bulgarian legislation: women enjoy civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights identical with those of men. But it is obvious that *de jure* equality of women with men does not automatically lead to their *de facto* equality in all spheres of life, despite the official policy aimed at the strict implementation of the principle of equality of the sexes. According to the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation, one of the striking deficiencies in Bulgarian legislation is the fact that there is no formal legal definition of gender discrimination, nor has a working definition been established through the case law.

21. According to the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, in 2000, in Bulgaria, there have been no special mechanisms for the advancement of women. Parallel to the process of elaborating a draft law on equal opportunities, a working group at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy elaborated a model for such a mechanism and the respective law.

Georgia

22. In the last years the Georgian Government has taken legislative measures to improve its human rights records. Before and after acceding to the CEDAW in 1994, in the context of its ongoing legislative reform, Georgia enacted a number of laws, which facilitate implementation of the provisions of the Convention. New legal instruments are expected to help to secure *de jure* equality of women and men. However, there is no specific legislation, prohibiting discrimination against women on the basis of gender or marital status.

23. In Georgia some governmental and parliamentary bodies work *inter alia* on the issue of discrimination against women: Parliamentary Subcommittee on Protection of Mother and Child, and the Children and Mother's Health Protection Department.

Greece

24. Greece, a Member of the European Union, fully endorses and supports all actions promoting equal opportunities between men and women in employment, development, social and political life. Legislation in Greece recognises the principle of equality, in accordance with article 119 of the Treaty Establishing the European Community and directives. Greece ratified the CEDAW without any reservations in 1983, and in its framework, as well in the framework of obligations under the Council of Europe and the European Union, the Government of Greece promoted in Parliament and passed laws that brought about profound change in the position of Greek women. However, despite the

strengthening of women's position within the Greek society, the issue of gender inequality continues to persist in everyday life.

25. Appropriate institutional framework was established in Greece after signing the CEDAW, to implement gender equality. Measures were introduced to promote equal opportunities between women and men in order to increase the awareness of all institutions to equality issues.

Moldova

26. While the Constitution and existing legislation enshrined equality between women and men, and no discriminatory provisions were contained in the law, the Government of Moldova recognises that there is a need for further legislative reform, as well as for the creation of adequate mechanisms for the realisation of women's rights. New legislation is being drafted to cover labour issues, family, criminal and civil matters. Women parliamentarians, together with governmental bodies and NGOs provided support to harmonise these reforms with the provisions of the CEDAW. Moldova's legislation covered the rights of women, but lacked a prohibition of, or sanctions against, discrimination against women. Although Moldova ratified the CEDAW in 1994, the Constitution, however, does not contain any specific legal provision concerning the relationship between the domestic law and international treaties and conventions on human rights. As a result, international legal provisions and standards on women's human rights are not directly incorporated into the national legislation.

Romania

27. Since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, Romania undertook efforts to implement the CEDAW and to harmonise Romanian law and policy on gender equality and women's equal opportunities with the provisions of the Convention and to bring legislation in line with European and international standards on human rights protection. In 2000 a Government Decision regarding the approval of the National Plan on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men was adopted. The law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, containing specific provisions on equal opportunities in employment, was adopted by the Senate in October 2001 and is waiting to be discussed in the Chamber of Deputies. In addition to the positive aspects of the democratic transformation of Romania since 1989, the economic and social costs of the transformation had created some difficulties in the full implementation of the international norms on women's rights.

28. After the Fourth Conference on Woman's Rights in Beijing in 1995, a national mechanism for the advancement of women was set up in Romania. The Department of Advancement of Woman and Family Policies within the Ministry for Labour and Social Protection – at Governmental level, the Sub-Commission for Equal Opportunities – at the Parliamentary level. A Department for Child, Woman and Family Policies – within the Ombudsperson institution, the Consultative Inter-Ministerial Commission on Equal Opportunities between Men and Women.

Russian Federation

29. According to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, all are equal before the law and court, the State guarantees equal human rights and freedoms irrespective of sex, men and women have equal rights and freedoms and equal opportunities to take advantage of those rights and freedoms. Among other legislative acts, containing provisions on equal rights, the Code of Labour Laws, the Federal Law and the Family Code. In 1997

the State Duma of the Russian Federation supported “The Concept of Law - Making Activity to Ensure Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women”. The Russian Federation ratified a number of international documents, including the CEDAW, which prohibit any form of discrimination against women. However inequalities, increased in the transition period, still exist.

