

SUPPLEMENTARY HUMAN DIMENSION MEETING

PROMOTION OF GENDER BALANCE
AND
PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL AND PUBLIC LIFE

6-7 May 2010

Ratsaal, Hofburg, Vienna



Opening remarks by

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Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on *'Promotion of Gender Balance and Participation of Women in Political and Public Life'*.

I would first like to express my appreciation to the Kazakh OSCE Chairmanship for having proposed this topic. It seamlessly follows up on the third SHDM of last year under the Greek Chairmanship that dealt with Gender Equality and the complex relationship between gender and violence.

My appreciation also goes to other OSCE institutions and field missions not only for their participation in this meeting, but also and most importantly, for their contribution to promoting and supporting women's rights. I also appreciate the participation of our international partner organizations and representatives of civil society from across the entire OSCE region. The issues to be discussed here can only be successfully addressed by a wide coalition of actors.

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Excellencies,

In the simplest terms, democracy is understood to mean the rule of the people. Central to a democratic system of government is its

representative nature and hence its ability to respond to the needs of the citizens, women and men, on an equal basis.

In most countries, women make up more than half of the adult population and the electorate. This, we must admit, is not reflected in their level of participation in public affairs. Democracy is to remain a mere aspiration if significant parts of the citizenry are *de facto* excluded from public affairs. This is a major challenge for any democracy.

Throughout the last decades, many nations have taken drastic measures to ensure de-facto equality between women and men. Political will to address this challenge has been matched with groundbreaking laws and policies. Yet, the progress is uneven across the region: for example, the representation of women in parliaments, which is one of the most widely used indicators, ranges from 45% to as little as 6%.

Within the OSCE region, we had an average of around 14% women in national parliaments in 1995. We now have an average of 22%. Fifteen years have resulted in a mere 8% increase in women's representation in parliaments. This increase is largely due to significant progress made in a small number of participating States. In upper houses, progress is even slower.

Some additional statistics reveal a harsh reality. Only 4 OSCE participating States have 40% or more of women in parliaments (*the recommended benchmark set forth by the CoE and endorsed by the*

UN). Notably, 12 OSCE States have female presiding officers of parliament – the OSCE’s host state, Austria, is among them –, although this does not necessarily point to a higher degree of women’s participation in political life in these countries. And sadly, only 12 OSCE States have 30 % of women in parliaments (*the goal set by the UN to have been achieved globally by 1995*).

Starting with the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, OSCE participating States have firmly and repeatedly emphasized that “*full and true equality between men and women is a fundamental aspect of a just and democratic society based on the rule of law.*” Furthermore, OSCE States have affirmed their goal of not only achieving de jure but also de facto equality between men and women (§40, Moscow Document 1991).

At the Athens Ministerial Council meeting, held in December last year, the participating States adopted the *Decision on Women’s Participation in Political and Public Life* to generate a new momentum to address the continued under-participation of women in governance structures across the OSCE region. It calls on States to undertake specific measures to promote gender balance in all legislative, judicial and executive bodies, especially emphasizing the need for gender balance at the decision-making levels.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This OSCE-wide meeting on the promotion of gender balance and women's participation in political and public life should avoid leaning towards self-congratulatory statements. This is an opportunity for all of us to critically evaluate what has been achieved, what hasn't, and how to do more.

To move forward, we must identify the approaches that have proven to be successful. We must also examine the challenges that still lie ahead. The three questions we should ask ourselves and answer are the following:

- What can concretely be done to increase women's political participation at national levels?
- How can we put last year's MC Decision on Promoting Women's Political Participation into action?
- What particular assistance can the OSCE provide to participating States and other actors in promoting women's participation in political and public life, and what should be our priority?

I am looking forward to a fruitful and enlightening discussion and thank you for your attention.