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**Statement** by the Deputy Director-General of the OPCW, Ms Odette Melono, at the CSP-27 Side Event Panel Discussion “Women, Peace & Security and the Chemical Weapons Convention”

28 November 2022

Excellencies,  
My fellow panellists,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to thank the Embassies of Canada, Colombia, Finland, Ireland, Mexico, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States for organising this important panel discussion. I am honoured to be speaking at this side-event on women, peace and security, and the Chemical Weapons Convention.

In other words, I am happy to have a seat at the table. Just now, I came from sitting on the podium of the conference hall in my capacity of Deputy Director-General of the OPCW. In my previous role as Ambassador for Cameroon, I sat in the conference hall behind my country’s name plate. In both situations, I was glad to have a seat at the table.

Why do I stress this so much? Because sitting at the table is the best way to have your voice heard. If you are not there, your perspective will not be part of the discussion. And women need to be part of the discussion on peace, security, and the Chemical Weapons Convention. Let me try to explain why.

Women in some ways live in a different world to men. In many countries, while boys are encouraged to go to school, girls are prevented or discouraged from doing so for cultural or economic reasons. As a young African girl, I was fortunate to have a mother who saw my education as a priority.

While boys are often seen as naturally gifted or drawn to the STEM fields—girls commonly face systemic disadvantages in pursuing studies in those fields. The result is that only 35% of all students in STEM-related fields are women.

While men continue their careers largely unimpeded by the obligations that flow from marriage or having children, women often need to take time out due to pregnancy, nursing, and raising young children.

And those of us who do continue to work are often made to make painful choices between being with our children and doing our professional duty. As a young diplomat and mother, I recall well having to choose between staying with my sick child or flying to Addis Ababa for an international conference, an opportunity which - if turned down - would have almost certainly meant not receiving any more such opportunities.

The way that women experience the world means that we have a particular perspective on many issues. When it comes to peace, security, and disarmament, women's perspectives are shaped by the world *we* experience.

When it comes to the use of chemical weapons, women's experiences are also different to those of men. When chemical weapons are used, it is often the women and children hiding in basements who are the first victims. When they arrive at hospitals, women commonly wait longer for treatment due to the lack of female first responders, or the lack of facilities or procedures specially designed for women. In addition, studies by the UN Institute 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. This is why we need a seat at the table. This is why diversity and inclusion are not a "nice to have" at the OPCW, but a "need to have". We cannot effectively fulfil our mandate without them. Women's perspectives must be heard, otherwise we will not effectively address the impact of chemical weapons or know how to respond to such threats holistically.

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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. So diversity for the Organisation means both geographical representation and gender parity. For this reason, the OPCW's management, under the leadership of the Director-General, Ambassador Fernando Arias, who is an international gender champion, has made the promotion of diversity and inclusiveness a strategic priority. The Secretariat has implemented this strategy through several measures. The first, and perhaps most visible, has been achieving gender parity in the senior appointments of the organisation. This is quite remarkable considering that just a few years ago, there were no female directors. There has been an increase from 22% to 30% in women employed in the professional grades within the Organisation over the past seven years.

This is progress, but we can still improve. A particular challenge for the OPCW is that the technical posts – such as inspectors – have been persistently under-represented among women. This relates back to what I mentioned about the lack of women in the STEM fields. What can an organisation like the OPCW do about this systemic issue? Well, we can do two things. First, we can – in partnership with our States Parties – build the impetus to have more women in science and technology. Secondly, we can remove the barriers to women being successfully recruited.

With respect to the first measure of getting more women into science and technology, the OPCW established the Women in Chemistry programme in 2016. The programme is intended to break down gender barriers and to ensure that equal gender participation is a working reality for women. The programme was put in place after an assessment in 2015 showed that only 33% of sponsored participants in capacity-building programmes were female. The programme comprises the Symposium on Women in Chemistry and the Basic Analytical Chemistry Course for Women Chemists.

In November 2022, a Compendium of Best Practices on the Engagement and Advancement of Women in chemical safety and security was launched. The Compendium identifies best practices in recruiting, training, and promoting women in chemistry.

The Basic Analytical Chemistry Course for Women in Chemistry selected from Member States whose economies are developing or are in transition, is designed to facilitate the adoption of good laboratory practices.

Regarding the second measure of removing barriers to recruitment, we have developed a new sourcing strategy to attract candidates from the widest possible pool of talent, including our technical areas of work. Our recruitment process has also been amended to ensure it is as inclusive as possible.

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In addition to trying to have more women at the OPCW, it is also important to ensure that our programmes incorporate a gender lens. Gender-mainstreaming can help to re-shape activities across the Organisation to respond and address the issues that affect women.

In 2018, two initiatives were established to promote gender mainstreaming in the Organisation: the OPCW's joining of the International Gender Champions (IGC) hub and the introduction of Gender Focal Points (GFP) in the Secretariat.

The OPCW Gender Focal Points are 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.

For instance, the Secretariat broadened the scope of the Practical Guide for Medical Management of Chemical Warfare Casualties to include psychosocial impacts of chemical weapons use.

In 2021, the Secretariat launched its first workshops on chemical incidents for women in a first responder role. These workshops raise awareness around gender-based challenges to operational issues in response procedures, and career-building in the response and emergency management fields.

The Office of Internal Oversight has now included gender as a specific KPI for all audits and evaluations to be conducted under its programme, in addition to the geographical representation KPI.

In 2020, the OPCW carried out a Gender and Diversity Audit in order to gauge how we were doing in gender equality, and where we could do better. This Audit identified multiple opportunities for the OPCW to become a more inclusive workplace.

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One of the recommendations, which was implemented, was to update our policies to strengthen our internal culture to advance well-being and inclusiveness.

For instance, our staff Code of Conduct was revised 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.

This year, the Technical Secretariat instituted a flexible working policy for the first time. These working modalities have been shown to be key to attracting and retaining female professionals.

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

To make strides in this area, the Secretariat looks to the States Parties and policy-making organs for guidance and support. The 5<sup>th</sup> RevCon will provide a good opportunity for this. We must all work together at the national and international levels to make a difference for women in peace, security and the Chemical Weapons Convention. When those actions are taken, we all benefit.

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