

**Regional Conference on Gender Equality in Electoral Processes  
11-12 July 2018, Tbilisi**

**Working Session One: Election Observation and Women's Participation:  
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Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests,

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak on election observation and women's participation. I begin by expressing my appreciation to our colleagues from the Central Election Commission of Georgia and the Council of Europe for hosting this important event. ODIHR enjoys good cooperation with both institutions, and I look forward that it may further develop.

First, let me note the timing of this event. It is worth highlighting that this year we celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Georgian independence, which, of note, included extending suffrage rights to women in Georgia from the very beginning. To commemorate this milestone, last month in Warsaw, ODIHR had the pleasure to host a photo exhibition highlighting the 50 women who made a significant contribution to Georgia in the 100 years since independence. The photos of the women and their stories were truly inspirational and reminded everyone of what's been achieved, what's possible to achieve, and what still remains.

In this context, let me move to today's topic, gender equality in elections. As a starting point, we all can recognize that elections are the gateway to political representation and power. It is therefore critical that various aspects of an electoral process are considered with a view to understanding women's participation. To do this, let me highlight two key aspects: ODIHR's election observation methodology to assess women's participation; and challenges that remain in achieving equal opportunities for women, as identified by recommendations from our observations.

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At ODIHR, the foundation of our work rests in the recognition by OSCE participating States that equality between men and women is a fundamental aspect of democratic societies. All OSCE states have committed themselves to promote equal opportunities for the full participation of women in political and public life, and this is reflected in a rich and well developed body of OSCE commitments and international obligations related to gender equality.

We will have the opportunity to receive a comprehensive overview of these standards and thus I will not spend time to take you through them. However, let me highlight two important aspects, which are particularly relevant and serve as key points grounding our discussions during the conference.

First - the fundamental and overarching theme of equal rights is outlined in Article 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). It enshrines the notion of the "equal right... to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights". This language of equality of opportunity and non-discrimination recurs throughout all later gender-specific standards.

Second, is a more specific aspect. As outlined in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), there are provisions enabling the use of temporary special measures to accelerate *de facto* equality between men and women.

CEDAW emphasizes that such measures should not be considered discriminatory and later CEDAW general recommendations provide guidance as to what kinds of measures may be implemented.

It is important to note that election-related gender obligations contained within the ICCPR and CEDAW are strongly supported by a range of OSCE commitments. As recently as 2009, in Athens, OSCE participating States committed to “consider possible legislative measures, which would facilitate a more balanced participation of women and men in political and public life and especially in decision-making”.

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To place this in the context of ODIHR’s work, let me highlight ODIHR’s methodology for assessing these standards for women’s participation. In 2004, as part of a broader Gender Action Plan, ODIHR received a special mandate to “continue, as a part of its Election Observation Missions, to monitor and report on women’s participation in electoral processes”. This provided a clear direction to develop our methodology.

Prior to this, since 2000, ODIHR had already been closely examining women’s electoral participation, when a dedicated gender expert was first included on an election observation mission and we first specifically commented on women’s participation in an electoral context.

During 2002, ODIHR’s methodology was further refined, which resulted in the publication of the *Handbook for Monitoring Women’s Participation in Elections*. Through our methodology, we strive to take a broad approach to the issue, assessing women’s participation in various ways; as voters, candidates and elected representatives; their involvement in leadership roles within state institutions, electoral commissions and political parties; and how the legal framework and media structures can affect women.

We comprehensively report on these issues throughout the electoral cycle: in needs assessment reports before sending an observation mission, in interim reports and post-election day statements while a mission is working in-country, and in the mission’s final report. This includes aspects ahead of election day such as electoral preparations and the election campaign, on election day in the conduct of voting itself and post-election developments.

Even though it’s close to 14-years since publishing our *Handbook for Monitoring Women’s Participation*, it remains a core component of our methodology. As with all established methodologies, we are constantly looking to see if we need to refine our approach and how to possibly update the handbook. In general on our missions, we mainstream our approach in analysis and reporting on gender issues with all members of the core team.

In our experience, this approach has led to a more nuanced, technical analysis and resulted in more concrete and specific gender-related recommendations. Yet, it does have some risk, including potentially lower visibility or neglect of the issue at the level of meaningful analysis. To address such concerns, we support missions with supplemental information and recommend a dedicated paragraph on women’s participation in the executive summary of our reports to ensure the issue retains prominence.

In terms of methodology and assessments, we emphasized obligations under CEDAW in our reports, including the Committee’s General Recommendations and Concluding Observations related to specific countries. This helps to make our recommendations more concrete. We also incorporate gender considerations in other thematic handbooks related to election observation,

for example in our most recent publication, *The Guidelines for Public Security Providers in Elections*.

