

ODIHR.GAL/53/05
20 June 2005

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Check Against Delivery!

Seminar on Women in Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management

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Vienna 20 June, 2005



Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen.

Let me start by thanking the Swedish Government, as well as the Folke Bernadotte Academy for taking the initiative to hold this seminar, and for providing us with an opportunity to highlight issues pertaining to women, peace and security. Let me also thank Sweden for the regular and strong support my office has been receiving for our activities.

The theme you have chosen for this seminar is a crucial but often neglected part of the mandate of the OSCE and the ODIHR. Our organization was created to ensure security and stability in Europe and equal rights of women and men are essential if we are to reach this goal. Also the timing of today's event is well chosen, given the adoption, at the last Ministerial Council, of the enhanced OSCE Gender Action Plan.

Women as *victims* of violence, and especially of armed conflict – this is an obvious, and often talked about, fact. Women as *key actors* in conflict prevention and crisis management – this equally obvious fact is receiving much less attention.

The importance of involving women in peace-building efforts has been demonstrated in research that shows a connection between the status of women in a society and its level of conflict: Violent conflict is more likely to erupt in countries where women are inadequately represented in official institutions and where domestic violence against women is prevalent. This fact, however, comes close to mocking the other fact that it is young males who are most often victims of pre-conflict violence. Strengthening the role of women in society and making full use of their knowledge and expertise, therefore, promotes peace and contributes to conflict-prevention.

Gender equality should be an integral part of any kind of peace building activities, whether it is conflict prevention, conflict resolution or post-conflict reconstruction. Let us not forget that it is where violence and discrimination against women exist prior to a conflict that these are almost certain to remain and even be aggravated throughout conflict. The same applies to women's participation in decision-making structures of a society. If their participation is limited before the outbreak of a conflict, they are unlikely to be involved in decisions relating to the conflict or a following peace process.

One of the most important features of UN Security Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security is that it does not focus on women as victims, but as invaluable actors in any successful peace-building effort. Resolution 1325 clarifies that not only do women need to be represented, but their perspectives and experiences should also form part of the decision-making.

There is a common misunderstanding that one supports women and women organizations so that they alone can promote gender equality; so that the “gender box” can be ticked off. If this was the case we would be working against the very principles of SCR 1325, as well as the OSCE Action Plan.

I say this because resolution 1325 is very clearly echoed in the OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality. It obliges OSCE structures to promote the implementation of the resolution in particular in the prevention of conflict and in post-conflict reconstruction.

The Action Plan itself is built on the principle of gender mainstreaming. Therefore, also we at ODIHR seek to advance gender mainstreaming in all our activities: this means that we bring perceptions, experiences, knowledge and interest of both women and men to bear on our programme development and planning. However, the strategy of gender mainstreaming does not replace the need for targeted, women specific policies and programmes. It merely complements it.

The OSCE mandate is clear: promotion of gender equality is a commitment made by all 55 participating States. The mandate of the ODIHR is equally clear and relevant to the issue of gender equality: it is to promote and protect human rights, as well as to monitor and support compliance with international human rights standards.

Resolution 1325 refers to the need for full implementation of international human rights law that protects the rights of women and girls during and after conflicts. Also, it calls for measures that ensure the protection of, and respect for, human rights of women and girls, for instance relating to police activities.

The ODIHR directly and indirectly supports the implementation of the Resolution. The integration of a gender perspective and the promotion of women's role in conflict prevention, post-conflict reconstruction and maintenance of peace, are integral concerns addressed by the ODIHR throughout our activities for democratic development and promotion and protection of human rights.

For a number of years now ODIHR has had several programmes aiming at increasing women's participation in democratic processes. The need to increase and further establish women's participation in elections, as voters, candidates and officials, has been an important part of our election-related work. A good example of this is the Handbook on monitoring Women's participation, which we issued last year. The situation of women also plays a key role in the work of our Contact Point of Roma and Sinti, that aims to address the difficult role Roma women face as more often than not the victims of double discrimination.

I also want to mention an example of direct support and concrete activities of the ODIHR on the issue of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. This is a programme that focuses on increased participation of women in decision making in Georgia. Since 2001, the ODIHR-supported NGO Coalition on promoting gender equality in Georgia has included the Working Group on Women and Peacebuilding. The Coalition works to raise awareness among women's groups and build their capacity to take active role in peacebuilding initiatives. The focus is on the role of women in conflict resolution and the provisions of the UN Resolution 1325.

The Coalition works together with the Georgian government to increase the involvement of women in conflict resolution processes. As a joint civil society-government effort, a special action plan on increasing women's role in peacebuilding is currently being developed, in partnership with the Ministry of Conflict Resolution and the Ministry of Defense. The Women's NGO Coalition also has a close cooperation with the National Security Council.

Of course we aim to build on our experiences in project work and will continue to adapt our programmatic work to changing circumstances to make them as focused and effective as possible.

What have we learned so far?

Internationally, we all have learned the hard way that peace and security depends on rapid response to early indications of a conflict. We know from experience that conflict resolution and peace-building requires creative and flexible approaches. Experience also shows that it is only when we meaningfully involve women in politics and security that we see real, lasting changes in societies.

In these areas, the ODIHR's efforts to support capacity building of women and of women organizations are examples of how women's skills are built in order to support and maintain peace and stability. This also involves contributing to the strengthening and development of relevant legislative frameworks, judicial and administrative infrastructures.

While women have often been absent from formal processes of peace negotiations and development of reconstruction plans, they have generally played a vital role at grass root level in sustaining and later rebuilding local economies and communities. For example, women's organizations have contributed to ensure that peace accords address demands for gender equality in new constitutional, legal and electoral frameworks. Furthermore, women's organizations at grass root level around the world have found the Resolution an effective tool for bringing greater attention to the needs and priorities of women.

In line with the OSCE's comprehensive security concept, we should see the promotion of gender equality as a fundamental contribution to achieving sustainable stability and security in our region.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

The role of women, and the impact of conflict on them, is connected to changes in the nature of conflict. In present-day conflicts, civilians are often made prime targets and women even more so. Gender-based violence, including sexual violence, has increasingly become a weapon of warfare.

It is essential that we take on the challenge of ensuring the effective protection of women in conflict; conflict prevention must take this into consideration by systematically strengthening the role of women in society, and ensuring their effective participation in public and economic life.

Threats to women in conflict situations underscore the need to incorporate gender analysis into early warning activities. Women's experiences are a valuable but overlooked indicator of conflict.

Five years ago, when adopting Resolution 1325, the Security Council for the first time truly addressed women's role in security. Let me conclude by saying that making women's concerns an integral part of policy making and activity implementation, is setting gender equality as a prerequisite for sustainable security and stability. Just as our work promotes gender equality, so does gender equality increase the likelihood of our work succeeding.

The Chairman of the Permanent Council in his intervention today laid out the road map of the Organization for meetings and Conferences related to the implementation of commitments in the area of gender equality. I hope that this road map will be filled with content in the form of concrete activities. For our part, the ODIHR will certainly continue to contribute actively.

Thank you.