



**ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS**

**Symposium on Women in Chemistry**

**Opening Remarks by Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü**

**OPCW Headquarters, The Hague, the Netherlands**

**17 May 2016**

---

*REMARKS AS DELIVERED*

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is indeed a pleasure to welcome you today to the Symposium on Women in Chemistry. You come from a wide range of professions in the chemical sciences – from industry, from government and from academia – representing more than 40 countries. You are joined here by several women Ambassadors, who are serving as their countries' Permanent Representatives to the OPCW.

This is the first such symposium ever hosted by our Organisation. And it is a timely event – for many reasons. Women continue to play an increasingly important role in the chemical sciences, and for this, they must be empowered to reach their full potential – for the benefit of us all. Exchanging experiences and ideas on how we can best do this is the aim of this symposium, as is celebrating the valuable contributions already made by women to chemistry.

For its part, the OPCW is proud to bring its international platform to bear in promoting greater cooperation in this area.

This symposium will cover a broad range of challenges and opportunities for women pursuing careers in the chemical sciences, in academia, in research, or in industry. Most importantly, it will provide an interactive forum for sharing experiences and advice that not only advance careers, but also build skills and opportunities.

To give this event a practical component, the OPCW Laboratory will offer a three-day basic analytical chemistry course for women chemists directly after this symposium.

I especially hope that the networks that you develop here will build bridges in the future. I also hope that some of you can go on to serve as mentors to colleagues at the start of their careers. I would especially encourage that those in a position to do so can mentor others in countries with less abundant opportunities.

For it is clear that a lack of opportunity remains the experience of many female professionals in the chemical sciences across the globe.

A variety of factors have contributed to this. Achieving gender equality more generally – both in education and in employment – faces challenges in many countries because of entrenched social and cultural factors. But even in those countries where progress has been more readily achieved, women still face obstacles to career advancement, which their male counterparts may not. This must change, and not only for reasons of fairness and equality, for there are also practical considerations.

By not giving our female colleagues the same opportunities, we deny ourselves a fully productive workforce. And we deny ourselves one half of our brainpower for making advances that benefit all of humanity. This clearly comes at an enormous economic and scientific cost, in addition to a moral and societal one – a cost that we can ill afford.

We must do better – for our collective security, for our prosperity and for our humanity.

\* \* \*

For its part, the OPCW highly values the role of women in our mission to rid the world of chemical weapons, and to ensure that chemistry is used solely for peaceful purposes. We have taken steps to address gender imbalance in the Technical Secretariat, including by appointing women to more senior positions.

I am sure that they will share their experiences at the OPCW with you today.

We are also seeking to include more women in OPCW training and capacity-building activities.

As I already mentioned, our added value can be the international platform that our organisation provides. It is bound up with the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals, which underline inclusiveness and equality in education, as well as the need to achieve gender equality and to empower women and girls across the globe. This will remain a guiding principle as we work to strengthen the bulwark against the misuse of chemistry, and to foster science in the service of peace and security.

Our vital mission is best served not only by placing the right people in the right positions, but also by ensuring that all women have the opportunity to excel in the chemical sciences, wherever they may reside.

This applies to government service, to universities and to industry. These sectors should also be benefiting women, no less than men, on the basis of new opportunities for career mobility and skills transfers provided by a globalising economy.

I am certain that many of the speakers at this symposium will inspire colleagues as role models in this regard – particularly those who have overcome obstacles to pave the way for others.

As Marie Curie, perhaps the greatest role model for women scientists, once remarked: “We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something and that this thing must be attained.”

I look forward to your contributions to the discussions today.

And I encourage you to express your ambitions and your concerns, so that we may all work together to support women in chemistry into the future. The OPCW will continue to play its part in these endeavours.

Thank you.