

Dear Minister Jensen, Director Scheele, Ladies and Gentlemen, I warmly welcome you all to the 5th International Conference on Men and Equal Opportunities, organised by the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs, in co-operation with the Nordic Council of Ministers and the European Institute for Gender Equality.

At this 5th conference in a series of ICMEOs launched in 2012 by Germany, we aim to further discussions on topics ranging from toxic to caring masculinities. We hope to facilitate sharing knowledge and good and promising practices to strengthen men`s responsibility for oneself, responsibility for care for others and responsibility for care for society.

Now, you might ask - why focus on care again? Sharing care was also the focus favoured by our colleagues in Luxembourg organising the 3rd ICMEO four years ago. Hasn`t the topic of men and care been discussed enough already?

I personally think that care is a marvellous word. According to the Cambridge dictionary, as a noun, the word "care" has four meanings – protection, attention, deal with and worry. In addition, as a verb, it has two more meanings – worry and want. When looking at its meaning in the American English, we find an additional meaning – help. I`m confident that this provides enough room for discussions in many other ICMEO-s and other conferences.

You might also ask - why talk about responsibility? Isn`t it one of the problems that men already are overburdened by responsibilities? Shouldn`t we concentrate on rights? Opportunities?

In the Estonian Gender Equality Act, gender equality is defined as equal rights, obligations, opportunities and responsibility of men and women. While equal rights, obligations and opportunities get attention more often, equal responsibility tends to be left out of limelight. Even though sharing the burden of responsibility is of equal importance. Furthermore, I`m sure that no-one doubts the simple truth that shared burden makes the weight of it lighter and thereby reaching the goals faster.

Addressing the issue of men and care helps to address a long list of wider societal challenges. Among them:

- men`s shorter life expectancy,
- unequal sharing of care between women and men for children and related impediments women face on the labour market,
- increasing care burden on individuals and the society due to ageing societies and thereby increase in the number of elderly dependants,
- also labour shortage in the care sector,
- prevalence of violence against women in private and in public spheres, both online and offline,

- standstills and backlashes in gender equality policies, just to name a few.

Men should be seen and should see themselves as important actors in promoting gender equality and solving gender inequality related challenges in modern societies. Men should also recognise themselves and be seen as beneficiaries of gender equality policies.

So, why the focus on responsibility to care for oneself? Because we believe that leaving aside the youngest among us or those who need special support and care, it is first and foremost up to every individual to take a responsibility for his or her actions and wellbeing.

To bring an example, it is clear that it cannot be victim`s responsibility to assure that a perpetrator seeks help against his ineptitude of socially acceptable behaviour. It is the full responsibility of the perpetrator.

But the state has to be there to provide necessary support in fulfilling this responsibility. In Estonia, different services are available for perpetrators. For example, in 2018, social programme “Internal Security” was made available for men who were violent in a relationship. Also, in 2019, the “Caring Fathers” programme was opened to fathers who have problematic, including violent, relationships with children and/or child's mother. Individual counselling is available through victim support system. In addition, this spring the Social Insurance Board opened a helpline for perpetrators of violence, through which they are encouraged to take responsibility for their violent behaviour.

Why the focus on the responsibility to care for others? Because we believe that both the joys and the burden of care for others has to be shared between women and men in both families and in the society.

While the percentage of fathers using a 10-days paternity leave has reached almost 60 in Estonia, the percentage of men among those taking parental leave has stayed remarkably low – still less than 4%. In recent years we have made further efforts to increase the flexibility of parental leave and benefits system. Also, starting from July this year we prolonged the individual right of fathers for compensated paternity leave from 10 days to 30 days.

When looking at men sharing the professional care burden in the society, the situation in Estonia is far from satisfactory. For example, only 13% of those employed in the field of „Human health and social work activities“ were men. In the coming years, we plan to first conduct research on the specific reasons behind Estonian men`s low participation in sharing the ageing societies` increasing burden of also professional care, followed up by strategies and actions to improve the situation.

Why the focus on the responsibility for a society? Because we believe that the responsibility for the sustainability of our societies, including ecologically and gender equality wise, rests equally on the shoulders of women and men. Research and situation analysis in different parts of the World show that this is not yet the case.

Recent studies also show that billions (of dollars) could be saved in the state budgets by decreasing the harm of restrictive masculinities in societies.

The importance of men's and boys' active participation and responsibility as actors of change for gender equality and their role as co-beneficiaries of gender equality policies is acknowledged in principle. However, this general awareness is often not backed up by long-term commitments and initiatives. Not many countries have yet a long-term and strategic approach to reaching such aim. It is in the interest of whole societies that more active approach on this would be taken by states in the coming years.

Last but not least, only a few day ago, we made a difficult decision for the conference that had for months been planned to welcome participants both online and physically present in Tallinn, to take place in a fully virtual format. While made with a heavy heart and inconveniencing many good co-operation partners, we knew that at the end of the day, it is us who have the responsibility to take care of the health and wellness of participants and the community.

While it is regretful that the COVID-19 related situation in the World has prevented us from meeting with you in Tallinn, I'm glad that so many of you from Estonia and from all over the World have decided to join us virtually.

I hope that regardless of all, we have managed to still create for you a space and environment for gaining new knowledge from research as well as from each other's experiences.

I wish you all fruitful discussions inspiring a variety of action for the years to come.