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**The role of regional and inter-governmental organizations
in promoting gender equality**

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**UN CSW Interactive panel on
“The Role of regional and intergovernmental organizations in promoting gender
equality”**

**10-year Review of the Implementation
of the Beijing Platform for Action
New York, 10 March 2005, 3-6 pm**

As a regional arrangement under Chapter VIII of the Charter of the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is a key instrument for early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation in its region. At the OSCE Istanbul Summit in 1999, the Heads of State or Government declared that “The full and equal exercise by women of their human rights is essential to achieve a more peaceful, prosperous and democratic OSCE area. We are committed to making equality between men and women an integral part of our policies both at the level of our States and within the Organization.” The OSCE has a broad and comprehensive view of security: the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, along with economic and environmental co-operation, are considered to be just as important for the maintenance of peace and stability as politico-military issues, and as such are an integral component of OSCE activities. Gender equality contributes to comprehensive security, which is a goal of OSCE activities in all three dimensions, the human dimension, the economic and environmental dimension, and the politico-military dimension. A gender perspective should therefore be taken into account in the Organization’s activities, projects and programmes, in order for the Organization to achieve gender equality within its own operations as well as in the participating States.

In Sofia in December 2004, the OSCE’s Ministerial Council decided to endorse the “2004 Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality” adopted by the Permanent Council earlier in the year. The Decision of the Ministerial Council recalls the Beijing Platform for Action, the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the UN General Assembly in the year 2000, and the UN Security Council resolution 1325 and refers to the need to appropriately reflect a gender perspective in the activities conducted under the auspices of the OSCE. It also stresses that the OSCE should develop further and strengthen a continuous and sustainable gender-mainstreaming process.

This new Action Plan sets out a clear set of priorities for the OSCE for promoting gender equality within the organization and in all participating States, and for ensuring monitoring of its implementation. It was developed on the basis of experiences gathered in the process of implementing the first Action Plan from the year 2000 and it seeks to address challenges which were identified in the course of action. In particular, it was noted that gender mainstreaming requires a more consistent, systematic attention to gender perspectives in the

activities of the Organization based on a cross-dimensional approach and also adequate monitoring and review mechanisms.

Within the Organization, the Plan addresses in particular training programmes on gender awareness, on the promotion of a professional and gender-sensitive management culture and working environment and on applying innovative recruitment strategies to ensure a gender-balance in staffing.

With regard to assistance to its participating States the plan focuses on:

- The implementation of relevant commitments
- The highlighting and promotion of the role of women in conflict prevention and peace reconstruction processes
- Providing a framework to regularly review the implementation of the Plan

The OSCE is working at different levels and in different areas on the promotion of gender equality:

- Through the Gender Unit of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR),
- through its field missions in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Eastern and South Eastern Europe,
- and through other structures including the Office of the Coordinator of Economic and Environmental Affairs, through the Secretariat, and through the programmes of the Special Representative to the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.

Since 1998/1999 when gender advisers were introduced both to the ODIHR in Warsaw and the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, activities have been developed in the following critical areas of concern: education and training of women, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, human rights of women and the girl child.

The first and largest programmes that were developed are aiming at women's empowerment and their participation in political decision-making. For almost five years the ODIHR has been developing and implementing large scale programmes in South Caucasus and Central Asia in order to support democratic development in OSCE participating States by country-tailored activities aimed at increasing the participation of women in democratic processes and advancing the role of women at all levels of decision-making. The ODIHR programmes have been designed to safeguard continuity and to allow for long-term impact by adopting a three phased implementation strategy of awareness-raising, local capacity building and national expertise development.

The continued under-representation and insufficient participation of women in democratic processes and decision-making subsequently results in governance and policies that fail to acknowledge the needs and interests of the more than 50% of the population that women represent. This is particularly evident in transition and post-transition societies with a resurgence and increase in the prevalence of traditional attitudes and stereotypical expectations towards women predominantly occurring in regions outside of capitals. These traditions and attitudes have a negative impact on the status of women and on the choices and

opportunities available to women, and are subsequently leading to women being increasingly marginalized and underrepresented in democratic processes.

One of the successful approaches, for which the OSCE's political and the ODIHR's democratic institutions building mandates are well suited, is ensuring the increase of women's equal participation in decision-making and influencing democratic developments by building effective and sustainable co-operation strategies between civil society and government structures. Such an approach requires awareness-raising of gender equality as an integral part of democratic society, capacity- and expertise-building on local and national levels, the promotion of women's leadership, and initiatives to increase the role of women in decision-making processes, as well as integration of policies and mechanisms that guarantee equal rights and opportunities for women and men.

