

Women's Entrepreneurship in the OSCE Region

Trends and Good Practices

Vilnius, 3 and 4 March, 2011

International Conference
REPORT



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I. Introduction

1.

An international conference entitled “Women’s Entrepreneurship in the OSCE Region: Trends and Good Practices” was held in Vilnius, Lithuania, from 03 to 04 March 2011. The conference was co-organized by the OSCE Gender Section, the Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour and the Gender Studies Centre of the Vilnius University.

The conference is part of a comprehensive project conducted by the OSCE Gender Section on women’s economic empowerment since May 2010 and funded by Andorra, Germany and the United States. As such, the next step is to act upon the follow-up steps and recommendations that the conference will generate and to support innovative ideas, networks or concrete and valid needs that would lead to economic growth through women’s entrepreneurship, in particular in Central Asia and South Caucasus.

2.

The conference was attended by 97 experts, practitioners, representatives of business women associations and networks, of NGOs, of governments as well as a number of OSCE staff, international organizations and some diplomats. The participants came from 26 countries from across the OSCE Region. One international consultant prepared a background study on behalf of the Gender Section that was shared with participants in advance of the conference¹. Nearly a quarter of the participants were themselves either moderators or panellists. Notes for the preparation of this report have been taken by OSCE staff². This report has been prepared by the Gender Section team and designed by Jana Palaversa. The list of participants is attached to this report as an Annex.

3.

The conference was opened by Audra Mikalauskaite, Vice-Minister, Ministry of Social Security and Labour who emphasized the importance of women’s contributions in the economic sphere in Lithuania and their current status. In her welcome note, Dalia Leinarte, Director of the Gender Studies Centre at Vilnius University, underlined the linkages between women’s professional status, how they participate on the labour market, and how this links into the new challenges created by the current financial crisis. Jamila Seftaoui, the OSCE Senior Adviser on Gender Issues welcomed the participants and thanked the co-organizers and the donors of the event. She highlighted OSCE’s commitments for gender equality and the importance of women’s economic empowerment in the work programme of the Gender Section and a number of OSCE field operations. She then walked the participants through the objectives and the programme of the conference.

4.

The objective of the conference was two-fold:

To offer a platform for exchange on challenges and opportunities for women’s economic empowerment and make trends on women’s entrepreneurship in particular more known across the different regions of the OSCE. Emphasis was put on Central Asia and South Caucasus but experiences have been invited from across the OSCE.

To exchange and offer for debate good practices. This is to contribute to the creation of new ideas for future projects by all stakeholders: business women, practitioners and managers of well grown networks of women’s business associations, experts, and the relevant programme managers in international organizations.

¹ Women’s Economic Empowerment: Trends and Good Practices on Women’s Entrepreneurship in the OSCE Region by Jozefina Cutura. OSCE, December 2010. ISBN: 978-92-9234-542-6.

² Shahlo Ismailova Field Assistant, Tajikistan: Lola Maksudova, Human Dimensions Officer, Uzbekistan: Gabriel Leonte Economic and Environmental Adviser, OSCE Secretariat: Anne Rennschmid Field Officer Tajikistan: Kristin van der Leest, Adviser on Gender Issues ODIHR.

5.

The agenda of the conference was structured around four panels addressing the following four themes:

- i. Links between women's economic empowerment and their chances to escape severe insecurity and vulnerability;
- ii. Examples from the field illustrating challenges and progress on women entrepreneurship;
- iii. The role of networks and business women's associations;
- iv. The role of State, the private sector and international actors;

In addition, four break-out sessions were held to deepen discussions, allow for close networking and for preparing in a participatory manner the follow-up steps and recommendations of the conference.

The deliberations and results of the break-out sessions were presented by the groups and debated in plenary at the end of the event.

6.

At the beginning and at the end of the conference, key notes have been presented by invited experts and debated by the participants. The first one by Jozefina Cutura summarised the background study on trends and good practices in women's entrepreneurship which was circulated to set a framework for the works of the conference. The second key note speech was by Dinah Bennett and wrapped up comprehensive key success factors when promoting female economic empowerment.

7.

All presentations and speeches are enclosed as annexes to this report.

2. Overview of the panels and the final debate

Panel One

Women's economic empowerment and security

Overview of Session: Key Issues

- How the economic empowerment of women contributes to a more secure and prosperous society.
- The risks of the economic exclusion of women.

