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**SECOND PREPARATORY MEETING OF THE 29<sup>TH</sup> OSCE ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM**

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

**Session III: Promoting sustainable development by empowering women and girls as contributors to the protection of the environment**

- Advancing women’s involvement in decision making and leadership for the protection of the environment and water management.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It is my honour to participate in the Second Preparatory Meeting. It has been very interesting to listen to the previous presentations. As our contribution to the discussion, I wish to address **the importance of including women in decision-making and leadership for the protection of environment.** I will focus especially on **water management.**

During my more than 20 years of working with water-related issues, I have learned that water is closely linked to all areas of **women’s** lives, but **rarely are women at the tables** making decisions about the distribution, management, or use of available water resources, or sanitation and hygiene.

The same holds true in the OSCE area, where it is **mostly men** who take decisions about water policies. Yet, at the end of the day, the decisions first and foremost **will affect women and girls.** There are no meaningful reasons for this gender imbalance in the water sector. This is why we must challenge the existing formal, societal and mental structures and change them Together.

Dear colleagues,

It is important to involve women in policy-making in the water sector because **they are directly affected by the decisions** and have information relevant to making those decisions. They have knowledge about current water distribution, quality, collection, and **how water generally is used** in their region. Including and empowering more women into the leadership would help bring in new perspectives and represent the demographics. We challenge the OSCE participating states to work towards **empowerment of women** in the water sector, not just to participate, but to lead.

All of this is nothing new to us. In the OSCE area and especially Central Asia, we already have initiatives, which aim to improve the gender balance in the water sector.

Finland has also been involved bilaterally in Central Asia's water sector through **development cooperation**. For example, in Tajikistan's remote Gorno-Badakhshan region, together with local authorities, Finland's Water Management Programme joined hands to **improve access to clean water** for the people of three districts. **More than 75 per cent** of those who took part in decision-making about water supply systems, **were women**.

Let me give you another example from the field **from Kyrgyzstan**. With the support of the government of Finland, UN Women facilitated a project, through which women were connected with **local Water User Associations**.

As water collection was considered as women's task, the lack of water resources had immediate influence on women. They had to fetch water from long distances, even during the dark hours, putting them at risk of violence.

In this example, the active women were able **to negotiate better conditions for water collection**. Access to water was provided during the daytime, and female farmers got flexible schedules for irrigation. In two years, the project increased the number of women who participate in decision-making in Associations **from 13 to more than one hundred**. Not just number of women increased, but also their influence.

Please also allow me to bring a short example from Nepal, where I used to work as UNICEF WASH Chief some five years ago during the earthquakes. Firstly, hygiene is important part of water management, and menstrual hygiene management is not possible without knowledge and understanding of needs. Well... here my own knowledge and experience fell short, as how could I know, which type of cloth is best in menstrual hygiene pads or which pads are easy to wash, or what temperature water supply is warm enough. So, there really are bits and parts of water management where we men are helplessly lost, but happy to work together and let those lead who actually know.

Dear colleagues,

As with all activities that aim to change current situations and customs, **local ownership is of utmost importance**: sharing information and exchanging experiences. The motivation for change needs to come from within.

The previous example from Kyrgyzstan illustrates this well: one woman joined the Water User Association of her village and **brought women's perspectives and realities** to the decision making table. By sharing her experiences, many more women joined the Associations and became **actors of change** in their own regions.

Dear friends,

We must focus on **concrete steps** to increase the representation, and quality of representation, of women in the water sector. Let's implement effective projects on the ground, create new initiatives together, and make sure that **this important issue stays high on the agenda of our organisations and societies at large**.

Thank you for your attention. I am looking forward to your questions and discussion.