

Remarks by EU Special Representative, Amb. Patricia Flor

at

"Women in Modern Central Asia"

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Women's role in building the future of Central Asia

Madame President, Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and privilege to be here today at the First International Conference on "Women in Modern Central Asia" and I would like to thank you for the invitation. I believe that this conference offers a unique opportunity to reflect on challenges and opportunities that women in Central Asia are facing and I am looking forward to the exchange between scholars and practitioners on topics evolving around gender in Central Asia. I am sure that the keynotes and especially of course our special guest her Excellency, the former President of Kyrgyzstan, Roza Otunbayeva, will give you some food-for-thought for the working group sessions in the afternoon.

I have given the title "Women's role in building the future of Central Asia" to my speech today. I am happy to speak on a topic that is so very close to my heart. During all my postings I have always promoted the cause of women and as EUSR for Central Asia I am delighted to also encourage women in Central Asia to speak out and fight for their cause. Of course, women in Central Asia largely share the challenges faced by their sisters elsewhere on the planet.

From 1998-2000 when I was the Chairperson of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) also participating at the "UN General Assembly Special Session (Beijing +5): Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century", we debated during many nights and negotiations how to promote the advancement of women and gender equality. Issues such as gender based discrimination, violence against women and poverty were seen as among the major obstacles to gender equality worldwide. Globalisation has created additional challenges for the implementation of the UN convention on women's rights, such as trafficking in women and girls, labour migration and increased risk of sexual exploitation. Despite some progress over the last two decades, discrimination against women in many parts of the world, including in Central Asia, persists. Such discrimination "violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity", as "The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women" (CEDAW), article 3 outlines. Therefore it is a human right issue of first order and for

governments it is an obligation under international law to eliminate discrimination. Let me also acknowledge before I concentrate on Central Asia, that inequality and gender-based violence continue to be an issue also in the EU countries. So these are the problems that meet us everywhere.

1. General situation of women in Central Asia

Looking retrospectively at Central Asia's historic context, the disintegration of the USSR and the transition to newly independent Central Asian states has resulted in a continuous change of Central Asian societies, offering opportunities as well as challenges for men and women alike.

While the Soviet Union can be seen as a modernising force in the lives of women, offering for instance education and participation in economic life to them, it is not clear where current developments lead. Women play a crucial role in maintaining the fabric of Central Asian societies; on the other hand they come under increasing pressure. Some changes are connected to the advance of so-called national traditions and Islamism, to a decrease in women's status in society and in some regions the decline in the socio-economic level in general. In addition, the post-Soviet transition, in Central Asian countries, has contributed to a degradation of public services in education, healthcare, pensions and social benefits; conditions that have had a significant influence on the situation and rights of women and young girls.

Generally, and this is to be welcomed, the five Central Asian states are officially committed to the protection and promotion of women's rights and the "Millennium Development Goals on Gender Equality". All Central Asian countries ratified the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women" (CEDAW 1979): Tajikistan in 1993, Uzbekistan in 1995, Turkmenistan in 1997, Kyrgyzstan in 1997, and Kazakhstan in 1998 outlined national strategies for gender equality. However, the actual implementation of the conventions and other laws, aimed at protecting women leaves much room for improvement. The gap between laws and reality remains by far too wide.

This gap is especially wide in rural areas. Of the around 63 million people of Central Asia a large portion lives in villages, there is also an increasing de-urbanisation especially in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Life in rural areas today is much more difficult for women than for men: not only is it more demanding to either work or find work in rural areas, traditional gender roles are also more strictly maintained and for women there is less access to help when they become victims of violence. Because of migration, women now often carry the double burden of raising children and providing sustainable income alone.

2. Violence against women

In Tajikistan, sexual violence, committed by armed groups during the civil war against Pamiri women has left a generation traumatised ("The advocates for human rights" report, 2008) and fears were revived during the latest July events in Khorog, Gorno-Badakhshan region (registan.net, 27.07.2012). Factors such as civil war, economic crises, impact of migration, discourse on patriarchy as a component of national identity, collapse of health and education systems are among the explanations of the increase in violence against women.

Violence is also an issue in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The process of transition and the struggle for national identity has influenced the increase in ethnic related violence in Kyrgyzstan, notably during the June 2010 events. Experiences of women in Osh and Jalalabad during the conflict were documented by the Kyrgyzstan's Inquiry Commission (KIC) in 2011. The KIC report stressed that violated women were even too scared to seek help from state healthcare bodies during the conflict.

The U.S. Department of States' "2011 Human Rights Report", notes that domestic violence, including physical, psychological, sexual, economic harassment and bride kidnapping (especially in rural areas) is also a problem in Kazakhstan. Legal and social options available to victims are limited.

In many cases, economic dependence on the perpetrators of violence limits victims' ability to follow through with criminal complaints, and police often take an attitude that domestic violence is a "family matter" unworthy of intervention except in extreme cases. ("The Advocates for Human Rights, 2011").

Non-consensual bride abductions and early and forced marriages of adolescent girls are additional examples of violation of women's rights in the region. According to a UN report ("Forced and early marriages: a focus on Central Asia and Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union countries with selected laws from other countries", 2009), an unbelievable 60-80 % of all marriages in Kyrgyzstan involve bride kidnapping.