Additionally, violence against women, which has been identified as a prevailing global problem, is a human rights violation that undermines women's involvement and participation in addressing any development needs. Therefore, in 2005, the priority areas in the ODIHR's programme include:

- Civil society & government co-operation at national and local levels on advancing the role of women at all levels of decision-making;
- Capacity and expertise building on promoting equal opportunities and equal participation of women and men in policy-making and for civil society and government structures;
- Development of women's leadership;
- Preventing and combating domestic violence.

During 2001-2004, the programme succeeded in developing structures and practices to promote an increased role of women in democratization and in decision-making in the countries of operation. The programme has created strong NGO networks, has built teams of qualified local trainers and has inspired and set off community initiatives for women as well as new organizations promoting increased participation of women in society, and gender equality in particular, outside the capitals or large towns. In effect, the programme has had a significant impact on increasing the understanding of the issues and creating a demand for involving civil society in the democratic processes, increasing the participation of women in decision-making and promoting equal opportunities for women and men.

The activities and priorities of the programme have been selected and tailor-made, based on the analysis of the situation in each country and an evaluation of the potential impact and value added by OSCE's involvement. The programme's design and strategy give it a catalyst role of starting local initiatives, forming partnership teams consisting of civil society and government representatives thereby giving "ownership" of the programme to the local stakeholders and encouraging sustainability. National expertise development provides for knowledge transfer, which, at local, national, and regional levels, secures that national experts are equipped with the knowledge, skills, networks and status required to lead and substantively support women's movements, and to develop, conduct and run their respective national programmes at all levels of society.

In Eastern and South Eastern Europe the OSCE Missions support the Gender Task Force (GTF) of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe in its programmes *Women Can Do It* aimed at increasing women's participation in political life. Focusing on capacity building, the

programme is rolled out in several phases, from *Grassroots Women's Political Empowerment*, to *Mainstreaming Gender Equality in Party Politics*, and political empowerment of women employed in municipal administration and public institutions, as well as in special areas such as *Women Voters Can Do It*, *Women Can Do It in Trade Unions* and *Roma Women Can Do It*. The second phase, *Women Can Do It II*, seeks to improve gender equality in parliamentary political parties using a gender quota of 30% for the minority, in all cases the women, in the electoral legislation. The *Women Voters Can Do It* project reaches out to households and voters through media campaigns, including TV spots, radio jingles, billboards, postcards, and posters. The *Women Can Do It in Trade Unions* projects target textile, healthcare, and teachers unions, thus women dominated areas of work, with the aim to empower these unions to establish a constructive dialogue with the Government and public so as to seek new solutions to outstanding social problems with a gender perspective.

Some Missions re-enforce the programmes of the GTF through the development of similar projects, rolled out on a wide geographic scale. In 2004, the OSCE Mission to Serbia and Montenegro implemented a programme aiming at improving gender equality in local governance by linking women in politics, local government, and civil society. Women employed in municipal administration and public institutions were trained to become focal points for gender equality and local campaigns promoted women's participation in politics, with particular focus on municipal elections.

Women in local governance are encouraged to work on local social and communal problems, to show that women who are in charge in municipal bodies can bring solutions and thus promote more women in political decision-making processes. They are also given support in order to play a more active role in elections related activities through organized actions of local women's political network.

Public campaigns comprised media campaigns, public opinion polls on women in politics, street actions such as performances in the city centre, distribution of promotional material on squares, local markets and pedestrian zones, lobbying among local committees of political parties, and round tables with representatives of political parties, forums of women, NGOs, experts and citizens. Also, the building of alliances was facilitated by the participation of high ranking officials, a fact that contributed to the improvement of networking with other social actors. In most towns, social dialogue between local NGOs, media and the municipal gender focal points with regard to gender equality issues has been initiated. Gender focal points and municipal bodies for gender equality became more visible and recognizable in political and public activities of their towns. The programme resulted in the encouragement of professional women to step forward into political life. It strengthened women's political networks with the purpose of mutually work and campaign to introduce changes in locally created and led politics of gender equality. Furthermore, it introduced the culture of gender equality as an inevitable part of public and media life.

Another important area of work of the OSCE Missions in the framework of the Beijing Platform for Action, in particular in South Eastern Europe, is assisting host countries in developing gender equality mechanisms at all levels of governance. These programmes aim at strengthening already existing gender equality commissions or at developing such bodies where they do not exist.

