

**United Nations Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-seventh session
4 - 15 March 2013
New York**

INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

on

**"Elimination and Prevention of all Forms of Violence Against
Women and Girls"**

Tuesday, 5 March 2013 from 3:00pm to 6:00pm

Focus: Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls

**Addressing gender inequality and discrimination to prevent violence
against women and girls**

by

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Estonia is a very small peaceful country of 1, 2 million people in the North-Eastern corner of Europe, in fact just a week ago we celebrated the 95th anniversary of the Estonian Republic. Gender equality and women's rights are priority areas in Estonian human rights related foreign policy. As the newly elected member of the Human Rights Council Estonia will continue to promote the full implementation of the *Beijing Platform of Action* and the principles of the *International Conference on Population and Development*. As a strong supporter of the rights based approach, we remain committed to the principle of equality between women and men as a fundamental right. This principle has its roots in our constitution, dating from 1920, whereas the right to participate in elections was granted to women already in 1918. Estonia continues to actively advocate the incorporation of the gender dimension into all UN activities, so that our pledges for gender equality would become a reality. Estonia continues to support the full and comprehensive implementation of the Security Council resolution 1325 on "Women, Peace and Security". It follows our realization that sustainable peace and development are not possible without the inclusion of women. Also, Estonia's voluntary contributions through UN funds and programs and bilateral development assistance aim to support the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

However, women's rights are an issue that needs constant attention and awareness rising. The myths that hinder gender equality are still viable and continue to blur our minds. It is hard to see the big picture, it is immensely difficult to recognise how many faces gender inequality has and how much it affects the whole society. Violence against women is one manifestation of gender inequality, and even if we deny that, it is obvious that this condemned phenomenon affects the whole society. Even more, the whole world.

I would like to point out some of the root causes of violence against women and girls and illustrate them with Estonian examples.

The factors that contribute to gender-based violence include:

- insufficient understanding of the importance of gender equality
- attitudes in Estonian society favoring and justifying violence
- attitudes in Estonian society favoring women's economic dependence on men
- the continual spreading of myths in society about violence, perpetrators and victims
- insufficient support and aid for women who have experienced violence etc

Insufficient understanding of the importance of gender equality

When you are working in the institution dealing with gender equality, it is not the easiest job in the world. You all probably know it. In Estonian context, it is a subject that is often ridiculed. And social problems that are so evident in our society, are not seen as problems stemming from gender inequality. Moreover, my experience shows that surprisingly it is the women themselves who are frequently the ones that protest boisterously against gender equality.

An example from very recent discussion in Facebook:

Woman: "If a man has no mammoth to hunt or war to fight, let him run the parish. And let women stay women, give birth and raise children, and take care of men."

Woman: "I think that every woman dreams of man who is making all decisions for her!"

This is definitely a question of education as well as the question of logical thinking. Stereotypical gender roles are slow to change.

Attitudes in Estonian society favoring and justifying violence

It is a disgrace that people still justify violence against women and girls. Furthermore, also the victims of violence do it! Victims themselves try to believe that their partners are better persons than it seems. Victims are praising their partners where possible. They argue that 'he is not so bad', 'actually he is not so cruel', 'he is very nice when he is abstinent', 'in spite of the alcohol problem, he is hard-working, 'he is very clever in his work', 'he is a good grandfather', 'talented specialist in his field' etc.

Women-victims justify violence by assuming responsibility on themselves. Here is one example:

„But I was unable to run away from my responsibilities. If I have taken on a mission then I should perform. I wanted to make it work. And maybe my mission is to educate him to live in a different way, to explain the violence and to make causes of this violence visible him and to deal with this violence and to stabilize him. To lead him back to normal. I feel that this is my life goal and I should try hard /---/ to carry this hard load like a horse, this is my life goal. And I went back. I went several times back again. I tried to be more modest and not to irritate him“

There is no excuse for violence and justifying this phenomenon is unacceptable!

