



Developing and Implementing Gender Policies in the OSCE

Challenges and opportunities

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the largest regional security organisation in the world, has in recent years experienced a process of ‘gendering’ its policies and practices. However, this process has led to somewhat limited results, and the achievements made even risk facing a backlash. Why has the gender agenda met so much resistance in the OSCE context? This policy brief outlines some of the political and institutional barriers to the implementation of gender policies in the OSCE, both internally and in the organisation’s external programmes and activities. It also highlights some institutional opportunities for the OSCE in this field.

Brief Points

- A comprehensive Gender Action Plan was adopted by the OSCE in 2004. However, 14 years on, the OSCE has still not sufficiently fulfilled its commitments.
- Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the OSCE has experienced increased polarisation, especially between the “East” and “West” and between “liberal” and “conservative” States. This has significant consequences for the development of the progressive gender equality agenda.
- One of the main challenges to political decision-making within OSCE is *the consensus rule*, which provides all 57 OSCE participating States with a veto power, also on gender issues.
- The added value of the OSCE can largely be found in its strong on-the-ground presence through its field missions. The best way for progressive OSCE States to support the implementation of gender policies is to promote and protect the autonomy of these missions.

Introduction

The OSCE is the largest regional security organisation in the world, currently consisting of 57 participating States in Europe, North America, Central Asia, Russia and South Caucasus. It is therefore an interesting case for assessing the impact of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda specifically, and the “gendering” of security politics more broadly, in the context of multilateral organisations. The 57 participating States are all members of the OSCE’s Permanent Council, which is the main body for decision-making and political dialogue in the organisation. The organisation’s executive structures are the Secretary-General’s Office and the Secretariat, the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Representative for Freedom of the Media (RFoM), and the High Commissioner for National Minorities (HCNM). Finally, the OSCE also has a strong on-the-ground presence, with 16 field missions, programme offices, project-coordinators or other forms of organisational structures in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Gender as a Component of the OSCE’s Comprehensive Approach to Security

The OSCE’s policies, programmes and activities are based on a comprehensive approach to security, reflected in the OSCE’s three dimensions – the politico-military dimension, the environmental and economic dimension, and the human dimension. In this context, gender is considered as a cross-dimensional issue, and should accordingly be addressed in the work of all three dimensions and in all parts of the organisation. Consequently, most OSCE institutions, structures and activities involve a gender component.

With regards to the executive structures, the OSCE Secretariat has a designated Gender Section, which focuses on integrating a gender perspective in policies and programmes of the organisation itself, but also on assisting staff and participating States in capacity-building, and in developing operational tools and training courses and materials. Further, ODIHR’s mandate to assist participating States and civil society in promoting democracy, human rights, and non-discrimination also includes the promotion of women’s rights. ODIHR also focuses on the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on WPS, and has its own advisor specifically working on this topic. Similarly,

the HCNM has a particular responsibility to address the double discrimination of minority women, and the Office of the RFoM is mandated to address the particular risks faced by female journalists in the region. Further, all of the OSCE’s field missions, programme offices and project-coordinator offices (except for the one located in Uzbekistan) explicitly state their mandate to work towards gender equality in their respective operating countries. In addition, the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) has its own gender adviser in Kyiv as well as around a dozen gender focal points located around Ukraine. On the political side, the gender agenda is largely driven forward by a group of more or less gender progressive participating States, including countries such as Canada, Norway, Switzerland, and the EU bloc.

The 2004 Gender Action Plan

In order to guide the OSCE’s work on gender, a comprehensive Gender Action Plan was adopted in 2004. This action plan assigns detailed and extensive tasks related to gender equality, the inclusion of women, and gender mainstreaming to concrete actors in all parts of the organisation. This includes measures to be taken within the organisation itself, related to issues such as the increased recruitment of women – in particular at management level – and the promotion of a professional work environment, as well as concrete measures for ensuring gender mainstreaming in the organisation’s policies, projects, programmes, and external activities. The plan further highlights the OSCE’s commitments in relation to the WPS agenda, as it includes specific language on the implementation of UNSCR 1325, stressing the OSCE structures’ responsibility to promote the inclusion of women in conflict prevention and post-conflict

processes. In particular, it highlights the specific need of policies, activities and programmes in the politico-military dimension to take into account obligations in UNSCR 1325.

The 2004 Gender Action Plan is still in place today, as there has seemingly not been sufficient political space to develop a more updated action plan. In fact, proponents of the gender agenda within the organisation have proposed the inclusion of an addendum to the original plan, which would update and complement it, rather than opening up for negotiations on a completely new document. One reason for this is a fear that these new discussions may result in a backlash over what has previously been agreed. With increasing polarisation and opposition to the gender agenda among some participating States, including Russia and the Holy See, such negotiations could result in a weaker action plan than the one currently in place. However, as the 2004 plan is comprehensive, detailed and relatively ambitious considering the OSCE’s actual achievements in the field of gender policies, there is first and foremost a need for better implementation. With or without an addendum, 14 years on from the adoption of the action plan the OSCE has still not sufficiently fulfilled its commitments.

