



## United States Mission to the OSCE

### **Working Session 14 Tolerance and Non-Discrimination II, ensuring equal opportunity for women and men in all spheres in life, including through implementation of the OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality**

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Warsaw, September 28, 2016

Equal opportunity for women and men in all spheres of life is critical to building resilient, democratic societies; supporting open and accountable governance; ending extreme poverty; furthering international peace and security; growing vibrant market economies; and addressing pressing health and education challenges.

One of the biggest threats to reaching these goals is gender-based violence. As Secretary of State John Kerry has said, “Gender-based violence plagues every country and it perpetuates conflict. It creates instability that can flow from generation to generation, and it tears apart the ability of states to hold together as states in some cases. It makes all nations that experience it less secure, less prosperous, and clearly less free.”

Gender-based violence is an umbrella term for any harmful threat or act directed at an individual or group based on actual or perceived biological sex, gender identity and/or expression, sexual orientation, or lack of adherence to varying socially constructed norms around masculinity and femininity. It disproportionately affects women and girls, and it can take many forms, including intimate partner violence, female infanticide, domestic violence, sexual violence, and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation or cutting, and early and forced marriage.

Although women and girls bear the weight of gender-based violence, men and boys are critical partners in ending gender-based violence—and too often their potential for changing norms that discriminate against women is untapped. Men and boys have an important role to play not just as advocates, influencers and allies, but also as survivors as well. Boys who are subjected to violence as children are more likely to perpetrate sexual violence later in life. Harmful gender or social norms that see girls as less valuable than boys perpetuate cycles of violence.

Gender-based violence also increases during and after armed conflict. Too often, women and girls are casualties of military conflict. According to the Kyiv-based international women’s rights center La Strada, **Russian** intervention in eastern **Ukraine** led to a dramatic surge in violence against women across the country due to existing gender disparities and post-traumatic stress experienced by internally displaced persons fleeing the conflict living alongside soldiers returning from combat.

Recognizing the unique needs communities face in recovering from conflict and reintegrating fighters, specialized services are critical for displaced and resettled men and women, as well as soldiers returning to civilian life. Militaries have an important role in preparing male and female forces for reentry into normal life by creating a culture of support that empowers them to address the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder before it can cause secondary violence in homes and communities.

States need to prioritize support for female IDPs and refugees fleeing conflict, crisis, and repression. We need to reduce the vulnerability of women and girls in transit and while their migration status is being determined. Many are fleeing parts of the world where their rights were limited or abused and help was unavailable. As **European Union** Agency for Fundamental Rights reported this year, most migrant reception centers lack information on how survivors can report gender-based violence or where to seek help. The study also noted that many refugees are afraid that if they report abuse, it will negatively affect their visa applications.

We commend the participating States that have put in place procedures for identifying survivors of violence, and who have conducted asylum interviews with women in private by trained staff of the survivor's same sex. We also commend states that have created women-only spaces in their reception centers. Women and girls need to know they are in a place where their rights and dignity are respected. They need to have spaces where they can meet, offer each other support, and recover from the violence they have experienced.

Although some OSCE participating States prosecute domestic violence under general assault laws, laws specifically against domestic violence send a message to perpetrators, strengthen authorities' ability to hold abusers accountable and can relieve the survivor of the burden of pressing charges. OSCE participating States that do not have specific laws against domestic violence include **Armenia** and **Uzbekistan**. We urge **Kyrgyzstan** to combat practices like non-consensual so-called "bride kidnapping." This is not a historical or cultural symbol, it is a crime.

We are concerned that women in **Chechnya** are subject to honor killings, domestic violence, abductions for marriage, and early marriages. Officials and public figures should condemn such practices, not condone them. It is not enough to have protective laws on the books if they are not implemented. Women must be able to rely on the law's enforcement.

Equal opportunity in all spheres does not only entail freedom from gender-based violence, but freedom for women and girls to realize their full potential. In too many countries, women are marginalized by sexual harassment and discrimination in educational institutions or in the workplace. Women are preemptively screened out or forced out from using their talents in critical spheres. We commend those participating States with laws that ensure access to a level playing field for men and women.

There is much work left to be done. The United States encourages participating States to cooperate with the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and the OSCE Senior Advisor on Gender Issues.