



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

**FROM STANDARDS TO REALITY:
INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND CONTEXT FOR THE
EMPOWERMENT AND INTEGRATION OF MINORITY WOMEN**

address by
Knut Vollebaek

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the
**Expert Roundtable: “Women as Agents of Change in Migrant, Minority and Roma and
Sinti Communities in the OSCE Area”**

Vienna, 6 September 2012

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Festive speeches always highlight the role of women in our societies. Reality is often less festive. This conference is particularly suited to addressing not only women in general as actors in society, but also focusing on where minority women might serve as agents of change in their various communities.

In this session we should look at the current landscape. What is the real situation like? Do women in minority communities have a particular role to play? If yes, how may we strengthen their role so that they can become agents of change? What should we do to empower them?

In my work with national minorities and during my frequent travels to the field, I have seen ample evidence that many women are already powerful agents of change in minority communities. I have actually come across such evidence in some unlikely places: places where life is difficult for most people, but especially for women from minority backgrounds. I stand in awe of these women and am inspired by their courage and perseverance in the belief that change is needed and so do what they can to effect it.

In the Transdnistria region of Moldova, I have taken tea with brave school directors who take extraordinary and even dangerous measures to ensure that minority-language schools stay open and have the books they need. I have talked to members of Parliament in Skopje who are revitalizing the assembly's work on minority issues, and to activists in northern Kosovo who, despite physical risk, continue to forge a path towards reconciliation. In the Gali District in the Abkhazia region of Georgia, I have met teachers and doctors who have chosen to live in harsh circumstances in order to provide the minority Georgian community with vital services. These women, like the mother who wants to make sure her children have access to high-quality education in their mother tongue or the NGO worker who helps Roma families with civil registration procedures, rarely make headlines, but their impact – on one community, one family or even one child – make them agents of change.

It is not only women from minority backgrounds who are on the frontline in addressing ethnic tensions. I am equally impressed and inspired by women from majority communities who, based on their own principles and beliefs, advocate for minority rights, speak out against discrimination and seek to build bridges between different groups in society.

Women can play a fundamental role in promoting peace and security, because women's initiatives are often among the first civil society entities to reach across ethnic divides and bring people together. This has been the case in the Balkans during the last decade, in places like Mitrovica in Kosovo and in Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I have seen it more recently in the activities of women trying to prevent a resurgence of ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 states that it is essential to increase the representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and in mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict.

However, we have to admit that there are barriers that prevent women from minority backgrounds from harnessing their full potential as agents of change. They easily become victims of exclusion. I often note the absence of women around the table when I meet with government officials. Even when I meet with representatives of minority communities, they tend to be mostly men. Projects I have undertaken to address sources of inter-ethnic tension have encountered obstacles when minority women are unable to attend training sessions without their husbands' permission. In situations during or after inter-ethnic conflicts, it is often women who adapt more quickly to changing circumstances and take on additional responsibilities, but for this they do not necessarily get much recognition or reward. I am reminded of the courageous Uzbek women I met in Osh in Kyrgyzstan after the June 2010 violence. Amidst the rubble of their homes, they stayed with their young children to protect their property rights and oversee reconstruction after their husbands had left to avoid further harassment and possible persecution.

In spite of the crucial role that they play, women belonging to national minorities are often among the most marginalized in society. They are at greater risk of being excluded not only by the public authorities but also within their own communities and wider society. The specific situation of women in minority communities may be overlooked both in interventions aimed at national minorities and in policies or programmes focused on women

in general. For this reason, they require special attention and measures to promote their role in society and protect them from discrimination.

My experience has taught me that the stability of a society as a whole benefits from the fullest possible participation and inclusion of all its members – irrespective of ethnic or linguistic identity, country of origin, citizenship or gender. Marginalization of certain groups is not only unfair, it also contributes to tensions that, as we have seen throughout history, can lead to conflict, as Ambassador Beham pointed out in her opening remarks. Any form of discrimination or inequality, including that based on gender, undermines democratic governance and weakens the social fabric. Being tasked with a mandate to provide early warning of ethnic conflict and to take early action to prevent it, I am concerned about the extent to which gender inequalities make societies more vulnerable to other kinds of tensions that can threaten stability and security.

A crucial precondition of security is respect for human rights. Minority and migrants' rights, along with women's rights, are part and parcel of human rights and help to ensure that all groups in society can enjoy their rights on an equal footing. The main international and regional minority rights instruments, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the Copenhagen Document and other OSCE commitments, or the more recent UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, reflect and are congruent with the fundamental principle of gender equality.

States are also responsible for identifying and fighting discrimination within communities. Even when responsibility for certain public functions is shifted to minority communities, this does not absolve the central authorities of their duty to ensure that human rights, including women's rights, are equally respected.

Let me put these general principles into the context of a few substantive areas of my work, which I believe offer a useful framework for examining some of the challenges to the integration and empowerment of migrant and minority women and may assist them in becoming agents of change.

A fundamental area, which is reflected prominently in UN Security Council Resolution 1325, is participation in public life. Addressing barriers to inclusive public participation, including the participation of those who are doubly vulnerable, such as minority women, is essential to building stable and democratic societies. It is a basic principle of good governance that people should be consulted on decisions that affect them. A lack of gender balance limits the ability of representatives to effectively represent the interests of their communities. Addressing gaps in participation is not an easy process. Promoting the rights of minority women can sometimes mean confronting the traditional minority leaders, even when advocating for increased protection of minority rights of the community as a whole.

