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Lack of gender equality: stubborn gender roles feeding into gender based violence. What to do?

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Conference Gender stereotypes and their influence on equal opportunities and domestic violence - sharing international experience in projects of EEA / Norway Grants held by Open Society Fund Prague

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to this event. It is so timely and adequate – to put forward these questions. I am happy to share some experiences from 'lived policies' with you.

Recently the World Economic Forum (Davos) presented the annual report on the Global Gender Gap, where the Czech Republic scored as number 96 of 142 countries. There sure is something to work on.

It is important to connect the lack of gender equality to prevailing gender stereotypes and gender roles. Gender-based violence must be seen as part of what constitutes gender in-equality, including being a breach of basic human rights.

Conferences like this stimulate the public debate and can – in due time, influence politics and business cultures. Media should be 'fed' properly and continuously, on these matters.

It is obviously still necessary to shed light on women's positions in the families and in work life, and analyse the prevailing gender-based division of labour.

We need to ask about the work-life balance for women, as well as for men. Men's choices and preferences do matter a lot.

We have to address why social expectations to women and men, boys and girls still are so different, and why we still socialize our children into gendered roles.

We need to highlight why media carry traditional (but in appearance, modernised) gendered sexual stereotypes and body images of women and men, to sell all kinds of products (It is too easy to say that "this is what the public wants"). Women and girls are frequently pictured as pray or 'awards'. A young girl is often deemed after the way she looks, more than her merit as a young and able person.

Why do we still, in many countries, address gender equality as a pure women's issue, 'outside' the main areas of politics; as a 'side-task' for special interested persons?

Equality is at the centre of politics; economy and welfare issues. It is about power-sharing. If this is not the fact, then why all this resistance to change something 'unimportant'? Global research has time and again shown the connection between equality and economic growth. UN, EU, OECD and World Economic Forum have all recommended to invest in equality to boost economy.

When will we, together, recognise that boys and men need to be taken on board in the GE project, globally? Asking them about what they want for the future? Do they still want to be locked in traditional

roles? What are the expectations to them regarding boyhood, male-hood and parenthood? Do some of the male-roles or masculinities carry toughness or aggression as means of solving problems in daily life? Ask also men and adolescent boys if they think they have a 'social gender'; you might be in for a surprise: Most have not thought about this. If we do not have the men and boys on board the equality project, we certainly will not succeed. That is why the UN's campaign 'He for She' (against gender based violence) is so needed.

When will we openly agree upon that reaching equality is so difficult, because it has to do with deeply embedded values in our cultures that must be addressed and brought out in the open? Values are not necessarily good or precious just because they are old. Few things age as well as good wine.

To me, equality means freedom for every person, regardless of gender or where ethnic origin, ability/disability, sexual orientation, sexual identity or age, intersect with gender. Freedom to use locked up energy to participate in society, with trust, without fear and with confidence.

I would warn against every type of 'reductionism', where a person is 'shrunk' to appear as 'only' biological sex, the ethnic background, sexual orientation, only his or her disability or age, or being 'just a child'. These are the kind of 'silo'- and dangerous group-stereotypes we have to get rid of. Any person is a rich composite, a melange, of many traits and characteristics: a full person. On the other hand and regrettably, carrying many characteristics perceived as of 'lesser value', can lead to increased and multiple discrimination: for instance an individual combining the female gender and a minority ethnic background. Such intersectional discrimination lies within the discriminator or stems from a given society's prejudices or structures, never in the discriminated person.

The equality project is difficult because it involves numerous value-discussions and the need to scrutinise traditions, beliefs, practises, images and expectations. Technological changes and shifts are much easier to do.

To detect often covered, implicit or even 'unintentional' gender disparities, needs methods and training. That is why it is extremely useful to have the FRA survey on violence against women or The World Economic Forums Global Gender Gap measurements: it cannot be doubted that action is needed from Governments and Parliaments, corporate sector and civil society.

