

29th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum

**“Promoting comprehensive security, stability and sustainable development
in the OSCE area through women’s economic empowerment”**

SECOND PREPARATORY MEETING

Stockholm, 10-11 June 2021

OSCE Secretary General

Helga Maria Schmid

Opening remarks

Thank you very much.

Minister Hallberg,
Deputy Minister Isaki
Excellencies,
Dear Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to join Ambassador Larke, in welcoming you to the Second Preparatory Meeting of the OSCE’s 29th Economic and Environmental Forum.

The prolonged shutdowns triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic have had a profound impact on global economic activity. There can be no doubt that women have disproportionately suffered the socio-economic consequences. Now that a return to “normalcy” seems within reach and the economic recovery is gaining pace, there’s added urgency for decision-makers to consider policies that will ensure a more level playing field for women.

Improved access to education, financial services and technology are powerful levers to build back better and ensure sustainable economic development. This is a matter of equity and social justice, but also about harnessing the full potential of women’s entrepreneurship, ingenuity and talent.

Creating a socioeconomic environment that responds to the needs of both men and women is instrumental for promoting cohesive, prosperous, inclusive and secure societies. This is also an important international commitment in the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda.

Against this background, the topics under discussion today, in particular women’s equal participation in business, trade and transport, assume particular importance.

Research by McKinsey that was done prior to the pandemic suggests that global annual GDP could be 26% higher by 2025 if women and men participated equally in the economy. In other words, promoting equal opportunities for women is a key factor for securing prosperity, stability and security.

A number of Ministerial Council decisions call on participating States to develop and strengthen measures that lead to increased diversification in traditionally male-dominated sectors. While OSCE commitments do not make explicit reference to the nexus between gender, trade and transport, these sectors play a significant role for connectivity and prosperity in our region. Moreover, OSCE participating States have mandated the OCEEA to support the implementation of WTO Trade Facilitation Agreements that speed up the movement, release and clearance of goods.

In 2017, 118 members of the World Trade Organization, among them many OSCE participating States, signed the Buenos Aires Declaration on Women and Trade. The signatories agreed to share best practices and build the evidence base to support policymakers, trade and investment institutions, and businesses to make commerce more responsive to the needs of female entrepreneurs.

Harmonized trade and border clearance procedures that are based on agreed international standards have obvious security advantages for the OSCE region. They lead to more predictability in economic relations, increased confidence building and good-neighbourly relations. But women will benefit from standardization only if barriers that prevent them from fully participating in trade and transport are first identified and then removed. Sound evidence and analysis based on gender-disaggregated data should inform the design of trade and transport policy so that policy-makers can assess their effect on gender equality and introduce corrective measures as necessary.

There is also a need for greater gender awareness and better representation of women in decision-making positions, particularly in the transport sector. Embedded norms often predispose girls and women to pass over a career in this essential part of the economy. Public-private partnerships could increase the visibility of women in transport professions and inform them about the range of available employment opportunities.

The OSCE has gained some preliminary experience in this area. As part of the projects we have done, we have identified some of the obstacles preventing women from pursuing a career in transport and logistics. We are now aiming to launch a number of career advancement initiatives for female professionals already employed in beneficiary ports.

Another area where the OSCE has been advancing women's participation for quite a while is environmental co-operation. Since 2014, the OSCE has fostered the inclusion of gender perspectives in water governance and the participation of women in conflict resolution and water management in Central Asia and Afghanistan. We have developed a guidance document "*Gender Mainstreaming in Water Governance in Central Asia*". We are currently launching a Mentoring and Career Development Programme in partnership with the Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia and the Stockholm International Water Institute.

And finally, we will also launch a new extra-budgetary project on women's economic empowerment as a catalyst for energy security and sustainability in Central Asia. Energy

remains one of the least gender-balanced industries. OSCE-wide, women represent around 20% of the energy workforce despite the invaluable role they could play as change agents across the energy value chain. This must change if we want to meet global sustainability goals and the OSCE's gender equality and energy related commitments. The project will assess the job creation potential of renewable energy and explore policies that can help place women at the forefront of the energy transition.

I am firmly convinced that the OSCE can play a useful role in the sharing of knowledge and good practices on gender-responsive approaches to trade, transport and environmental co-operation.

As we head into the post-pandemic recovery phase with renewed reasons for optimism, I encourage all of you to consider the benefits of addressing the economic gender gap – as well as the costs of inaction. At this juncture, women's economic participation and empowerment is perhaps more critical than ever.

Thank you.