Moderator:

Jamila Seftaoui, OSCE Senior Adviser on Gender Issues

Pannelists:

Dalia Leinarte - Director of the Gender Studies Centre, Vilnius University

Vera Gracheva – Senior Adviser (Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings)

Ermelinda Xhaja - OSCE National Programme Officer (OSCE Presence in Albania)



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This panel sought to establish the links between women's economic prosperity and the effects that prosperity has on the security in society as well as for women in particular. Additionally, the panel identified risks and vulnerabilities associated with lack of opportunities for women or their outright economic exclusion.

It concluded that it is of strategic importance to the stability of States and communities and to their economic growth to open up and include women in the economic sphere. Creating opportunities for women in the market and for their growth has been proven to enhance the chances of a State to achieve an advanced degree of democracy as well as a significant economic growth given the proven added value of women's economic activities on national GDPs. Women's economic empowerment has also to be recognized as a key condition for the eradication of

modern slavery and trafficking of human beings. The linkages between successful economic opportunities empowering women and the efficiency of anti-trafficking measures are well researched and need to be stressed and highlighted to the political and economic decisions makers.

The panel emphasised the consequences of excluding women and the perils women face in times of economic crisis. Even part-time labour relegates women to the service and education spheres and perpetuates gender disparity as women will depend in those cases on partners to survive fully. During times of economic crisis and changing migration patterns women are more likely to become unemployed, girls to leave school increasing the risk of being trafficked or recruited into illegal or illicit work. Trafficking has been linked to organised crime and radicalisation movements that prey

on desperate people.

As such, depriving women and girls in vulnerable environments from an economic opportunity to make their livelihoods is one of the major root causes to put nations, communities and women in an insecure condition.

The panel identified several projects targeted at empowering women, combating human trafficking and protecting and reintegrating victims of trafficking through economic activities. The panellists noted several practical tools such as micro-credit, capacity building and the exchange of good practices that NGOs, international organizations and governments should use to enhance women's employability and stimulate women's entrepreneurship and make them less vulnerable to severe risks such as trafficking and being recruited into illegal/illicit networks.

Conclusions

- In many vulnerable environments, there is a direct link between the exclusion of women from the economic sphere and their risk of being trafficked and misused by criminal and extremists' circles.
- There is clear evidence that the promotion of women's economic activity is crucial for a stable, prosperous and democratic society.
- In particular, women's economic empowerment is a key condition for the efficiency of anti-trafficking programmes.
- However, part-time work, which has long been seen as one of the solutions for women with children, perpetuates gender stereotypes and disparities and should not be the ultimate aim of women's economic empowerment.
- International organizations, civil society and governments can play a positive role by providing practical support such as capacity training, exchange of successful practices, and facilitating access of vulnerable groups to professional and financial stakeholders and to micro-credit.
- Efforts should be made to raise awareness, at all levels, of the positive impact female entrepreneurship has on society and the economy both in terms of development and stability.
- There is a need to develop further gender sensitive economic and migration policies.



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Panel Two

Risks, challenges and progress in the field of women's entrepreneurship

Overview of Session: Key Issues

- Identifying major challenges for women entrepreneurs.
- Innovative approaches to overcome and advance women's entrepreneurship.

Moderator:

Hanna Sands, OSCE Gender Officer

Pannelists:

Dono Abdurazakova - Consultant (Uzbekistan)

Lilia Gevorgyan - President, Women Support Business-Centre Foundation (Armenia)

Fatima Sharipova - President, Women of the Orient (Tajikistan)

Ruta Rutkelytė - Member of Parliament (Lithuania)



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The second panel agreed that female entrepreneurs, regardless of which country they are from, face many common challenges including: the perception of women's traditional roles, difficulties in accessing credit, not enough women with business management education, lower salaries for women and government policies and structures that do not respond quickly enough to meet the needs of female entrepreneurs. Even in relatively good conditions, the panel pointed out, the percentage of female entrepreneurs in OSCE zone

countries is low, concentrated in urban areas and often confined to traditional spheres like service and food.

Panel members discussed successful programmes and identified tools that could be used to make female entrepreneurship more successful such as: networked women's resource centers, use of media to raise awareness of the public and policy makers, a database and virtual network of female business associations, capacity building programmes, micro loan

programmes and lobbying governments to create more advantageous conditions for female entrepreneurs. It was noted that women's resource centers must, in the long term, be able to support themselves.

The panel also called for an action plan on how to provide business training to more women. They further suggested gender analysis of markets and recognized the need to get more men involved in promoting female entrepreneurship.

