The Role of the OSCE in Combating Violence Against Women

Statement by Ambassador Gerard Stoudmann
Informal Working Group on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men
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Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to address this meeting and present what the ODIHR, (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) has been doing to address the issue of violence against women. I believe that this issue perfectly fits into the OSCE agenda, although it might not seem to be the case at first glance.

I do not need to go into what violence against women is, as this has already been discussed extensively today, but it is interesting to look at some figures and some recent reports like the Women 2000 report by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights or the report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women.

If we look at the International Helsinki Federation report we see that in Azerbaijan, for instance, in a survey among 850 women respondents between the age of 19 and 60, 37% reported to have experienced incidents of violence. 32% of these incidents happened in the family where they were born, and 58% in their husbands’ families. The same report mentions Bosnia and Herzegovina where a survey among 249 women shows that 50% were beaten by husbands or boyfriends. In Kyrgyzstan, the situation has gone from bad to worse following the economic crisis which has had very negative consequences within families, especially for women. All forms of violence against women have increased, and the research shows that out of 1000 women respondents, only little more than 10% had not been abused. Among the abused women 65% had secondary and university education. The last example is Albania where the situation for women is very serious, yet there are no special legal provisions addressing this issue.

In the Special Rapporteur’s study we find clear reference to the correlation between psychological violence and physical brutality. In the United States, for example, it seems that as many as 35-40% of the women who experienced violence attempted to commit suicide. This makes clear that we are not talking about a secondary issue. We are talking about a serious and worrying violation of human rights. Why should the OSCE deal with this problem, and who, within the OSCE, should deal with it? Violence against women as such already justifies the intervention of the OSCE as it is a serious human rights violation. But I would not like to stop at this point. The OSCE as a security organization interested in long-term stability and security within its participating States must also be interested in strong civil society and sustainable democracy. Despite the fact that violence against women can be found across the OSCE area, there is nevertheless a correlation between the development of democracy and civil society and how violence against women is being dealt with. So dealing with violence against women fits pretty well in the OSCE agenda. Although we may not have the level of expertise of
specialized organizations and NGOs, we have to push the issue and keep it on the agenda. We have to go beyond the pure human rights context, in the interest of the development of strong civil societies. Violence against women discourages or prevents, in some cases, women from participating in social and economic life and from contributing to the development of society. We know also that women have very often a healthy impact on potential tensions and conflicts within society. By preventing them from fully participating in building of democracy by having a positive influence in periods of tension, we are not rendering a service to the OSCE’s superior objective of fostering democracy and, through this, long term stability. There is a clear link between this important and very specific problem and the global philosophy that should be the engine of this organization. We cannot accept this type of human rights violation which undermines democracy and civil society.

So we have to deal with it—and we have been attempting to address this issue at the ODIHR. One of the most well known examples is certainly the combat of trafficking as one aspect of the violence against women. However, I will not concentrate on this issue today as this is well known to most of you already and I would like to focus on some other examples. This, of course, is not to say that we forget about trafficking as one of the main examples of violence against women. Our experience with working for the promotion of women rights in the OSCE region—be it South Eastern Europe, the Caucasus or Central Asia—has led us to the following findings: first of all, there is the lack of data and analysis on the issue of violence against women. There is therefore, secondly, a lack of awareness of the fact that violence against women is an abuse of their human rights. Linked to this is obviously an insufficient legal framework to protect victims and prosecute perpetrators, and therefore also insufficient law enforcement mechanisms and insufficient support mechanisms such as legal aid or shelters.