



The power of ideals

Why we must stay the course in narrowing the gender gap

Despite the dramatic advances in women's rights over the past three decades, why do we still have to explain over and over again that it does not make sense to leave one-half of the population out of the mainstream of society? Why is it often a long stretch from declarations of intent to actual implementation? The Secretary General's first report rating the OSCE's performance in fulfilling its gender-related commitments is a reminder that the biggest hurdle we face is not so much decision-makers' open opposition to the gender aspect of our work, as their deep-seated lack of interest in, and understanding of, the significant role it plays in bringing about truly comprehensive security.

BY AMBASSADOR METTE KONGSHEM

As a young diplomat with the Norwegian Delegation to the United Nations in New York, I was responsible for the Third Committee of the General Assembly, which deals with social, humanitarian and cultural matters. Gender issues figured prominently on the agenda. The first UN Conference on the status of women had just taken place in Mexico City in 1975.

Coming from a country that has always brought gender issues to the forefront, I felt fortunate to have arrived with the right "baggage" at the right place at the right moment.

Since then, considerable progress on the gender front has taken place in many countries around the world and in international organizations. Action-oriented strategies, legislation, new institutional mechanisms and educational programmes are enlightening minds, changing attitudes and heightening awareness.

Through the years, I, too, have come to identify closely with the concept behind the struggle for the equality of opportunities between men and women. Quite simply, I boil it down to a matter of fundamental fairness, justice and basic human rights.

But beyond that, it makes good economic sense. Empowering women to play a more dynamic role in all facets of everyday life gives a society "competitive advantage" in bringing about sustainable stability and security, as in the case of Norway and other countries.

These were the thoughts running through my mind when, in the autumn of 2003, I initiated the development of the OSCE's 2004 Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality while I

Coalition of Women's NGOs
in Tbilisi, Georgia.

was serving as Chairperson of the Informal Working Group on Gender Equality and Anti-Trafficking.

Why was this initiative necessary? After all, a lot of good work was already being carried out within the framework of the first Action Plan for Gender Issues, launched in 2000. My intention was not to reinvent the wheel, but to take our gender scheme on to the next level. The Organization lacked an overarching strategy that would ensure the systematic implementation of action measures and, at the same time, serve to hold managers accountable for carrying it out.

By dint of determination and hard work by delegations and the Secretariat, we reached consensus on just such a strategy, as set out in the 2004 Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality.

Less than two years after the document was adopted by the Ministerial Council in Sofia in December 2004, another milestone was reached when the Secretary General devoted a first-ever report to the Permanent Council in June 2006 on how the Organization was living up to its gender commitments. This was a direct follow-up of the implementation measures in the Action Plan, and will be an annual event.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

- A gender-balanced organization performs better across the board. In our efforts to rebuild post-conflict societies, strengthen human rights, fight intolerance, resolve frozen conflicts, forestall tensions, and confront a complex array of security challenges, we need to draw on the creativity, experience and talent of both men and women.
- If the OSCE is to be true to its comprehensive and cross-dimensional approach to security, it needs women as policy-makers, as negotiators and as peacemakers. We must simply reject the notion that the goal of gender equality is an isolated issue, to be tackled only within the confines of human-dimension activities.

Here is where the practice of “gender mainstreaming” is crucial. We should be looking closely at every official decision, every OSCE programme and project, and every conference and workshop, and asking ourselves: Does it address the specific needs and priorities of both men *and* women?

Let us focus on women’s special strengths. We have to start thinking of women as more than just victims of circumstances. I look forward to a time when project documents no longer carry the stock phrase, “women and other disadvantaged groups”.

One of the points of reference in the Gender Action Plan is UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security, which reaffirms women’s central role in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction processes — an area where the OSCE holds a definite advantage. For its part, Norway, which fully recognizes the importance of women’s involvement in all forms of peace- and democracy-building activities, has adopted its own plan for the resolution’s implementation.

TIMELY TOOL

A great deal of soul-searching has been taking place throughout the Organization in the past few years as we try to enhance its relevance and effectiveness. Talk of reform has been on everyone’s lips. We have been setting

Gender profile of the OSCE

As of 1 December 2005, women in the OSCE made up:

- 42 per cent of a total of 3,428 staff;
 - 0 per cent of heads of mission;
 - 3 out of 13 deputy heads of mission;
 - 45 per cent of support staff (G category);
 - 39 per cent of professional staff (P-1 to P-4, including national professionals in the field and staff seconded by governments);
 - 32 per cent of internationally contracted and seconded staff.
- In field missions, the proportion of women in this category varies widely — from 43 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 13 per cent in Georgia;
- 34 per cent of a total of 629 seconded staff members;
 - 34 per cent of a total of 87 support and professional staff contracted in 2005. Also in 2005, 580 men and 159 women applied for contracted posts at the P-5 level; and
 - 12 per cent of staff in managerial positions (P-5 and above; heads and deputy heads of mission; heads of institution). This percentage is higher than the level of 5 per cent at NATO but lags behind the 28 per cent at the International Organization for Migration and the 25 per cent at the European Parliament.

