

SUPPLEMENTARY HUMAN DIMENSION MEETING

GENDER EQUALITY

WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

5 November 2009

Ratsaal, Hofburg, Vienna



Opening remarks by

Ambassador Janez Lenarčič

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

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on *'Gender Equality with a Special Focus on Violence Against Women'*.

I would first like to express my appreciation to the Greek OSCE Chairmanship for having proposed this topic. In 2002 already, combating and preventing violence against women was the subject of a supplementary human dimension meeting, but the angle chosen this year is different as it tackles the complex relationship between gender and violence. This is a welcome approach, and, as we will see later today and tomorrow, indicative of both the magnitude and intricacies of the challenges ahead of us.

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 overcoming these challenges within their respective mandates. I also appreciate the participation of our partner international organizations and representatives of civil society from across the entire OSCE region.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

A life free of violence is an inalienable and fundamental right of all, women and men alike. Nevertheless, women continue to be exposed to gender-based violence, within their homes and in their communities, sometimes perpetrated or condoned by state actors. Gender inequalities actually increase the risk of violence by men against women and inhibit the victims' ability to seek protection.

Concerted action at the international level over the last several years has succeeded in having the issue considered within the **broader human rights framework**. In this context, emphasis is placed on the responsibility of states to make all necessary efforts to **prevent** all forms of violence against women, to **prosecute** perpetrators and to provide adequate **protection** to victims of violence.

At the 2005 Ministerial Council in Ljubljana, OSCE participating States confirmed their commitment to addressing violence against women. *MC Decision 15/05 on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women* reaffirms the commitment of the OSCE States to existing international legal instruments that recognize violence against women as a violation of fundamental human rights. The Decision also urges participating States to – I quote - “*ensure that all female victims of violence will be provided with full, equal and timely access to justice and effective remedies, medical and social assistance, including emergency assistance, confidential counseling and shelter*”. It also urges States to “*adopt and*

implement legislation that criminalizes gender-based violence and establishes adequate legal protection” (MC. DEC/15/05, 6 Dec 2005, §§4 i, ii).

One year earlier, in Sofia, the Ministerial Council adopted the *OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality*, which calls on States to make the prevention of violence against women a priority and to address it by taking proactive steps through law and policy.

Drawing upon these commitments and developments, allow me a few observations that could guide our discussions today and tomorrow.

Clearly, at the core of all of our efforts is the recognition that gender equality is essential to peace, democracy, economic development and therefore to security and stability – the OSCE’s core business, if you wish. Violence against women is global, systemic and rooted in power imbalances and inequalities between men and women. It is also based on long-standing stereotypes, and compounded by a history of impunity for perpetrators of violence.

These phenomena cannot be effectively fought if their root causes are not acknowledged at the highest level of state authorities within a society. While concrete measures can achieve a lot, there is little they can do if there is no public acceptance of what is at stake, of what needs to be done, and how this needs to be done. Combating harmful stereotypes requires more than one-off measures that may

look nice on paper; it requires action at all levels of society, in different forms, through various means, from education to politics.

In other words, it requires an inter-disciplinary, rights-based approach particularly in the three areas we will focus at this meeting: protection, prosecution and prevention.

Protection: We should aim at comprehensive and integrated protection measures and support services. This includes immediate responses such as **legal, psychological and medical support**, but also encompasses mitigating the consequences of violence through **housing, financial and employment assistance**.

Prosecution: As I said, there is a long history of impunity that partly explains today's reality. In order to end impunity for violence and in order to secure effective prosecution, it is the State authorities - and not the victims - that need to take responsibility. Effective investigation and prosecution of crimes of violence against women, leading to appropriate sentencing of perpetrators, **sends a strong message of zero-tolerance for violence against women**.

Finally, prevention: Three types of preventive measures need to be distinguished:

- (1) preventive measures in the narrow sense, aimed at preventing violence from happening through a wide range of initiatives that address the root causes of violence;

- (2) another set of measures include the immediate response intended to mitigate harm after violence has occurred; and
- (3) measures of long-term care and support for the victims.

Prevention is a multi-faceted effort, and can be conducted at the international, regional, national and local levels.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The OSCE, with all its components, takes concrete actions to support participating States in implementing their commitments in this field.

The ODIHR works with participating States to promote women's rights, gender equality and to combat violence against women. We conduct activities that aim to ensure that women's rights are known to women and men, and that they are protected by law and in practice. This work includes capacity-building for professionals working on these matters, such as law-enforcement personnel. Real achievement depends on the level of mobilization of society as a whole, and I should add that we at the ODIHR have been particularly keen on promoting and supporting co-operation between state and non-state actors in this field.

Let me also point out the work carried out by the OSCE's Gender Section, which has recently compiled a resource guide for

practitioners and policy makers entitled: *Bringing Security Home – Combating Violence Against Women: A Compilation of Good Practices*.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

This meeting is an opportunity to share such good practices and to review the progress achieved. In order to continue to move ahead we must identify the approaches that have proven successful, but also to examine the challenges that still lie ahead.

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

It is now my pleasure to introduce the keynote speaker of this SHDM, Ms. Cheryl Thomas, who is the Director of Women's Rights Programme at the Advocates for Human Rights, the leading US-based civil society organization which has worked worldwide with other actors to inspire and foster legal and policy reforms in the field of combating violence against women. Her presentation will set the scene for the discussions over the next two days. Ms. Thomas, you have the floor.