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Annual Conference of the Gender Equality Commission (GEC):
Women forging lasting peace
Dismantling barriers to gender-inclusive conflict resolution and peacebuilding

Speech by Michael O'Flaherty
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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Minister, Chairperson, dear friends,

I began my international human rights work during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Those wars were, as many of you will recall, marked by high levels of sexual violence. What was also notable at the time was that next to no attention was paid, at least by policymakers in the international organisations, to the actual and potential role for women in the building of peace.

It was only after the adoption of the Dayton Agreement that the essential role of women was allowed to manifest itself in terms of the consolidation of the hard-won peace. Civil society organisations on the ground played then and continue to play a most important role. I also recall the leadership provided by brave women within the United Nations structures. Today, I recall with appreciation the work of Elizabeth Rehn and Madeleine Rees.

A few years later, I was in Sierra Leone during its civil war. By then, some progress had been made in acknowledging the important role of women in the management of a pathway out of conflict. Already before the peace process began, civil society organisations, the National Human Rights Institution, and elements of government under the leadership of women were playing an essential role in developing the building blocks for peace. We were successful in ensuring that their voice was present in the peace negotiations that took place in Lome.

Today, I think it can be said without doubt that some of the strongest human rights foundations within the Sierra Leone Peace Agreement have at their roots the engagement of a civil society that was in large part led by women. That is also the reason that the peace process paid attention to issues of sexual violence.

A few years later, I found myself in Northern Ireland leading an institution, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, that had its very origins in the peace process in that part of the world, the Belfast Good Friday Agreement explicitly providing for the establishment of the commission. I mention it today because there is no doubt that the Commission was established on the basis of the targeted and specific advocacy of a group known as the Women's Coalition. And it is increasingly recognised that so much of what has made the Belfast Good Friday Agreement durable is as a result of the work of the Women's Coalition, led by Monica McWilliams.

Side by side with such developments in the field came the normative and institutional initiatives that we know so well. All of which I think it is important to acknowledge build on decades of work by women's organisations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Let me mention just four key moments.

The first is the decision to prosecute sexual crimes at the international tribunals for Rwanda and former Yugoslavia.

Then there was the adoption in 2000 of Security Council Resolution 1325, and here at the Council of Europe in 2010 of Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)10.

And then of course just a year later there was the adoption of the Istanbul Convention, again in the Council of Europe.

These developments were in their turn accompanied by groundbreaking research confirming what was anecdotally known, such as that women's participation increases the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years by 20 percent and for 15 years by 35 percent.

And that women's participation produces more sustainable outcomes including increased durability and quality of peace and better implementation of agreed measures.

In other words, by the 2020s, so much progress had been achieved that it could be believed that despite huge gaps on the ground that the role of women in forging peace was solidly established.

What a shock then to see those photos of the US-led Ukraine peace talks in Jeddah in March of last year. There was not a woman in sight. What is more, accounts from the talks hardly addressed so many of the issues that are integral to the women peace and security approaches. More specifically one got the impression that the huge investment of Ukrainian women for peace had been disregarded. Here I think for instance of the work of Ukraine's Alliance for Gender Responsive and Inclusive Recovery.

The great powers approach to peace-making in Ukraine was a wake-up call and it was followed by a number of initiatives.

One of the most notable of these was the recent adoption of Ukraine's new women peace and security strategy that identifies roles for women in defence, security and peace building.

I also reacted, making advocacy to embed human rights in Ukraine's path to peace my top priority. In July last year, I delivered to the government a 10-point memorandum on the topic, listing the role of women in peace process as one of the 10.

I continue to work with the Memorandum. For instance, last November in Warsaw I convened human rights leaders to consider how to operationalise it. Notably the UN, the EU and the OSCE were represented by senior officials who are women. We were also honoured with the participation of Nobel peace prize laureate Oleksandra Matviichuk.

You might ask will our efforts make a difference, especially considering the transactional approach of some actors? I am hopeful, especially with the support of Ukraine and the increasing role being played for peace by states that have been strong women peace and security proponents.

An early test of my hope will be the outcome of the upcoming Ukraine Recovery Conference that will take place this month in Gdansk.

Dear friends,

please allow me to briefly return more generally to the topic of this conference. I think it is timely and very well framed.

It can I think play a role in propelling forward both standards and practice. As you consider that, I encourage you to engage four questions.

First, how can we overcome the persistence of the patriarchy and its associated misogyny and discrimination?

Second, how can we more effectively battle that most brutal expression of patriarchy - gender-based violence? Including of course in terms of promoting accession to and compliance with the Istanbul Convention.

Third, how can we better embed attention to women peace and security in peacetime and in conflict prevention? (A topic on which I consider the Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)10 to be very good indeed.)

And fourth, as is the case in so many other contexts, how can we build better partnerships for women peace and security? Partnership of states and multilateral organisations with civil society and partnerships across the multilateral organisations themselves.

In conclusion, I encourage us never to address women peace and security issues in a siloed way. They must be tackled as integral to the broader quest for peace and respect for human rights and for equality.

Madeleine Rees, former head of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) put it well in a recent speech. She said "peace is about equilibrium. If we have inequalities, discrimination and binary narratives, we are automatically moving away from equilibrium, causing injustice and fear. And when you have fear, you have no peace."

Thank you.