



Women in Science: Promoting and Empowering Women Scientists to Change the World

An online event organised by the Embassy of Indonesia in the Hague
Keynote address by the Deputy Director-General of the OPCW, Ms Odette Melono

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Excellency, Ambassador Mayerfas,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to speak with you on the important topic of “Women in Science” and the ongoing efforts to promote, support and empower female scientists to change the world. I would like to thank the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia for organising this hybrid event on this theme.

We live in an era where the ever-accelerating pace of science and technology is bringing unprecedented opportunities for a better future for all.

Against this backdrop, women scientists are increasingly carrying out ground-breaking research, heading multinational chemical companies, steering chemical societies, and driving positive change.

The outbreak of the pandemic has demonstrated the vital role of women researchers in the fight against COVID-19.

Women have been at the forefront of this effort: from advancing knowledge of the virus and developing new techniques for testing, to creating the life-saving vaccines.

In this regard, I am very pleased to see on this panel Dr. Carina Joe, who has been instrumental in this important endeavour.

Last year, we celebrated the first all-female recipients of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, which Emmanuelle Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna achieved for their work on genome editing. This was a triumph for all current and future female scientists.

When receiving the prize, Professor Charpentier said, I quote: *"I wish that this will provide a positive message specifically for young girls who would like to follow the path of science... and to show them that women in science can also have an impact with the research they are performing."* End of quote.

Despite the distance women have travelled in the scientific world, there is still a long way to go to reach equality.

According to UNESCO, women account for only one third of the world's researchers and hold fewer senior positions than men at top universities.

There is an urgent need to look beyond the statistics and to identify and tackle qualitative factors that deter and inhibit women from pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering or mathematics, the so-called STEM fields.

Special focus is needed on addressing long-standing biases and stereotypes which steer women and girls away from sciences.

Giving women equal opportunities to pursue and thrive in STEM careers can greatly narrow the gender pay gap.

Encouraging women to take up such careers can enhance empowerment and promote economic security, while building a diverse and talented STEM workforce.

The economic benefits of greater female participation in the sciences are considerable. Ongoing research suggests that increasing women's participation in STEM fields could boost their earnings by \$299 billion over the next ten years.

Clearly, sustained and concerted efforts are needed to find ways for young women to develop their interest in science and to foster an environment to enable their success.

At the OPCW, we recognise that all women should have a chance to engage with, and excel in, the chemical sciences.

This was why the Organisation launched the Symposium on Women in Chemistry initiative in 2016.

Today, the Symposium serves as the OPCW's leading event for exploring the challenges and possibilities for women in the chemical sciences.

It seeks to strengthen their awareness of the use of chemistry for purposes not prohibited under the Chemical Weapons Convention, as well as to promote the OPCW's capacity building programmes available to them.

It also helps propel international solidarity and cooperation in the development of future human capital in this field.

Furthermore, it provides an interactive forum to share experiences, build networks, and advance careers.

This year, we are also walking participants through the active efforts of the OPCW Secretariat to support gender mainstreaming.

Our focus in this area will centre on activities under the International Gender Champions initiative and our internal programmes for gender equality.

Moreover, our outreach efforts to strengthen female participation in our flagship annual capacity-building scheme—the Associate Programme—are already showing positive momentum.

When the Programme began in 2000, there were only four women among its 12 participants - this year, however, we counted 17 women among the Programme's 40 participants.

To date, the Associate Programme has proudly helped train 160 women from 77 States Parties.

I am pleased to inform you that this September we launched our first 'International Online Workshop for women in a first responder role to chemical incidents' with over 130 women participants.

The workshop was supported by a professional team of female facilitators from around the world.

Its aim was not only to strengthen the participants' capacity with basic and advanced incident response and management, but also to raise awareness of gender-based challenges to operational issues and careers in the emergency management fields.

Indeed, the OPCW remains firmly committed to fostering and advancing a diverse and inclusive working environment.

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, there was only one woman out of ten leaders in the senior management structure. Today, however, there are five.

We have also achieved an increase of women employed in the professional grades, with the number growing from 22% to 30% over the past six years.

This is progress, but clearly more needs to be done.

A particular challenge for the OPCW is that the technical posts – such as inspectors – have been persistently under-represented among women.

Accordingly, it is important to expand recruitment in the STEM fields.

Promoting gender equality in chemistry and science can be a force multiplier for our societies, and for the full implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The OPCW, for its part, will continue to strive and advocate for women in chemistry as we promote international cooperation in this field and advance capacity-building courses for women chemists and chemical engineers.

Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Chemistry for the benefit of humankind remains vital to improving the quality of life of all people around the world and for contributing to the safety and security of future generations.

To this end and more, women should and must be empowered to participate fully and meaningfully in this global effort.

Let us play our part supporting, facilitating, and advancing women's education and careers in chemistry.

I thank you.

How do you perceive the role of women in development and peace, especially in the peaceful use of chemicals?

There are two main interconnected aspects: First, giving women a voice; and second, being effective in achieving the OPCW's mandate. Women's perspectives must be heard in the effort to achieve peace and further development. They have the right to take part in the decisions affecting their lives. Moreover, women's experiences can be different and can lead to different approaches to peace and development if properly taken into account. In terms of the peaceful use of chemicals, at the OPCW we have long recognised that to succeed in our mission, we must reflect the diversity of the world we serve. Diversity for the Organisation means both geographical representation and gender parity.

What is the role of OPCW in advancing the role of women in development and peace? What is your view concerning women's representation in OPCW's decision making, including if not especially, women from the developing countries? Do we have enough women scientists supporting the work of the OPCW?

The OPCW can 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.

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.

As regards women's representation in OPCW's decision-making, as I mentioned, the Secretariat has made great strides in this regards, with 5 female directors now in the senior management team. This helps ensure we have a gender perspective in our decision-making. Geographical representation is also a pillar of the diversity we seek to maintain at the OPCW. In this regard, having voices from all four corners of the globe, and from countries with varying levels of socio-economic development, is important to ensuring our programmes are effective and responding to identified needs of our States Parties.

With respect to the number of women scientists at the OPCW, this is a work in progress. We have made some important strides forward in recent years, for instance actively sources

female candidates, and making our vacancy announcements more inclusive, and using targeted outreach and engagement with States parties. We have also appointed Gender Focal points and in 2020 conducted a Gender and Diversity Audit to gauge how we were doing in gender equality, and what we could do better. We'll be implementing the opportunities to be more inclusive in the coming months.

Based on your experience, what are the challenges in advancing the role of women in the STEM field especially from developing countries?

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. In addition, there are sometimes cultural, social and sometimes national barriers to women advancing in these areas. It is therefore important that national governments make strategic choices and implement plans to remove such barriers, and instead provide incentives, to educating girls.

International organisations such as the OPCW can also help build the impetus to have more women in science and technology and to remove the barriers to women successfully being recruited. This is what the OPCW has sought to achieve through its Symposium on Women in Chemistry, and through a recruitment process that is fair and representative.

Do you think the world of science, both at the public and private spheres, already offered equitable access, opportunity and recognition for women scientists or for young girls who aspire to be?

As mentioned, there remain a number of systemic challenges for women and girls in the scientific area. Equitable access and opportunity means a level playing field and a fair chance for all regardless of gender. Unfortunately, there is much work to be done to make this a reality. But the good news is that many governments and international organisations are working hard to improve this situation, and events like this are important to keep driving the message that this is a situation that needs ongoing attention and concrete actions to achieve full gender parity in this area.
