

Estonian women's organizations' statement to the CEDAW Committee

Madame Chair, distinguished Committee members.

My name is Eha Reitelmann.

As the representative of the Estonian Women's Associations Roundtable, which consists of almost 170 different women's groups, I would like to mention here some of the critical issues we believe need to be addressed by Estonia in order to comply with CEDAW convention:

First: the weak institutional mechanisms and lack of political will to implement principles of equality between women and men.

In 2004, it seemed to the women's organizations that a strong foundation had been laid for the protection of women's human rights and the jettisoning of Estonia's patriarchal culture by the passage of the gender equality law, the increase of duties for the Chancellor of Justice, and the establishment of the Gender Equality Commissioner's office. Unfortunately, the ensuing developments have not brought the anticipated results.

While the gender equality law, adopted in 2004, required all national and local governmental agencies, employers and educational institutions to advance gender equality, there is no statute that gives anybody authority to check if the law is being implemented. **Hence, our experience has been that the gender equality law is being ignored.**

The failure to implement the law starts at the highest level. To date, the Ministry of Social Affairs lacks a Council of Gender Equality whose responsibility it to set the general direction for gender equality policies and to advise the government on a strategy for the advancement of gender equality.

A significant reason why gender mainstreaming has not progressed in Estonia is, in our opinion, the incompetence of the officials and the politicians in this area.

Although a number of national and local officials and politicians have received training over the past years, the problem lies in the fact that officials and politicians are constantly changing jobs and, as a result, progress in the area of gender equality practically does not occur.

The Gender Equality Law requires that laws be analyzed to assess their gender impact. This should be conducted by the Gender Equality Commissioner and the Gender Equality Department of the Ministry of Social Affairs. The officials do not have funds nor the personnel to conduct this analysis and hence it remains undone. Such analysis is critical in order to raise public awareness, based on data, about stereotypical thinking.

The government will claim that progress is being made by pointing to specific projects. However, a project by project approach can not replace a comprehensive, sustainable approach to achieving gender equality.

The progress on gender equality that was achieved toward the end of the 20th century and the beginning of this one, largely thanks to the pressure applied by international organizations and the funding by foreign countries, has been stopped and in some cases, the women's organizations have the impressions that we are going backwards in Estonia and that some institutions are being destroyed.

Thus, this spring the coordination of family policies was assigned to the Gender Equality Department of the Ministry of Social Affairs. The public is sent the message that gender equality is not important enough to have a separate institution, including clearly differentiated policies and measures.

Three years ago, women fought for and won a Gender Equality Commissioner. This important development is now being threatened by a legislative proposal that would add to the office of the commissioner discrimination all other groups like ethnic minorities, religious groups, the disabled, different sexual orientation, and the aged. In the past years Gender Equality Commissioner has dealt with issues facing women in minority groups.

It is our concern, however, that the proposal will further marginalize women's issues.

Second: the employment situation.

Women's wages are about 75% of men's, the labor market is clearly segregated, and many problems exist for women with combining of work and family life. Among European countries, Estonia has one of the highest percentages of women working, and we also lead in the category of largest wage difference between women and men. At the same time, women are expected to give birth to more than one or two children in order to prevent a demographic decline.

For the achievement of the latter, parental benefits are paid per child up to 18 months and mostly women take this benefits. Currently, there is discussion about extending the period of parental benefits payments, which would bring a break in a woman's career if sufficiently flexible systems are not provided and if the father is not brought significantly into the realm of childrearing. It would mean going backwards in the area of equality between women and men.

The Estonian government's report and answers to the Committee's questions show that the government lacks a program for the solution of the problems. In the opinion of the women's organizations this is clearly related to institutional weakness, because it is not possible to resolve such challenging tasks by projects alone.

Third: gender stereotypes and their continuation in the educational system (and this is of much concern to us).

Estonian educational system constantly re-produces gender stereotypes. Estonian educators have not received gender equality and human rights based education or supplementary training, and as a result they do not know how to introduce the subject to the students. In the general curriculum, the subject practically does not exist, and in the proposed draft curriculum, which was presented to the public for comments, the topic was included marginally.

We think the problem is due to the competence of curriculum and school textbooks compilers and their attitudes, but mostly due to the lack of a system which would require educational officials to carry out the responsibilities assigned to them by gender equality law.

Estonian women's organizations are concerned about the implementation of gender equality laws in the country. *We have constantly presented to the government our positions and proposals in the areas that we consider important and we plan to continue doing same in the future.*

Yet, we ask the CEDAW Committee to encourage the government of Estonia to comply with all requirements that the state has adopted by international agreements in the area of eliminating all forms of discrimination against women.