Conclusions

Common challenges for promotion of women entrepreneurship were identified by the panelists. Ways to tackle problems such as gender stereotyping, lack of access to loans, lack of skills and confidence among female entrepreneurs and lack of policies supporting women entrepreneurs were debated. Women business associations should work on:

- Proper research and statistics on women's entrepreneurship.
- Raising awareness within financial institutions and governments to the special needs and situation of women who intend to start business.
- Becoming self-sustainable as soon as possible.
- Networking with and lobbying for reforms, better policies and structures.
- Offering targeted capacity building and business literacy.
- Enhanced networking amongst women business associations across regions and especially between established networks with large potential and lessons learned and new ones.

Panel Three

Advancing women's economic growth – the role of business women's associations

Overview of Session: Key Issues

- What methods and strategies can be used by women's business associations to build capacity of women entrepreneurs?
- How can women's business associations influence structural challenges and problems and how can they help women entrepreneurs to manoeuvre in complex business environments?



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Moderator:

Olivera Popovic, President of Association of Business Women in Serbia

Pannelists:

Cornelia Sperling - Managing Director, Business Women Networks (Germany)

Tatiana Batsuchina - International Centre for Advancement of Women in Business (Moldova)

Asta Sileikienė - Business Women Network (Lithuania)

Pia Ramirez Maard - Winnet Board of Directors (Sweden)

Members of panel three gave a brief history and summary of the current status of their respective Women's Business Associations (WBAs). They went on to introduce good practices and effective ways for WBAs to have a positive impact on female entrepreneurship. Each member identified numerous elements they believe were key to make their WBAs successful. The panel agreed that it is crucial to define and know the target group to be able to develop structures based on local needs e.g. transitioning from basic capacity building to sharing concrete experiences. They

emphasised how essential it is to work on all levels; individual, group and structural but always keep the bottom up approach in order to keep the original purpose of the association in mind. It is important to focus on practical assistance for members and meet their needs at each stage of development. They further recommended that WBAs forge strong partnerships with chambers of commerce, experts and other WBAs and where possible seek out public-private partnerships. The panel stressed the vital role WBAs play in lobbying the government to change policies and

create conditions conducive to women's entrepreneurship. All panel members agreed that one of the top priorities of a WBA should be to use mentorship programmes or other structures (books, databases, internet forums) to transfer knowledge and share good practices at both a national and international level. Additionally the panel recommended that WBA use media to create an awareness of the work they are doing and profile successful women, as media attention can attract new members and resources as well as influence public opinion.

Conclusions

- WBAs are a key factor in the process of advancing women's economic growth.
- Empowerment of women entrepreneurs cannot take place without reflecting the gender structures/stereotypes and developing strategies to cope with and address them.
- International exchange among WBAs is critical for developing new growth strategies and sharing experiences.
- WBAs should identify and approach different types of stakeholders and agencies: government bodies, international networks, the private sector, Foundations, regional WBA networks, and local associations
- Lobbying the government is an essential activity. Women's business interests should be prioritized as much as associations gathering businessmen.

Panel Four

State, private sector and international initiatives to support women's economic growth

Overview of Session: Key Issues

- How can state reforms, private sector reforms or international organisations drive economic growth through women's entrepreneurship?

Moderator:

*Eugenia Benigni, Anti-Trafficking and Gender Officer
(OSCE Mission to Moldova)*

Pannelists:

Jozefina Cutura - Consultant (USA)

Melanie Bixby - Senior Coordinator, Global Women Issues, US Department of State (USA)

Tsovinar Harutyunyan - Senior Democratization Assistant (OSCE Office in Yerevan)

Zivile Sukyte - Chief Specialist of Alternative Activity Division, Ministry of Agriculture (Lithuania)



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The fourth panel focused on how government, international organisations and the private sector can positively influence women's entrepreneurship. The panel identified three sets of examples regarding women's economic and entrepreneurship promotion, namely; public private partnerships, supplier diversity and increased access to finance through bank lending. They agreed that State government plays a critical role and its policies directly affect the success of female entrepreneurship. In addition to direct financial and training support, government laws and policies such as, tax breaks for small businesses, and streamlined administrative policies can drive the

economic growth of women's entrepreneurship.

NGOs and private sector organisations are also not limited to direct financial support. Through networking, mentorships, programmes and corporate responsibility activities they can advance women's entrepreneurship by, for example, lobbying government, providing capacity building trainings, empowerment activities developing the self-confidence of women, as well as their skills to find employment or set up small businesses.