The United Nations "Human Development Report" in 2009 includes Turkmenistan in the category of countries in which "there are no or weak laws against domestic violence, rape, and marital rape, and these laws are not generally enforced. Honour killings may occur and are either ignored or generally accepted."

Domestic and sexual violence, especially committed by a member of the family is still mostly seen as a taboo in Uzbekistan. Family members or elders within the *mahallah* (in Uzbekistan) usually handle such cases with unknown results. Cases are rarely brought to court, also because there is no specific law on domestic violence.

Incidences of early forced marriages and teenage bride kidnapping in Central Asia continue to grow, jeopardising teenage girls' life, health, psychological and social development. The World Health Organization gathered evidence on the detrimental health and social effects on girls' and young women by early and forced marriages.

Women victims of violence have limited access to justice, due to limited administrative and professional capacity of police and judicial system and lack of knowledge among the women about their rights. Pressure from the family and the conception of violence as a "private" issue by the law enforcement authorities, as well as endemic corruption worsen the situation of women victims.

Cultural traditions often also discourage victims from filing complaints to the authorities. Besides, the often dysfunctional justice system of Central Asian countries makes it generally unlikely to reach a fair verdict. Consequently, a number of young women resort to desperate actions, they either kill their torturers or more often commit suicide.

3. Labour Migrants

A difficult economic situation, high unemployment rates, poor infrastructural changes and the decrease of social services are considered as main factors which drive both men and women to labour migration. The main flow of migration from Central Asia goes to Russia, 85% in the case of migrants from Tajikistan, 70% of migrants from Uzbekistan and 60% from Kyrgyzstan. The migration phenomenon takes an additional toll on the women left behind.

The number of divorces in Central Asia is growing every year, especially in families where the spouse has migrated. Migration starts to have a negative impact on family values. In addition, women feel pressure from men who stayed behind. Taking advantage of the social vulnerability of women men often exercise sexual violence, leading to additional serious problems for abandoned children in the Central Asian counties. As a further negative result of being left alone, women lose their social status, come more and more under pressure from society; abandoned wives of migrants often feel socially and economically isolated. This aggravates already existing feelings of loneliness and despair and leads to more suicides every year.

4. The role of women in building the future of Central Asia

The overall picture, seen from a human rights perspective is therefore a bleak one. But our focus today is not one on women as victims.

Women in Central Asia also display the most extraordinary strength and resilience in conflict and crisis. They hold the social fabric together when other ties fray and have demonstrated a particular talent as peace builders.

We have seen examples in Kyrgyzstan during the June 2010 events and during the latest events in Khorog, Gorno-Badakhshan region: women played a decisive role during both events; they acted as peace negotiators, they took up positions of responsibility to restore order and to take care of the wounded and dead. Women became a leading factor to act and maintain the community up and running during these conflicts, (Women Peace Network, 2011; Zuhra Halimov, Open Society Tajikistan, 22.09.2012).

My latest visit to Tajikistan in July coincided with Khorog events. I visited Darwas, a village on the Tajik-Afghan border in Gorno-Badakhshan region. The women there demonstrated engagement, readiness and a strong wish to decide and change their own future. In fact, they are now managing village life and even agriculture on their own while many men are absent.

These are inspiring examples, and we can doubtless speak of many others. But too often women's potential as peacemakers, as mediators, as re-builders of communities, is not valued and utilised enough.

Humankind loses a lot, if the female half of the population is not empowered to play their part in building society. The challenges to human security cannot be tackled without the contribution women make.

It is important to note that through continued efforts, women in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have managed to ensure their representation in State and governmental institutions: as the only country in the region, Kyrgyzstan had a female president, who ensured a peaceful and democratic transfer of power; and we are especially honoured today to have Roza Otunbaeva with us. Women hold important political positions in Kazakhstan (Minister of Health, Kairbekova Salidat and the Minister of Economic Integration, Zhanar Aitzhanova) and Uzbekistan (Minister of Economy, Galina Karimovna); as well as in Turkmenistan - the Speaker of the Parliament (Akdzha Nurberdyeva), just to mention a few. But we must also say that the numbers compared to the positions held by men are still too few.

Despite this progress, best intentions and efforts, we are too far away from our objectives, commitments made have not yet been fulfilled.

Women of Central Asia will need to continue to fight for their rights. They have to continue working on continuous transformation of the societies, they have to lead the way towards the future they believe in. It is a long and difficult road and the journey towards human rights and gender equality is far from completed. It is a battle that must be fought every day, with every law, in every school, at every election.

Gender equality is also about empowerment, democracy, economic development and social justice. We all know about the talent and wisdom that is wasted when a society refuses to break with inequality. It is a tragedy for the individual and a loss for society. Everyone, all women in Central Asia and elsewhere should have the chance to fulfill their potential, should have the opportunity to contribute to the life of their society and to the future of their country.

The women of Central Asia are part of the transformation process and we need women to believe in themselves, to be convinced that they can get involved in building prosperity and democracy. Discrimination should have no place in the new country that you build.