Attitudes in the Estonian society tend to favor women's economic dependence on men

Although Estonian women are generally active in the labor market, employment rate among women with young children is considerably lower than among men with young children. In 2010 employment rate of women with children under 6 years of age, was 52% (men 83%). The employment gap is much bigger among women and men with children aged 0-2 years (women 30%, men 91%).

Since Estonia's population is only 1,2 million people, our country has a generous child care leave for 3 years (1,5 years of which is fully paid). Yet, there is lack of flexible and affordable high-quality daycare for children, especially younger than three years of age, which strongly hinders women's return to labor market. If women do not participate in the labor market, economic dependency grows, which is one of the factors that increases the risk of becoming a victim of violence. Studies show that the rate of violence is higher among women with young children. The large gender pay gap (2011 22,9%) further increases women's economic dependence on men. In Estonia the average gross salary per month in 2010 was 932 euros for men and 708 euros for women, which roughly means 567 euros net salary for women per month. And there are also women who are in a relationship and get children and never have their own income. And as for the women who do leave – more than 90% of single parents in Estonia are women. In a single parent's case housing costs, fixed expenses and their children's needs take all their income. Many women are up against the fact that they get no alimony from the fathers of their children. Many Estonian women who are already in violent relationship say, that they cannot leave, because they can't make it on their own financially.

It should be noted that the lower than average earnings of women are a danger for social sustainability – poverty of women is closely linked to poverty of children. Children, in turn, are future members of the society and employees, and if they grow up in homes with scanty resources, this will have a direct impact on the future of society.

The continual spreading of myths in society about violence, perpetrators and victims

Unfortunately the myths that diminish the problem of gender violence are still viable. And there are sadly lots of people who run away from this unpleasant topic, and have the logic: “It is not my problem so the problem does not exist”. I have encountered even high-level politicians who hold that view. These kind of beliefs are very dangerous, because attitudes in society towards violence are of crucial importance in fighting against gender violence:

*I don't know anyone who is a victim of domestic violence, so it is a fabricated problem.
Men are more violent, raging and wild anyway....
All what is taking place at home, has to remain at home...*

A 2009 survey of victims indicated that the majority of victims of violence never tell anyone and never seek help. They are also unaware of their options of getting help. It is necessary to expose the roots of violence against women and the magnitude of the problem, to encourage victims and persons close to them to seek help and inform the public about the existing support systems, which serve the battered women and their children. Fortunately, we have already seen a positive shift in attitudes – for example, police generally understands the nature of the problem and reacts adequately. Calling the police is used more than some decades ago. As one of the victims put it:

Attitudes have changed a lot. The world has expanded also to the police.

Estonian positive transformations towards gender equality

In order to enable women to play an active role in development, it is of utmost importance to protect and promote the rights of women and create the necessary conditions for their involvement in decision making processes. That includes women's reproductive health and rights, including access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, family planning, as well as access to education, political power and financial assets.

Estonia started work on gender equality in 1996 and more specifically on violence against women in 2001. In 2001 we conducted our first study on domestic violence and in 2002 first campaign against trafficking in women was launched. The findings were shocking and the eyes of Estonians were torn open. We have taken a lot of actions towards gender equality. I would like to point out few in my speech.

Awareness raising activities and development of services for victims

An important goal for us has been to increase awareness about gender equality and violence against women and girls. We are thankful to our neighbouring Nordic countries that have helped us to carry out these activities.

In addition to awareness-raising activities, Estonia has developed services for victims of violence. We have 10 shelters for women that are operated by NGOs and who provide counselling (psychological, legal, social etc). We have hotline services both for victims of

trafficking as well as domestic violence, we have a rehabilitation centre for women in prostitution and shelters and counselling centres for victims of trafficking. I am pleased to note that victim support services are provided in every county of Estonia. We have 26 national victim support specialists all around Estonia who coordinate victim support. Most of the regional victim support officials work in local police units and therefore the police participates actively in the system. Victim Support Act enacts victim support services and the respective benefits paid. The aim of victim support services is to enable or improve the ability to cope of those who have been neglected, mistreated or suffered physical, mental or sexual abuse. The victims are counselled and helped how to communicate with the state, local governments and legal persons. Victims and their dependents are paid state amends. We conduct trainings for police, social workers, child-care workers, teachers etc, on regular basis.