Source: The Secretary General’s first Annual Evaluation Report on the Implementation of the 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality, issued June 2006. The statistics were gathered by the Department for Human Resources and the Gender Section with the aim of identifying key problem areas, improving recruitment strategies and calling participating States’ attention to the need to nominate more women for higher-level posts.

priorities, developing a strategic vision and improving the way we work in a changing security environment.

I believe that tapping into the fullest potential of both men and women is part and parcel of this process and that the Gender Action Plan serves as a timely tool to reshape our way of thinking.

“It is crucial that the OSCE ensure that its own house is in order since it assists participating States to promote equality of opportunity between men and women,” one of my colleagues said at the Permanent Council. I could not agree more.

We need only look at the dismally low numbers of female managers and policy-makers in OSCE structures, as mentioned in the Secretary General’s report, to convince ourselves of two things:

- We — and that includes participating States — have to continue exploring alternative approaches to identifying and nominating female candidates for senior positions.
- We should also continue examining how our Staff Regulations can catch up with other organizations’ best practices to foster a gender-sensitive working environment and family-friendly policies.

Furthermore, if we can agree one day on measures to strengthen the role of the Secretary General, this would, in my view, provide the position with sufficient “clout” to make a case for operational aspects of priority issues —

including the promotion of gender equality. The same holds true for staff responsible for gender matters in the Office of the Secretary General and for the gender focal points in the field. To be able to generate meaningful change, they need to be vested with greater authority and be more closely involved in the development of new policies and programmes.

However, such reform-related actions in the gender area will not be enough; they need the vigorous backing of gender-sensitive leadership at the highest levels, and by this I don't mean just the Secretary General. Chairmanships, managers, and heads of mission and institutions must send clear and positive signals that they wish to make a difference.

For a start, since managers are accountable for the Action Plan's performance, they should, at the very least, familiarize themselves with its contents and ensure that gender concerns do not take a back seat in favour of other "more pressing" or "more important" issues at various senior meetings.

I am encouraged by the progress made by the Conflict Prevention Centre, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and the High Commissioner on National Minorities towards integrating gender into the mainstream of their activities. They have shown the way through a number of valuable activities and ideas, as described in the Secretary General's report.

LIVING DOCUMENT

Less than two years into the Action Plan, it is, of course, rather soon to expect dramatic strategic changes in the Organization. Considering our limited capacities and resources, what can we, the participating States, do to help the gender teams in the Secretariat and in the field, who are doing their utmost to shoulder their share of responsibilities under the Action Plan?

Mette Kongshem, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Norway to the OSCE since September 2002, was Chairperson of the OSCE Informal Working Group on Gender Equality and Anti-Trafficking in 2003-2004.

Her first diplomatic posting was in New York, with the Permanent Mission of Norway to the United Nations. She later served as Counsellor with the Norwegian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and as Ambassador to the Czech Republic (1996-1999).

Other positions she has held in Norway include Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Trade and Shipping (1981-1983) and Director-General responsible for European and North American Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1999-2001).

Ambassador Kongshem holds a bachelor's degree in political science, and French and Nordic languages and literature from the University of Oslo. She also attended the NATO Defence College and the Norwegian Defence College.

I believe that it is incumbent on each one of us to propel the issue forward and let it gather steam. If we wish to demonstrate how serious we are about the tasks at hand in the gender arena, we should provide the Organization with the resources and the tools necessary to make the Action Plan a living document.

In our discussions in the Permanent Council, we should not neglect the gender perspective in the economic and environmental, as well as in the politico-military, dimensions. We should take the gender factor into account in drawing up conflict-related strategies and concrete projects and programmes. If the OSCE decides to proceed with security-sector reform, as recently proposed, we should make sure that gender is not left out of the equation.