There is a need for strong civil society institutions that focus on gender equality and women's rights. An active and independent civil society is a key component of any vibrant, democratic society and from my experience women play an essential part in civil society today in Central Asia. Women NGOs have proven to be the most active private organizations, as a result of the challenges women had to face during the transition period after the fall of the Soviet Union. Let me give you some examples:

Since 1990s "The Forum of Women's NGO of Kyrgyzstan (FWNGO) and the "League of Women Lawyers of Tajikistan" contribute to the democratization of the society and protection of human rights, by increasing monitoring skills among the women's NGOs in the area of violence against women, by organizing capacity development, by combating resistance to women's political participation and by providing judicial training for younger females.

In Uzbekistan over 120 women's NGOs have registered with the justice organs in 2009 (Ministry of Justice of Uzbekistan). "The National Association of Uzbekistan's NGOs" undertook a sociological survey in 2007 on "State of the field, problems and needs of the members of Association of Uzbekistan's NGOs". It revealed that women constituted the majority of those who were involved in NGOs.

"The Association of Business Women of Kazakhstan", can be mentioned as another example of a dynamic association, aimed to bring women active within business, politics, science, education, health, culture together, in order to make common efforts for a better future.

However, only comprehensive actions and solutions will make a difference and in that, education is essential. Governments across Central Asia must take proactive measures to promote education for girls and women participation in politics, public life and business.

Education is the critical first step. Many of you here are representatives of your country; you are scholars, activists and professionals and you are well positioned to educate women on their rights. In addition, there is a need to support business training for women to make sure that women can find independent livelihoods, that abandoned wives of migrant workers and talented young female entrepreneurs are given a chance, that women's economic empowerment becomes an important part of building their future.

"The World Development Report for 2012 on Gender Equality and Development" makes a convincing argument for "smart economics". Let me explain it very shortly:

Countries that create better opportunities for women and girls tend to raise productivity. Send a girl to school, boost the economy; the gross domestic product per capita and gender equality are positively correlated. As for productivity, output per worker would rise by up to 25% in many countries if barriers were removed that prevent women from working in certain occupations or sectors. This is smart economy. And this is a call upon governments to empower women in order to stimulate economic growth and development.

Last but not least

5. EU engagement and gender equality promotion

Let me stress that the European Union is with you on this journey. To try and help overcome the political and social barriers, to help ensure your role in shaping your future.

Support for human rights, for women's rights is key in everything the EU does but it is even more so in EU cooperation with countries in transition. The EU mainstreams gender in all programmes. EU programmes help to promote women's participation in political life, they give legal support to victims of violence; they help women in remote areas to learn more about their rights and they promote access to education, social security and healthcare.

Let me give you some practical ideas of what we are doing and set out what plans we have for the future:

As part of the implementation of the EU-Central Asia Strategy, the EU pays particular attention to the issue of human rights and the objective of gender equality and women empowerment. During the annual human rights dialogues with all five Central Asian countries, the rights of women are one of the main topics for the dialogue.

The EU pursues a twin-track approach on gender equality in development cooperation: It takes measures specifically designed to tackle gender inequalities; more widely, it aims to incorporate gender issues into all aspects of development policy ("mainstreaming").

In June, 2010 the EU Council endorsed our "Plan of Action on Gender Equality in Development Co-operation." That will ensure that gender equality is mainstreamed throughout the EU's work with partner countries – at all levels. We build on best practice and the experience we have from the work that we have done in countries around the world.

Let me give you a few examples of the EU support to gender equality and gender empowerment in Central Asia:

During the period of 2009-2011 the EU provided support for women and young entrepreneurs in remote districts of Uzbekistan (Surkhandarya and Djizzak regions). The goal was to promote entrepreneurship among women and youth, to contribute to job creation and thus reduce poverty among women.

During 2011-2012 the European Union supports the programme, "Women Connect across Conflicts: Building Accountability for Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888, 1889" in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The aim of the programme is to increase the capacity of women's human rights activists and their networks to effectively influence, and mobilize for dialogues on security and peace issues.

In 2011 the EU allocated EUR 6.500.000 mio. to the programme "Increasing Accountability in Financing for Gender Equality (FfGE) – EU/UN Partnership on Gender Equality" (2011-2015) in several countries, including Kyrgyzstan. The overall aim of the programme is to increase the volume and effective use of aid and domestic resources to implement national commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment. EU Delegations will also strengthen efforts to

mainstream gender equality in the programming cycle, including through technical capacity building.

Of course, there is still a lot to be desired, for instance regarding the representation of women in political life, especially in decision-making positions. That is where we, as women whose voices count, have a role to play. We must rise to the challenge and push for change.

I see many brilliant women in this room today who are full of ideas on how we can address these issues and I am looking forward to a stimulating and productive day ahead. Let us not forget the burden of responsibility we hold – to give voice to those who would otherwise be voiceless, to give power to those who would otherwise be powerless, and to protect those who would otherwise be without protection.

And for once we have gender on our side – after all, as one of the EU's first female Prime Ministers said, "*If you want anything said, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman.*" (Margaret Thatcher)

I wish you a successful conference and thank you for your attention.