During the years 2013-2015 Estonia will improve the quality of services, raise awareness of the issues via public awareness campaigns, carry out close studies to map the situation and provide analysis for future actions.

Estonia is a very internet-friendly country, Freedom House ranks Estonia as the world's number one for Freedom of the net. Freedom of expression is a backbone of a democratic society and we can say that an internet connection is a human right for Estonians. Of course, this holds many dangers. Therefore we have now three web police constables who are making internet safer for us. One of the constables is Russian-speaking.

Legal and policy reforms to address gender inequality and discrimination

Estonia is a democratic country and the respect for human rights is of utmost importance. The most effective measure to promote equality is formal guarantees of equal rights, i.e., equality of women and men before the law. This has been achieved in Estonia, for the most part. There are three main national instruments to guarantee gender equality: the Constitution, the Gender Equality Act, and the Equal Treatment Act. As a member of the European Union and other international organisations Estonia is firmly committed to equality of women and men.

The Gender Equality Act was adopted in 2004. In 2010 Estonian government adopted a Development Plan for Reducing Violence for Years 2010–2014, which includes both domestic violence and trafficking in human beings. The development plan foresees a number of actions, including raising awareness, regular mapping of nature and scope of domestic violence and trafficking in women; development of services for victims and training specialists working with both victims and abusers. Improvements in legislation also include the application of a restraining order under the new 2006 Code of Civil Procedure and the Code of Criminal Procedure.

The most recent was the 2012 amendment to the Penal Code, which added trafficking in human beings as separate crime.

All changes in legislation have been very strongly supported by our NGOs. Women's organisations have been active and sometimes necessarily critical partners to government. We are appreciating their efforts and co-operation highly.

Role and responsibilities of government in preventing violence against women and girls

Estonia firmly believes that greater focus should be placed on the role of men and boys in prevention of violence. To draw more men and boys into actions to stop violence. Media could play an important part to influence the change of attitudes. Awareness-raising can be seen as the most effective preventive measure: it can influence public attitudes and stereotypes, as well as contribute to the shaping of more respectful and non-violent behaviour among young generation, in particular among young men. Special attention must be paid to familiarising women with their legal rights in order to provide them with the means to stop violence at an early stage. Specific programmes directed towards violent men should be drawn up and the patterns of behaviour of men should be dealt with.

It is necessary to deal both with the victims and also raise awareness to avoid victims in the future. Estonian government has taken responsibility for taking measures to ensure that the people working with victims are well trained, and more capable of detecting, preventing and dealing with the complex issue of domestic violence, and also that high-quality support services are available to all victims who need them.

Conclusion

Gender inequality is not perceived as an acute problem in Estonian society and the level of knowledge about gender equality is significantly lower than in our neighbouring Nordic countries. There is ample room for development in terms of raising awareness of the equality and inequality between women and men. The current situation, where inequality is not perceived as a matter of concern, does certainly not mean that inequality of women and men is not a real problem in our society. Quite the opposite: inequality of men and women is linked with many important social problems, which could have serious and expensive consequences for the entire society. The fact that inequality of women and men is hidden and unacknowledged only perpetuates this situation, because people see no need or reason to interfere.

Estonia is a very small country. Therefore, we cannot afford to waste any human resources. Every person should be of value. Every person's potential should be used. We all are responsible for tackling gender inequality and violence against women and children. And it is always easier and less costly to intervene earlier – before someone has become a victim or has experienced discrimination.

To fight violence against women and girls, to achieve gender equality – the first thing we have to be, is brave. We have to be brave and open our eyes – we have to look at the whole picture. We have to admit, that if we tolerate even one of the many manifestations of gender inequality – then it means, that we tolerate all of them. We have to take responsibility for our own actions, we have to be empowered to make our own decisions. This is what will change the world!

I will end my presentation with a short video that demonstrates one Estonian example of changing the future world – it is a video about girls who participated in empowerment training – a good example of primary prevention.

Thank you for your attention and please, enjoy the video!