

International Women's Day 2021***Women's Leadership in Peace Building and Conflict Prevention*****Welcoming Remarks****Secretary General Helga Schmid*****Zoom, 8 March***

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today is a special day, because we will be discussing the important role that women play in peacebuilding and conflict prevention and how the OSCE is supporting them. Let me start by saying that I know all too well from my own personal experience what it feels like to be the only woman in the room, the only woman at the negotiation table, or the only female voice in a male-dominated conversation.

So, why is Women's leadership important?

A study of peace processes of the past 30 years found that only 13 % of the negotiators were female. This is unacceptable. And why – because we have empirical evidence that women's meaningful participation – and I mean meaningful – greatly improves the sustainability of peace processes. Where women are absent, peace agreements carry a lot higher risk of falling apart and a relapse into conflict becomes more likely.

We need to draw the lessons from this. The same study, by the way, found that women constituted on average only 6 % of mediators and signatories in major peace processes worldwide. We also know that women and their views remain underrepresented in formal OSCE-supported mediation processes. It is our responsibility to make these processes more inclusive and more representative.

Throughout my career, and in particular as Secretary-General of the External Action Service in Brussels, I have called for greater efforts to reduce gender inequality around the world and increase women's agency in matters of peace and security.

From Somalia to Yemen and Afghanistan, I worked hard to increase the participation of women in respective political processes or in the Parliament.

Last year when we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the first landmark UN Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security, I discussed the Syrian peace process with Syrian female peacemakers. And I recall the work done with great female leaders in the Syrian negotiation context to promote dialogue between female politicians and connect negotiators in

the peace talks with the UN process. And let me share another very personal experience which I will always remember: In Colombia, I took part in an event of the Truth Commission on the Day of Remembering the victims of sexual violence. And I will never forget the truly emotional experience, when women came forward to share what they have experienced. But also it confirmed to me how important a gender perspective is to reconciliation – and there is no sustainable peace without reconciliation.

Now, I am with the OSCE and I want to use this opportunity to highlight how the OSCE programmes and initiatives are contributing to strengthening women's leadership in conflict prevention and peacebuilding in our region.

Let me just share some examples with you:

For the past three years, the eight-week *Scholarship for Peace and Security* programme has provided training and professional networking opportunities for young women in conflict prevention, arms control and disarmament. This is one effort among many to train and to mentor young women professionals, to encourage political participation and to support women's peacebuilding networks on the ground.

Starting in Montenegro, the OSCE last year launched an ambitious project to increase women's participation in the police. Women police officers are more likely to solve volatile situations without using physical force. They improve investigations, not least in cases involving gender-based violence, sexual offences and children.

Based on interviews with police officers, NGOs and international partners, the project will produce tailor-made recommendations to increase the share of women working in the police and to support women police officers move up through the ranks.

In North Macedonia, the OSCE Mission to Skopje has supported a mentoring programme for young women police officers and we are very happy to have with us today Ms Meri Avramova who participated in the programme.

And as many of you will know, the OSCE Border Management Staff College in Dushanbe has been offering a special women-only staff course for border officials to promote women's leadership in border management for a number of years.

Meanwhile, the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek has helped to establish the Kyrgyz Association of Women in the Security Sector that now counts over 2,000 members. It has also supported women's mediation networks in southern Kyrgyzstan since 2010.

These are just some examples of how the OSCE actively promotes women's leadership. Further work is needed – from addressing gender specific needs in the security sector to supporting female role models and women pioneers who have the courage to take up non-traditional roles, and inspire others to follow. I am sure we will be hearing some more stimulating testimonies

from our panelists, along with some important suggestions of where we may want to focus our future efforts.

At the same time, we need to pursue our efforts to make the OSCE an attractive workplace for women that want to lead for peace and security.

In the Secretariat, the institutions and field operations, women working in all three dimensions are already making leading contributions to the OSCE's work. They are heading field operations, leading patrol hubs and managing monitoring teams. Women are running projects ranging from arms control to economic empowerment and from environmental security to safeguarding human rights.

Attracting and retaining the best talent to our Organization, in particular women, will significantly boost our ability to deliver on our mandates to prevent conflict and build peace.

At a minimum, we must ensure a bias-free and gender sensitive working environment. I believe very much in awareness raising when it comes to the gender bias. And like in the EU, I have encouraged all colleagues to take the "Implicit Bias" test. This is really so important. To succeed, our approach must be comprehensive and ambitious. I want the OSCE to be a place where women can grow and thrive, where their contribution is valued and encouraged. This is my strong commitment as the Chief Administrative Officer of all OSCE executive structures.

The OSCE's Gender Parity Strategy is producing first results: In senior management, we have gone from 25% women in 2018 to 40% by the end of last year. So there is progress in some categories but our goal is to achieve full gender parity in all categories, including in our field operations. This will require substantive efforts over the coming years and we will only succeed if we all pull together. I am grateful to the Swedish OSCE Chairpersonship for its leadership on gender equality issues, including the emphasis placed on women's economic empowerment, which is a precondition.

In closing, I want to thank the Gender Issues Programme for organizing this event and all panellists for taking the time to share their thoughts with us. In particular, I'm glad that we will be hearing from a young woman from Kazakhstan today who is also a representative of the Perspectives 20/30 Initiative. Ms Aigerim Seitenova, I very much look forward to your intervention.

In the meantime, let me hand back to our moderator. Thank you very much.