



**Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Discrimination
against Women**

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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women**

Twenty-sixth session

Summary record of the 540th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Wednesday, 23 January 2002, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Abaka

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Convention (*continued*)

Combined initial, second and third periodic reports of Estonia (continued)



The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (continued)

Combined initial, second and third periodic reports of Estonia (continued)
(CEDAW/C/EST/1-3)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Estonia took places at the Committee table.*

2. **The Chairperson** invited Committee members to continue with their questions.

Article 7

3. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling**, after commending Estonia for achieving the figure of five women in a cabinet of 14, said that the Swedish Government held courses for new ministers to alert them to equality issues and to draw their attention to both formal and actual equality. She wondered if the same could be done in Estonia. She was amazed at the huge number of women's organizations in the country and asked if any formal procedure existed for obtaining the opinion of those organizations when new laws were drafted. She wished to know whether the bill on the framework concept of civil society allocated any budgetary resources to women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and when it was likely to be adopted. Lastly, she enquired whether the Government intended to use the forthcoming Baltic Sea Women's Conference to promote the Convention and to urge States to ratify the Optional Protocol and the amendment to article 20.

4. **Ms. Tavares da Silva** confessed to being puzzled by the fact that, in Estonia, apparently only younger women with higher education in the upper income brackets were interested in becoming politicians. Was women's disinterest connected with the low prestige of political office or did men impede access to the political arena? Perhaps specific measures could be taken to encourage greater participation by women in politics.

5. **Ms. Myakayaka-Manzini** asked whether the country's electoral system was based on party lists or proportional representation and whether it really worked in favour of women. While Estonian women participated actively in political parties, few were

elected to parliament. Fortunately the five women ministers held non-traditional portfolios where they might be able to exert a beneficial influence on gender issues and she therefore enquired whether there were any plans to introduce measures ensuring that more women entered parliament and, if such plans existed, what methods were going to be used. Did they include affirmative action?

Article 9

6. **Ms. Corti** commented that the Estonian law on nationality seemed to rest on *jus sanguinis*. According to the report one quarter of persons living in Estonia who were not Estonians were married to non-citizens; she was curious to know what was meant by the term "non-citizens" and how aliens could acquire Estonian nationality. She would also like further clarification regarding the position of stateless persons in Estonia and asked what problems were encountered by mixed marriages and if minorities had recognized rights. Could they use their own language and set up their own schools? More generally speaking, what steps were taken to integrate foreigners in Estonia?

7. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling** said that she, too, was greatly concerned about the effects of the Citizenship Act on the foreign women living in the country, most of whom were Russian. Was the number of women without Estonian nationality, or who were stateless, higher than that of men? Given that aliens were required to learn the Estonian language in order to become eligible for naturalization, she would like to know whether the courses were geared to women's needs and took account of the dual burden of caring for a family and going out to work. Were the courses equally accessible to men and women or did hidden discrimination prevent women from attending them? Finally she asked what impact statelessness had on women and children in the long term and what action the Government was contemplating to help stateless women acquire Estonian nationality.

8. **Ms. Saiga** said she believed that there was de facto or hidden discrimination against women in mixed marriages and asked what the Government was going to do about it.

Article 10

9. **Ms. Manalo** said that it was plain from the report that Estonian girls took education very seriously and

outperformed boys at all levels yet stereotyping was still prevalent in education; she was puzzled by the fact that no attempt had been made to reform the curriculum and teaching materials in order to eliminate bias. Similarly she wished to know what incentives were offered to girls to persuade them to opt for natural and physical sciences and vocational training in subjects not traditionally identified with women.

10. She was mystified by the statement on literacy in the penultimate paragraph on page 55 and enquired whether the rate referred to was that of functional or general literacy. Were men and women equally literate? Lastly she noted from tables 10.7 and 10.8 on page 52 that there were few women professors and was eager to learn what measures were being taken to redress the situation.

11. **Ms. Acar** said that it was clear from the report that Estonia had a gender-segregated market and that most women were to be found in the caring professions that carried lower salaries and less prestige. Furthermore the oral presentation had disclosed that women were over-represented among part-time workers. Those factors were indicative of a major problem. She believed that women's reluctance to enter the political arena might be due to a feeling that, even if they did participate, they would be unable to make any real difference to policy, but she was surprised by such an unusual attitude in such a highly educated population.

12. It seemed likely that the education system was responsible for the above-mentioned imbalance and she urged the Government to review textbooks and expunge gender discrimination from them. The education system was apparently divided into general and vocational instruction, with girls tending more towards the former, which then usually led to university training. She had the feeling that only the most highly qualified boys chose general education and that prompted her to ask whether male and female graduates were regarded as equally accomplished and competent. She failed to understand why there were so few female professors when women had been in academia for such a long time.

13. Lastly, she wished to know whether gender studies were fully integrated into the higher education system and whether they led to the award of degrees. Were such courses part of the curricula of other mainstream programmes?

Article 11

14. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling** said that it was clear from the report that the heritage of the Soviet era still strongly affected the labour market. She wondered whether the Government was at all concerned to see the concentration of women in the service sector and in lower-paid positions and whether any schemes had been set up to train younger and unemployed women in non-traditional occupations. Was it obligatory under Estonian legislation to offer unemployed women State-subsidized jobs or the opportunity to participate in training programmes? If that were not the case, she recommended the adoption of such laws. Similarly she wished to know whether women who stopped working for family reasons were entitled to retraining if they wanted to go back to work.