30. Despite abundance of regulations prohibiting any form of discrimination in the Russian Federation, however, there are no mechanisms for their implementation. The following governmental and parliamentary structures work in the field of protecting women’s rights: Committee on the Affairs of Women, Family and Youth in the State Duma, a Committee on the Issues of Social Policy in the Federation Council, a Commission on the Problems of Women’s Status – on the federal level in the executive system.

Turkey

31. The principle of the equality of men and women has been adopted in the Constitution and in the laws of Turkey. The Turkish Labour Law states that there shall be no difference in the wages paid to men and woman for work of the same nature carried out in the same work place. Equal treatment of genders was provided by the Civil Code. Recently a commission has been authorised to prepare a draft bill, sensitive to gender, which takes into consideration the amendments made in the laws related to the family in European countries, and also international agreements signed by the Republic of Turkey. The Commission completed its studies and announced the new Turkish Civil Draft Bill in 1998. Reservations which Turkey had formerly expressed regarding certain articles of CEDAW were removed in 1999. According to the Report “Women 2000”, prepared by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, although CEDAW was ratified by Turkey, domestic legislation has not been changed to comply with CEDAW requirements. There are no legal provisions punishing discrimination on the basis of sex in Constitution or other laws. The Civil, Criminal and Labour Codes have many discriminatory provisions. However, certain steps complying with CEDAW have been taken: the Supreme Court annulled the law on spousal permission for women to work in 1990, declaration of income tax by the “family head” was abolished in 1998. Instead, women and men can declare individual incomes, etc. In the beginning of 2002, 1030 Articles of the Turkish Civil Law have been amended. These amendments have granted new rights to women and secured gender-equality in all fields.

32. The General Directorate of Women’s Status and Problems was established on 25 October 1990 within the framework of CEDAW and the decisions of the Third World Conference on Women. Its mandate is to ensure the rightful status of women and gender equality in the social, economic, cultural and political context. The Directorate has been directly affiliated to the Office of the Prime Minister since 1991. In addition, a Parliamentary Commission was established in 1998 to assess the status of women within the framework of CEDAW.

Ukraine

33. After the Ukrainian Government approved and signed the Beijing Platform of action, equal rights and opportunities for men and women became incorporated into the authorities’ agenda. The new Constitution with gender-sensitive language was adopted in 1996, where equal rights are ensured by providing women with equal opportunities in public, political, and cultural activity, in obtaining education and vocational training, in

work and remuneration, by creating conditions that enable women to combine work and motherhood etc. In addition to Constitutional guarantees, the CEDAW was ratified by Ukraine in 1980 and entered into force in 1981. The dramatic economic crisis resulting from the transition of the country to a democratic market-oriented society and from structural adjustments endangered the *de facto* enjoyment of the human rights of woman.

34. In Ukraine the Sub-committee on Legal Support for the Rights of Women, the Family and the Child operates under the Parliament of Ukraine. Further, the Sector for Women, Protection of Family, Maternity and Childhood operates under the Cabinet of Ministers. The sector was created as a body to develop measures to ensure social and legal guarantees for women's equal opportunities in the sphere of employment and family. However, mechanism for realisation of women's rights in Ukraine is not an effective mechanism of eradicating gender equality.

IV. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

35. At present, situation of women in the Black Sea region should be viewed within the context of problems, generally encountered in the areas of current economic, political and social situation in the Member Countries, as well as within the context of high economic and social costs of restructuring to the market economy. Among the most acute issues during the last decade were economic deterioration, decline in real incomes, spread of poverty, unemployment, massive migration and a sharp worsening of living standards for what appeared to be the majority of the population in the transition countries. All these problems had a serious impact on women in their roles in the political, economic, social and cultural life.

A. Women and the labour market

36. Study of the situation in the labour markets of the BSEC Member States reveals some general trends in the field of female participation in the labour force. In the communist past, women in transition region had high rates of participation in the labour force. In contrast to the case in Western economies, women in transition countries usually had full-time jobs throughout their working lives, since the planned economy required a large workforce. The transition had changed the labour landscape in the region enormously and weakened job security for both women and men. The rapid process of change and adjustment in all sectors has led to increased unemployment, with particular impact on women, leading to their marginalisation in economic and social activities. The high rate of unemployment among women was primarily due to the rapid restructuring and privatisation of industries employing large proportion of female labour.

