



29th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum

**“Promoting comprehensive security, stability and sustainable development
in the OSCE area through women’s economic empowerment”**

CONCLUDING MEETING

Prague, 8-10 September 2021

**OSCE Secretary General
Helga Maria Schmid**

Opening remarks

Thank you, Ambassador Funered,
Ministers,
Dear colleagues,

I am happy to welcome you to this final meeting of the Economic and Environmental Forum.

It’s a particular pleasure for me to address you in person today.

Earlier in the year, our first and second preparatory meetings have laid the groundwork for a better understanding of the nexus between women’s empowerment, sustainable development and security.

This year’s Forum cycle has also heightened our awareness that gender inequality remains a persistent feature in all of our societies and that we must do more to promote women’s social and economic participation.

Progress has been slowing and in some cases, unfortunately, has been reversed.

COVID-19 has been a major factor.

Its economic fallout has amplified the gender employment gap and shattered professional opportunities for millions of women and girls.

To rebound from this set-back, policy makers and business leaders must reaffirm their resolve to achieve gender equality and act to advance women's economic empowerment.

But the underlying problem has persisted for far too long. Countless women and girls have seen their potential either unrecognized, or their aspirations ignored or their achievements denied.

So this age-old discrimination carries hefty economic costs, too.

First, let's consider the gender pay gap.

How can we reasonably justify that women are paid less than men for the same work, with the same level of qualifications?

And why is unpaid care work, estimated by Mc Kinsey at 10 trillion dollars annually worldwide, classified as "leisure time" and given zero value in Gross Domestic Product?

The gender pay gap is one of the reasons why 70 percent of the world's poor are women and girls.

Second, there's a career opportunities' gap.

Why have over 150 men walked in space but just a handful of women? Why is this, especially since women mathematicians have played an essential part in putting men there in the first place?

And why are men still preferred to women on company corporate boards – even though there are plenty of women with the right background and expertise?

Economists have established that gender equality in our labour markets would add many trillion dollars to our economies. Can we really afford to forego such sums year after year?

Finally, there's the digital divide.

And here, I would like to refer to UN Secretary General António Guterres who said that a man's credit limit can be up to 20 times higher than that of his wife – simply because of biased algorithms.

Flawed metrics have become the basis for economic decision-making, distorting policies and denying women equal opportunities.

The limited involvement of women and girls in digital technologies is also narrowing the scope of innovation, making inventions less useful for everyone.

In this context, I very much look forward to a new initiative currently underway.

Our Gender Issues Programme has reached out to OSCE field operations in Central Asia to ask for assistance in mapping policies to promote gender equality in digitalization.

We want to get an overview of what's available before making targeted offers of our own, for instance in support of women in technology networks.

Let me also highlight our undertaking to close the gender digital divide at the OSCE.

In the framework of the Generation Equality Forum meeting in Paris earlier this year I have committed to ensuring that 80% of all our technology innovation projects, programs and activities are fully gender mainstreamed by 2026.

Striking a better balance is essential if we want to build back better and develop more just and solid foundations for stable and secure societies.

The forthcoming Stockholm Ministerial Council meeting provides a timely opportunity for OSCE participating States to lead by example.

As our governments design and implement post-Covid-19 recovery plans, the adoption of substantial commitments on women's economic empowerment would be very timely and signal our staunch determination to leave no one behind.

We must re-energize our efforts to create a more equal, just and sustainable OSCE region, where women and men can make full use of their talents and aspirations and more fully contribute to our common good and security.

Also in this context, I would like to underline the need for equal security for women and girls in Afghanistan.

This would also reinforce the very nature of this organization as a platform for dialogue among equals, where every voice matters.

Before concluding, a word on climate change.

It has been a summer of extremes, with unprecedented heatwaves, floods, and wildfires across the OSCE region.

And in its most recent report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has presented findings and regional projections that have alarmed us all.

Women and men experience the impacts of climate change differently.

Climate change is not gender-neutral. Nor should our response be.

As stated in the Gender Action Plan agreed by the Parties to the Paris Agreement, women's economic empowerment is central to climate policy.

Active involvement and the empowerment of women in all spheres of climate action are essential for the transition to a greener, more sustainable and equitable economy.

This includes promoting women's leadership in climate processes, improving access to green jobs and encouraging to drive innovation and entrepreneurship in the green economy.

Through our current OSCE project on climate security, we are raising awareness, identifying potential hotspots and assessing the potential impact of climate change on security.

But in using a regional and participatory approach, there is scope for us to do more to better understand and better address the emerging risks also through a gender lens.

I thank the Swedish Chairpersonship for prioritizing climate security and women's economic empowerment and for giving us the unique opportunity to explore policy options in both areas in a comprehensive and complementary manner.

I would also like to thank our Czech hosts for their hospitality in this beautiful city, as well as all of you present here today for your active participation and cooperative spirit during this meeting.

Thank you