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Statement

**by H.E. Gabriele Heinisch-Hosek
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of the Republic of Austria**

**at the 53rd Session of the United Nations
Commission on the Status of Women**

New York
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Mr Chair,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a privilege for me to address the opening session of the 53rd Commission on the Status of Women. Austria fully aligns itself with the statement made by the distinguished representative of the Czech Republic on behalf of the European Union.

The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in all areas of life is of the utmost importance on the way to achieving gender equality. Clichés and gender stereotypes still influence the way we think about the roles men and women are to assume in society.

It is also an essential element of women's and equal rights politics to ensure that responsibilities are being equally shared between women and men.

Many measures have already been taken in Austria to improve the compatibility of career and family life. By introducing a **flexible child care benefit**, families are given the opportunity to make use of child benefit according to their individual needs and wants. If both partners take up childcare responsibilities, one after the other, the benefit can be drawn for a longer period of time. We are making this additional offer to motivate more fathers to take on their share of family duties.

Reconciling work and family life is, of course, an issue for both women and men. It is important to support active fathers, and to understand and shape the roles of mothers and fathers along the lines of a modern, egalitarian relationship. The development of a so-called **papa-month** contributes towards involving fathers from right after the child's birth. As men are often the ones with higher incomes, the **income-dependent child care benefit** will motivate men to take an active interest in their children's care.

Over the coming years up to **6000 additional places in child care** will annually be provided in Austria, especially for children below the age of three in order to give women the possibility for full-time employment. The current introduction of a mandatory, free-of-charge year in kindergarten for five-year-olds is another important step to help combining in each household career and a family.

These measures should also support women's participation in the labour market, to contribute towards establishing an individual and independent income that women can live on. Especially in times of crises, like the one we are facing right now, it is important to strengthen the circumstances of those who are amongst the economically most vulnerable – namely women.

Therefore the members of the Austrian government together with the social partners have agreed to formulate a **national action plan on gender equality**. The plan is to be drafted for the duration of 5 years to supply annual reports which will serve as evaluation and planning tools. General coordination of this plan will be the task of the minister for women. The key focus is to be placed on equal rights for working women, securing opportunities on the job market, reducing the gender pay gap, and support for women in leading job positions.

The **disproportionate burden** that women face in family and domestic responsibilities, especially **in caring** for children, elder, sick or disabled family members hinders their effective participation in the labour market, their professional advancement and political activities on all levels. In the health and care sector in Austria women account for 82% of the employees. Within this sector the number of women in the medical staff is only 54%. Women do most of the private care work and thus contribute enormously to our national economies. Steps to enhance their status, also in terms of legal provisions, are therefore urgently needed.

In terms of Austrian retirement laws concerning care issues, there are plans to increase the provisions to compensate for the double workload of those women who pursue a career and take care of their children during the first seven years of their children's life. If working hours are reduced to care for a near relative, this will no longer be a reason for disadvantages in retirement terms.

There are currently discussions in Austria regarding a possible legal right to part-time employment, in cases where a near relative needs personal care, in order ensure the possibility of combining a career with being a caregiver.

In Austria, since 2002, the “family hospice leave” allows employees, most of them

women, to take a certain period of time off work, reduce their working hours or change them, in order to take palliative care of their dying relatives or seriously ill children while still maintaining their status as employees. Losses of income are - except in cases of hardship - not reimbursed.

The **HIV/AIDS** pandemic has **aggravated the feminization of care work** and its impact on the sharing of responsibilities. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the increasing feminization of the disease itself with more women and girls becoming infected. In order to reverse this alarming trend we need to step up our efforts to guarantee women's and girls' access to sexual and reproductive health information and services.

Concerning the care of HIV/AIDS patients in Austria, the private initiative ***HIVmobil***, founded in 1999, deserves a special mention. The ***HIVmobil*** specializes in HIV-specific medical care, part of home-based care, and works with highly specialized nursing staff, 50% of which are male. ***HIVmobil*** works in close cooperation with the treatment centers and other care organisations providing other aspects of home-based care. The unique feature of ***HIVmobil*** is their close cooperation with and management of interfaces between intra- and extramural care. Since 1999 185 people have been cared for at home, 54 of whom were women.

I would like to use this opportunity to invite you all to the world's biggest AIDS Charity event, which is celebrated annually in Vienna: the Life Ball. I am also proud to announce that Vienna will host the International AIDS Conference in 2010 organized by the International AIDS Society in cooperation with UNAIDS and others.

Let me close my statement by assuring you that Austria stands ready to work with other member states towards strengthening the mechanisms and structures that will allow the UN to remain a strong partner for women and men on the way to achieving gender equality.

Thank you.

