

The Role of the OSCE in Combating Violence Against Women

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Informal Working Group on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men

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Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to address this meeting and present what the ODIHR has been doing to address the issue of violence against women. I believe that this issue perfectly fits into the OSCE agenda, although it might not seem to be the case at first glance.

I do not need to go into what violence against women is, as this has already been discussed extensively today, but it is interesting to look at some figures and some recent reports like the Women 2000 report by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights or the report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women.

If we look at the International Helsinki Federation report we see that in Azerbaijan, for instance, in a survey among 850 women respondents between the age of 19 and 60, 37% reported to have experienced incidents of violence. 32% of these incidents happened in the family where they were born, and 58% in their husbands' families. The same report mentions Bosnia and Herzegovina where a survey among 249 women shows that 50% were beaten by husbands or boyfriends. In Kyrgyzstan, the situation has gone from bad to worse following the economic crisis which has had very negative consequences within families, especially for women. All forms of violence against women have increased, and the research shows that out of 1000

women respondents, only little more than 10% had not been abused. Among the abused women 65% had secondary and university education. The last example is Albania where the situation for women is very serious, yet there are no special legal provisions addressing this issue.

In the Special Rapporteur's study we find clear reference to the correlation between psychological violence and physical brutality. In the United States, for example, it seems that as many as 35-40% of the women who experienced violence attempted to commit suicide. This makes clear that we are not talking about a secondary issue. We are talking about a serious and worrying violation of human rights.

Why should the OSCE deal with this problem, and who, within the OSCE, should deal with it? The relevant OSCE commitments have been mentioned by previous speakers: the 1991 Moscow Document and the 1999 Istanbul Charter for European Security, but also the Gender Action Plan provides a very clear reference. Violence against women as such already justifies the intervention of the OSCE as it is a serious human rights violation. But I would not like to stop at this point. The OSCE as a security organization interested in long-term stability and security within its participating States must also be interested in strong civil society and sustainable democracy. Despite the fact that violence against women can be found across the OSCE area, there is nevertheless a correlation between the development of democracy and civil society and how violence against women is being dealt with.

So dealing with violence against women fits pretty well in the OSCE agenda. Although we may not have the level of expertise of specialized organizations and NGOs, we have to push the issue and keep it on the agenda. We have to go beyond the pure human rights context, in the interest of the development of strong civil societies. Violence against women discourages or prevents, in some cases, women from participating in social and economic life and from contributing to the development of society. We know also that women have very often a healthy impact on potential tensions and conflicts within society. By preventing them from fully participating in building of democracy by having a positive influence in periods of tension, we are not rendering a service to the OSCE's superior objective of fostering democracy and, through this, long term stability. There is a clear link between this

important and very specific problem and the global philosophy that should be the engine of this organization. We cannot accept this type of human rights violation which undermines democracy and civil society.

So we have to deal with it -- and we have been attempting to address this issue at the ODIHR. One of the most well known examples is certainly the combat of trafficking as one aspect of the violence against women. However, I will not concentrate on this issue today as this is well known to most of you already and I would like to focus on some other examples. This, of course, is not to say that we forget about trafficking as one of the main examples of violence against women. Our experience with working for the promotion of women rights in the OSCE region -- be it South Eastern Europe, the Caucasus or Central Asia -- has led us to the following findings: first of all, there is the lack of data and analysis on the issue of violence against women. There is therefore, secondly, a lack of awareness of the fact that violence against women is an abuse of their human rights. Linked to this is obviously an insufficient legal framework to protect victims and prosecute perpetrators, and therefore also insufficient law enforcement mechanisms and insufficient support mechanisms such as legal aid or shelters. We therefore, when addressing this issue, try to gear our projects to the following fields: data collection and analysis, support for development and reform of legislation, awareness raising, law enforcement and legal aid.

I would like to give some examples of what we are doing in these fields, perhaps also to begin a discussion on what else could be done and what could be further expanded.

As regards data collection and analysis, the ODIHR has begun and will continue to support a project to monitor women's rights violations, including violence against women, in Central Asia, and particularly in Uzbekistan.

In the field of support to legislation we have been supporting, to give an example, local efforts in Kyrgyzstan to bring about legal reform on the issue of domestic violence. We, in particular, have provided legal expertise on drafting a law on domestic violence and initiated co-operation between NGOs and members of the parliament on this issue. We therefore hope that the parliament of Kyrgyzstan will approve appropriate legislation on this issue in the near future, which of course will be

only a first step because the legislation will have to be implemented. Through this example I also want to indicate that what we are trying to do as well is to build local capacity, e.g. by training of trainers, in order to enable local NGOs to deal by themselves with the problems rather than merely import external experts.

In the field of awareness raising we have initiated a number of projects which are often linked to raising awareness of trafficking. But there are also other examples. In Azerbaijan, for instance, the ODIHR has initiated Government-NGO co-operation on preventing violence against women. The ODIHR organized a meeting of around 100 government and NGO representatives last year, which was the first occasion, to my knowledge, where this issue was publicly raised and discussed in Azerbaijan. This project will continue throughout this year and hopefully beyond.

In Albania there has been a training project, which was also initiated in 2000 to create awareness of women's rights including forms of violence. Sixteen trainers were trained to disseminate information on these issues and as a result over 400 persons from various segments of society and from all over the country received information on the issue. This project will continue throughout this year and in 2002 as well.

There are further training projects in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia which take place under the umbrella of gender equality but where preventing violence against women is part of the curriculum.

In the field of law enforcement, the ODIHR supported the development of a curriculum for training Albanian police officers on women's rights, violence against women and trafficking. This curriculum will be used this year to train the police in the region of Elbasan, and it is planned to expand the training to the rest of the country. In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia we organized a training programme on prevention of domestic violence which was particularly aimed at prosecutors and judges.

In the field of legal aid the ODIHR has provided technical expertise in former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and in Tajikistan, where we have been supporting a centre for legal aid to women. In Kazakhstan, we have a very interesting project

which I would like to see developed elsewhere as well: we have supported free legal aid to women victims of domestic violence which has enabled us to assist over 140 women victims, including many victims of repeated violence. I believe that free legal aid to woman victims of domestic violence, although it does not, of course, uproot the problem, is a very good example of what can be done with a quick and immediate impact. Of course it is not sufficient -- we have to deal with the roots of the problem and we have to deal with the long-term environment and the legal framework --, but this is the kind of measures that can make a difference and that can be also perceived by the people, the women and our NGO partners in different places, as something concrete that goes beyond seminars and speeches.

I would therefore hope that, if the necessary funding is provided, we will be able to further develop this type of activities. This also corresponds very much with what we do in the field of trafficking, for instance as regards support for trafficking hotlines. I think the trafficking hotlines have proven to be very useful models that could be extended to non-trafficking cases, including domestic violence.

So, as you see, we are addressing the problem, but that does not mean that we are solving it. It is just the beginning, the beginning of awareness within the OSCE and within the participating States. The problem will persist. But through our institutions and field presences we have to put it high up on the agenda. I would like therefore, in conclusion, to encourage all participating States to increase the measures and instruments that they have or that they intend to create at national level to prevent and combat violence against women, and to support OSCE efforts, be it through institutions or field presences, to further develop our activities in this field. Once again, this is not only about dealing with a blatant and unacceptable human rights violation. Addressing violence against women fits very well into the philosophy of this organization and serves our long-term objective of ensuring strong civil society and stability.