



Closing speech by Carlien Scheele: Europe needs to care more about care

Dear guests here in Tallinn, online, and across the world,

Thank you for this exciting and very timely conference. Throughout the conference we discussed different angles of care: men's responsibility to care for themselves, care for others and care for the wellbeing and sustainability of societies. These, different forms of care, are at the core of gender equality and a healthy environment. To achieve a gender equal society, we need to understand better how men contribute to gender equality, what is holding men back and where they need support. We need to have honest, at times uncomfortable, discussions on what society expects from men and how we get away from the Man Box – a rigid construct of cultural ideas of male identity - as defined in excellent research done by Promundo.

But what are these rigid constructs? When I say stoicism, whom are you thinking of? When I say 'sweetness' whom are you thinking of then?

It is no secret that these cultural ideas and gender stereotypes persist at all levels of society. I would like to begin with something positive. We know from the special Eurobarometer on gender equality, that 80% of men in the European Union believe that gender equality is important for them personally. This number is a validation for all the work that we are doing and we should be proud of it.

Having said that, we can still see that men are slightly more inflexible when it comes to gender stereotypes than women are. They are especially harsh about themselves. For example, 47% of men still think that the most important role for them is to earn money (41% women think so). While most of women and men agree that it is acceptable for a man to cry, still 12% of men think that is unacceptable to cry. However, there are big variations within the European Union, where respondents in Sweden, Netherlands and Finland almost all agree

that it is acceptable for men to cry, compared to Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania where approximately 65% respondents think so.

The same report shows that most men (81%) and women (86%) in the European Union agree that men would take parental leave to take care of their children, but the reality looks different.

EIGE's work on parental leave shows that some Member States limit access to parental leave. In 2016, in the European Union, 34% of women and 23% of men are not eligible for statutory parental leave. More women than men are ineligible because of the gender differences in labour-market participation. In the EU-28, not working is the main reason for ineligibility for parental leave (78 % of women and 54 % of men). The other most common reasons for ineligibility are various employment conditions, such as length of service (15 % of women and 20 % of men), or self-employment (7 % of women and 26 % of men).

I am very happy to say, being here in Tallinn, that Estonia, together with Sweden, and Finland has one of the most inclusive parental leave scheme in the European Union.

The panel on state policies supporting active fatherhood brought additional food for thought on challenges related to COVID-19. Could there be a transformative change? What has the pandemic taught us so far?

Sadly, in times of crisis and natural disasters there is a documented rise in domestic abuse. Several countries in the European Union registered a jump in domestic violence reports during the COVID crisis. The majority of the victims of domestic abuse are women, but we cannot overlook also male victims of domestic abuse. Despite being less in numbers, also these victims need support. Due to high prevalence, violence against women remains a major challenge for the EU, where men need to step up. However, it is not only about individual men, it is about Member States' policies on gender-based violence. As long as women continue to be harassed and experience violence in their homes, at work, and on the streets, we will never achieve gender equality.

I was particularly happy for the panel focusing on preventing and countering gender-based cyber violence, online hate speech and anti-gender online movements. I am also glad to announce that EIGE will take an in-depth look into anti gender equality narratives that spread

in the European Union. This will help us to better develop fact-based narratives that can be used by different gender equality advocacy groups.

Cyber violence can silence women online and discourage them from taking a prominent role in public life. For example, around 4 in 10 journalists have reported self-censorship following online abuse and according to our research 52% of young women refrain from sharing their opinions online due to the fear of abuse.

Cyber violence has not yet been fully defined or legislated against at EU level.

Sadly, women most frequently face violence in the domestic sphere, with nearly one in four women (22 %) experiencing physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner since the age of 15.

The same is true of the most extreme forms of violence. Although men make up the largest share of homicide victims, women make up the largest share of those killed by an intimate partner or family member.

Yet only a third of women who face violence at the hands of their partner contact authorities, partly due to the pervasive belief that violence is a private matter. Intimate partner violence against women, which is defined as any kind of violence inflicted by a current or former partner, regardless of whether the woman lives with the perpetrator or not, should not be a private matter.

Furthermore, it affects not only women victims, but also children who witness such violence and the EU society as a whole.

As mentioned earlier, the COVID-19 lockdowns saw increased levels of reported domestic abuse incidents.

COVID-19 has had also an enormous impact on gender equality, one that we will experience and try to understand for the years to come. Even without a crisis, caring responsibilities usually fall heavily on women. Before the Covid-19 outbreak, women in the EU spent 13 hours more than men every week on unpaid care and housework.

The COVID crisis has also shown how essential carers are to the well-functioning of society and the economy. During the pandemic, people showed their appreciation for care workers by clapping nightly across the EU. But we must also recognise the value of care work by increasing wages and improving working conditions. These measures could also attract more men to work in the sector – making it more gender-balanced.

I was happy to hear that in the workshop on Men Sharing the Burden of Professional Care Work, there were so many inspiring actions from Europe and beyond, that strive for changing how the society views professional care work.

This conference takes place in Tallinn. The proximity to the sea, combined with low altitudes on the land, is a justified concern when speaking about climate change. Climate change impacts, mitigation, causes and adaptations are not gender neutral. I was very happy to hear in the panel on sustainable societies that gender is in focus of these debates. Climate change, indeed, is another major challenge of our time that is becoming an increasing worry for all of the EU citizens. Gender concerns must be integrated into environmental policies because climate change and responses to climate change impact the daily lives of women and men differently. As EIGE's Beijing Platform for Action +25 report clearly states - tackling climate change requires a gender lens.

Yet, it is also about our everyday actions. We know that women show more concern for the climate and are more likely to adopt eco-friendly behaviour. This, however, can add additional burden to unpaid labour. Men too, as we heard in the panel, are doing their share, but we all need to shape up.

The ones most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change tend to be women. Energy poverty is disproportionately affecting single women (especially older women with low pensions), lone mothers and female headed households.

Unfortunately, women continue to be under-represented in decision making bodies, that deal with environmental policies. Men dominate decision-making positions, with close to 80% of government ministries dealing with environment, climate change, energy and transport being headed by men.

Environmental policies are often blind to the impact they have on the gender division of labour – including care work, the social organisation of human reproduction and health, as well as the accessibility of public goods and services.

Solutions are not difficult to find. New technologies, in particular ICT in the energy and transport sectors, could provide opportunities to lessen gender disparities, if different needs and perspectives of all genders were taken into account at the earliest stage, but technologies only will not save us. They have to come hand in hand with the behavioural change.

Dear Colleagues,

This conference has raised so many crucial topics for gender equality. The messages at the conference were loud and clear – better understanding of issues that men are facing, is needed. This is why, I promise, that I will take this topic up also with our Management Board and other stakeholders, to see how can we address it the best. State commitments to keep men engaged in gender equality policies are needed. We need to ensure that men keep caring for themselves, their loved ones and the environment. Conversations, like these ones at the conference, are the drivers for progress and call for policy-makers in Europe to care more about care. I am looking forward to the next ICMEO conference in two years!

Thank you.