It is in the nature of complex themes that the glass is often looked upon as half-empty as well as half-full. The good news is that the step-by-step implementation of the Gender Action Plan has triggered the development of a comprehensive gender mainstreaming process across OSCE structures, supported by a strengthened training programme. The common consensus is that gender issues have finally been placed in the spotlight. I look forward to the next report of the Secretary General, which I hope will take a more analytical approach.

The fact that women's concerns are now squarely on the OSCE's agenda can only bode well for the future. I am reminded of the words of the physician and humanist Albert Schweitzer, who said: "The power of ideals is incalculable. We see no power in a drop of water. But let it get into a crack in the rock and be turned into ice ... and it splits the rock."

The beginning of the implementation of the OSCE's Gender Action Plan is one such "crack in the rock".





Armenian women struggle to carve a niche in politics

For women in newly modernizing societies, gaining a foothold in politics is easier said than done, especially in countries that place a premium on patriarchy. This holds true in Armenia, despite women's share of traditional advantages: They continue to have the same access to education as men, spearhead many non-governmental organizations, and are the acknowledged "glue" that holds the family together, while also contributing substantially to Armenia's economic life. Seeking to address this paradox, the OSCE and its partners have embarked on activities aimed at motivating women to apply their leadership abilities in the political arena.

**BY BLANKA HANCILOVA AND
TATEVIK MELIKYAN**

Improving a woman's lot in Armenia, as in many other countries, is an uphill struggle. People in positions of authority — mostly male — tend to regard the goal of equal rights in a patronizing manner. According to popular thinking in this still-fragile democracy, other more pressing problems deserve to take centre stage. Even more disturbing is the fact that it

is not only men, but also women, who consider "gender" a non-issue.

"Most people think that denying the existence of gender-based discrimination, whether at the level of family or of society, will make the problem go away," says Nora Hakobyan, leader of the Women's Republican Council, a highly respected Armenian NGO.

Many of her colleagues agree that the blatant disregard for gender issues by the public at large is an even bigger factor in keeping women largely invisible in the political process than is a gender-insensitive governing structure.

Ms. Hakobyan is convinced that open discussions, followed by active remedial measures, will go a long way towards bringing the subject into the public domain. "Right now, however, there simply are not enough initiatives directed towards reaching out to women themselves," she says.

Some advocates for women's rights look back with nostalgia at the perceived merits

Photos, pages 21 to 23:
Women's Rights Centre in
Echmiadzin, Armenia.



of the old Soviet system, under which the “women’s question” was declared “solved” by integrating women into the political structure through established quotas. Others disagree, arguing that, in fact, discriminatory practices and attitudes continued to lurk in the background.

Both sides do tend to agree on one thing: Fifteen years after independence, Armenia has yet to install an effective mechanism that would once and for all demonstrate a determined political will by ensuring that women — who represent more than half of the country’s 3 million population — are not left out of the policy-making and decision-making process.

Although a comprehensive, six-year national action plan on improving women’s status was launched in 2004, and although a sound legal framework for equal rights exists, relatively little has changed on the ground.

Consider these numbers:

- Of 16 ministers, only one — the Minister of Culture and Youth Affairs — is a woman;
- Of 58 deputy ministers, only four are women;
- Of 131 parliamentarians — deputies in the National Assembly — only six are women, representing five per cent of the total;
- The situation is not much different in local governmental bodies: only four per cent of town mayors and five per cent of village councillors are women;
- Not a single woman has ever been appointed to the post of governor — ten seats in all — or to that of deputy governor since regional and local government bodies were established in 1996.

It is this profile of Armenian women’s political participation — or lack of it — that the country’s international partners have called “alarming”.

Many feel that this skewed picture risks

becoming even more so as men continue to seek job opportunities abroad and the proportion of women who head households increases further, leaving them with little time for self-help activities.

Jemma Hasratyan, head of Armenia’s Association of Women with a University Education, says that “women’s passive stance towards political involvement can be traced to a combination of “society’s generally low level of democratic political culture and women’s lack of political skills and experience”.

JOINING FORCES

In a widely hailed collaboration among international organizations and their local partners, the OSCE Office in Yerevan and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) joined forces with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Armenian Peace Coalition in August and September 2005 to encourage women to start taking an active interest in political affairs, starting with the municipal elections in autumn 2005.

Some 250 women, in groups of some 21 participants each, attended one of the 12 two-day seminars in Yerevan and ten other regions. Eleven Armenian trainers were hand-picked to teach skills in leadership, team-building and mobilization of communities, with a special focus on local electoral processes and legislation.

Since most of the women were either members of NGOs or came from the educational sector, the quality of the discussions was high, as was the interest, especially among the age group of 45 and above.