15. The report supplied little information about older women in the workforce and she therefore asked for more data on the subject. It seemed likely that the large number of older women living in poverty was a result of previous indirect discrimination and so she wanted to know what measures the Government planned in order to address that issue. The section of the report concerning article 13 referred to an analysis and strategies to combat women's poverty, but she was not sure whether those strategies had actually been implemented

16. She enquired whether the new pension system took account of the patchwork employment biographies of women. Had the new system been subjected to a gender impact assessment? It was not clear to her whether the additional pension years allowed for child rearing were added automatically or whether they were added only if a parent gave up work to look after their children.

Article 12

17. **The Chairperson** said that she was extremely troubled by the claim that women's reproductive rights were "protected" by the Termination of Pregnancy and Sterilization Act. Abortion was not a reproductive right under the Convention. Often, government measures and policies that appeared to protect women were actually retrogressive and even hazardous to their health. Although the report gave no information on the frequency with which pregnancies were terminated, it was important to be aware that, even if they had no immediate complications, abortions could be an

obstacle to childbearing later on and have a terrible psychological effect. The report led her to believe that abortion was being used as a form of contraception; that should never be. On the contrary, contraceptives should be as widely available and inexpensive as possible, not only for university students but also, and, in particular, for low-income women, who, paradoxically, perpetuated their own poverty by bearing children for whom they could not provide. Such women should have free access to contraceptives. Easier access to contraceptives would also prevent the spread of human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS). Lastly, aggressive programmes should be launched to enhance men's role in family planning

18. From outside sources, the Committee had learned of the very high suicide rate in Estonia, which ranked third in the world for men and sixth for women. She wondered whether the causes of female suicide had been studied and whether they were more common among, for example, single and divorced women and senior citizens.

19. While welcoming the impressive number of female doctors in Estonia, she would like to have more data on their income level, as compared to that of other professions, in order to determine whether there was any stereotyping in that area. For the same reason, she wondered which scientific disciplines were preferred by women.

20. In conclusion, she urged the State party to consult the Committee's general recommendation No. 24, which set out a holistic approach to implementing article 12. Awareness of women's specific health needs would also increase as more women participated in decision-making. In that connection, she was certain that the five new female ministers would sensitize government authorities to women's health issues. She agreed with Ms. Schöpp-Schilling that some training was necessary in order to mainstream a gender perspective into the work of all ministries. Lastly, she commended the State party on its excellent breastfeeding programme.

21. **Ms. González** supported the Chairperson's comments, adding that the figure of 91 abortions per 100 births was alarming. She urged Estonia to strengthen its sex education programmes and to encourage more responsible sexuality among its population, particularly its youth.

22. **Ms. Gaspard** enquired about the reasons for abortion under the Termination of Pregnancy and Sterilization Act, and wondered whether there were problems in enforcing the Act. Noting that 86 per cent of abortions in 1998 had been legally induced, she requested details on the other 14 per cent and their possible causes.

23. **Ms. Corti** supported previous speakers' remarks concerning abortion. She expressed concern that the rapid growth in private hospitals — from 2 in 1992 to 28 in 1999 — could have a serious effect in a situation of increasing unemployment and poverty among women. She would appreciate information on the differences between State and private hospitals, any private insurance schemes that might help cover the cost of the latter and any measures taken to ensure a decent life for the growing proportion of elderly women living alone.

24. She wondered why the programme council against AIDS had not been created until 1998, and what the Government, particularly the Ministry of Social Affairs, was doing to prevent the spread of the disease. More information should also be provided on drug abuse, particularly among women, in view of its relationship to the incidence of AIDS.

Article 14

25. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling**, noting that approximately one third of Estonian women lived in rural areas, welcomed initiatives already taken by the Government on their behalf but stressed the need for a more comprehensive and statistics-based approach. She hoped that the next periodic report would contain more statistics and give a fuller account of the situation of rural women of various ages in terms of poverty, unemployment, education and health. It would be interesting to know how women's equal access to health care and attention to their specific female needs were being ensured as hospitals became increasingly privatized.

26. She was concerned at the significant number of rural women who were unpaid workers on family farms and would appreciate more background information on whether those women had worked on collective farms during the Soviet era. She also hoped that the Government would contemplate using the satellite accounting system developed by the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of

Women (INSTRAW), which recognized the value of household and other unpaid work. She wondered whether unpaid rural women workers received social security benefits.

Article 15

27. **Mr. Melander** said that his question concerning the high number of female judges and prosecutors was akin to that posed by the Chairperson with regard to doctors, namely, whether those fields were attracting women because they were poorly paid.

28. **Ms. Aouij** echoed Mr. Melander's concern, but added that the impressive number of female judges and prosecutors could have an extremely positive effect on the interpretation of laws and the integration of a gender perspective. She wondered whether the female members of the judiciary were familiar with international treaties, particularly the Convention, and whether they had had occasion to invoke it.

Article 16

29. **Ms. Aouij** expressed concern at the decline in marriages and the increase in both consensual unions and the divorce rate (82 divorces per 100 marriages in 1999). She wondered whether the causes for those trends had been studied and how easy it was to obtain a divorce. Could a person obtain a divorce upon request or did a judge try to reconcile the spouses, particularly if they had young children? She also wondered if the situation was aggravated by the country's economic problems.

30. **Ms. Goonesekere**, while congratulating the Government on its extensive efforts to adapt its Family Act to the provisions of the Convention, noted that the references to child marriages — marriages contracted by persons between 15 and 18 years of age, which could be annulled if contracted without consent — stood in stark contrast to both the norms of the Convention and the Government's national population policy, which stressed the need to improve reproductive health and the welfare of the family. The delegation should indicate why such provisions had survived in the updated Family Act, whether child marriages actually took place and the Government's response in such situations.

The meeting rose at 4.15 p.m.