



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

PARTICIPATION OF MINORITY WOMEN
IN POLITICAL AND PUBLIC LIFE

Panel presentation by
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to the
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Dear excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to participate on this panel alongside such distinguished and accomplished women.

When we speak about participation of women in public and political life – a topic close to my heart and my professional experience – we are talking about making sure that society benefits from the potential of all members of society. The same is true when we talk about the participation of national minorities. And when we talk about the participation of minority women, we can find that they face double challenges. Participation is first and foremost a right – but it is also a means to ensure that all voices are heard and that decisions are responsive to the needs of different groups. Broad, inclusive participation contributes to stable, just and secure societies. This is why participation is a large focus of the *Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*, the most recent thematic recommendations produced by my institution.

Women, like men, are not homogenous; they come from different ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds. The women and men who are successful in politics and public life tend to represent the elite of society, rather than marginalized groups.

Women may face additional barriers, beyond those based on gender, to their participation in political and public life. This can be particularly true of women of minority backgrounds. The *Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area* calls attention to the need to promote the participation of Roma and Sinti women in public life. The OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality calls on my institution to address specific issues relating to the participation in public life of women belonging to national minorities and to take steps to counter double discrimination, within the context of my conflict prevention mandate.

The reasons that minority women may face additional obstacles to participation and be at greater risk of marginalization are of course contextual. Cultural factors may play a role. Minority women may have fewer opportunities to acquire proficiency in the State language. They may have problems accessing documents required to register as candidates. They may

face difficulties making the connections needed to rise in the political ranks, or accumulating the financial resources needed for successful campaigns – as I believe the majority of women in politics do. Practices such as family voting can affect equal voting rights of minority women.

I see in my work that women may face the first obstacles to participation within their own communities. Often, my interlocutors among formal and informal minority representatives are mostly men. Yet the absence of minority women at the table means we are failing to tap into an underused resource. How can we be sure that we really understand and take into account the needs of women in all their diversity – and the needs of all members of minority groups? Here we have the same rationale that underpins UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

One could argue that international experience with methods to promote women's participation are more widely accepted and tested than methods to promote minority participation, reflecting the fact that the participation of minorities may be more politically sensitive and the roots of their exclusion more closely linked to the specific historical and local context. Minorities may have a strong political identity and mobilize around specific issues, which is not always the case for women as a group. The arguments in the “power play” against women and minorities might be different – but the techniques to exclude are similar.

Still there is opportunity for good practices on both sides to be mutually enhancing and reinforcing.

Measures to promote participation of marginalized groups can include special arrangements in elected assemblies or in different branches of government; special measures for participation in civil service; design of electoral systems; and advisory or consultative bodies. A key challenge is to make sure that we do not pursue one goal at the expense of the other. Measures to promote minority participation must be gender-mainstreamed, and measures to promote women's participation must be inclusive of women from different backgrounds.

I would like to highlight a few areas in particular, being aware that the political system of every country demands tailor-made solutions if we want these solutions to be effective.

First – informal networks: As a member of the Finnish Parliament, I had the honour in my last mandate of chairing the cross-party caucus of women. Cross-party caucuses of women can be very efficient when they have good and clear objectives. Some OSCE field operations highlighted the experience of this caucus in their projects. In earlier years, I have also been active in an initiative called the Roundtable for all Swedish-speaking MPs of the Finnish Parliament – no matter their political affiliation. These loose structures and informal networks have at times played an important role in helping groups to co-ordinate on positions of importance and thereby achieve results in decision-making. In the government where I served, we had a majority of women, and sometimes we sat down to see what difference we wanted to make – one of the results being that all forms of domestic violence, even minor, became public prosecution crimes.

Second, political parties are an extremely important arena for promoting the participation of women and of minorities. Internal party dynamics are not always conducive to achieving gender balance or ethnic diversity, even though it is to parties' own benefit to expand their constituencies. Parties can strengthen their outreach to minority women, recruit them as candidates, include their issues in party platforms and provide advancement opportunities for them within the party. In Georgia, I am launching a new project to increase political parties' engagement with national minorities, including promoting a focus on minority women.

Third, a number of countries in the OSCE area have formed specific bodies to facilitate minority participation. This can be a positive practice, if such bodies are formed in a fair and transparent manner and are able to participate effectively in decision-making. The active engagement of minority women is no less important in strengthening the legitimacy of these mechanisms. Later this year, my office will launch an assessment of political participation mechanisms for minorities in several countries in central and south-eastern Europe. Gender aspects will be analysed as part of the assessment methodology. I hope the findings will generate useful recommendations for the bodies concerned and for the respective authorities.

Lastly, I would emphasize local governance. I know from my own experience that this can be a particularly important venue for minority participation and representation, especially when persons belonging to national minorities are geographically concentrated. It is at this level that decisions are often made about important issues for the maintenance and promotion of

minority identities, such as education. Locally elected officials and civil servants are in the best position to understand the needs of local communities. In a number of countries my office has supported language training for civil servants in ethnically mixed municipalities, with courses designed to encourage women's participation.

We know that there are consequences when excluded or marginalized groups lack equal opportunities to participate. Society not only misses out on their contributions, but faces the risk that their further marginalization can lead to tensions and even violence. For this reason, we should take care not to reinforce marginalization within groups as well. We may lose out on opportunities to strengthen our societies and prevent conflicts.