37. For example, according to official statistics, in 1999, 7.5% of men and 16.3% of women of working age were registered as unemployed in Armenia, while 60% of people having higher education were women. In Bulgaria, according to official statistics, as of March 2000, the unemployment rate was 18.75%, 54% of which were women. In Georgia, as of May 2000, there were 105,873 officially registered unemployed persons, 60,4000 (55%) of whom were women. According to data by the Ukrainian Employment Service, as of July 1999, in Ukraine there were 1,144,000 officially registered unemployed persons (4.06%), the majority of whom - 70% - were women, and 70% of unemployed women had higher education.

38. Legislation of all the Member Countries prohibits gender discrimination in the labour market. Although many regulations and provisions legally protect women's

labour, in reality these provisions are not properly enforced. Concerning discrimination against women in this field, the following may be noted: the principle of equal pay for equal work is not always observed, especially in private sector; women face discriminatory treatment on the grounds of gender and age; women work mostly in the low-paid public sectors of education, health care, in public administration, and not in management and leadership positions; discrimination is more obvious in the business sector, where, for example, women receive fewer loans than men, etc.

B. Women's participation in power and decision-making process

39. Legislation guarantees equal rights for women and men in such areas as fundamental rights and freedoms, the right to elect and to be elected to governmental bodies, participation in decision-making process, etc. However, there is a discrepancy between the legal theory and actual practice, when analysing women's access to decision-making positions in political life.

40. With collapse of the communist regime in many of the BSEC Member Countries, in addition to the increased social and economic burden, women lost representation at the political level. The rule, which reserved a quota for all governmental positions for women, vanished with totalitarianism. As a result in post-communist countries, from 1987, the percentage of women in parliaments has decreased, For example, from 28% to 5.7% in Albania, from 34% to 10.7% and 5.7% in the lower and upper houses respectively in Romania. Parliament was 33% female in the Soviet Union, but in many of the newly independent states the figure is now under 10%.

41. Over the last two decades the **Inter-Parliamentary Union** has been debating the issue on women in politics on a regular basis and publishing studies, covering main aspects of women's advancement. According to the data issued on 4 February 2002 the number and percentage of women in the PABSEC National Parliament are as follows:

Country	Lower or single House				Upper House or Senate			
	Elections	Seats	Women	% W	Elections	Seats	Women	% W
Albania	06. 2001	140	8	5.7	---	---	---	---
Armenia	05. 1999	131	4	3.1	---	---	---	---
Azerbaijan	11. 2000	124	13	10.5	---	---	---	---
Bulgaria	06. 2001	240	63	26.2	---	---	---	---
Georgia	10. 1999	235	17	7.2	---	---	---	---
Greece	04. 2000	300	26	8.7	---	---	---	---
Moldova	02. 2001	101	13	12.9	---	---	---	---
Romania	11. 2000	345	37	10.7	11. 2000	140	8	5.7
Russian Federation	12. 1999	449	34	7.6	N.A.	178	6	3.4
Turkey	04. 1999	550	23	4.2	---	---	---	---
Ukraine	03. 1998	450	35	7.8	---	---	---	---

42. Women's participation in government is rather weak. For example, currently there is no woman minister in Armenia. The Bulgarian Government includes two women ministers – the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labour and Social Policy and the Minister of Environment out of total seventeen. In Greece there is one female member of the Cabinet – the Minister for Environment, Regional Planning and Public Works, out of total seventeen. The present Romanian Cabinet has five female members out of total twenty-seven: the Minister of European Integration, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Small and Medium-Sized and Cooperation Enterprises, the Minister of Education and Research and the Minister Health and Family. In Russia there is only one woman in the

Government – the Vice-Premier responsible for social policy and labour relations. There is no woman represented in the present Government of Turkey, and only eight women have been members of Government since 1935. In the Ukrainian Government there is one woman – the Minister of Justice.

