



Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting **on Media Freedom and Gender Equality**

8-9 March 2021

(online)

ANNOTATED AGENDA

BACKGROUND

The OSCE participating States commit to Media Freedom and Gender Equality

Since the Helsinki Final Act (1975), OSCE participating States repeatedly committed themselves to freedom of expression and media freedom as essential factors for peace and security in Europe. OSCE participating States have consistently reaffirmed that freedom of expression is “a basic component of a democratic society” (Budapest Summit, 1994), and that independent media and freedom of expression are cornerstones for stability and peace.

In 1997, they entrusted the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) with a mandate to assist them, observe media freedom developments and respond to “serious non-compliance with OSCE principles and commitments by participating States in respect of freedom of expression and free media” (PC Decision 193/97).

The participating States committed themselves to “take every opportunity offered by modern means of communication [...] to increase the freer and wider dissemination of information of all kinds” (Vienna 1989). They also subsequently took note of the increasing role of the internet and other technologies, and adopted commitments in the area of internet freedom.

Specifically, they called for the internet to remain “an open and public forum for freedom of opinion and expression, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (Sofia 2004).

In December 2018, the OSCE Ministerial Council adopted the Decision on the Safety of Journalists (MC/DEC/3/18). As the first holistic OSCE document on freedom of the media, it significantly extends the current set of commitments by the participating States, enabling a better understanding of the current threats to journalists’ safety and independent media and required responses thereto, as part of a wider common set of commitments on media freedom and freedom of expression in the region.

The OSCE participating States repeatedly reaffirmed that freedom of expression is a “fundamental” and “internationally recognized” human right, as well as “a basic component of a democratic society”. Over the last decades, the OSCE participating States continuously expressed commitment to safeguard freedom of information and freedom of the media, and underlined that pluralistic and independent media are indispensable for open, equal and accountable societies (Budapest Summit, 1994). At the same time, OSCE participating States declared that the “full and equal exercise by women of their human rights is essential to achieve a more peaceful, prosperous and democratic OSCE region” (Istanbul Summit, 1999).

The 2004 the OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality (MC.DEC/14/04) recognizes that equal rights of women and men and the protection of their human rights are essential to peace, sustainable democracy, economic development and therefore to security and stability in the OSCE region. It tasks OSCE executive structures to apply effective gender-mainstreaming, with the goal of achieving gender equality, in all programmes, projects and activities. The Action Plan also specifically tasks the RFoM to be alert to allegations of serious intolerance towards women and incitement to gender discrimination in or by the media in participating States in accordance with Chapter 6 of the mandate of the RFoM.

Full enjoyment of human rights is a prerequisite for the enjoyment of equal opportunities and media freedom and gender equality can advance and mutually reinforce one another. Both media pluralism and diversity in media content have a strong gender dimension. The 2004 OSCE Action Plan underlines the need to encourage increased participation of women in the media as well as the need to be alert to instances of intolerance and gender discrimination. OSCE participating States also recognized “the strong influence [the media] can have in countering or exacerbating misperceptions, prejudices”. Harmful stereotypes, a lack of media coverage of gender equality issues and weak representation of women in decision-making positions can undermine the ability of women to enjoy the right to freedom of expression. At the same time, the media can play a transformative role in demands for accountability and by implementing gender-sensitive reporting.

Further, as a regional arrangement under Chapter VIII of the Charter of the United Nations, the OSCE plays a key role for early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation. In this context, the OSCE is also committed to promoting and supporting the implementation in the region of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) on women, peace and security (S/RES/1325), including to explore the need of meaningful participation of women and the essential role of women in securing and maintaining peace. Important commitment in this regard is for example the 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality (MC.DEC 14/04), and MC.DEC 14/05 on Women in Conflict Prevention, Crisis Management and Post-Conflict Rehabilitation.

The role of the media for gender equality in the OSCE region

Personal and public communication today increasingly take place online and/or via digital tools. The international community recognized that the protection of freedom of expression

includes all forms of electronic and internet-based modes of expression. Any limitations on forms of communication or expression disseminated over the internet must be justified according to the same criteria as non-electronic or offline communications. Therefore, the exercise of freedom of expression requires a digital infrastructure that is universal and inclusive, providing a free, accessible and open space for all. The MC Decision No. 4/18 calls on participating States to take measures, in consultation with companies that work on information and communication technologies (ICT), to address specific forms of violence faced by women and girls through digital technologies. It also highlights the need for specific measures to prevent violence against women engaged in professional activities with public exposure. It also recognizes the chilling effect it has on young women interested to enter these areas of work. Freedom of expression and a pluralistic media landscape can only be achieved through diverse voices - including the ones of women and female journalists. In this context, the MC Decision No. 3/18 specifically calls on participating States to condemn publicly and unequivocally attacks on women journalists in relation to their work, such as sexual harassment, abuse, intimidation, threats and violence, including through digital technologies. It also highlights the concerns by the distinct risks faced by women journalists in relation to their work, including through digital technologies, and underlining the importance to ensure their greatest possible safety and that the experiences and concerns of women journalists are effectively addressed.

