



United States Mission to the OSCE

Opening Statement at the OSCE Economic and Environmental Dimension Implementation Meeting

As prepared for delivery by Deputy Chief of Mission Courtney Austrian
Vienna
November 15, 2022

I would like to begin by thanking Ambassador Halacinski and the Polish OSCE Chair, and the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, Ambassador Hasani, for organizing this Economic and Environmental Dimension Implementation Meeting. Thank you as well to Minister Blomqvist, Ms. Ionova, and Special Representative Pahlovici for their remarks this morning.

EEDIM is an opportunity to collectively examine how participating States have been implementing our commitments, and I welcome this year's focus on women's economic empowerment. The 2021 Swedish chair-in-office made this a priority and reminded us all of the commitments our governments have made. One issue of high concern throughout 2021 and today is the devastating and disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and their economic opportunities; I will return to this issue later.

However, the massive humanitarian crisis caused by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, with its disproportionate impact on all women, presents an ongoing urgent threat that has only compounded the pandemic's continuing gendered impacts. As we sit here this morning, millions of Ukraine's women and children have awakened in unfamiliar locations, alone or far from friends and family, vulnerable, facing the increasing threat of economic insecurity, and dependent on the aid and charity of others with unclear prospects for their future lives. We unfortunately know the statistics well by now: UNHCR confirms over 7.7 million Ukrainian citizens have crossed into other countries since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, and another 6.2 million have been internally displaced. UN Women estimates that up to 90 percent of refugees are women and children, as are 60 percent of the internally displaced. In addition to this acute humanitarian crisis, the Kremlin's full-scale invasion has also unleashed related energy and food security crises that have affected the global economy and significantly complicated the economic recovery from the pandemic – at great cost, especially to women whose economic security is often more precarious, across the OSCE region and the world. Nevertheless, Ukrainian women remain a vital source of strength, ingenuity, and courage as Ukraine continues to fight for sovereignty and democracy, and the United States remains deeply committed to standing by their side, raising their voices, and advocating for their continued leadership in all sectors of life.

The United States applauds OCEEA for developing new activities to address the economic and environmental consequences of Russia's brutal war of choice against Ukraine. It is our view that any discussions in the OSCE on promoting women's economic empowerment should now also consider how to do so given the disproportionate impact of the war on women, both in Ukraine and across the region. We cannot meet our commitments without addressing the reality of the world we live in.

In addition to the long-term damage caused by Russia's aggression, we are still faced with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused massive economic damage and exacerbated longstanding global gender gaps including in labor force participation, pay, and access to economic, financial, and digital resources. In the United States, for example, between February and April 2020, women in the workforce lost 13.5 million jobs while posting a net reduction of 1.5 million more jobs than men. Women's unemployment jumped nearly fivefold, while men's increased fourfold.

Moreover, the pandemic's overall economic impact remains an extraordinary challenge: it caused the highest job losses on record, while the recovery from it has been relatively strong compared to those from previous recessions. Yet the recovery is disproportionately affecting women of all backgrounds, and gender differences in the labor market have intensified. For example, men have returned to work in numbers exceeding their February 2020 employment level in the United States, but women still have not returned to work in numbers reaching pre-pandemic levels. This reality, and the persistence of longstanding obstacles and gender gaps, has long-term negative consequences for women and our collective economic prosperity. According to a Gates Foundation study of 95 countries, promoting access to income and assets, control of and benefit from economic gains, and the power to make decisions are indispensable elements of effectively promoting women's economic empowerment.

In today's final session, you will hear from a White House expert on gender policy issues who will discuss in more detail how the United States is working to implement our national and international commitments on women's economic empowerment, including through the implementation of our first National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality. In normal times, these and related questions should be the principal focus of our efforts to promote women's economic empowerment in the OSCE, but it is unavoidable today that we must simultaneously consider how we have met our commitments on women's economic empowerment in the face of the combined consequences of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic. There is clearly much more to do.

The United States looks forward to hearing during today's sessions about best practices, reviewing how participating States are implementing their commitments in this important arena, and discussing how the OSCE can help given the challenges we face today.

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