



United States Mission to the OSCE

Opening Statement at the 29th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum in Prague

As prepared for delivery by Chargé d’Affaires, a.i. Courtney Austrian
September 9, 2021

I would like to begin by thanking the Swedish Chairpersonship for its dedicated attention to the Second Dimension’s Economic and Environmental Forum and its ongoing efforts to promote Women’s Economic Empowerment. I would also like to thank her Excellency Ann Linde for her personal attention to this topic, which she has demonstrated throughout the Swedish Chairpersonship. Additionally, we appreciate the work of the Office of the Coordinator for Economic and Environmental Activities for organizing this event under the ongoing pandemic conditions.

Over the past year, the United States has welcomed and actively supported the Chair’s efforts to promote women’s economic empowerment and thus improve security in the OSCE region. The linkage between these issues is clear to us. As has been noted in previous meetings of the EEF, an updated consensus decision on women’s economic empowerment is long overdue; the most recent was at the 2011 Vilnius Ministerial Council. Much has happened since and the OSCE region has also faced unexpected challenges, in particular the ongoing pandemic. Through existing and new commitments made in the Second Dimension, as well as the work and platforms for the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, the OSCE can take tangible steps to prevent backsliding, encourage further progress, and address these issues successfully and in meaningful ways.

The United States welcomes the discussions today and tomorrow on promoting women’s economic empowerment via pandemic recovery efforts and in a post-pandemic period for sustained development. In particular, we welcome the Food for Thought Paper circulated by the Swedish Chair in advance of the session later this morning on "The Way to Stockholm" and its consideration of substantive areas of emphasis and topics which could be addressed by a Ministerial Council decision.

As the paper underscores, the data we have clearly demonstrates that women and girls have borne a larger share of the negative impacts of the pandemic. This is true both for women on the front lines as health care professionals, teachers and care givers – whether paid, underpaid, or unpaid caregivers — as well as through secondary effects. An Oxfam International report from April 2021 highlighted that women’s lost income in 2020 due to the pandemic totaled at least \$800 billion, which is equivalent to the combined wealth of 98 countries’ GDP. Significantly, despite the sheer size of this figure, Oxfam’s estimate did not even include wages lost by the millions of women working in the informal economy, which includes domestic and garment workers, who have been fired or whose hours have been severely reduced. Participating States should strive to develop more resilient economic and social structures to alleviate this vast inequality and prevent its recurrence in the future.

It is also essential to focus on how women's economic empowerment can be achieved through effective policy formulation and implementation. If our public policy responses fail to account for the causes and the lingering effects of these stark realities, our full economic recovery will suffer. Such neglect would prevent women from regaining the pre-pandemic progress that had been achieved as well as squander the chance to create a stronger foundation on which to make further progress.

A critical issue in this regard is addressing the digital gender divide, since the majority of formal jobs worldwide have a digital component. A failure to address the problem of unequal access to technology would prevent women and girls from participating in ever-growing digital societies. According to Plan International, the gender technology gap also threatens to negatively affect economic growth and development. Plan International estimates that an increase in women connected to the internet translates to a rise in global GDP.

Unpaid vital care work most often falls to women and girls, forcing women to choose between careers and caring for loved ones. As we witnessed during the COVID pandemic, this can create a shock to the economy as women exit the workforce to conduct this type of care. Women who work in the formal paid care economy – particularly in elder care and child day care – are often underpaid. We should better support the formal care sector as a vital component of our economic infrastructures, as care work makes other productive work possible.

We also want to increase women's leadership and participation in decision-making and the development of innovative solutions to combat the climate crisis, which is critical to our common security and prosperity. Often employed in agriculture or tourism, women frequently bear the brunt of climate change and are well-positioned to offer locally relevant, meaningful, and effective strategies to overcome climate-related challenges.

Women's economic empowerment is not a singular event, but should be promoted in all stages of life. This includes through meaningful participation in decision making processes, quality education for girls, ensuring women's equal employment rights, and creating and guaranteeing access to critical financial and economic resources.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these important topics during the concluding meeting of the Economic and Environmental Forum. Looking ahead, the United States hopes participating States will move toward a consensus text on women's economic empowerment at this year's Ministerial Council in Stockholm. We hope the text will commit States to invest in care work to build stronger economies, close the gender digital divide, and engage women in finding solutions to climate challenges. I assure you the United States is, and will remain, fully engaged in the OSCE on the economic empowerment of women.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

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