As countries strive to achieve greater levels of democracy, it is imperative to recognize that a movement towards gender equality is made as important a priority as other reforms being implemented at the national level. The existence of both legislative and non-legislative measures to address discrimination and promote equal treatment and opportunities are prerequisites for the fulfillment of international commitments. The key to the establishment of good governance at local level is the ability to respond to the distinct needs and concerns of the local population, and thus encourage representative and participative governance processes. To effectively pursue the goal of gender equality and anti-discrimination at all levels, international assistance can support broader initiatives to foster collaboration and establish sustainable institutions and processes to achieve these shared goals.

The process of the further institutionalization of the gender equality mechanisms is focusing on providing legal and political recognition of the gender equality mechanisms, providing know-how and political empowerment of women and providing further institution building to already existing gender equality mechanisms.

In order to provide legal recognition, the Missions give assistance to developing the necessary legal framework on gender equality, based on international standards, which should contain provisions for regulating the procedures for establishment, function, nomination of members, decision-making, public representation, and budgets of the mechanisms. Political recognition is sought through the development of a formal memorandum of understanding with public administration and local self-government regulating mutual support and through emphasizing the importance of such mechanisms in public statements through the Organization's political work. Capacity building activities include the provision of issue based training opportunities, advocacy and leadership training, inter-municipal networking, information-sharing and broad-based public awareness campaigning. Regular activities to provide support to the network of the municipal gender focal points include various education activities in co-operation with the trained municipal focal points for the newly elected women in municipal assemblies, members of political parties, business women, women from media and activists of women's movements. Also, networking activities of institutions across regions and across various related fields of work, including gender based violence and health, are regularly carried out in order to create mutual strategies and synergies on achieving gender equality.

Thus, the Missions provide support to a large number of diverse gender equality mechanisms, functioning on distinct yet interrelated levels of institutionalization processes on national and local level. Through the gender programmes political institutions have been shaped and reshaped with the main objective to ensure political and legal frameworks that provide basic conditions for the continuous work on gender issues in order to move towards gender equality in the European context of the first decade of the 21st century. The programmes are rolled out in close partnership with all levels of local institutions dealing with gender equality, women's rights, and equal opportunity and non-discrimination issues.

Another area in which the OSCE has taken a leading role is the fight against trafficking in human beings. Since the year 2000, the Stability Pact Task Force on Trafficking in Human Beings, working under the auspices of the OSCE, has provided a mechanism for South East European countries to develop and execute innovative approaches to combat the human rights violation of modern-day slavery. This structure allowed for increased public awareness, sharing of best practices, and coordination of legislative and policy responses to combat trafficking in persons.

Since its inception, the SPTF has provided critical leadership and served as a catalyst for the creation of the country mechanisms designed to organize the implementation of anti-trafficking work in the countries and across the region. Through the SPTF framework, participating governments have started to play a leading role in the regional fight against trafficking, resulting in enormous improvements in structures and anti-trafficking legislation throughout the region.

The SPTF has been a leading advocate for the view that responses to human trafficking be victim-centered and, in so doing, showed that preserving and protecting the human rights of the victim is not inimical to the interests of States in effective law enforcement and regulation of migration. At the same time, the SPTF consistently pressed the theme of “inclusion” and the necessity of cooperative efforts among government and law enforcement officials, NGOs and international organizations.

The Task Force’s regional activities were firmly based on the needs and priorities of the member countries. It has been crucial to achieve sustainability through a regional sense of “ownership” of this issue, through development of local participation, responsibility, and accountability of efforts. The SPTF has ensured that the regional dimension of the multi-faceted elements of human trafficking are fully considered and included in the planning and implementation of anti-trafficking activities in and among the participating member countries.

In 2003 the OSCE Ministerial Council endorsed the OSCE Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings and established the OSCE Anti-Trafficking Mechanism, consisting of the Special Representative and the Anti-Trafficking Assistance Unit. In May 2003, the Chairman-in-Office appointed Dr. Helga Konrad as the OSCE Special Representative on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.

The Special Representative on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings works first and foremost with governments, motivating them to accept and act on their own account to curb human trafficking. She supplies governments with decision and policy-making aids. Her mandate extends to assistance in setting up national strategies for efficient internal and transnational cooperation. At the same time, the Special Representative continues to raise awareness of the complexity of the problem and proposes ways in which to address it in a comprehensive way.

