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United States Mission to the OSCE

Opening Statement at the 29th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum Preparatory Meeting

As delivered by Bahram Rajaei, Political Officer

June 10, 2021

Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks to the Swedish Chairpersonship for focusing the work of the Second Dimension through the Economic and Environmental Forum on Women’s Economic Empowerment. I also would like to thank our distinguished keynote speakers for their insightful remarks, which have provided today’s event with a meaningful broader context. The United States welcomes continued discussion on the opportunities and challenges presented by women’s economic empowerment, which affects our broader work on economic and environmental issues—as well as our ability to recover from the pandemic. We appreciate the efforts of the Chair and the Office of the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities to organize this meeting under restricted pandemic conditions.

On March 21, President Biden established the White House Gender Policy Council, and stated: “Advancing gender equity and equality....is also a strategic imperative that reduces poverty and promotes economic growth, increases access to education, improves health outcomes, advances political stability, and fosters democracy. The full participation of all people—including women and girls—across all aspects of our society is essential to the economic well-being, health, and security of our Nation and of the world.”

The pandemic has shown us in the grimmest ways how crises exacerbate inequality. The data show that women and girls have borne its negative impacts

disproportionately, whether on the front lines as health care professionals, caregivers, and essential workers, or in its secondary effects, and in both visible and less visible ways. In the United States women make up over 60 percent of our essential workers, taking on greater health risks to keep vital services running. In January, women's participation in the U.S. workforce dropped to the lowest level since 1988. Approximately 2.3 million women have exited the workforce since February 2020, forced to choose between their jobs and businesses or adequate care for loved ones. What can we as participating States do to empower women and develop more resilient economic and social structures?

Madam Chair,

The United States believes that substantive discussions at the OSCE about realistic ways to collectively meet this challenge should be our focus. We offer three specific policy challenges to be considered by participating States.

First, care work should be viewed as a core facilitator of the broader economy and pathway to a more resilient workforce. As the pandemic has clearly shown, without public investment in a care work infrastructure—including childcare and eldercare—economies will remain vulnerable to shocks that pull women out of the workforce when they are forced to choose between caring for their families and their careers or businesses, which also importantly provide income to support their families. Economies suffer when half the citizenry is held back from its full economic potential, and so will efforts to bring about a robust, sustainable economic recovery from the pandemic.

Second, we need to close the gender digital divide. Women are particularly at risk, as the gap between women's and men's access to and use of the internet and mobile phones remains significant. This matters because digital technologies, including mobile banking, allow for the formalization of small, informal businesses. They also broaden women's market access and women who participate in the formal economy benefit from greater stability and can better access public support.

Third, we must consider how the effects of climate change disproportionately affect women and girls, and how action is needed to ensure gender-inclusive climate solutions that lead to sustainable economic growth. Women disproportionately work in sectors vulnerable to the effects of climate change, including tourism and agriculture. Those who work in these sectors informally and seasonally face further exposure to disruptions. Alternatively, if women are empowered with greater access to technology and autonomy for their livelihoods in less stable industries, they can weather climate and other shocks better. Moreover, removing barriers to women in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math directly increases our collective capacity to confront the climate crisis.

Through commitments made in the Second Dimension, the work and platforms of the Office of the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, and assistance provided to participating States through Field Operations, the OSCE can and should take tangible steps to address these issues.

In conclusion, I look forward to the discussions over the coming days and months and assure you the United States remains fully engaged, including through the OSCE, on the economic empowerment of women.

Thank you, Madam Chair.