



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

ODIHR and Gender Equality

“...Full and true equality between men and women is a fundamental aspect of a just and democratic society.”
(Moscow Document, 1991)

What is Gender Equality?

Gender equality means equal rights and opportunities for women and men in laws and policies, and equal access to resources and services within families, communities and society. It refers to women and men being able to access and participate in all spheres of life on an equal footing, including in democratic governance, decision-making and the security sector. Gender equality requires that women and men receive adequate and equitable protection of their human rights, including the right to live free of violence in a safe and supportive home and community.

Why is the OSCE involved?

While significant advances have been made in promoting gender equality in the OSCE region, inequalities persist in both the private and public spheres, based often on stereotypes and conventions perpetuated at the state level and in society at large.

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has a mandate to assist OSCE participating States in promoting women's political participation, to monitor and report on

women's participation in electoral processes, and to provide expertise and support to strengthen democratic institutions for advancing gender equality, as described in the *OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality*, adopted in 2004 in Sofia.

As mandated by Ministerial Council decisions from Ljubljana in 2005, ODIHR supports participating States in focusing on the role of women in matters of peace and security at all levels, as well as in preventing and combating all forms of gender-based violence against women and girls.

How does ODIHR work on Gender Equality?

ODIHR assists participating States in advancing equality between men and women in all spheres of life and at all levels. ODIHR works to promote women's participation in politics, elections and the security sector; to strengthen national mechanisms for the advancement of women; and to prevent and combat violence against women and girls.

ODIHR also advocates for the provision of equal treatment and gender-sensitive assistance to men and women victims of all forms of trafficking in human



beings. Special attention is also paid to advance the equality and rights of men and women from marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as Roma and Sinti communities, minorities and migrants.

Women's participation in politics

Women continue to be under-represented in governance structures across the OSCE region, particularly in decision-making positions.

ODIHR works to increase women's participation in political and public life by identifying discriminatory laws and policies and sharing good practices for women's engagement in democratic processes. Trends in women's political participation are outlined in the study *Gender Equality in Elected Office: A Six-Step Action Plan*. ODIHR also promotes women's participation in parliaments, focusing on structures and initiatives that enable women to influence policy and legislative agendas.

To foster women's participation in political parties, ODIHR is compiling and sharing good practices on voluntary measures that have been successful in advancing women's roles in parties. ODIHR pays special attention to strengthening internal party democracy and including a gender perspective into political party regulation, so that both women and men are able to access party structures and decision-making on an equal footing, as outlined in the OSCE/ODIHR – Venice Commission *Guidelines on Political Party Regulation*.

ODIHR also implements activities that promote women's contributions to local governance, facilitate dialogue between elected officials and civil society, and strengthen women's political leadership skills across the OSCE region. ODIHR supports women's

organizations in developing policy papers assessing levels of women's political participation.

Women's participation in elections

The low level of women's political participation is often particularly evident during elections. ODIHR's election observation missions assess the extent to which an election process meets OSCE commitments by taking fully into account how the election process affects both women and men, and then making recommendations on how that election process can be improved.

Election observation missions examine women's participation as voters, candidates and elected representatives; their involvement in leadership roles within state institutions, electoral commissions and political parties; and how the legal framework and media structures affect women, as well as men. *The Handbook for Monitoring Women's Participation in Elections* outlines practical steps to be taken by each election observation mission to better integrate a gender perspective into its work. ODIHR follows-up on recommendations from election observation mission reports and conducts legislative reviews related to women's participation in electoral processes.

Women's participation in the security sector

Effective security institutions, policies and programmes should reflect the needs and interests of both men and women in order to serve the public in a fair and non-discriminatory manner. This can be achieved by ensuring that women are recruited and promoted within the ranks, providing for gender



parity in decision making and sensitizing all security providers to issues that predominantly affect women.

ODIHR trains law enforcement, armed forces, border management and other security personnel, based on the *Gender and Security Sector Reform Toolkit*. The training topics range from gender skills building to properly responding to security issues such as domestic violence and human trafficking.

ODIHR also aids with the development of national action plans for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Information exchanges among peers in the security sector provide assistance on specific issues such as drafting internal gender policies.

National mechanisms for the advancement of women

National mechanisms for the advancement of women serve as protectors of women's rights and monitors of state compliance with national and international gender equality obligations. Such mechanisms have been established across the OSCE region, yet they demonstrate various degrees of capacity and effectiveness in ensuring that gender equality commitments are implemented in practice.

Independent national human rights institutions (NHRIs) play an important role, both in promoting public awareness and understanding of women's rights, as well as in protecting them. ODIHR works to strengthen the capacity of NHRIs to protect and promote women's rights and gender equality by sharing good practices and expertise across the OSCE region, as compiled in the *Handbook for National Human Rights Institutions on Women's Rights and Gender Equality*. ODIHR also assists participating States with the

development of non-discriminatory legal and policy frameworks for the advancement of women, including by supporting the creation of national action plans for gender equality or combating violence against women.

Preventing and combating violence against women

Violence against women and girls is a persistent problem across the OSCE region. Exacerbated by a lack of visibility and by gender-based inequalities and stereotypes, such violence is often viewed as a private or domestic affair rather than a human rights violation. This violence should be recognized as something that not only threatens the physical security of women and girls, but also limits women's ability to participate and make their own decisions in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres. Preventing and combating violence against women should be a precondition for all other activities aimed at promoting women's rights.

ODIHR's efforts to prevent and combat violence against women are often linked with other activities, including those focused on women's security and women's participation in politics. ODIHR works on strengthening legal and policy frameworks for preventing and combating violence against women; building the capacity of law enforcement and judicial authorities to play an effective role in prevention and prosecution; and increasing the gender sensitivity of security-sector personnel and security-sector reform processes.



Partnerships

ODIHR works with a range of partners to foster gender equality and women's rights, and to prevent and combat violence against women.

Our partners include:

- Participating States — governmental structures for gender equality, national parliaments and political party regulators;
- Women's groups and civil society organizations working on human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as political parties and active and aspiring women political candidates;
- Law enforcement, armed forces, border management and other security personnel;
- Independent national human rights institutions (NHRIs);
- OSCE Field Operations, the OSCE Secretariat, including the Gender Section, and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly; and
- International organizations — UN Women, the United Nations Development Programme, and the Council of Europe, as well as international political institutes, party foundations and think tanks.

More information

For detailed information about ODIHR's gender equality initiatives and to view its full range of resources and publications, please visit: www.osce.org/odihr/gender

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