



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**

**29<sup>th</sup> OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum**

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

**FIRST PREPARATORY MEETING  
Vienna, 15-16 February 2021**

**Secretary General Helga Maria Schmid**

**Opening remarks**

Ambassador Funered,  
Excellencies,  
Dear Colleagues,

I would like to join Ambassador Ulrika Funered in welcoming you to this first preparatory meeting of the 2021 Economic and Environmental Forum process. Not least because the topic under discussion is very dear to my heart. Women’s economic empowerment is key to achieving security, stability and sustainable development, particularly COVID has made a case for that.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives in ways we couldn’t have imagined just a year ago. Over the past year, many crucial challenges, including widespread and persistent inequality in economic opportunities for men and women, have been drifting out of focus. Yet the pandemic has in fact worsened pre-existing inequalities. And it has also started to undo some of the progress toward gender equality that we have achieved in recent years. This is exacerbating inequities in income distribution and in access to health, quality education and jobs. We have also seen a dramatic surge in violence against women and girls.

So it is absolutely clear that we have to stop this downward spiral now.

Already last July, Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund and former EU Commissioner, wrote: “It is crucial that policymakers adopt measures to limit the scarring effects of the pandemic on women”. She urged governments to react rapidly and decisively to counteract the pandemic’s disproportionate economic damage afflicting women, which she described as a threat to the stability of the global economy. And I think she is absolutely right. In turn, economic instability poses a threat to security.

Yet there are some encouraging signs: the UNDP Global Gender Response Tracker found that four out of five countries have included gender-specific measures to assist women in their pandemic response plans. So the message is beginning to percolate: The faster policymakers and business leaders act to push for greater gender equality, the greater the benefits. Not just

for women, but for national and global economic growth. To put it simply, what is good for women is also good for society as a whole.

So the Swedish Chairpersonship's priority for this year's Forum process is particularly meaningful and particularly crucial

I also commend and firmly support the Chairpersonship's strong commitment to addressing women's equal participation in all dimensions of security.

The OSCE has a substantial *acquis* of commitments to work towards achieving parity between women and men in the economic and social spheres. But today's unprecedented circumstances call for a strong, coordinated international response. Bridging the gender gap must be at the heart of future policy choices to pave the way for long-lasting stability and long-lasting security.

We all need to be part of the solution, men and women alike. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the Women, Peace and Security agenda already provide us with the long-term vision.

Now is the time to start moving towards a "new normal". Returning to business as usual after the pandemic subsides will not bring about a sustained, long-term economic recovery that will ensure stability and security for all. Instead, we need to create the space for imaginative, innovative choices. Central to this new approach should be a focus on women's economic empowerment. And, I fully agree with Ulrika Funered when she talks about the need for women's access to economic resources and possibilities and also when she highlights the critical importance of education in all this. In this way we not only build *back* better, but build *forward* better. The OSCE is well equipped to substantially contribute to this goal.

So let's make the most of this year's Forum process. We can build on the 2011 Vilnius Ministerial Council Decision on promoting equal opportunity for women in the economic sphere, as well as the 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality. Given the extraordinary challenges we are up against, we may well want to consider new and courageous commitments.

In closing, I would like to thank the Swedish Chairpersonship once again for putting women's economic empowerment in the spotlight. I would also like to thank the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities for their organizational support for today's event.

Dear participants and speakers, I look forward to your active contributions to our discussion. As representatives of participating States, civil society and businesses – as individuals – as men and women – it is our common responsibility to follow through on our shared commitments.

Thank you.