However, a substantial divide persists between women and men in internet access and their possibility to use digital technologies to exercise their right to freedom of expression and information. The magnitude of the gender digital divide became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, among the varied experiences from media during the COVID-19 crisis is how essential journalists are for conveying information in a fast and far-reaching manner, and how important it is for policy-makers to provide accurate and trusted information to media.

Media is a key actor in society and as such, media can also significantly contribute to either reinforcing or challenging gender inequality or gender bias. Media is a platform and tool for discourse with influence on policies and social practices, especially at the time of conflict when fear and deprivation make people more uncritically receptive to ideologies and new norms.

Journalists, sources and media workers are contributing to a societal dialogue and mediation of values, not only by providing a platform for peoples' participation in the public space, but also as active drivers of the conversation and reconciliation of ideas, or dialogue, itself. The UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security (2000) and subsequent resolutions (Women, Peace and Security Agenda) recognizes that men and women experience war and conflict differently due to their gender roles and that women must be involved in all steps of conflict resolution and peace building for peace to be sustainable. It also put conflict-related gender-based violence on the security agenda.

The way media works is thus substantially influencing how the aims for women, peace and security can be realized. Gender and conflict-sensitive journalism can make the voice of marginalized people heard, tell the stories from the conflict that are overseen in formal peace

negotiation, break the stigmas and taboos surrounding gender-based violence, and challenge the harmful gender stereotypes and culture of violence that fuel conflict.

Women that are active voices in media are subjected to more than three times as much abuse online as men, such as online harassment and attacks, threats of rape and physical violence, obscene images, cyber stalking, devaluation of work, sexist comments, and account impersonation are a daily occurrence on an unprecedented scale thousands of women journalists across the OSCE region are facing. The amount of evidence is daunting. Nearly three-quarters of women journalists say that they have experienced online abuse, harassment, threats and attacks, according to a 2020 survey conducted by the International Center of Journalists and UNESCO. Twenty per cent of the 1,210 women journalists and media workers who participated in the survey reported being targeted with offline abuse and attacks that they believe were connected with online violence they had experienced. The 2020 Annual Report by the Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists by the Council of Europe described online harassment as endemic. Women journalists are the target of an ever-increasing number of gender-based intimidations and attacks online, including through social media platforms, commentary fields in media outlets, and direct digital communication. A survey conducted by the International Federation of Journalists shows that in 2018 the number of female respondents that confirmed the experience of online abuse was lower than in 2020. Among those, 47 per cent said they did not report the abuse, and when they did, it was mainly to their media management. An alarming 40 per cent responded that they avoided covering certain stories as a result of the abuse.

The safety of women journalists online directly affects the quality of our democracies and the right of society to access a plurality of information. In 2020, the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media published a comprehensive Resource Guide on the safety of female journalists online (<https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/468861>), which responds to the gaps that exist in addressing the safety of women journalists online. Following the work of the Safety of female journalists online project (#SOFJO, see <https://www.osce.org/fom/safety-female-journalists-online>) by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, this Resource Guide aims to assist States and provide guidance to all relevant stakeholders, including non-State actors, across the OSCE region in addressing online harassment and abuse against women journalists.

Against this backdrop, the first Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting 2021 is dedicated to promoting Media Freedom and Gender Equality by providing a platform to discuss measures to improve:

- 1) Gender Equality and the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through any media;
- 2) The Role of the Media in the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda;
- 3) Safety of Female Journalists Online.

Day 1

15.00 – 16.00

OPENING SESSION

Opening remarks

Introductory addresses

Technical information

16.00 – 18.00

SESSION I: Gender Equality and the right to freedom of expression including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through any media

Gender equality and freedom of expression are intrinsically interrelated, and democracy thrives when a plurality of voices are heard, both on- and offline. Over the last decades, the role of the internet in seeking, receiving and imparting information and ideas became increasingly important. The international community repeatedly underlined that human rights apply online as well as offline. Despite the internet's accessibility compared to other communication platforms, there remains a considerable gender digital divide. Without equal access to technology and the internet, women are not able to equally participate in public discourse and to exercise their right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds. This session will address the impact of the gender digital divide (access and skills) on the possibility to express oneself and to access information, as well as on the overall information landscape. If women lack access to the internet and their perspectives are not included in the creation of digital tools and online content, existing inequalities may be exacerbated. At the same time, the session will address how gender-based online violence leads to self-censorship, silencing and pushing women and other marginalized voices out of online spaces.

Unequal opportunities for women to exercise their right to freedom of expression may also arise from biased technologies, posing additional challenges to both freedom of expression and gender equality. While technological advancement undoubtedly enables a flourishing and enriched information ecosystem, the use of technologies is not gender neutral can reinforce and amplify existing gender inequalities. Without gender-sensitive and human rights-friendly algorithms, AI-based content curation and the choice of data used for machine-learning technologies are likely to spread or reinforce existing inequalities, thus perpetuating discrimination and hindering gender equality. The session discussions could address the impact of a biased development and use of technologies, especially if deployed with little or no transparency and accountability. In order to realize the universality of freedom of expression, a safe, open and enabling internet for everyone without discrimination is vital.

