

Intervention: For Working Session 7 on October 1, 2009 Afternoon
Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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Organisation: Forum for Civic Responsibility of the
Austrian Round Table/ Weg der Versöhnung

Topic: Gender and Equality Policies

As the representative of the Forum for Civic Responsibility of the Austrian Round Table /Weg der Versöhnung I applaud the goal and the efforts of the OSCE Permanent Council in the adoption of the 2004 Action Plan for Gender Equality, to put an end to the discrimination against women in education and hiring and to put an end to the abuse of women, including domestic violence, harassment at the work place and human trafficking. As is stated at the beginning of the Action Plan,

"The full and equal exercise by women of their human rights is essential to achieve a more peaceful, prosperous and democratic OSCE area. We are committed to making equality."

Because of this commitment to equality, I would like to point out the observation that there are **possibilities of interpretation of what equality means in attitude and implementation that may actually bring about less respect for women**, may restrict opportunities and perhaps further financial disadvantage. "Equal" in the sense of "equal in respect", "equal in dignity" and "equal in opportunities for education, hiring and salary" does not necessarily mean "same" nor "societal pressure to be the same" nor "only worthy of respect unless the same".

1) Participating States must recognize that the legitimate quest for equality between men and women has achieved positive results in the area of equality of rights. This quest, however, must be accompanied by the awareness **that equality goes hand in hand with and does not endanger, much less contradict, the recognition of both the difference and complementarities of men and women**. Without this recognition, the struggle for equality would not be authentic. Success in struggle for equality and the empowerment of women can best be achieved when *antagonism* between men and women gives way to *mutual respect* and recognition of the identity and the role of one towards the other.

2) Participating States **must address discriminatory practices that exclude women from decision-making processes.** This must be done on the one hand **by empowering women in the work place** and on the other hand **by ending discrimination of women who choose to be wives and mothers.** It must be ensured that these are protected and not penalized by taxation or social security norms. It is also important that respect is expressed towards those who choose to be wives and mothers by way of the language we use, whether as the OSCE, as Participating States, as politicians or in the Media. We strongly urge OSCE/ODIHR to take up measures to end social exclusion of such women by **increasing the value of the occupation of raising children in public view.** We need to be cautious not to make the common mistake of inadvertently furthering one injustice in the attempt to correct another. Dignity is for all.

3) The recognition of the **difference and complementarities of men and women must not be eliminated from school books** and educational materials. In an attempt to further equality we must not thwart diversity (!) nor be afraid of finding new ways of speaking about realities of the uniqueness of male and female in a manner, which is in line with the findings of science and which is freeing and empowering for both boys and girls.

4) Regarding the meaning of the term "gender": there is **no international binding definition of gender.** We suggest **OSCE continue to use the term in an objective way as referring to the biological sex** (man and woman).

5) **Gender mainstreaming and anti-discrimination policies must respect fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of contract and the freedom of expression.**

6) Regarding Gender Mainstreaming policies in schools: we urge for recognition of the **rights of parents to know what their children are being taught in questions of human sexuality,** as some educational materials are written in a manner that gives the impression that all kinds of sexual practices are of equal value, an idea which has consensus neither in science nor in ethics, nor does it have the general affirmation of parents.

7) In developing policies in favour of gender equality, Participating States must take care to **avoid disproportionate and/or ambiguous language concerning unqualified control over sexuality and fertility, which can too easily be interpreted as including societal endorsement of abortion and any sexual practice.**

8) **We strongly advocate the freedom of conscience regarding placing children in adoptive homes: The right of the child to the best possible environment has priority over the rights of the adults to have a child.** For example, the rights of a child to have a loving father and mother has priority. **Magistrates and paediatricians** must be free to make decisions in the best interests of the child, not in the best interest of the couple desiring a child. Our common sense confirms what **the UN Charter on the Rights of the Child clearly states: The child's best interest is of the utmost priority.**