International organisations have similar possibilities, however, they often have more direct access to

government and therefore can be better placed to lobby government, shape policy or encourage government to invest in programmes targeting women.

It is important to note that WBAs should cooperate internationally to share good practices, successful programmes, databases and other tools with one another.

Conclusions

- Promoting female entrepreneurship requires a cooperative effort between many parties at many levels, all using numerous tools and resources. No two countries can approach the issue in exactly the same way.
- Media is crucial in the success of a network partly for PR purposes but also highlight the existence of female entrepreneurs that can serve as an inspiration to others.

Final Discussion

What needs to be done? Follow-up steps to the Vilnius conference

Overview of Session: Key Issues

- Presentation of the results of the break-out sessions.
- Discussions of the way forward emanating from the conference.

Moderator:

Jamila Seftaoui, OSCE Senior Adviser on Gender Issues



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Break-out Session One

Strengthening the role of national women's entrepreneurs associations

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Break-out Session Two

Driving women's entrepreneurship through State reforms and public-private partnerships

Discussions in this group focused on how to build partnerships with governments in order to advance reforms and obtain support (including financial) and on how to work in partnership with the private sector and the corporate world. The group identified a number of concrete steps that might be instrumental to achieving success. First and foremost, it is important to identify the interest and motivation of various potential partners (government or private sector) to work with and support

women's business association, and shape the message accordingly.

With regard to establishing co-operation and accessing assistance provided by international organizations, including the OSCE, a number of instruments were considered helpful, including: resource manuals, compilations of best practices, databases, as well as various web resources. Such tools could be further developed. The group supported the importance of continuing the practice of convening

international conferences, but emphasized the need for concrete follow-up in terms of capacity building activities which could be implemented at regional as well as at national and local levels. Both the OSCE Secretariat and the OSCE field operations could play a role in that regard. Group Two concluded there is a positive momentum regarding partnerships to support women's entrepreneurship, and it should be maintained.

Break-out Session Three

Maximizing the potential of regional networks and international programmes

Having analyzed various aspects of interest for the work of women's associations, from combating trafficking to entrepreneurship promotion, the group concluded that while a lot of experience is already available, there is a need that it be better structured and consolidated. Thus, one of the main recommendations was the need for guidebooks or compilations of best practices, which could as well take the form of databases or CDs. The target group of such a product should also include policy makers. With regard to combating trafficking, the main focus should be

on how to work on prevention and identify groups at risk. Brochures providing information for migrants were also considered useful.

Concerning entrepreneurship promotion, information should be provided on how to start a business, what kind of support is available, how to access micro credits and other forms of financing as well as on social entrepreneurship. Exchange of information should be promoted among women's entrepreneurs associations on how to influence economic policies.

Concerning networking, the key aspects are how to recruit new members, what kind of services to provide to the members and how to adapt to new developments and requirements, how to design internal regulations and decision making processes in order to keep focus as well as flexibility, how to engage in regional and international networking, how to lobby effectively. In particular, group 3 supported the development of a compendium of best practices on how to maximize the potential of regional networks.

Break-out Session Four

Securing information, access to capacity building, funds, and female entrepreneurs' centres

The group was of the view that situation differs from country to country with regard to the easiness and the ways in which women entrepreneurs can access information. The local context should be taken into account (i.e. developed or developing country, urban or rural context, access to internet etc.). As well, one should know the target group and be able to adapt accordingly.

The creation of information entrepreneurship centres was considered a useful model that does

facilitate the exchange of information. In addition, such experiences could be linked through the creation of a virtual database including links to different websites from different countries.

Convening regular meetings of local women entrepreneurs' representatives was also considered an effective practice. An example from Georgia, where local NGOs meet weekly, was provided.

Access to funding, including for capacity building, was identified as

an obstacle. Often, women entrepreneurs face indirect discrimination from banks and there is a need to raise awareness of bankers on women entrepreneurship. The idea of creating women's banks was also put forward. Female entrepreneurs and associations should also be encouraged and trained to apply for funding from other sources, including global organizations. Educations seminars on how to start businesses and how/where from to get funds would be useful.

