



Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Media and Gender Equality

Opening Session, 8 March 2021, 15:00

Opening Remarks by the Representative on Freedom of the Media Ms. Teresa Ribeiro

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you here today, on International Women's Day, to this supplementary human dimension meeting on Gender Equality and Media Freedom. Gender equality and human rights such as the right to freedom of expression and media freedom are permanently interlinked.

And pluralistic and independent media are indispensable to open, equal and accountable societies. Let me underline today, on International Women's Day, as well as on any other day, that freedoms cannot be a privilege of some, while excluding others. Freedom can only be inclusive.

Let me also emphasize two main points from the very outset: (1) Democracy, security, and sustainable progress all build on human rights – *universal* human rights. Equal opportunities are a prerequisite to the enjoyment of human rights. (2) The inclusion of women's voices on equal terms and their visible participation in public discourse is a precondition for pluralistic media. It is evident that media freedom and gender equality can advance and mutually reinforce one another.

Our society's security and prosperity depend on the inclusion of all; and democracy can only thrive when all voices of society are included. Society based on equality increases diversity and media pluralism, but also the realization of the individual right to freedom of expression. This meeting on Gender Equality and Media Freedom will outline how, and why. As all of society benefits from both media freedom and gender equality, we also need a whole-of-society approach in order to advance.

While States have clear international obligations and commitments, also other actors and civil society undoubtedly have an essential role to play. That is why we are particularly pleased to see such a high number of participants at this event, including so many civil society representatives, to discuss what all stakeholders can – and should – do.

Let me also add that both gender equality and media freedom are integral parts of the OSCE's comprehensive security framework. Without equal rights and opportunities, we will not be able to achieve peace, democracy or sustainable economic and environmental development.

It is important to underline this especially in the current crisis setting: Today's and tomorrow's discussions will also provide an opportunity to address how the COVID-19 pandemic affects both gender equality and media freedom and the already existing challenges to realize the – universal – freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through any media.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a first step, it is important to discuss how to enable equal and safe access to freedom of expression, including through technology. Access to the internet and digital tools is a fundamental precondition for freedom of expression. And it is clear that the same rights must apply both offline and online.

At the same time, however, we have repeatedly seen that not everyone can benefit equally from technological process. To the contrary, technological progress might even have a negative impact on already marginalized groups.

Consecutive studies have underlined that despite the internet's general accessibility compared to other communication forms, there remains a significant gender digital divide. However, without equal access to technology and the internet, women and men are not able to participate on equal terms in public discourse..

Today, there is no more clear separation between offline and online. The online sphere had become an integral component of our lives shaping our participation in public life. If women lack access to the internet, and their perspectives are not included when digital tools are being developed and content shared, society is not yet equal. To the contrary, existing inequalities may even be exacerbated. We need to address the gender digital divide, by working on media and digital literacy and overall digital empowerment. We need to make sure that technology is an enabler and not a barrier to freedom of expression.

For the same reasons we have to address a discriminatory deployment of technology. It is crucial to acknowledge that neither the use of nor technology itself is gender neutral. Without gender-sensitive and human rights-friendly algorithms and AI, we do not only risk hindering equality, we do even risk perpetuating discrimination. I hope that we will be able to discuss possible solutions to this.

In addition, this first session will also touch upon how gender-based online violence leads to self-censorship and to silencing and pushing women – and other voices that are not the dominant ones of society – out of online spaces.

As I mentioned before, both gender equality and media freedom are essential components of comprehensive security. In this context it will also be relevant to discuss the Role of the Media in the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

Global research of media in transitional and conflict countries found that overall women constitute only 13 % of persons interviewed or spoken about in a conflict setting.

If we are to promote peace, this must increase, as both men and women have the right to freedom of expression and make their voices heard. Sustained peace can only become a reality if the perspectives and voices are taken into account.

The media can play a role in this, for example by providing comprehensive narratives on gender equality, gendered representation of men and women in peace and conflict and women's lives in conflict and post conflict settings. The media can also raise awareness of the different impact of conflict situations, without representing women and girls solely as victims but rather highlighting stories on the variety of leadership roles women take on in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Another issue closely connected to realizing OSCE commitments on both gender equality and media freedom, including the *2018 MC Decision on Safety of Journalists*, is the safety of female journalists online.

As mentioned by my colleague Matteo, a recent UNESCO and ICFJ study not only highlighted that two thirds of women journalists experience online violence due to their profession – which is agitating – but also underline a clear link between online violence and offline attacks.

Over the last years, we have seen an increased awareness by all stakeholders of the threats women journalists face, in particular online, and what this means not only for gender equality and the journalist's individual freedom of expression, but also to plurality and media freedom overall. With the lack of women journalists' presence, their information and unique perspectives, we all lose. A better understanding of this has led to a substantial increase in international commitments to combat online harassment and abuse of women journalists, including in the OSCE. Let me emphasize that in 2018, all participating States committed themselves to add a gender perspective to the safety of journalists.

And while all of this is essential and important, it is not sufficient. We still see an abundance of online hate, harassment and abuse of women journalists, and an alarming gap between the commitments and their implementation in practice. That is why my Office published the #SOFJO Resource Guide with 40 proposed actions addressing ten key actors to improve the digital safety of women journalists. I am convinced that this publication will provide much needed guidance and I am looking forward to discussing with you some of its actions, and hear about your proposed solutions and good practice examples.

I am very much looking forward to today's and tomorrow's discussions on how to improve the implementation of our commitments related to both the promotion of media freedom and gender equality, and to hear from experts, representatives of States and civil society, as well as international organizations and other stakeholders. My special thanks go to the experts who have agreed to share their insights with us over the next two days.

I am also particularly looking forward to the valuable perspectives and recommendations by civil society and wish all of us fruitful discussions.

Thank you for your attention!