

CONSTITUENCY OFFICE
1030 Denman Street, No 106
Vancouver BC
V6G 2M6
T: 604-666-0135
F: 604-666-0114



OTTAWA OFFICE
Rm. 800 Justice Building
House of Commons
Ottawa ON
K1A 0A6
T: 613-992-3213
F: 613-995-0056

OFFICE OF THE HON. HEDY FRY, PC, MP
VANCOUVER CENTRE

July 3, 2020

By E-Mail
Mr. Roberto Montella
Secretary General, OSCE PA

Dear Secretary General Roberto Montella,

I want to thank you for your ongoing efforts to promote gender equality at the OSCE PA. In particular, I want to express my appreciation for your participation in our webinar, *The Gendered Impacts of COVID-19*, hosted by the OSCE PA on 15 June 2020.

As the Special Representative on Gender Issues, I was inspired by the guest speakers and the discussion among the delegates. I think it's important, following such a meeting, to maintain momentum and to encourage participating States to prioritize gender-sensitive approaches in their COVID-19 response planning and decision-making. As I said at the webinar, I am concerned that this pandemic threatens to stall the progress that has been made towards gender equality in many participating States. However, if OSCE parliamentarians commit to incorporating the voices and perspectives of diverse women, our responses to this pandemic can serve to advance gender equality across the OSCE region. For this reason, I ask that the Secretariat deliver this letter to all heads of delegation.

As a starting point, I hope that parliamentarians from all participating States will read, and carefully consider, my annual report "[The Gendered Impacts of COVID-19](#)." Furthermore, using the information gathered at the webinar on 15 June, I make the following recommendations:

- **Collecting disaggregated data:** First and foremost, to ensure that any action taken on the points below is effective, inclusive and evidence-based, parliamentarians should encourage their governments to prioritize the collection of disaggregated data. Governments must establish strategies to collect data disaggregated by sex, as well as other intersectional factors such as race, sexuality, age, disability, socioeconomic status and migratory status, and should use this data to inform their pandemic response plans.
- **Addressing gender-based violence:** Parliamentarians should advocate for the establishment of additional measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, which appears to be on the rise during this pandemic. These measures should include designating domestic violence shelters as essential services, increasing resources to frontline organizations that help women experiencing violence at home, and improving funding to online and telephone crisis hotlines.

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- **Applying an intersectional lens:** Parliamentarians must urge their governments to apply not only a gender lens when developing COVID-19 policies, but also an intersectional lens. Every effort should be made to incorporate the voices of marginalized groups, including Indigenous peoples, peoples with disabilities, migrant workers, racial and ethnic minorities, and LGBTI individuals in pandemic decision-making and response plans.
- **Supporting women in parliament and health care leadership positions:** The inclusion of diverse women's voices and perspectives in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making is critical. To this end, parliamentarians should support and advocate for special efforts to increase the representation of diverse women in parliament and health care leadership positions.
- **Addressing the unique needs of health care workers:** Parliamentarians should raise awareness regarding the unique needs of health care workers, the great majority of whom are women. In raising this awareness, parliamentarians should underscore the value of the work performed by all health care workers and call on participating States to provide suitable personal protective equipment, psychosocial support, and appropriate salaries.
- **Including civil society organizations:** Parliamentarians should advocate for the inclusion of civil society organizations in decision-making related to the pandemic. Collaborating with civil society organizations – and ensuring that they receive adequate financial support – will improve the effectiveness of government aid, particularly to the most vulnerable in our societies.
- **Incorporating gender analysis in economic responses:** Parliamentarians should urge their governments to ensure their economic recovery and social assistance plans reflect the prevalence of women in many of the industries affected by COVID-19 shutdowns. As well, assistance should be provided to women-led business, which often face challenges in accessing capital. and to informal workers, many of whom are women. Parliamentarians should also advocate for policies to support women and families who face increased care responsibilities at home as a result of the pandemic. These policies must take into consideration the unique circumstances of single parents, the majority of whom are women.
- **Maintaining sexual and reproductive health care services:** Parliamentarians should highlight the need to continue to provide routine health services for women, particularly sexual and reproductive health care services. It is essential that we not repeat the mistakes of past public health emergencies, where sexual and reproductive health care was sidelined, and women suffered as a result. Parliamentarians must call on their governments to protect the quality and availability of sexual and reproductive health care for all women, while making special efforts to safeguard the rights of women who are marginalized and consequently suffer worse health outcomes than the general population.
- **Promoting the use of gender-responsive budgets:** Parliamentarians should promote the use of gender-responsive budgets (GRB), which help ensure a gender-equitable distribution of resources. While GRB is important at all times, it is particularly critical during the development of pandemic response and recovery plans, including the allocation of stimulus and emergency funding.

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For its part, the Secretariat should implement concrete measures to ensure a diversity of women's voice are incorporated in the OSCE PA's work during and after the pandemic. Examples of possible measures are outlined below. Some of which are based on the recommendations I sent to the Secretary General on 10 December 2019, but adapted to the pandemic context. Among other measures, the Secretariat should:

- Apply gender and intersectional lenses, in collaboration with the Bureau and Special Representatives, in the delivery of all activities related to COVID-19 and beyond, including in the development of meeting topics and agendas and the drafting of reports and other informational documents.
- Ensure that the voices of civil society are heard in OSCE PA activities related to COVID-19.
- Encourage participating States to consider the gender ratio of their delegations for future web dialogues and meetings; where gender parity cannot be achieved, delegations should comprise at least 35% women. I would be happy to draft and co-sign a letter to delegations to this effect.
- Integrate gender analysis into the preparation of web dialogues and similar events and include gender analysis in the documentation provided to parliamentarians before OSCE PA events.
- Continuing to integrate a gender lens in the Secretariat's staffing policy, with the objective of achieving gender parity among staff and ensuring that women have access to leadership opportunities.
- Increase efforts to incorporate gender and intersectional lenses to OSCE PA staffing policies.
- Take proactive steps to ensure OSCE PA communications reflect the contributions of female delegates. While the assembly membership is not gender equal, we can nonetheless improve how we represent the engagement of men and women in our assembly.
- Continue to appoint women parliamentarians to leadership roles in electoral observations missions, as special representatives and to other similar positions.

To conclude, I urge all parliamentarians and the OSCE PA to take the above recommendations into serious consideration as we continue to respond to the current crisis. Women have made remarkable gains during the past several decades; I am particularly conscious of these gains when I think back to my time attending the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, where a group of diverse women produced a progressive blueprint for advancing women's rights. On the monumental occasion of the 25th anniversary of this Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, it is incumbent upon all of us to remember and honour the important commitments made in Beijing to uphold gender equality and empower all women.

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As always, I thank you for your support for the promotion of gender equality throughout the work of the OSCE PA.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hedy Fry', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Hon. Hedy Fry, PC, MP
Director, OSCE PA