

OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum: UK opening statement

Thank you Ambassador Funered, and to Her Excellency Foreign Minister Linde, His Excellency Minister Kulhánek, and Secretary General Schmid for your opening remarks. It is a privilege to be here in Prague and I welcome our continued discussion on these important topics, looking forward to making progress towards agreeing Ministerial Council deliverables for commitment later this year.

Over the course of the year the Forum has highlighted the challenges women face compared to men in fulfilling their economic potential – legally restricted from having the same choice of jobs; less likely than men to participate in the labour market; and limited access to finance and business support.

Women have also been at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19. Scientists, healthcare workers and carers have been working tirelessly to keep people safe; and teachers have done a tremendous job in adapting quickly and skilfully to ensure that our children continue to be educated. But the effects of the pandemic have disproportionately affected women and girls, worsening many of the challenges they already faced.

We therefore welcome the opportunity to discuss how we may take the opportunity to recover from the pandemic in a more inclusive way. The backsliding we have seen on gender equality during the pandemic is a cause for great concern. We must now look ahead to a recovery which benefits, and indeed is driven by, women and girls around the world.

This sustainable economic development cannot be achieved unless due attention is also paid to the environment that surrounds it. As we look to the future, we must ensure that inclusion is placed front and centre in our efforts to tackle climate change. In November we will host an inclusive COP26 that will advance gender-responsive climate action and finance. We will amplify the voices of women and girls, including those that are most marginalised, ensuring that their expertise and experiences as decision-makers, advocates and leaders is acknowledged and acted upon.

Here, I am looking forward to what I hope will be a practical discussion on how we can advance this agenda through policy. In our experience, tools like gender budgeting initiatives and data disaggregates can improve women's empowerment by focusing on the key economic and social matters that are often overlooked or obscured in conventional policy analysis and decision making. I look forward to hearing others' experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also forced all of us to rely more than ever on our digital devices for every aspect of our lives, and the increasingly-important cyber and digital sectors' workforces are not diverse. In the UK, only 15 per cent of the cyber sector workforce is female, as is only 28 per cent of the

wider digital sector. Improving diversity and inclusion is therefore a crucial element to the cyber and digital sectors' ability to address the skills gap and ensure that the digital transformation is accessible and provides equal opportunities for all.

Finally, education facilitates the success of girls and should encourage them to dream bigger than the generations who have come before. This is where we sow the seeds for women leaders and decision-makers.

Equal access to education and training is one way that we may be able to tackle injustices like the gender pay gap, key to building economies that work for everyone and ensuring the equitable future of work.

In the UK, it is encouraging that the national gender pay gap is at a record low. However, to close the gap entirely we are requiring large employers across all sectors to publish the differences between what they pay their male and female staff in salaries and bonuses. Transparency is key to addressing the gender gap because it exposes the barriers women face in the workplace and motivates employers to take action, which will help to accelerate change.

Madam Ambassador,

If our collective societies' prosperity is to be maximised, and therefore act as effectively as possible against the threat of instability and conflict, it is right that we focus our attention on these important topics. Beyond the gains for economic growth, gender equality can reduce poverty and foster a more equitable distribution of income – all elements that can prevent conflict.

Once again, we welcome and thank the Swedish chairpersonship for making this topic the focus of this year's Economic and Environmental Forum, and pledge our constructive support as we seek to strengthen our common efforts on this issue.

Thank you.