

**Council of Europe - OSCE/ODIHR
International Conference on Gender Equality
in Public Life**

**16 June 2015
Minsk**



Opening address by
Michael Georg Link

Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

Excellencies,

Distinguished Members of Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the second day of the conference on gender equality in public life.

I would like to thank our partners, the Council of Europe and the Belarusian State University for fruitful cooperation. I will also use this opportunity to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus for their kind support.

As one of the key documents for, what is known today as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, reminds participating States to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, without distinction as to sex and other grounds.

This idea later evaluated into the 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality which aimed to set out the priorities of the OSCE in promoting gender equality, in the Organization and in all participating States in compliance with all the relevant international standards promoting gender equality.

The OSCE Gender Action Plan has been our road map to ensure transformation from de iure to de facto gender equality.

However, our region could do much better with the de facto equality. While, in most of the OSCE participating States, women make up more than half of the adult population and the electorate, this is not reflected in their level of representation in elected office.

The recent data shows that 2/3 of OSCE participating States have failed to reach the 30 per cent target of women in decision-making positions required by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. This failure might call into question our ability to reach the 40 per cent

target of women in parliaments and other elected assemblies by the year 2020 as recommended by the Council of Europe.

Five years after the adoption of OSCE Ministerial Council Decision No. 7/09 on Women's Participation in Political and Public Life, which calls on the participating States to “consider providing for specific measures to achieve the goal of gender balance in all legislative, judicial and executive bodies”, it is clear that further measures need to be taken to enhance participation of women in political and public life in the OSCE region.

Let us go back to the beginning of 20th century and remind ourselves about the roots of our long struggle for gender equality and women's right to vote. Not so long time ago, women were told they were too emotional to exercise their right to vote and too fragile to stand in the polling stations. As years went by, country by country, laws have been changed due to dedicated advocacy by women like you.

Some might argue that, in the last ten years, the representation of women in parliaments, rapidly increased from the average of 18.9 per

cent to 25.3 per cent in the OSCE region. However, even if the current trend persists, equal representation might be achieved only in 50 years in the OSCE region and in 150 years worldwide.

In the OSCE context, Belarus represents a good example with a solid representation of women in the Belarusian Parliament. As of 2013, there were 34.5% of women in the Council of the Republic, which is a slight increase from 32.8% in 2012; however, a decrease can be noted in terms of women's representation in the House of Representatives, with 26.6% of women in 2013, down from 31.8% in 2012.

A positive trend was recorded in the 2011 Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women for Belarus as the percentage of women elected to local government councils has risen to notable 45 per cent.

Belarus has also demonstrated its commitment to international gender equality standards and achievements in supporting families with

children which should ultimately ensure preconditions to have more women involved in a public sphere.

I feel privileged to lead ODIHR which has a strong mandate to assist OSCE participating States in promoting women's political participation, to monitor and report on women's participation in electoral processes, as well as providing expertise and support to strengthen democratic institutions for advancing gender equality, as emphasized in the 2004 OSCE Gender Action Plan. Over the last five years, ODIHR has been developing its programme on women's political participation, by taking a comprehensive approach in looking at dynamics of political life of the OSCE participating States through the lens of gender equality. This approach has led to deposition of good practices and lessons learned as well as development of comparative research on key aspects of women's political participation in the OSCE Region, including women's participation in parliaments, political parties and elections.

Only last year, ODIHR organized and co-organized over 20 events focusing on women's political participation, reaching out to 900 stakeholders from across the OSCE region. ODIHR collected an impressive amount of information and developed expertise captured in the recently published Handbook on Promoting Women's Political Participation in Political Parties as a practical resource for women politicians and party leaders, on gender equality measures which leadership of political parties can support in reforming their structures and operations. As of this year the Handbook is also available in Russian.

To further advance de facto gender equality, ODIHR successfully piloted a gender audit methodology to work with parliamentary political parties. This innovative approach set ground for the development of customized Gender Action Plans for political parties as their road maps to enhancing gender equality.

The upcoming 20th Anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2015 represents a good momentum to conduct a serious assessment of

how both numeric and substantive participation of women in public and political life in the OSCE region could be enhanced. Therefore, our Office is preparing a Compendium of Good Practices for Advancing Women's Political Participation in the OSCE Region.

OSCE countries have declared their commitment to the human dimension issues and agreed that issues of human rights, including women's rights, cannot belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the participating States. This is why the OSCE is not only a community of values but also a community of responsibility.

This conference is an important contribution to the discussion about women's participation in public life, and we hope that this collaboration, with the Council of Europe and our Belarusian counterparts, will continue beyond this event.

I would like to thank you all for your active participation and contribution.

“The beginning is always today”. These words, by the 18th century advocate for women’s rights, Mary Wollstonecraft, resonate today as much as in the past. Today, all of us in this room are on the path to improve a landscape of public and political life. Our politics shaped by gender equality is not only better for women but better for the entire society.

I wish you a successful and fruitful continuation of the conference.

Thank you for your attention.