Finally, within our observation activities, we strive to demonstrate good practice and ensure gender balance in the composition of our own teams. In recent years, some 40 per cent of our election experts recruited and deployed were women, including in decision-making positions, serving as Heads and Deputy Heads of Missions. We also stress that OSCE participating States consider gender-balanced when nominating long- and short-term observers.

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Yet despite existing international obligations and commitments and efforts by ODIHR and others to assess and promote women's participation, it is clear that more work remains to advance the equal participation of women in political life.

Women's parliamentary representation currently rests at some 27 per cent across the OSCE region, one quarter of elected representatives; an increase from 22 per cent in 2010. Such advances, although insufficient, show some positive effect of good practices in promoting women's involvement in elections. However, this increase is largely due to progress in a small number of countries. In several others, progress has stagnated or reversed. Currently, only 20 of 57 OSCE participating States achieve 30 per cent or more women in parliaments (an interim benchmark set by the UN in 1995). When looking at these figures, I acknowledge that it is frustrating to repeatedly note the clear benefits of including women in political and public life, from improving a party's public image to expanding the pool of expertise, yet not seeing larger change in practice.

In better understanding the challenges that remain in securing equal opportunities for women, it is telling to review past ODIHR recommendations from our election observation activities pertaining to women's participation. In the last 10 years, ODIHR has made some 80 recommendations explicitly related to women's participation in more than 80 elections observed. While this is an average of one recommendation per mission, many recommendations, especially related to gender, are often multi-layered and several recommendations can be packaged within larger recommendations.

In recent years, our recommendations have referred to challenges with candidate registration, representation in election management bodies, access to campaigning, including access to financing and media. Others relate to election day irregularities and a lack of voter education. If we unpack these recommendations, the total is closer to 120. I would add that other recommendations have a direct impact on women's participation such as calling for a more level playing field and the removal of discriminatory provisions.

If we look at recommendations that focus exclusively on women's participation, the direction of these recommendations is telling. In the last five years, nearly half relate to candidate rights and registration, recognizing the importance of ballot access for advancing women's elected representation.

Using the language of temporary special measures, recommendations often cited the need to consider a minimum number of women candidates, how to effectively order gender on candidate lists, and how elected representatives are replaced if a candidate resigns or otherwise gives up their position. Increasingly, recommendations also incorporate the need to impose effective incentives or sanctions for parties to enhance gender balance on their candidate lists.

The second largest category of recommendations, around 20 per cent, relate to measures to enhance women's representation in electoral management bodies and other state institutions. These recommendations have also evolved and increasingly focus on the need for women's representation in senior decision-making positions.

In this regard, I am encouraged to see that a number of election management bodies across the OSCE region are chaired by women, which can serve as powerful examples for other countries. However, it is clear that more still can be done to further enhance representation, including at the central and lower levels of election administrations.

On this aspect, let me fully acknowledge and warmly note the recently founding of the association *Women in Electoral Management- International (WEM)*. This is an important initiative to highlight existing good practices in a range of aspects to promote women's participation. I hope that membership extends to many more election management bodies, including those chaired by both women and men.

Around 12 per cent of ODIHR recommendations focused on parties and campaigning, encouraging women's greater representation within parties, including leadership positions as well as greater visibility in campaigns and to counter negative stereotyping. A sizable number of recommendations, 10 per cent, focussed on voter education and training of polling staff to safeguard against election day abuses that disproportionately impact women, most notably family and proxy voting.

I would lastly add that around five per cent of the recommendations relate to media, campaign finance, or the provision of sex-disaggregated data. These are issues that we have paid increasing attention to in recent years, but a review of our recommendations indicates that perhaps more thought and consistency can be given to these issues.

Like all recommendations, OSCE participating States have committed themselves to follow up promptly the ODIHR's election assessment and recommendations. Overall, however, we see mixed results in considering and implementing ODIHR's recommendations.

Much of this lack in progress is due to a lack of political will to introduce the necessary legal or regulatory changes. This situation, however, should not deter our collective efforts. In some instances, we have seen positive change, through introducing quotas, or ensuring women candidates are included on lists or allocated specific opportunities for campaigning. These can serve as powerful examples of what's possible to achieve. Other good practices mentioned here and elsewhere can showcase that efforts to enhance women's participation elections brings more inclusive processes and can also be seen as good, smart policy decisions.

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In closing, it is clear that many countries throughout the OSCE region continue to face challenges to enhance women's electoral representation. This is even more reason why we need to keep the issue of gender equality in electoral process on the collective agenda and remain firm and enhance our approach to assessing the issue and in providing recommendations that are clear, implementable, and lead to meaningful change. I hope that this conference provides an opportunity to further discuss recent developments and consider the way ahead.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to our discussions. [end]