



Statement by the Deputy Director-General of the OPCW, Ms Odette Melono at the Women's Initiative for Gender Justice

As delivered on 18 May 2021, Netherlands

Ambassador Lisa Helfand,

Our distinguished moderator, Ms Melinda Reed of the Women's Initiative for Gender Justice,

My fellow panellists, Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank the Embassy of Canada to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Women's Initiative for Gender Justice for organising this important panel discussion.

I am honoured to be speaking at this event on advancing gender equality in the international justice field.

It is encouraging to see that so many organisations around the globe have signed onto the International Gender Champions initiative. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (the OPCW) has been a member of this Initiative since 2018.

As the implementing body of the Chemical Weapons Convention, the OPCW essentially has two main roles. The first is to support and verify international efforts to permanently rid the world of chemical weapons and the second is to promote the peaceful uses of chemistry.

You may ask yourself what the connection is between a mission to destroy chemical weapons and eliminate any possibility of their use and gender equality. I think there are two main interconnected aspects: First, giving women a voice; and second, being effective in achieving our mandate.

Let me try to explain what I mean by giving women a voice. I come from Cameroon, a country in west central Africa with a huge amount of diversity. Like many other countries, religion, culture, geography, and socio-economic status have a huge impact on the likelihood of a girl or woman in Cameroon to have a voice, to have choices, and to make decisions about their life. In that lottery of circumstances, I was lucky. I had a mother who told me that I belonged in school, and that I could choose a career in which my voice could be heard. This led me to study overseas and eventually get a job in Cameroonian Foreign Office working on the portfolio on human rights.

In this capacity, I travelled to villages in Cameroon and saw girls and young women who supported large families by themselves, who carried water from the wells, and whose strength and resilience were formidable. Despite their resourcefulness and immense potential, these women were powerless and voiceless in matters that directly affected them. For instance, when a village had to decide on where to place the first public tap with drinkable water, it was the men who decided, even though the job to bring water home fell to the women. I very

soon realised that education and equal opportunity were the life rafts to a better standard of living for women and their families.

Over time, I came to see that those of us working in international organisations could – and in fact had a moral duty – to use our voice to speak for those girls and women who lacked a voice.

This brings me to international organisations that deal with disarmament and weapons of mass destruction. These types of weapons are by their nature indiscriminate. However, in terms of the effect of chemical weapons, studies by the UN Office for Disarmament Research have shown that women may be more susceptible to toxic agents, and may be prone to problems in reproductive health including miscarriages and infertility. When chemical weapons detonate, it is often the women and children hiding in basements who are the first victims.

This means women's perspectives must be heard. I have learned first-hand that having even one woman's voice in a room of negotiating parties can turn the dynamic and lead to a different outcome.

So, this leads me to the second aspect of the interconnection between efforts to destroy chemical weapons and gender equality: being effective.

At the OPCW we have long recognised that to succeed in our mission, we must reflect the diversity of the world we serve. The OPCW is composed of 193 States Parties, which means 98% of the world is under the protection of the Convention. So diversity for the Organisation means both geographical representation and gender parity.

So, moving to the question for the panel on how to turn theory into practice, how has the OPCW sought to promote this diversity?

First of all, OPCW's management has made the promotion of diversity and inclusiveness a strategic priority. A number of substantial steps have been taken to make the change happen. One of the most visible changes has been in senior appointments of the organisation.

Three years ago, as memorably pointed out by the Canadian Ambassador Sabine Nolke when looking at the almost all-male composition of the podium during a meeting with States Parties, there was only one woman out of ten leaders in the senior management structure. Today, however, there are six. In fact, our new Legal Adviser, Ms Hafida Lahiouel, who started a week ago is a woman from Algeria.

There has been an increase from 22% to 30% in women employed in the professional grades within the Organisation over the past six years.

This is progress, but there is clearly room for improvement. A particular challenge for the OPCW is that the technical posts – such as inspectors – have been persistently under-represented among women. It is important to expand recruitment in the STEM fields – that is science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Going back to my observation about education and opportunity, the reality is that women only represent 35% of all students in STEM-related fields, and an even smaller percentage continue careers in these areas. This is the result of systemic disadvantages in the chemical science area, which stops women from contributing to scientific discovery and innovation.

There is much that international organisations can do to help build the impetus to have more women in science and technology and to remove the barriers to women successfully being recruited.

In terms of advancing the empowerment of women in the chemical sciences, the OPCW holds the Symposium on Women in Chemistry. This annual event aims to highlight the contributions made by women in the field of peaceful chemistry as well as raise awareness of education and capacity-building opportunities. I take this opportunity to thank Canada and the EU for their support of this event and to inform that the next edition of the Symposium will be held this July in a virtual format.

In terms of removing barriers to recruitment, we have developed a new sourcing strategy to attract candidates from the widest possible pool of talent, including in our technical areas of work. This involves actively sourcing applicants via campaigns on Impactpool and LinkedIn, recruitment marketing for specific posts, making our vacancy announcements more inclusive, using targeted outreach and engagement with States Parties, and partnering with other talent pools such as the UN Female National Officer Talent Pool. Our recruitment process has also been amended to ensure it is as inclusive as possible.

But, equality in recruitment alone is not enough; gender-mainstreaming is a holistic approach that needs to re-shape activities across the Organisation.

In 2019, the OPCW established Gender Focal Points, a group of ten staff members whose goal is to promote gender equality and mainstreaming in the Secretariat.

This mechanism has already had an impact and has been consulted regarding gender issues when planning and implementing key activities and programmes.

In 2020, the OPCW decided to launch a Gender and Diversity Audit in order to gauge how we were doing in gender equality, and where we could do better. This Audit, which was recently concluded, has identified multiple opportunities for the OPCW to become a more inclusive workplace.

For instance, the new post of Diversity Officer has been created to address the gaps identified in the Audit, and recruitment for this position is due to start this month.

We are also updating our policies and guidance for staff to strengthen our internal culture to advance well-being and inclusiveness.

For instance, we undertook a revision of our staff Code of Conduct to place greater emphasis on gender equality, respect for diversity, and the prevention of harassment.

In addition, we updated our administrative directive on maternity and parental leave and breast-feeding arrangements to ensure greater flexibility, choice and equal treatment for all parents concerning childcare.

The OPCW has taken concrete steps in enhancing women's roles and institutionalising inclusivity and diversity, but clearly these efforts must continue.

Let's not have the men decide where to put the tap that women will use. This world belongs to all of us. And we all need a voice.

I thank you for your attention.

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