When governments consult with persons belonging to national minorities in decision-making, they should reach out in a manner that encourages the participation of both men and women. For example, I often encourage authorities to create and support consultative mechanisms at different levels of governance to involve minorities in decision-making. But it is important that such bodies are designed and formed in a way that encourages the active participation of women. Such participation must be effective and not merely symbolic. Efforts to raise the capacity of civil society organizations to advocate for policy change should also look for ways to help minority women's voices be heard.

The barriers to gaining entry to formal political structures can be even more difficult to surmount for minority women. This may be linked to cultural or socio-economic factors, such as limited education opportunities or insufficient access to financial resources or social networks. Depending on the context, States and other actors, such as political parties and NGOs, may need to pursue special measures to promote the participation of minority women in public life. These might range from reconsidering the design of electoral systems, setting targets and creating action plans to establishing training or internship programmes, or creating funding opportunities. The HCNM *Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life* set out principles that can be adapted to guide the creation of measures at national, regional and local levels, based on an approach of inclusiveness and non-discrimination.

Education is of particular importance to my conflict prevention work. Educators prepare the next generation of citizens for participation in our diverse societies. How history is taught, the extent to which stereotypes are challenged, the quality of the teaching of both minority and

majority languages, all these factors make an enormous difference in the process of integration. Educators have the potential to instil values of inter-ethnic co-operation and to promote understanding between communities, making them key actors in building a culture of conflict prevention. Despite this crucial role, educators – who are overwhelmingly women in most countries I visit – are often undervalued and undercompensated.

Schools provide an ideal environment in which to address values and practices related to gender equality. Outside the family, schools are where boys and girls may first encounter gender-based expectations. States, educational institutions and communities should pay particular attention to ensuring that girls from minority backgrounds, who may encounter greater obstacles in their education than other groups, receive the support they need to attain their full potential. In countries where I am engaged in the education sphere, I have sought to advance gender-equality principles in projects that promote interaction between pupils and teachers from different backgrounds, as well as in activities to support multilingual and multicultural education in both textbooks and classrooms.

Proactive measures are also needed to ensure that institutions such as the police are representative of and responsive to the communities they serve. This means being sensitive to the needs and concerns of minority women as well as making sure that they themselves are able to join law enforcement bodies. A diverse police service is a more effective police service. As such, it is not only a matter of equal opportunities; it is in the best interests of the State and society. However, the HCNM *Recommendations on Policing in Multi-Ethnic Societies* emphasize that efforts to recruit a diverse police service, while important, are not enough. The organizational environment must support the equality of all members, and actively promote a positive image of diversity to the public. Just as the police have a role in promoting good inter-ethnic relations, they should also foster an environment where minority women face no obstacles to their security or to the exercise of their fundamental rights. Other so-called “hard security” institutions, such as the military, should also give minority women who want to serve their countries, the opportunity to do so.

The media can play an important role in giving a voice to marginalized groups, such as minority women, and informing society about the problems they face. But just as journalists can use their reporting to help dispel stereotypes and contribute to a healthy public dialogue, so too can their work reinforce ethnic or gender stereotypes and divisions. The responsibility

of States to promote a pluralistic, independent media is a cornerstone of OSCE commitments. The HCNM *Guidelines on the use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media* focus on one specific aspect of media pluralism, but the general principles they set out concerning development and application of State policy can also be useful when considering the situation of minority women. For instance, media regulatory and consultative bodies can only benefit from the participation of minority women. Public service broadcasters should support balanced programming that meets the needs of diverse groups, including covering the issues facing minority women and girls, both in their communities and broader society.

Anastasia Crickley underlined the important difference between integration and assimilation. This gives me the perfect opportunity to draw your attention to a new set of thematic guidelines that I will formally launch in November. These Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies are based on the 20 years of experience my institution has acquired in advising States in the OSCE region on how to improve the cohesion of society. While this experience is shaped by my mandate and rooted in situations involving national minorities, I believe it can provide policymakers with useful lessons regarding the integration of all the constituent groups of a society. One of the key aspects of my approach to integration is that it is a long-term process involving the active efforts of all members of society, whether majority or minority, man or woman, who share rights as well as responsibilities. Integration is achievable when the elements of a pluralistic democracy are in place, including non-discrimination and gender equality.

Our experience suggests that integration policies have to be complex and multi-layered to respond to the many challenges of diversity. This includes recognizing that individuals have multiple identities, such as a woman whose parents are of different ethnic backgrounds. Legislation should protect individuals from discrimination based on any aspect of their identity. Policies should be appropriately contextualized and evidence-based. This may mean formulating the design of interventions aimed at addressing the needs of minority women on data that has been gathered about their situation.

As the Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies are intended as a practical tool, I hope they will generate a useful debate among experts like you as well as inspire further policy developments. They are based on the premise that a society works better when all its members are able to participate, to contribute and to fulfil their potential. Integration policies

can facilitate the role as agents of change for minority women, who need to be able to use all their skills in order to pursue change in their communities, and in society as a whole. Their active role will lead to stronger communities and to stronger societies – integrated societies in which at the same time there is respect for diversity. When minority women are empowered, society is empowered, and we all stand to benefit.