

Opening Remarks for the Gender Equality Review Conference

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Check against delivery!

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this Gender Equality Review Conference in my new capacity as Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

First, I would like to express my appreciation to the Swiss Chair-in-Office for proposing this conference and for joining efforts with ODIHR and the Secretariat in making it possible. My appreciation also goes to OSCE Field Operations, not only for being here today, but for reaching out to those in need and working with stakeholders on the ground. I am also glad to welcome today many of our partners, including international organisations, civil society partners, gender advocates and women activists. We owe them gratitude for their daily struggle to observe, report, and fight inequalities and violations of women's rights, throughout the OSCE area.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The gender equality debate is anything but new. It was addressed by the OSCE participating States with the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, it was debated in 2004 in Sofia, when the *OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality* was adopted, the tenth anniversary of which we are celebrating today.

This, however, does not mean that we can sit back and enjoy the fruits of our labour. Indeed, we are here today to determine what specific gaps can be found in the implementation of the Action Plan.

Take representation of women in public life, for example. The higher we go on the decision-making ladder, the fewer women we see. We shall make *no* mistake in attributing this to women's lack of interest, skill, education, or professionalism.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let us acknowledge that women face a ceiling, sometimes very obvious and visible, but often invisible: a glass ceiling; the unseen barrier that keeps them from rising to the upper ranks, regardless of their qualifications or achievements.

Advances have been made in the OSCE region, yet women continue to be under-represented in public institutions in all three branches of government – executive, legislative and judicial – particularly in decision-making positions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The glass ceiling must be broken for the sake of fairness, social justice, the full utilisation of our human talent and capital, but most importantly to guarantee the human rights of all citizens. For we all know that these human rights are the foundation of any democracy.

Democracy refers to the rule of *people*, rule of *all* citizens, women and men. Yet, women make up only about 25 *per cent*¹ of parliamentarians in the OSCE region. With less than a year to the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, it appears that the overwhelming majority of OSCE participating States will fail to reach the minimum 30 per cent benchmark for women's representation in decision-making.

A better representation of women in political and public life is not only required to improve the representative nature, accountability, and quality of democracies, but it has a profound impact on the practice of politics and on the way laws and policies are able to respond to the needs of all citizens.

Here, political parties are particularly important. As facilitators of democracy, they have a special role in ensuring that women and men are equally able to access elected office. I am pleased to report that ODIHR has some excellent expertise to offer on this topic, which was compiled and shared in the *ODIHR Handbook on Women's Participation in Political Parties*, to be presented at a side event to this conference this very Friday.

Along with other knowledge tools, this new Handbook, which has been written under the directorship of my predecessor, Ambassador Janez Lenarčič, aims at encouraging political party leaders, men and women alike, to support the integration of gender aspects into internal party decision-making processes.

I sincerely hope that this Handbook will motivate political party leaders across the OSCE region to ensure the equal participation of both women and men in democratic governance processes, to our common benefit.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While a better representation of women in the public sphere is extremely important, it is not the only challenge we face. Indeed, discrimination against women quite often takes place behind closed doors, out of the eyes of the public. I therefore particularly appreciate the Chair-in-Office's idea to address the topic of domestic violence with an Addendum to the 2004 Action Plan at the OSCE Ministerial Council in Basel.

I furthermore encourage you to pay particular attention to those women who face multiple layers of discrimination, as is the case for Roma women and girls. This morning, I had a chance to meet some very active NGO representatives from all over the OSCE area and discussed with them how to combat discrimination against Roma and Sinti women. This is particularly relevant in times of crises and social upheaval. I am very concerned about the situation in Ukraine, where the situation of the Roma has significantly deteriorated in the recent past because of the ongoing conflict there.

¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, Women in National Parliaments, data as of 1 May 2014, available at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to conclude by referring to the 1991 Moscow Document, where the OSCE participating states declared that they want to achieve not only *de jure*, but also *de facto* equal rights for men and women. We should certainly ensure commitments to gender equality *on paper*, but *more importantly* we shall implement actions and measures towards gender equality *in reality*.

We, all of us participating in this conference, shall aim for equal rights and opportunities for women and men in laws and policies, and equal access to resources and services. We shall aim to break that glass ceiling and to ensure that women and men are able to access and participate in all spheres of life on an equal footing, including in democratic institutions, decision-making and the security sector. We shall aim for women and men receiving adequate and equitable protection of their human rights, including the right to live free of violence in a safe and supportive home and community.

I am confident that your deliberations over the next two days will go beyond an exchange of views and provide concrete recommendations and action points towards achieving these very goals. I am very curious to hear them.

Thank you!