

Working Session on Gender Equality – 6 October 2011

**Opening Remarks by Wendy Patten, Special Representative
of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Gender Issues**

Thank you very much, Ambassador Lenarcic.

Good morning and welcome to all the representatives of governments and civil society to today's session of the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting on tolerance and non-discrimination on the basis of gender. Today's session will focus on equality of opportunity for women and men, preventing violence against women, and a broader discussion on implementing the 2004 OSCE Action Plan on Gender Equality. We hope the session will highlight challenges, offer innovative approaches, and propel further action to promote women's rights and gender equality in every country in our region.

I am particularly pleased to see so many representatives of civil society here today – national and international women's rights NGOs, women who are leaders in their communities, and advocates for women and gender issues on all levels. I have worked on women's rights and gender issues for many years, both in the governmental and NGO sectors. Having seen the work from both perspectives, and now having served as Special Representative of OSCE Chair-in-Office on Gender Issues for more than a year, I can attest to the vital role of civil society in advancing gender equality and women's rights. NGOs engage governments, they put gender issues on the agenda and spark public debate, and they build support for solutions to improve the lives of women and girls. They take issue with government action or inaction on gender issues and call on governments to do more, to make more progress toward a just society free from gender discrimination. Indeed, an active civil society is a hallmark of strong, vibrant democracies.

In my work on violence against women, I have seen time and again in countries around the world the importance of cooperation between law enforcement and NGOs running shelters or crisis centers, who find ways to work together to combat domestic violence, each from their unique role. Such partnerships between civil society and government are a key component of the kind of coordinated community response that begins to change the social dynamic that has allowed domestic violence to persist for far too long. Enacting anti-domestic violence legislation is essential in establishing a legal and institutional framework for addressing domestic violence – but it is not enough. Legislation must be implemented effectively, which means ensuring that the law is fully understood and implemented not only in capitals and major cities, but also at the local level – in every community throughout the country. When local police and prosecutors treat domestic violence like the crime that it is, when women in rural areas know their rights under the law and know how to access legal protection and social assistance, and when abusers understand that domestic violence will not be tolerated or overlooked by officials, that is when the promise of anti-domestic violence legislation can finally be realized.

On violence against women and so many other gender issues, progress is often made by women coming together, whether in informal groups at the community level, in NGOs working at the national level, or in caucuses of women members of parliament. Women work together to put

gender equality issues on the table, to push for new legislation, policies and programs, and to develop smart solutions that improve the lives of women and girls and enable women to contribute fully to their communities and societies as a whole.

In these challenging economic times, we are reminded that it is critically important for societies to benefit from the economic contributions of all of their people – women and men alike. Yet the realities of gender discrimination in employment and in access to economic opportunity often leave women at the margins. No society can prosper when it leaves half its population behind. Harnessing the skills, talents, and abilities of women as well as men is a critical component of economic security. The OSCE should do all it can at the highest political level of the organization to promote equal opportunity for women in the economic sphere.

Women's full participation is also essential to peace and security. Last year, we marked the 10th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 on women, peace, and security. This UN resolution emphasizes the vital role that women can and must play in security sector institutions and in policy making related to conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict reconciliation. All too often, however, women are denied a seat at the table, thereby hampering peace building efforts and leaving women vulnerable to harm during conflicts. While we have OSCE commitments on women, peace, and security – both in the OSCE Action Plan on Gender Equality and in Ministerial Council Decision 14/05 -- there is so much more that needs to be done to ensure women's full participation in peace and security matters.

Another core area of the OSCE Action Plan on Gender Equality is equal opportunity for women to participate in political and public life. To provide introductory remarks on this issue today is Sonja Lukar, who is the Executive Director of the Central and Eastern European Network for Gender Issues in Ljubljana. She has extensive experience on issues of political participation, having been elected in the first multi-party national election in Slovenia in 1990. She is now very active as a political analyst and women's advocate, especially on women's role in politics. We are fortunate to have Ms. Lukar with us today to give remarks that will enlighten us, challenge us, and launch our discussion on this important topic.

Ms. Lukar – welcome.