43. Women are less involved in political parties. For example, women led only 4 out of 72 political parties, registered in Armenia in 1999. In Azerbaijan, only 2 political parties out of 40 have women serving as leaders in 2000. In Georgia, in the 1999 parliamentary elections, 4 out of the 39 participating political parties and blocs were chaired by women. In Ukraine, as of 1999, women led 6 out of 71 political parties.

44. A low percentage of women are represented in business and banking sector. For example, in Albania, the distribution of managers in private businesses in 1999 was 82% male and 18% female. In Armenia there are many women in the banking sector, but most of them carry out routine banking operations and office work, and usually do not hold top management positions in banks.

45. The growing strength of non-governmental sector, particularly women's organisations has become a driving force for change. NGOs have played an important advocacy role in advancing legislation or mechanisms to ensure the promotion of women. Women are very active in the NGO sector, especially in the last few years, and women head many NGOs. International women's non-governmental organisations are active on behalf of women and have always been a powerful influence in promoting women's rights. For example, in Armenia there are more than 30 women's organisations, which promote the political, social and cultural rights of women, and women head about 30% of active NGOs. In Georgia, prior to the Beijing Conference there were 34 women's NGOs. Their number increased after the Conference and now exceeds 70. Georgian women are actively involved in this sphere and are represented at the decision-making level. In Azerbaijan, after the Beijing Conference, the process of setting up NGOs intensified and there were about 40 women's NGOs in 2000. In Russia women are leading more than half of public organisations. About 600 women's organisations were registered in the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation (approximately 6% of the total number of public organisations in the RF) in 2000.

46. Women play a very important role in the field of education, public health, as well as in some fields of science. A significant number of teachers in higher educational institutions are women. According to the information from the State Committee on Statistics of Azerbaijan, the percentages of women and men working in the educational sector in 1998 were 66.9% and 33.1% respectively, and women comprise roughly 5% of the rectors of the state and private higher educational institutions. In Armenia, in 1997, out of 2.373 scientists working in the National Academy of Sciences, 1020 were women; in the 1999/2000 academic year, 46% of all teachers in state universities were women (2.759). In Ukraine the number of academic staff gradually decreased from 1994-1997, and, in this field, men were dismissed twice as quickly as women. As a result, the proportion of women in academics increased, amounting to 43% in 1998. Women make up 13.7% of doctors of science, and 30.8% among candidates of sciences, but only 2.6% of academics at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. In Turkey 17.828 (33%) of total of 53.805 academic staff in universities are women.

V. CONCLUSIONS

47. Excellent legal framework for the advancement of women, neither automatically guarantee, nor lead to the realisation of non-discrimination and equality of rights and opportunities between men and women. One of the main gender concerns today is the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality with regard to access to employment, business and social services.

48. Women's rights guaranteed by the legislation in all areas of political, economic and social life can be fully realised only under the condition of steady rise in the standard of living, free access to education, health care, culture and other social services, with elimination of the main reasons, which give rise to feminisation of poverty.

49. Perhaps the most serious barrier to women's equal participation in decision-making and leadership is the presence of stereotypical attitudes towards the gender roles of women and man which create a pervasive climate of discrimination and entrenched stereotypical ideas relating the role of women in public life. Our societies are bound by many stereotypes according to which the proper, traditional role of woman is at home, taking care of husband and children. Negative stereotyping of women and men, including stereotyping through the media which is the basic sender of social messages, reinforces the tendency for political decision-making to remain the domain of men. The traditional working patterns of many political parties and governmental structures continue to be barriers to women's participation in public life. Women may be discouraged from seeking political office by discriminatory attitudes and practices, family and child-care responsibilities etc.

50. Although women make up at least half of the electorate in all the countries and have the right to vote and hold office, as well as despite the widespread movement towards democratisation in the BSEC Member Countries, women are largely underrepresented at all levels of government, especially in ministerial and other executive bodies, and have made little progress in attaining political power in legislative bodies. The low proportion of women among economic and political decision-makers at the local, national, regional and international levels reflects structural and attitudinal barriers that need to be addressed through positive measures.

51. Owing to their limited access to the traditional avenues to power, women have gained access to power through alternative structures, particularly in the NGO sector. Through non-governmental organisations women have been able to articulate their interests and concerns and have placed women's issues on the national, regional and international agendas.

52. The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of sustainable development in all areas of life. Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.