Ms. Jozefina Cutura welcomed the OSCE involvement as it brings together a unique group of countries, thus providing a platform for cross-fertilization and exchange of good practices across the region. She then made a number of comments regarding some of the above mentioned recommendations and called for a more structured approach to women's entrepreneurship promotion. Regarding the development of a database of women's associations, she recalled the IFC had developed one and suggested to establish co-operation with them. She pointed out that effectively lobbying with the policy makers and private sector actors, including banks, to prioritize and support the work of women's business associations requires a stronger focus on presenting the longer term benefits. She advised to draw on the existing experience of other international

organizations, such as the IFC. Many resources and trainings are available and can be accessed by establishing the right connections.

Ms. Cornelia Sperling welcomed the background document prepared for this Conference and noted that, like other similar documents developed by other organizations, it focuses more on activities conducted by international organizations and states. There is a need to devote more attention to and promote the activities of women's business associations.

Ms. Melanie Bixby called on the OSCE and other donors to follow-up in a practical way and focus on sub-regional and country level activities.

Ms. Jamila Seftaoui emphasized the unique role the OSCE can play, given its wide membership, the closeness to the policy makers, its network of field presences and its comprehensive approach to security, including the economic and environmental dimension.

She underlined that it's a great comparative advantage on OSCE's side to be so diversified in geographical terms and in the quality of expertise and experience on women's entrepreneurship. She therefore, welcomed follow-up steps that seemed very much at the heart of the OSCE mandate and of the Gender Section's capabilities. She then summarized, from the perspective of the possible future OSCE's involvement, the key recommendations that emerged from the break-out sessions deliberations and that can be retained as firm follow-up steps:

- Developing compilations and manuals of best practices and innovative approaches that proved their effectiveness from across OSCE participating States: In that regard, the background document prepared for the Vilnius Conference – Women's economic empowerment – trends and good practices on women's entrepreneurship in the OSCE region – could be further expanded in the future to address more in depth the WBAs in different countries and sub-regions and the various concrete successful experiences from individual countries, in particular from Central Asia and other countries hosting OSCE field missions. A fully fledged didactical manual on the "how to" and "how now" and "using what networks and strategies" addressing the whole cycle of establishing, sustaining and bringing to growth women enterprises could also be commissioned and prepared by the Gender Section.
- Organizing technical seminars bringing together experts and women's entrepreneurs associations, at sub-regional and country levels around specific themes could also be organized, perhaps in co-operation with some regional WBA networks and with other international partners.
- Awareness raising and support to State stakeholders towards the development of reforms and enabling conditions for the economic empowerment of women is another activity where the OSCE: the Gender Section in co-operation with field offices could be envisaged if sufficient funds could be raised for it.



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3. Evaluation

Overall appreciation

55% of the respondents graded the conference as great –the highest score. 28% thought the conference was very good- the second highest score. Another 17% thought that the conference was good. All of the respondents say that their expectations were met.

Logistics

There were no issues or complaints about logistics brought up by the respondents, except for the coldness of the hall where it was held. There were requests to include the organisations that people belonged to in the LoP.

Panels

All panels were mentioned as satisfactory and there is a rather equal rating when asked about the panel they liked the most. If any panel would be singled out as the least favoured one, it would be Panel 3 as it scores slightly under the rest. One should keep in mind though that this panel was put directly after lunch, maybe that had an impact.

Some singled out Dinah Bennett's presentation as very interesting.

Break out sessions

All, but one, were pleased with the break out sessions they participated in and the discussions held. The majority thought it was a useful forum to exchange ideas and felt they had a fruitful discussion.

The one that was not pleased with the break out sessions felt that the discussions brought nothing new and no new ways of how to resolve them.

There was also one request that the questions from the break out sessions would be handed out to all the

participants before the session, so that they could prepare.

Use in their work and follow up steps

All the participants said that they would be interested in any possible follow up steps or activities that we would organize.

There was an overall agreement that they had learnt things at the conference that will be beneficial to their work at home. On the question how it was beneficial, the ones that gave practical examples mentioned that they will change how their organisations work based on the information they received, others mentioned that they will put more emphasis on lobbying. Another said that s/he would lobby for a change in the legislation.

Additional remarks

Almost all respondents mentioned that they valued the conference as a networking opportunity.

The lack of media coverage of the conference was pointed out. It was also suggested that social platforms could have been used more to get attention and to spread info about the conference.

There was a request to involve more Lithuanian NGOs for them to be able to network and benefit from the conference as well. A lack of interest by the local Ministry of Economy was noted.

There was one request to have more practical exercises.

Topics that could be covered in any follow up activity were:

- How to monitor and measure the effectiveness of women's empowerment projects?
- Start a regional networking organisation for female entrepreneurs.