Politicians (and all stakeholders) need to know why situations prevail, why attitudes, gender stereotypes reflected in gender roles are reproduced and carried – in schools, families, media, workplaces and politics. They need to discuss how to deal with such matters, and finally what to do: concrete measures.

I am pretty sure (convinced) that any economy, any culture in any hemisphere, cannot develop as wished and planned for, if all talents, regardless of gender, are not put to use. If we do not harvest the 'profits' from national investment in higher education; if not every grown person is in a formal tax position, gainfully employed with a salary to live on, earning pensions and paying taxes back to the common good: for the society to invest in job-creation and welfare; thus enlarging the economy.

I am sure that disrespect of the female gender and harmful stereotypes (including male stereotypes) contribute to uphold gender based violence: I do not say that it is the only reason, but an important one. We have, in Norway, seen research proving that the more gender equality within the family, the less violence (prof. Oystein Gullvaag Holter)

We know that poverty, substance abuse, psychiatric illness (untreated) and inequality in families (if only one spouse is working and the other is dependent) contribute to gender based violence; psychological and / or physical.

We know that there is, even in the Nordic countries, still a shame to admit violence going on in your close relationship and to report to the police. This is understandable: It is very, very hard to admit that you are victim of violence from your loved one. Or admit that you, as a parent, neglect the happiness of your child or is not able to protect the child from abuse. Some see no point in reporting, since there is no trust in the welfare or policing systems (from the FRA survey on VAW). In the Nordic countries, however, the reporting is going up, and I think we will see high numbers for a while before they decrease.

We must work on de-shaming the reporting of violence. It will take time.

There already exist valuable behavioural and brain research proving that children who are witness to violence or exposed to neglect, abuse, violence or extreme control, can be very damaged as adolescences and adults. Many of the perpetrators were themselves victims as children. Treatment of perpetrators should be a public concern.

To work on de-shaming would mean to encourage persons, from a very young age, to speak openly of violence and harassment, not only to health care workers or the schoolteacher you trust or a relative or friends, but be able to report a criminal act to the police. Teachers, pre-schoolteachers and health care providers must be trained to listen carefully, look for 'signs', establish 'early warning' awareness, as to prevent and give help in time, before serious things happen. Professions must have the duty to report a factual crime to the police.

We need to 'de-shame' asking for help, being a male struggling with aggression or inability to control own aggression, before bad things happen. It is fortunate that in both our countries we have men's organisations with green lines and support, to increase the acceptability for males to ask for help and to encourage partaking in eradication of gender based violence.

Norway has a nationwide treatment of perpetrators in place; to work with boys and men, but also with couples. The Government supports Family Counselling Offices, free of charge, around the country. They employ highly trained personnel to help, design treatment and conduct therapies and reach out to persons before violence happens or help sorting out a grave family situation. My Ministry have tasked these offices with developing alertness for early detection of violence and 'extreme control'. This includes of course also migrant families – often struggling with adapting to new norms and family cultures.

The police must be trained to assess the risks after early warnings, and to take further steps when the incidents are factual.

Norway has a system of family violence coordinators in all police districts and a risk-assessment system within the police force is in place. The judiciary and prosecutors receive training, as well. It seems that all countries need more and stronger sentences for crimes of violence and for the sentences to be published and explained widely.

A family therapist would say: Persons of both genders need to learn to communicate better, not using the 'language' of physical and psychological violence in a relational argument. Young persons must be advised that it is not OK to use the bully language of whore, bitch and homo in the schoolyards.

To eradicate harmful and outdated gender stereotypes, gender equality teaching must be included and integrated in schools. The teachers, including pre-school teachers, need professional training in gender sensitivity. We must conduct campaigns for 'washing' the schoolbooks picturing outdated gender stereotypes and engage with media in how they image men and women. We must engage with producers of on-line-video-games where many youths are involved and quite strong gender stereotyping is taking place.

We need to engage with sports and youth clubs, where young people assemble. In Norway, Denmark and Turkey, famous football-players and their teams acted as ambassadors against gender based violence, in agreements with Governments. Follow suit!

