



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 7: Equality of opportunity for women and men; Implementation of the OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality; Prevention of violence against women

As delivered by Erika Schlager
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, October 2, 2008

Madam Moderator,

Domestic violence continues to be a problem in virtually all OSCE countries – including my own. While domestic violence is a crime between individuals, the problem is often exacerbated by inadequate government mechanisms to support victims and hold perpetrators accountable. Without these mechanisms, many victims of domestic violence will fail to report it due to fears of retaliation, social censure, or social stigma. As a result of underreporting, it can be hard to gauge the actual scope of the problem. Furthermore, victims of domestic violence must have access to shelter and economic stability in order to permanently escape their abuser and prevent future violence.

Effectively addressing the problem of domestic violence requires a legal framework to ensure accountability for abusers. We urge all participating States to commit themselves to rigorous prosecution of domestic violence under either specific domestic violence statutes or under general assault laws. But legal frameworks are not enough. States must do more to train law enforcement and social workers in effective response to victims of domestic violence. The OSCE has conducted several related programs and we strongly support ODIHR's continued work in this regard.

Another egregious form of violence against women is so-called "honor killing." We commend Turkey for strengthening its laws to fight this problem. While not common, "honor killings" have taken place in several OSCE participating States, including the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, and Germany. Earlier this year in my country, Chaudhry Rashid allegedly strangled his 25-year-old daughter because she wanted to end her arranged marriage. He was charged with murder and is awaiting trial. The Netherlands has already implemented a program against this terrible act that could serve as a guide to best practices on how to address "honor killings."

Sometimes women also face discrimination as a result of seemingly well-intentioned government policies. While we commend the Government of Greece for trying to respect the religious traditions of Muslims in Thrace, their recognition of sharia law as preeminent in family and civic matters has unintentionally limited the rights of women. For example, Muslim women in Thrace have had to get the approval of a local mufti in order to get a divorce under Greek law. Additionally, under sharia law, many women are forced to give

custody of their children to the abuser. Women are afraid of leaving their abuser for many reasons, but the fear of losing their children is perhaps the greatest fear of all.

The rights of women can also be undermined in the name of ‘traditions’ that have questionable historical veracity. The case of bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan or polygamy in several other countries are disturbing examples where new curtailments and abuses against women are excused away in the name of “traditions” – yet an open inquiry into these so-called traditions shows them to have little historical validity.

We are disturbed that we continue to receive reports of OSCE peacekeepers abusing local populations – particularly children. The OSCE and participating States must take every step to ensure the physical safety and security of women and their children in crisis and conflict situations. Deplorably, the threat to their safety sometimes comes from those assigned to protect them. It is reprehensible that persons on peacekeeping missions would encourage human trafficking or sexual exploitation of the very population they were sent to protect. Such behavior weakens the rule of law, strengthens criminal networks, and undermines the mission’s own purpose and effectiveness. The vast majority of peacekeepers are honorable men and women performing vital tasks, usually under difficult circumstances. However, the misdeeds of the few can tarnish the reputation of the whole and are totally unacceptable.

Finally, Moderator, I would like to raise some issues related to the OSCE itself. While the OSCE can assist participating States in ensuring respect for the human rights of women, it should also serve as an example. We note that in the last year there has been a small but steady increase of women in professional posts in the OSCE. Training has also increased. But we believe more can be done. According to the most recent report on the implementation of the 2004 Gender Action Plan, only 19% of OSCE management positions are held by women. We call on OSCE’s senior management to ensure a professional environment in the workplace. It remains a matter of concern that the training for senior managers on this issue has not happened. This should be a priority.