
GENDER EQUALITY IN EUROPE IS IMPROVING, BUT SLOWLY | VIEW

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09.03.2018

EuroNews (8 March 2018)

The biggest challenge for women today is that they do the biggest burden of unpaid work, such as caring for children, caring for the elderly, and household work, says Virginija Langbakk of the European Institute for Gender Equality.

On International Womens Day, Euronews speaks to Virginija Langbakk, Director of the European Institute for Gender Equality, about closing the gender gap for women in Europe.

What are the top issues that need tackling to bring about gender equality in Europe?

The biggest challenge for women today is that they do the biggest burden of unpaid work, such as caring for children, caring for the elderly, and household work. When we look at the index developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality, the situation has actually deteriorated over the last ten years. In some regions, women are doing almost everything at home. And you cannot regulate it; you cannot simply say a man should do so many hours of work. So that is really extremely alarming, because its not improving.

The consequences of this can be seen in the constellations of modern families. We analysed single parents, and found that 80% of single parents are mothers. In employment, there is an 11% gap between the participation of single fathers in the labour market and that of single mothers, meaning that women tend to take part-time employment, or they wait because of all this care and unpaid work. If you look at families with three children or more, there the gender gap is 28%. So the more children you have, the less chances you have to earn your own salary, to be independent, to do what you want. Its very much the modern shift to how the families are formed.

The other thing that is very alarming is violence against women. In modern society, we should be changing, we should be thinking about respect and dignity, but its still happening so much and we are ashamed to talk about it.

What about women in the workplace? Are pay gaps a concern?

We are seeing that a pay gap, and also a pension gap, are the consequences of inequalities in both education and later in the labour market. The pension gap is very large, at an average of 40%.

We analysed and compared two sectors: first, care and health, which is dominated by women, and

then the ICT sector, where there are plenty of employment opportunities and a demand for skilled workers. Women are not encouraged, in fact they are discouraged, from entering the ICT sector. Starting at school, they are told there is no role for them in the sector. We are seeing these big differences because of what we call a segregation of women, or condensation of women, in low-paid jobs like social care, education, and teaching, compared to men, who go into more lucrative roles in information technology and engineering. Because of that, we see that the pay gap is extremely large and there aren't any strong measures to equalise it.

Is gender equality improving in Europe overall?

Yes, you could say it's slowly increasing. Last year, we launched the third edition of our Gender Equality Index. We saw some areas where there were no improvements, like unpaid work, and in family arrangements – the so-called private sphere, where men and women have to decide on their own how they divide their responsibilities.

But it's improving in the labour market, with the exception of the segregation of women in low-paid jobs.

Education is improving very strongly, but men are at a disadvantage here because women are taking up tertiary education at a very rapid rate.

It is improving in health. It is improving even in income and benefits. But we see the biggest inequalities have more to do with the specific segments – single mothers, women with migrant backgrounds or those with disabilities. If you just take the categories women and men, then the gaps may be smaller, but if you go deeper into specific categories you see that we need to focus on those differences, and we need to have specific targets to make gender equality work.

Virginija Langbakk is Director of the European Institute for Gender Equality. This Q&A has been adapted from an interview and edited for clarity.

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