

8. World conference on women

President. — The next item is the statement by the Commission on the UN world conference on women in Beijing.

Flynn, Member of the Commission. — Mr President, may I say first of all how pleased I am to have the opportunity so soon after our return from Beijing to share with the House my first impressions regarding the outcome of the conference. Needless to say, further study and analysis will be required in order that we can all come to a final view on the degree of success that has been achieved. That will, no doubt, be arranged. I will be happy to have these further debates on this particular topic

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and to participate in whatever arrangements are made to deal with it in the House.

At this stage the Beijing conference results can on the whole be regarded as very positive. Important steps have been taken towards establishing a basis for future action on equal opportunities and the promotion of human rights and the human dignity of women. The conference itself went well on the whole and took place in a good, positive atmosphere, even if there were some dramatic moments involving certain partners from particular Islamic states. But I have to highlight that the press, I think, put more emphasis on the difficult aspects than on the positive steps forward that were taken. This was a pity. It would have been more positive if the reporting had concentrated more on the substance than on some of the fringe incidents that took place.

I would like to stress a number of the positive advances on sexual and reproductive rights, violence against women, human rights and the respect for the human dignity of women, the role of women in the economy, improved participation in decision-making, the role of the media and ~~increased gender profiling, gender targeting of development policies and~~ ~~but not least~~, the emphasis on the role and the importance of non-governmental organizations.

On the whole the approach which I highlighted on behalf of the Community as the Commission's representative was that of partnership, partnership being the key word and the key concept that we have for the future. This partnership was also very much emphasized at United Nations' level, in the context of the implementation of the Beijing platform for action. It was also highlighted by the United Nations at the very beginning of the conference. It involves a new partnership between women and men, a new partnership between the key actors, in particular the non-governmental organizations and the public authorities, and a new partnership between the north and the south, with an increased focus on social development and the key role of women in development programmes and projects.

The non-governmental organizations warmly welcomed the Commission's approach and its emphasis on partnership. The NGOs' participation was, as you know, a major issue of the conference and it is absolutely true that the conditions in which the NGO forum had to take place were extremely difficult. To put it mildly the delegates had to put up with a lot. That was unfortunate and they were quite entitled to be very critical of some of the physical aspects of the arrangements made for them. The dialogue that Mrs van Dijk and I held with them actually took place in an open, unfinished building. It was lucky that the weather was dry on that particular day. This was not always the case. To say the least, the conditions under which that session took place were bordering on dangerous.

We managed, in spite of the conditions, to have a very fruitful exchange of views and, indeed, my visit to Hualou was one of the most stimulating aspects of the whole conference. I strongly advocated freedom of expression both in the plenary session and in the discussions with the NGOs. I think that was very much appreciated by everybody present on those occasions.

More generally, the Union played a leading role in the conference and the Spanish presidency presented a comprehensive text on all the elements of the platform and was very generous in referring to the significant help that it had received from the Commission. I believe the presidency handled the matter very well on our behalf. I would like to emphasize the excellent cooperation that existed between the Commission

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Debates of the Euro

Flynn

and the representatives of Parliament who accompanied us to Beijing.

Mrs Gröner's report on the conference was a hugely important contribution right from the very beginning. I would like to thank Mrs Van Dijk and her colleagues for their support and cooperation throughout the proceedings. I say that very personally to all who accompanied us in the delegation.

I would also like it to be noted that the Union got a great deal of support from many countries around the world. The African countries were particularly supportive; as were the countries of central and eastern Europe and some of the Latin American states.

I should like to conclude by stressing the need for implementation of the platform as a follow-up to the conference. This must be our prime concern. We must give immediate effect to this very important agreement. I intend to ensure that the Commission shows its political commitment to it and will be relying on the support of Parliament in this particular respect.

The proposal for a fourth action programme on equal opportunities, which was adopted by the Commission in July, provides a good opportunity to move forward in this area. We should push for its early adoption by the Council. The Social Affairs Council will discuss the Beijing follow-up at its next meeting on 5 October. This will give the Commission an opportunity to give its own assessment of the conference. There will be a major follow-up conference, which will be held jointly with the Spanish presidency in November, to discuss the action to be taken by the Union in the light of the results of Beijing.

Finally, the forthcoming Commission communication on the gender dimension of all relevant Community policies, which will be prepared in collaboration with the group of commissioners on equal opportunities, will provide a major opportunity to develop an integrated Community approach to the implementation of the Beijing conclusions.

I look forward to having the opportunity of discussing all of these activities in full with the Committee on Women's Rights and indeed to return to the House to discuss these matters later on. So, close cooperation between all of us will be needed if the Beijing declaration and the platform of action are to lead to concrete results here in the Union.

I think that Beijing was a positive event. I think it was successful in making progress on women's issues. I look forward to that progress continuing.

(Applause)