Finally, the session discussions could address how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the above-mentioned aspects.

Questions for discussion can include :

- How can States enable a more inclusive information landscape?
- How can States expand initiatives to address the gender digital divide and provide universal and affordable internet access to all?
- What opportunities and good practices exist in the OSCE for enhancing gender equality in and through the media, as well as for digital empowerment, and on how human rights safeguards, including freedom of expression, can enhance women's civic engagement?
- What measures are needed to effectively prevent gender biases being coded into technology and the reinforcement and amplification of gender inequalities through modern technologies as well as on social media platforms?

Day 2

10.30 – 12.30

SESSION II: The Role of the Media in the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

Free and independent media can play a key role in advancing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, as highlighted by the Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 from 2015. For instance, by providing comprehensive narratives on gender equality, gendered representation of men and women in peace and conflict and women's lives in conflict and post-conflict settings. Moreover, the media can contribute to raising awareness of the different impact of conflict situations, without representing women and girls solely as victims but rather highlighting stories of the variety of leadership roles women take on in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Most importantly, the media can hold those in power to account.

Gender and conflict sensitive journalism (GCSJ) recognises that the bias of media towards the views and experiences of men marginalises women from the narrative as relevant agents in conflict and peacebuilding. Global research of media in transitional and conflict countries found that overall women constitute only 13% of persons interviewed or spoken about. GCSJ focuses not only on the causes of conflict and efforts to resolve it, but aims to do this by representing voices from all sides and perspectives, including non-government organisations and people from all parts of civil society. In turn, journalists are able to produce a more comprehensive report, and contribute to democratic discourse with well-informed citizens that can make well thought out decisions – which could possibly bring about an end to the conflict.

In this context, there is significant scope for journalists, under the framework of ethical, gender-sensitive and conflict-sensitive journalism to use UNSCR 1325 as a tool in their reporting to try and understand women's role in conflict in a broader context. All UN member states, are encouraged to develop a National Action Plan (NAP) to show how they intend to implement the provisions and uphold the principles of UNSCR 1325. Thus it can be used to hold actors to account and promote women's involvement in peacebuilding as well as pay attention to the issues that particularly affect women and girls.

Questions for discussion can include :

- What good practices exist in training on women, peace and security in the OSCE region, in particular regarding inclusion of media?
- What does gender-responsive conflict-sensitive reporting mean in practice?
- How do national and regional action plans on UNSCR 1325 involve media and how is the contributions from media incorporate their role in the implementation?
- How can journalists be actors to further the women, peace and security agenda?

14.30 – 16.30

SESSION III: Safety of Female Journalists Online

Despite the increased awareness of the threats to safety of women journalists and challenges posed to media freedom overall, and a substantial increase in international commitments to combat online harassment and abuse of women journalists, there is still a gap between these commitments and their implementation in practice. This gap needs to be addressed to effectively improve the digital safety of women journalists and enable media pluralism online.

Online abuse, designed to intimidate or shame the journalist, has a profound mental, physical and emotional impact which can result in self-censorship, anxiety, long-term concerns about professional choice, fear and trauma. Furthermore, as physical attacks are commonly preceded by online abusive activities of various sorts and by various abusers, online violence may spur physical abuse, and/or the need to change daily routines, job location, home addresses, or even leave home countries for protection purposes. Experienced professionals leave the field of work, and young women hesitate to enter into journalism. Threats, abuse, violence and killings following online harassment not only violate women journalists' human rights and pose a clear threat to their safety and well-being, but they also have a profound, negative impact on journalism and reporting through self-censorship and lack of reporting. The public's access to information, diversity of the press, and freedom of expression are curbed and restricted. As a form of violence against women, it constitutes a violation of the human rights of women and negatively impacts society as a whole. Therefore, States should take measures to prevent and combat this form of violence, through legislation, awareness raising and implementation measures.

Women journalists should not be targets of online abuse or be silenced as they abandon online spaces as a consequence of attacks. With their lack of presence, information and unique perspectives also disappear. Enabling women journalists to report, comment, and maintain an online presence must be done by making their voices heard, whilst ensuring their safety online, providing support systems in newsrooms and professional associations, and training target groups in establishing preventive and accountable measures.

In late 2020, the conclusions from the first SOFJO phase were compiled in the form of 40 Proposed Actions directly related to the MC Decision 3/18, in total addressing ten types of Key

Actors. The *#SOFJO Resource Guide* is the concrete document that establishes the starting point for this second phase of the targeted project on the safety of female journalists online.

Questions for discussion can include:

- What is the situation for female journalists in the OSCE region related to international standards on safety and human rights?
- What concrete actions can States take to further the safety of female journalists online?
- What does Civil Society need from the States to further the safety of female journalists online?
- What are promising practices and lessons learned to prevent and combat online violence against women and girls, in particular women journalists?

16.30 – 17.30

CLOSING SESSION

Rapports from the working sessions
Comments from the floor
Closing remarks

17.30

Closing of the meeting

* * * * *