



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

***Breaking barriers and cracking ceilings: overcoming challenges to women's entrepreneurship in the Western Balkans***

***Side-event – CiO Conference on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment***

***6 September 2023***

**Welcome Remarks**

**OSCE Secretary General Helga Maria Schmid**

Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear Colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to this morning's panel discussion on overcoming challenges to women's entrepreneurship in the Western Balkans.

A warm welcome also to all the panelist – thank you for accepting our invitation to contribute to our important discussion.

As I said yesterday, I am very proud that the OSCE recognized early-on that there is no lasting stability and security unless women are equally represented and have access to decision making processes through our three dimensions.

Today, we are focusing on the second dimension. Women's economic empowerment has always been a priority for me, because it is a precondition for women playing a decisive role in decision making in all spheres of life.

As in many parts of the world, including in my country, Germany, women are still underrepresented as entrepreneurs across the Western Balkans. According to a recent report by the Regional Cooperation Council, the region would have a higher GDP by 5.0 %, on average if women's participation as entrepreneurs was

equal to that of men. But what are the challenges? Persistent gender stereotypes and cultural norms are still holding women back.

So we need to change this – we need to make it possible for more women – especially young women – to unleash their creativity and their entrepreneurial talents.

Because entrepreneurship provides women with opportunities to become financially independent, to break stereotypes – and nothing is more persistent than stereotypes -, and challenge traditional gender roles.

And involving women makes a difference for everyone: Women entrepreneurs often focus more on addressing social and environmental issues through their businesses. So supporting their ventures can also lead to positive social and environmental impacts – also to change when it comes to climate: climate change is also an issue we focus on. We have an example here today on the panel of two young women making a difference in their community.

Women entrepreneurs are not just creators of businesses; they are creators of opportunities, change, and progress.

Empowering women to become successful entrepreneurs is not just a matter of fairness or equality – it is an investment in the future with far-reaching economic, social, and cultural returns.

The OSCE – and I am really proud of that - is doing important work in supporting women’s entrepreneurship in South-Eastern Europe and beyond. So This panel will showcase some examples, but I would like to highlight one:

We have a project called “Young Developers and Entrepreneurs Advancing Startups”. It provided scholarships to 17 young women between 18-25 from the Western Balkans to attend a three week start up accelerator program at the

European Innovation Academy – which is one of the world’s leading summer entrepreneurship programs.

These talented young women had the opportunity to work with leading start-up coaches and mentors to further develop and scale up their businesses ideas, particularly in the field of training, sustainable tourism, waste management, energy efficiency, sustainable agriculture and pollution reduction.

I am delighted that one of the scholarship recipients, Andela Cipar, is here with us today.

I would like to conclude by thanking the OSCE Chair and our host for this conference, North Macedonia, - also Gorica, our staunch supporter in Vienna, for keeping this topic high on the agenda and also Vera, who represents Ambassador Igli Hasani and his team for organizing this important discussion. My thanks also go to Lara, our Senior Gender Advisor and her team for all their work. I am very proud of our cross-departmental cooperation in the Secretariat for a very good cause.

Thank you all for being here so early in the morning – thank you.



**Side Event**

***Breaking barriers and cracking ceilings: overcoming challenges to women's entrepreneurship in the Western Balkans***

**6 September, Hotel Mercure, Tetovo**

**8:00 -9:15**

Promoting a female entrepreneurial culture is an integral component of an enabling ecosystem that can foster women's economic empowerment, particularly in an increasingly competitive and digitalized business environment. This includes tackling gender stereotypes and addressing cultural norms that can negatively influence women's career choices and opportunities.

Persistent gender stereotypes and cultural norms can limit women's participation in the business sector. Such stereotypes often lead to gender-based discrimination, unequal access to capital, and limited networks for business growth. By providing targeted support and resources, especially to young women entrepreneurs, we can break down these barriers, change perceptions, and create an environment where women can thrive as entrepreneurs.

The side event will explore some of the challenges that women, especially young women in the Western Balkans, face when embarking on an entrepreneurial career and discuss what needs to be done to change perceptions of women's entrepreneurship. It will also feature two young women entrepreneurs from the Western Balkans who will share their own experiences with launching a startup.

*Welcome remarks: H.E. Helga Maria Schmid, OSCE Secretary General  
Official from N. Macedonia*

*Short film: "Sve sto nisam" (Everything I am not) The film was produced as a part of OSCE/OCEEA's "I WILL" project, focusing on changing perceptions of women entrepreneurs in Montenegro.*

A moderated discussion with:

- **Ana Sebek**, Senior Adviser, Ministry of Economy of Montenegro
- **Sanja Elezovic**, Gender Equality Expert
- **Andela Cipar** and **Sara Zurovski** - Young women entrepreneurs, Serbia
- **Leonora Kusari** – Principal, Regional Coordinator BIP, SME F&D, Kosovo (Advisory), SME Finance & Development Group, EBRD

*Closing remarks: H.E. Ambassador Neil Holland, Head of Delegation, United Kingdom Delegation to the OSCE*

**Moderator: Vera Strobachova Budway**, Economic Affairs Officer, Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA)