



Event: Gender Equality Forum

Location: Prague

Date: 15 September 2024

Distinguished guests,

Thank you for inviting me here today to share some insights into the protection against gender discrimination in Estonia, a country that has made important strides but still faces significant challenges to reach gender equality.

My name is Christian Veske and I am the equality commissioner in Estonia.

Estonia, like many societies that were occupied, or in the sphere of influence, by the former Soviet Union transitioned to democratic institutions and developed its legal frameworks relating to equality, during the process of accession to the EU.

Like elsewhere, it was one of the catalysts of embedding the principles of gender equality into country's legal framework, such as the **Gender Equality Act**, passed in 2004, which explicitly prohibits gender-based discrimination in the workplace, education, and access to goods and services. This law establishes the right to equal treatment and the obligation of employers to promote gender equality in their organisations.

Yet, the reality of gender discrimination and gender inequality goes beyond legislation, and I argue that it needs to be seen in a wider sociopolitical and economical transition context.

I will bring out a few important angles to consider, that in my view have had significant impact, when we look at gender inequalities.

1. Estonia's geopolitical location – being squeezed between Fennoscandia, other Baltic states and Russia. This reality, especially in early days of transition and in early 2000s, had significant impact, as Estonia wanted to break away from the Soviet legacy and model itself after Finland and Sweden.
2. Second, Estonia kept and developed its preschool system, where it is high quality and affordable. This allowed women to stay in the labour market. Conversely, Estonia also has one of the most generous parental leave



schemes in the European Union, which, one can argue, has an effect of keeping women away from labour market.

3. Third – rapid transition to market economy and neoliberal policies. This, in turn, has led to several very problematic results in terms of gender inequalities, one of which is one of the highest gender pay gap in the European Union.

All the above leads us to a critical aspect of Estonia's gender equality discourse: **cultural perceptions of gender roles**. Traditional gender norms are still prevalent in many sectors, influencing career choices, leadership positions, and social expectations. Women are often underrepresented in high-level decision-making roles, both in business and politics. Though we have seen some inspiring progress, such as the election of Estonia's first female president, **Kersti Kaljulaid**, and later, Prime Minister **Kaja Kallas**, the underrepresentation of women in leadership remains a significant challenge. This is reflected also, if we look at Estonia's position at the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) index, measuring gender inequalities in different domains, including that of political power.

One promising step towards gender equality has been the efforts to encourage women in **STEM fields**—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The government and private sectors have launched initiatives to reduce gender disparities in these traditionally male-dominated fields, where women are underrepresented. Several private initiatives, the most famous being Unicorn Squad, have also been launched, getting girls into robotics.

In addition, Estonia's civil society and international organizations have played an essential role in raising awareness about **gender-based violence**. The government has adopted policies aligned with international conventions, including the Istanbul Convention, aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women and currently we are in the middle of debating about the consent-based approach. Civil society led developments have also been very visible in wider equality developments – last year, Estonia adopted gender-neutral marriage act.

Despite these advancements, the **COVID-19 pandemic** further exposed vulnerabilities in gender equality, with women being disproportionately affected, particularly in the caregiving and service sectors. These challenges underscore the need for continued vigilance and reform.

In conclusion, Estonia has made remarkable progress in legislating against gender discrimination, and there are promising signs of transformation in the cultural and



social spheres. However, the journey toward full gender equality is far from being over.

I thank you for the attention.