



Welcoming Remarks of the OSCE Secretary General
Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Conference
5-6 September 2023, Tetovo, Republic of North Macedonia

Dear Chairperson-in-Office Minister Osmani,

Your Excellencies, Dear Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here with all of you today and again, my gratitude to our Chair for organizing this very important conference.

Gender equality and women’s economic empowerment are issues that are **very close to my heart** – they have always been - and I will always continue to keep them high on the agenda.

The OSCE’s comprehensive approach has recognized early on that women’s equal participation in all three dimensions – and our Chair just referred to it – is really critical to lasting security and stability. It is not a “women’s issue” it is an issue, really, for everyone.

Discrimination is pervasive, from access to employment to leadership positions.

Women continue to be under-represented or even excluded from key decision-making tables - whether peace mediation, conflict resolution, reconstruction talks or climate negotiations.

In some places, women are **denied their most basic human rights**, as we are seeing today in Afghanistan.

Moreover, we have seen an **increase of all forms of violence against women and girls**, including online violence and sexual harassment as well as in recent cases of femicide that shook the South-Eastern European region.

And finally, and the Chair mentioned it, the ongoing war against Ukraine is a stark reminder of the disproportionate impact of conflict on women, with increased risks of sexual exploitation, trafficking and sexual violence.

In this context it is paramount to **redouble our collective efforts** on gender equality and women's inclusion in all fields of life and decision-making processes.

First, we must continue to **invest** in women's leadership and support women's access to decision-making, including in peace and conflict resolution efforts.

Women's leadership has been one of my key priorities. In December 2021, I launched the *OSCE Networking Platform for Women's Leaders, including Peacebuilders and Mediators*. This initiative is connecting women leaders, mediators and peacebuilders from across the globe and is successfully supporting young women peacebuilders, including from Ukraine and Afghanistan, to play an active role in peace and conflict resolution efforts early on.

I am pleased that some members of this networking platform will actually present their priorities and vision for peace and women's inclusion at a side event on Women in Mediation this afternoon.

Secondly, we must **promote** women's economic empowerment and address all barriers women face to economic participation.

This includes removing barriers to **women's entrepreneurship**, which offers the opportunity to become financially independent, break stereotypes, and also challenge traditional gender roles.

As the OSCE, we support this through our "Young Developers and Entrepreneurs Advancing Startups" program, providing scholarships

to young women from South-Eastern Europe to attend a three week start up accelerator program at the European Innovation Academy.

Promoting women's economic empowerment also means addressing the **pervasive impact of corruption**, which is not gender neutral - and here I commend the Chair's decision to have a dedicated panel on gender and corruption at this conference. You alluded to it – I am proud that the OSCE has played an important role when it comes to this topic – including through addressing corruption in relation to accessing natural resources as well as on sextortion.

And thirdly, we must **fight decisively against all forms of violence** against women and girls by investing in effective response mechanisms and protective measures for the well-being of survivors. The dramatic cases of femicide, including in this region over the summer, are a cruel reminder that there is still a long road ahead of us to enforce relevant legislation to protect women and girls from all forms of violence.

Partnerships are key to preventing and combating gender-based violence. We continue to work with law enforcement agencies and the judiciary in our participating States to enhance their capacity to quickly and effectively respond to gender-based violence, and with our international partners to develop effective prevention programs.

For instance, during a visit I did to the OSCE field office two years ago in Tetovo I witnessed the excellent work done together with the local police to sensitize police officers to the need of efficient protection for women and girls from violence. This is a very successful example of the work we do and we should find more ways to replicate that – this will also be showcased today in another side-event.

We are also providing extensive support to civil society, which is at the forefront of supporting survivors and providing essential psychological support and assistance, including in cases of conflict-related sexual violence.

Finally, we must **continue to lead by example**. I am proud that this year the OSCE Secretariat has achieved gender parity among its international staff and is strengthening its response to violence against women and girls, including by raising awareness within the Organization about the harms of sexual exploitation and abuse.

And I really want to commend the work of all OSCE institutions and field operations for their incredible efforts to make our commitments under the 2004 Action Plan on Gender Equality a reality for the people across the OSCE region.

To conclude I would like to stress once again the importance of gender equality to our collective stability, prosperity and security.

Women make up 50% of the population. Their voices matter. Their access to decision-making is essential, as is their access to economic opportunities. They have a right to feel safe and to be safe – in the real world and online.

This is not just a moral obligation. It is a collective responsibility, it's a responsibility for everyone, and its critical for lasting peace and security.

I trust that this conference will help us all to exercise this responsibility even more effectively, and as the Chair said, hopefully also in the future. Thank you.