Political and Institutional Challenges to the OSCE’s Gender Agenda

Increased polarisation and a gender backlash

The OSCE has experienced increased polarisation over the last few years, in particular since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine that followed. As Canada, the EU, Norway, Switzerland and the US, among others, support



Olga Scripovskaia, who leads the largest SMM team in Donetsk, has been instrumental in introducing diversity to male-dominated meetings with security actors. Photo: OSCE/Cliff Volpe/CC-BY-ND

Ukraine, they regularly criticise Russia heavily, in particular for violating international law. Russia fiercely rejects any criticism of its behaviour and often uses aggressive rhetoric in its responses. This does not foster an environment for goodwill and constructive decision-making. Moreover, the recent political developments in Turkey have further enhanced this polarisation. As Turkey continues to shrink civil society space at home, the Turkish delegation has also increasingly opposed the inclusion of civil society organisations perceived to be hostile to the Turkish government in OSCE activities. This creates tension between Turkey and Western States in particular. In general, the increased scepticism and even opposition to “liberal” norms, values and political structures among several conservative state actors on the world stage are reflected in tougher negotiation positions and hardened fronts in the OSCE. Moreover, consensus-based decision-making processes in the organisation often become victims of internal tensions and resentment between certain participating States due to long-term or “frozen” regional conflicts, for instance the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The increased polarisation in the OSCE has had significant consequences for the development of gender policies, to the extent that the gender progressive agenda is currently facing a backlash. There is increased opposition to the notion of “gender” among conservative OSCE States, and generally a notable resistance towards gender-related policies and approaches from many states. For instance, Russia has obstructed several attempts to develop an action plan on. The Holy See opposes the use of the term “gender” as such, arguing that there is no clear or agreed definition of this term, whilst advocating policies that promote “traditional” roles for men and women. In general, attempts to promote gender-related policy initiatives by states supportive of the gender agenda are increasingly being hampered. This backlash is further enhanced by, and arguably also partly caused by increased polarisation between the “East” and “West” and between “liberal” and “conservative” States in the OSCE, labels that to an extent are overlapping and intertwined. In this environment, the contentious and heavily value-based issue of gender becomes a symbolic battlefield, where competing worldviews collide. As a result, proponents of the gender agenda risk experiencing not only a lack of progress in this field, but even a reversal of previously agreed commitments.



Amarsanaa Darisuren, OSCE Senior Adviser on Gender Issues, delivers welcoming remarks at a side event on combatting violence against women in conflict settings, 2018. Photo: OSCE/Micky Kroell/CC-BY-ND

Consensus-based decision-making

In the context of increased polarisation, the greatest challenge to the OSCE’s work on gender issues is arguably the organisation’s consensus rule in decision-making, which in practice provides all 57 participating States with a veto power. As a consequence, all participating States, regardless of their size or political influence, may obstruct policy decisions they dislike with very low political costs attached. The consensus-based decision-making process is often highlighted as an organisational strength, providing legitimacy to the political decisions that are made. However, it also means that reaching these political decisions in the first place is more challenging, especially in the more contentious policy areas, such as gender. Due to the consensus rule, even a small political actor like the Holy See has been able to single-handedly hamper important policy developments on gender issues.

Budget constraints

The OSCE’s budget must also be adopted by consensus, which has important implications for the execution of the organisation’s policies and activities. This affects all aspects of the organisation’s work, as it allows for states to conduct extensive micro-management of the budget. Participating States are largely able to hamper funding of activities, positions or programmes they perceive as somewhat problematic, which in turn has implications for the effectiveness, efficiency and continuity of the executive structures’ efforts. This system risks creating particular challenges for budgetary posts related to gender issues, as this is a controversial issue in the OSCE context. Further, the budget can only be adopted for one year at a time. This creates challenges for OSCE institutions in terms of predictability and long-term planning, which are needed to ensure

proper gender mainstreaming in all aspects of the organisation’s work.

