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STATEMENT ON  
“Women’s leadership in times of conflict and war and  
their role in the armed forces, diplomacy and beyond”

Delivered by Military Adviser Arne H. Knapskog at the Forum for Security Cooperation  
Vienna, June 21, 2023

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Madame Chair,  
Dear colleagues,

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to the FSC chairpersonship of Bulgaria for putting this issue on agenda. It goes without saying that the Women, Peace and Security Agenda is *undeniably* and *inextricably* linked to issues of security and stability in the OSCE region. We are therefore pleased to see that it continues to be prioritized by chairpersonships in this forum. We would also like to warmly welcome the speakers, and thank them their insightful reflections.

Women’s leadership in times of conflict and war is an issue that could not be more relevant, given the current state of global affairs. Russia’s illegal and unjustified war against Ukraine has reaffirmed the urgent need to strengthen female leadership in times of crisis. It has, furthermore, confirmed the indispensable role, and contribution of women in the security sector, particularly in the armed forces.

Madame Chair,

Norway has a long and proud history of including women in the armed forces. In 2015, Norway introduced universal conscription, making us the first NATO member to do so, and the first country in the world to conscript women on the same formal terms as men. Just a year earlier, a Norwegian woman, Major General Kristin Lund, was appointed the first female force commander of a United Nations peacekeeping mission. In 2023, women made up 36% of all conscripts. Despite reaching these milestones, and despite establishing formal equality between men and women, we recognize that there are still several barriers to women’s full, and meaningful inclusion in the security sector, including in leadership positions.

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In 2018, a survey revealed pervasive bullying and harassment in the military, with 50% of women under thirty having experienced bullying or sexual harassment while serving in the armed forces. Several sexual harassment and assault cases garnered media attention, making this issue a topic of public debate. As a result of these deeply worrying developments, Norway's Chief of Defense created a new position at the rank of general, which was tasked with addressing bullying and harassment in the military. Several new gender advisers were additionally appointed to improve not only diversity, but also to strengthen the implementation of gender perspectives in military operations.

We have drawn several lessons from this, the most important being that it takes time to change attitudes, norms, and behavior. In order to change attitudes in any institution, women must reach a critical mass. This is also why statistics on women's inclusion matter. This holds particularly true in the armed forces, where toxic masculinity often flourishes. We must recognize our shortcomings, and continue to work to ensure that women can be equally, and meaningfully included in the security sector without fear of harassment or violence.

We must also recognize that women's inclusion is not just about what is the *right* thing to do. Women's *meaningful* inclusion in the armed forces will ultimately increase the operational effectiveness of the organization. Yet, we can only achieve this aim through the engagement, and support, of men, including the ones sitting in this room today. Achieving gender equality is about changing attitudes and norms, which requires a transformative change in how we think.

Madame Chair,

We must be cautious of the governing narrative that war is the domain of men. All too often, women are depicted solely as peacemakers. Let me underline that including women in peace processes leads to a more sustainable peace, not because women are inherently peaceful, but because a representative peace is a durable peace. Women *must*, and *should*, be included in leadership positions in times of conflict and war, not because they are inherently good, but because they make up half the world's population.

Dear colleagues,

The statistics paint a sobering picture of the work we have ahead of us. In high-level decision-making – whether that be in diplomatic processes, or in the armed forces – women have been reduced to a mere, often insignificant, fraction.

Let me repeat yet again that we are talking about half the world's population: half the world's population is systematically excluded from matters of war and peace, from issues which define our very existence, and the world we live in. We owe it to these women to deliver on our commitments, to implement the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and to make a concerted and serious effort to change norms, attitudes and behavior – for half the world's population, for half of humankind – to the benefit of us all.

Thank you.