I'm not in favour of curbing the right to free speech, but hate speech that may lead to hate crimes, bullying or harassment, must be taken into the open and addressed properly and very seriously. Editors have vital roles to play. They should be invited to engage in campaigns and awareness raising concerning gender in-equality and violence. Is violence or disrespect of women part of positive family values? I think not. No one would defend that. Such messages should be published and discussed.

Violence, harassment and inequality is totally unproductive, not only for the individual but for society, economy and businesses. The costs of violence are measured in many countries, and they are enormous; harming and hampering the economy.

We need, as mentioned, to review the gender based division of labour, both in homes and in business. We have to address gender based power, and how to share power. Power-sharing is another extremely difficult topic to discuss openly. Many see power as a 'thing' you have, but power is a relation between persons or groups, and it has nothing to do with 'nature'. Where you have power-abuse, you will always see powerlessness and lack of freedom.

Able women, as able persons, should have the equal chance to compete for top jobs – anywhere. They should not get a job because they are born with the female sex, but because they should be seen as able, eligible persons, and not be whisked off – because they are born women (group stereotyping). Nevertheless, there is legal room for moderate or radical affirmative actions (positive discrimination) if one gender historically is in a very disadvantaged position.

Regarding indirect gender discrimination, it is often much stronger, than the open, direct gender based discrimination. Regarding this, some laws in Norway needed to be amended: Asking any person about pregnancy or 'planning to have a family' in a job interview, is now forbidden. It was also necessary to strengthen the law concerning returning from parental leave, as to fight discrimination. Men were also discriminated against, exercising their legal right to parental leave, as fathers. Many took their case to the Ombudsman and disputes were settled. Lessons learned: Women are discriminated against in work life for bearing children and taking parental leave – seen as non-reliable work- force, and men being victims to gender discrimination due to traditional male stereotypes or expectations from the employer, thus breaching fathers' legal rights (The situation is now improving, legislation and enforcement is in place, but we still see reluctance to hire pregnant women.)

The men and fathers should have the chance to come home, to have paid parental leave spending time bonding with their new-borns and older children. The strong Working Environment Act in Norway secures the right to paid leave of absence a certain numbers of days annually, for each parent, to care for sick children. It is gender neutral.

Maybe women have to let go of some 'traditional power' in homes and parenthood. Women do also carry stereotypes of women (and men).

Children should have a chance growing up recognizing that men have an enormous capacity for care, when they are invited to. Children should see for themselves that women and mothers are excellent top managers and ministers, combining work and parenthood.

What I am saying, is that we have to address both genders in all our endeavours.

Real gender equality coming true, requires a comprehensive family policy (including Family Counselling), gender neutral but gender sensitive, with flexibility and freedom of choice. But then you need to have a real choice, not to be 'forced' (from unseen pressure/stereotyping or lack of facilities) to choose either – or: Family or career.

The Norwegian affirmative action legislation on gender balance to elected board of governors of the large and listed companies, has done much for changing traditional roles of what is seen as male and female tasks. It has changed corporate cultures. Women are seen as quite capable of decision-making in the upper echelons of the economy.

We need, in all countries, to connect and cooperate with the Social Partners in work-life, as to make ILO's notion of Decent Work to come through. The mentioned FRA-survey on VAW, shows high frequency of gender based harassment at the work place, and even stalking. So, we have to find the best entry-point for engaging with corporate sector, large enterprises and trade unions to counteract sexism, harassment, and indirect gender discrimination at the work-places. The employers and other parties should be held accountable, since these are matters forbidden by law and not in line with EU fundamental rights, UN-conventions, The Istanbul Convention and other national legislation.

When the World Economic Forum (Davos) says that gender equality, with the present pace, can only be achieved in 2095, I think we cannot afford to wait that long. Our economies cannot, the need for equality and the right to live a life free of violence, cannot.

Congratulations on the making of a National Action Plan against Gender Based Violence here in the Czech Republic.

I am happy that Norwegian experiences can be of inspiration.

Thank you