The seminars revealed one major impediment that deterred women from filing their candidacies for public office.

“It was interesting to find out that most of the participants did not believe that there was such a thing as free and fair elections”, says



Nora Hakobyan, who co-ordinated the training activities. “There were two camps: the skeptics, who felt that the polling process was not at all dependent on their involvement, and those who felt that their participation would be an expression of constructive civic engagement. The trainers organized a stimulating dialogue between these two groups.”

Although the results of the training seemed fairly modest — 21 women went on to run in the local elections, and of these, nine were voted into office — project sponsors felt it was a satisfactory start. In addition, several of the training participants joined campaign teams and election committees.

More importantly, says Jemma Hasratyan, surveys carried out by her NGO indicate that the idea of women seeking a greater voice in public life is now looked upon more favourably than before.

HEAD START

With two significant polls in sight — parliamentary elections in May 2007 and presidential elections in 2008 — it is crucial that Armenia make a head start in preparing the way for a fair, transparent and democratic mechanism with a more gender-balanced slate of candidates.

As part of their contribution, the OSCE Office in Yerevan and its international partners are currently drawing up a fact sheet setting out Armenia’s gender-related commitments and good practices in gender mainstreaming, which will be used as an awareness-raising tool.

The OSCE Office is also planning a two-day seminar on budget preparation from a gender perspective for deputies of the National Assembly and staff of key ministries. The Office will continue working with the UNDP on its project to enhance women’s roles in elections, both as voters and as candidates.

“I used to think that I should not get

involved in political parties because by doing so I might lose my ‘civic face’”, says Nora Hakobyan. “I was wrong. Now I realize — and I hope others will too — that on the contrary, it is a chance for us women to make our needs known. We have a lot of catching up to do with our neighbours’ more favourable gender-related indicators.”

Indeed, a great deal is at stake if too few Armenian women promote the gender agenda, which encompasses a whole range of worrying socio-economic trends — from high unemployment rates and unequal pay, through trafficking in women and domestic violence, to gender-biased reporting in the media and rural women’s neglected needs.

“The international community is doing what it can to enable government officials, politicians and the public to understand the issues better and to improve our ability to tackle them”, says Ms. Hakobyan. “The spark is being lit by our international partners but we — the men and women of Armenia — should be the ones getting all fired up and taking action.”

Blanka Hancilova (right) was Democratization Programme Manager at the OSCE Office in Yerevan from February 2004 to October 2006.

Tatevik Melikyan (left) worked on democratization issues at the OSCE Office in Yerevan and is now Civil Society Programme Co-ordinator at the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation in Armenia.



The wonders of networking

Professional women in Central Asia and the South Caucasus

It's a fact: The primary source of expertise in promoting equal rights and opportunities among women and men in many emerging States tends to be visiting consultants from established democracies. This transfer of knowledge is undoubtedly enriching and necessary, but it does not always lead to sustainable local initiatives. To address this gap, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has been nurturing home-grown talent through a regional network covering the Caucasus and Central Asia — with impressive results.



BY TIINA ILSSEN

The idea behind the NGO Expert Panel on Gender Equality, launched by the ODIHR in 2004, is straightforward: to assist women who have an intimate knowledge of their native environment to feel sufficiently capable and confident to develop tailor-made responses on their own.

Between them, the Panel members — 15 prominent leaders of civil society from Central Asia and the South Caucasus — represent hundreds of national organizational networks that are long-standing ODIHR partners within a wider programme. Now six years old, the programme, aimed at enhancing women's par-

ticipation in democratic processes at all levels of decision-making, has recently expanded its geographical scope to include the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Ukraine.

Adding great value to the Panel is the fact that its members represent a cross-section of professions and fields of interest. They are university professors, economists, medical professionals, journalists and women's rights activists. Individually and collectively, they have the potential of wielding a great deal of influence beyond their specializations.

Mira Karybaeva, a prominent civil society activist from Kyrgyzstan, says the Panel is driv-

Leadership development in Khudat, Azerbaijan.

en by a sense of common purpose: “We’re all committed to making policy-makers in our countries realize that gender matters should not be considered as separate from political, economic and human-rights issues,” she says.

Increasingly, Panel members are gaining the skills and expertise that they need to pursue that goal. With the help of ODIHR-sponsored seminars and workshops focusing on leadership, best practices and strategy development, the 15 women are discovering that they can bring their credibility to bear on bridging civil society and government initiatives in such crucial areas as drafting gender-related policies, developing national gender action plans and creating new gender-equality mechanisms.