The dominant position of the Chairmanship

A unique aspect of the OSCE’s organisational structure is that the Chairmanship plays a particularly dominant role in leading key political processes in the organisation at any given time. The Chairmanship position is elected at the annual Ministerial Council meeting in December and held by one of the participating States for one calendar year. Each Chairmanship determines what the main political priorities of the organisation should be during its Chairmanship period. During this time, the Chairmanship is also able to make key decisions and appointments. Although some political priorities tend to be almost automatically continued from year to year, and many policy events and processes are followed up annually, this still provides the Chairmanship in question with significant political power. Further, the Chairmanship decides upon which participating States should chair the Committees of each of the three dimensions. The Chairs of the Committees, in coordination with the Chairmanship, largely determine the agenda of the Committees’ work during the year, which enables them to influence the work being done in each dimension. Finally, the Chairmanship also puts forth some key draft ‘decisions’ or ‘declarations’ that are to be negotiated among the participating States, often in the context of the different Committees, and finally adopted or rejected at the Ministerial Council. If adopted, the decision can pave the way for the organisation’s work, and may instruct the work of OSCE executive structures and field missions.

The dominant position of the Chairmanship can provide a challenge to the gender agenda in the OSCE, in particular the implementation



Overview of OSCE Field Operations. Source: OSCE 2018a

of gender sensitive policies and the inclusion of women in the organisation itself. For instance, the Chairmanship may appoint special or personal representatives to OSCE-led conflict resolution and peace processes in the OSCE region, meaning that the achievement of a gender balance in these senior positions relies upon the willingness of the Chairmanship. In general, the Chairmanship to a large extent influences whether gender should be an OSCE priority, and each Chairmanship's commitment to the gender agenda may vary greatly.

policies that are better adapted to the specific needs on the ground, consequently making these more effective and legitimate. This flexibility enables executive structures and field missions to implement policies related to the WPS agenda at the local level, even in cases where there is no comprehensive WPS policy framework at the political level. This is not to say that these institutions are completely shielded from the political backlash on gender, or that all parts of these institutions are equally able, or willing, to focus on gender issues. After all, these institutions get their mandate from decisions made by the participating States. However, as the 2004 Gender Action Plan assigns detailed tasks to the different parts of the organisation, and (almost all) field missions have gender equality explicitly stated as part of their mandate, the implementation of gender policies is and will be their responsibility – as long as they are able to act independently from the political turmoil largely paralysing the organisation's decision-making body. Thus, as the situation stands today, one of the best ways for progressive OSCE states to support the implementation of gender policies is to ensure that the autonomy of these executive structures and field missions is promoted and protected. This will enable them to resist the political backlash on gender policies currently taking place in other parts of the organisation.

Yet, a singular focus on the non-political aspects of the organisation does not solve the whole problem. OSCE institutions and field missions may be able to take the lead on the implementation of gender policies in outcome programmes and activities, but important work on gender equality also needs to be done within the organisation itself. Even though the Secretariat's Gender Section and the Senior Gender Adviser are doing good work in this regard, they are dependent on political support by the participating States due to the heavily political nature of the organisation, as is outlined above. Moreover, gender needs to be mainstreamed throughout the Secretariat's work, and cannot only be the responsibility of the Gender Section. So far, convincing in particular senior management of the importance of gender mainstreaming all aspects of the OSCE's work has seemingly been difficult. Proponents of the gender agenda in the OSCE are therefore likely to continue facing significant challenges in the time to come. ■

Institutional Opportunities: Field Missions and Executive Structures

The challenges that have been described in this policy brief are mainly connected to the political decision-making processes of the OSCE. Arguably, the added value of the OSCE in general is not embedded in the political body of the organisation, but in its strong on-the-ground presence and, accordingly, its ability to actually follow through on the implementation of policies, programmes and activities in different local contexts. In this way, the OSCE is able to close some of the 'implementation gap', which parts of the UN system, for instance, are heavily criticised for. Through its field missions in particular, the OSCE is able to implement gender-orientated

Further Reading

Jenichen, Anne, Jutta Joachim, & Andrea Schmeiker (2018) "Gendering" European security: policy changes, reform coalitions and opposition in the OSCE', *European Security*, 27(1): 1–19.

OSCE (2018a) 'Who we are'. Available at: www.osce.org/whatistheosce

OSCE (2018b) '2018 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting Highlights: Consolidated Summary'. Available at: www.osce.org/odihr/398840?download=true

OSCE, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2017a) 'Opening Statement by Turkey, 11 September'. Available at: www.osce.org/odihr/339031?download=true

OSCE (2017b) '2017 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting: Consolidated Summary'. Available at: www.osce.org/odihr/365486

OSCE (2004) 'Decision No. 14/04: 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality, 7 December'. Available at: www.osce.org/mc/23295?download=true

THE AUTHOR

Linn Marie Reklef is Centre Manager of the PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security. In 2017, she served as Adviser in the Permanent Norwegian Delegation to the OSCE in Vienna. She holds an MA in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of Oslo.

THE CENTRE

The PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security is a resource hub at PRIO for gender, peace and security studies. Its activities include research and publishing, teaching, training and policy advice. The centre provides a space for research and policy discussions among networks of national and international scholars, policymakers, NGOs, media and students.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.