The Special Representative also ensures the effective collaboration between all the agents and stakeholders involved in the fight against human trafficking, from governmental authorities, law enforcement officials to NGOs, and, last but not least, international organizations as sources of expertise and know-how. Furthermore, the Special Representative cooperates with all OSCE institutions and structures, especially with ODIHR, the Strategic Police Matters Unit, the Office of the Coordinator of Economic and Environmental Activities, the Senior Adviser on Gender Issues, and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

It is evident that the OSCE has recognized its important role in the strive towards gender equality and works for the full implementation of international commitments including the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly. The Organization has developed a broad range of activities of which only

a few can be mentioned in this framework. These activities and programmes fit into three different functions that the Organization should assume:

- promoter of a legal and political framework for gender equality
- supporter of the process of institutionalization of gender equality
- role model for the culture of gender equality and equal opportunities.

OSCE Missions and Institutions are revising or drafting laws and support local partners in the process of making the relevant changes to the legal framework in order to bring it into compliance with international standards including the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Examples of such work include the support given to drafting regulations on the prohibition of trafficking in persons, regulations on protection against domestic violence, anti-discrimination law and gender equality law. Several Missions are also assisting local partners in drawing up country reports under the CEDAW.

The support to the process of institutionalization of gender equality can go through projects as outlined above, but it can also be rendered as a political involvement to strengthen the existing network of gender organizations, both intra-state and inter-state. Such a network and common platform is critical if gender equality promotion efforts are to gain currency at national and local levels. Regional organizations can reinforce - and often create - synergies between the national and local government and non-governmental sectors that might not otherwise take shape. One of the great challenges in the process towards gender equality is the task of building links between gender equality actors within a country, to converge all of the various gender equality activities and approaches into one common cause with one common platform. As experienced on the international level, it takes a lot of political will and effort to gather all interests into one common movement in which all actors can bring added value. International organizations can lend legitimacy and buttress national and local level initiatives by symbolically as well as technically supporting advocacy and institutional activities that promote gender equality.

However, no political statement, no programme, no financial support will be truly effective if the organization itself does not reflect the values and standards that it promotes at a local level in its structures and operations. International organizations should reflect and reinforce the commitment to gender equality and make visible that this should be the same core value from the level of international and regional organizations down to national and grassroots level campaigns and initiatives.

In the OSCE, gender programmes in the field have been developed in parallel with provisions to provide for fair employment practices, appropriate staff rules and policies on the professional work environment and equal opportunities for women and men. Women have to have equal opportunity for advancement and representation at all levels of the Organization. In particular national staff members learning about and working with fair practices and policies will be able to transfer such labour standards into the national market if they are taking employment on the local market. In the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the organization's internal policies match with programmes in the host country. Initiatives within the public administration reform programme included the adoption of fair employment practices and the development of recruitment guidelines, job descriptions as well as employment policies, which ensure non-discrimination in recruitment and administration of staff. A fair employment monitoring programme assists companies to incorporate fair

practices in their human resource management, which includes non-discrimination as well as developing staff policies which do not discriminate women in the workplace.

In another area, namely the fight against trafficking in human beings, the OSCE has also taken a close look at the interrelation between the Organization's activities and the values reflected by its staff. It is not sufficient to develop programmes and projects to assist and protect victims of trafficking; measures are also needed to ensure that staff members are in no way linked to this terrible trade. At the 10th Ministerial Council in Porto (December 2002) the OSCE participating States declared that "We will not tolerate international staff members being involved in any illegal activities, inciting this criminal trade or behaving in contravention of this Code of Conduct." Furthermore, they committed themselves "to take all practicable measures to ensure the accountability of international staff members to their respective national and, when appropriate, local authorities for such activities."

Since November 2000, the OSCE has a Code of Conduct which addresses the expected behaviour of Mission Members towards the problem of trafficking. It clearly spells out the prohibition of affiliation with persons involved in trafficking. Also, the OSCE Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings spells out the structure for the implementation of the Code of Conduct including monitoring compliance and reporting on breaches. In addition to this, the OSCE Secretariat carries out staff training on gender mainstreaming, equal opportunities, violence against women, anti-trafficking activities and the Code of Conduct, in order to ensure that all staff members understand the importance of reflecting, in their own personal behaviour, the values and standards which the Organization promotes through its programmes.

The role of international and regional organizations in the promotion of gender equality can be very broad and diverse. The OSCE has taken a multi-faceted approach in line with the different mandates agreed upon by the Organization and host states of field missions. But only if organizations are also seen to embrace the values they promote in their inner structure will they be successful in this task.