Galina Petriashvili, who represents the Georgian journalists’ association, *GenderMediaCaucasus*, says the Panel’s composition makes perfect sense.

“Our countries have similar histories, similar problems, and similar laws, but in the gender area, we’re all experiencing varying degrees of success. Through the Panel’s activities, we are able to educate each other. Everyone benefits.”

Panel members from Azerbaijan, for example, are about to develop a nationwide microcredit scheme and hope to adapt lessons from the work of Charita Jashi. An economics professor, she has undertaken in-depth research on the economic situation of women in Georgia and has been tapping their entrepreneurial spirit through business-oriented projects and self-help publications. She is drawing on the resources of a countrywide network in Georgia that was set up with the help of the ODIHR in 2000.

“Just a few years ago, the voices of NGOs were not heard by the Government,” says Ms. Jashi. “Thankfully, we are beyond this phase in Georgia. Today, our recommendations are taken into account within the political process.”

Zulfiya Tukhtakhodjaeva, who represents Uzbekistan’s Association of Non-Governmental Women’s Organizations, finds the Panel’s information-sharing and joint plans of action extremely valuable in promoting national reforms in the gender area.

“We need all the help we can get to help women believe in themselves and overcome their fear of running for public office,” she says.

Ms. Tukhtakhodjaeva cites the usefulness of the strategy document on increasing women’s participation in policy-making processes that was developed by several women’s organizations at a meeting in Kyrgyzstan in 2003. “We take the opportunity at these events to disseminate information and to present an objective picture of what is happening in our countries,” she says.

The Panel’s extensive region-wide focus has been made possible in the first place by the ODIHR’s ongoing long-term investment in building robust national NGO networks and coalitions dedicated to gender issues.

Panel member Zulfiya Kochorbaeva from Kyrgyzstan recalls that in 1999, when her NGO, the Social Technologies Agency, took part in some of the ODIHR’s small seminars on leadership for the first time, participants from her country hardly had any experience in dealing with gender issues.

Within five years, the situation would change dramatically. “With the support of the ODIHR, we set up a national network, ‘Women Can Do It’, which now has a membership of more than 50 women’s organizations,” she says. Living up to its name, the group has been able to help place qualified women in key positions in local self-government bodies, women’s local councils and the electoral commission.

Recently, a ground-breaking development affirmed the network’s sense of empowerment.

“After the parliamentary elections in March 2005, when not a single woman was elected,” says Ms. Kochorbaeva, “we were able to lobby for the creation of a new post — that of a special presidential representative to parliament on gender issues. For the first time in Kyrgyzstan’s history, a representative from a women’s NGO was appointed to fill a senior governmental position.”

Ms. Tukhtakhodjaeva, the member from Uzbekistan, says that coalition-building efforts among women in her country are also yielding results.

“We are able to speak loudly, with one voice,” she says. “Before the 2004 elections, we managed to have our proposal for a 30 per cent quota for women on political parties’ lists of candidates accepted. This increased the proportion of women in parliament from 8 to 18 per cent.”

Buoyed by this achievement, women in Uzbekistan have already started preparing for the next elections, which are still five years away.

The women on the Expert Panel harbour no illusions that ingrained attitudes among certain sectors of society can be changed overnight. But they agree that the patient and persistent work of the ODIHR in building networks from the ground up has given rise to a high-level regional network that is just beginning to make its influence felt on governments and society at large.

Tiina Ilsen is Head of the Gender Unit of the Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Images of women in the South Caucasus

In 2003, when French photographer Eric Gourlan was asked by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) if he would embark on a photographic assignment to the Caucasus focusing on gender issues, he seized the opportunity to visit not only the capitals of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, but also about a dozen rural villages.

“I have a passion for meeting people and discovering their cultural heritage,” he says. “I don’t like travelling just for travelling’s sake. I like it

when I can serve as an ‘eyewitness’ through my photographs.”

His journey resulted in more than 100 images of women who were being assisted by the ODIHR to hone their leadership skills. The black-and-white photographs on pages 18 thru 24 of this issue of the *OSCE Magazine* are part of a collection that continues to be exhibited at various events.

Mr. Gourlan says that he was deeply impressed with the highly motivated women he met.

“They were making every effort to place gender issues on the agenda by using modest means,” he said. “In some places, some of the participants in the gender programmes were men. I noticed that

the younger women — and men — were beginning to understand that gender matters were not simply ‘women’s issues’. They knew it was all about the need for men to change certain attitudes.”

