



The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

Combating female genital mutilation and other harmful practices

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FGM and other harmful practices

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1. Introduction

The Republic of Estonia is a country in Northern Europe with a population of 1,311,800 as of January 1, 2016. While incorporated into the Soviet Union for 50 years, Estonia was a closed country with practically no immigration or emigration from other sources besides the other republics of the former Soviet Union.

Until recently, Estonia has been a highly homogeneous society. Individuals of different cultural and religious background are still quite rare in Estonia. In most cases they are tourists, mainly shoppers from Finland or Sweden. However, immigration to Estonia is showing growth, due to marriages, studying or working in Estonia. In connection with the European migration crisis Estonia will admit 700 refugees; the first seven have already arrived.

Estonia is one of the least religious countries in the world. One of the reasons is the Soviet-era suppression of all religions, as well as rituals of religious-cultural origin.

According to the latest census, carried out in 2011, the data made public in 2013, only 29 % of the population profess some certain faith. The Russian Orthodox faith is the most widespread, followed by the Lutheran faith; the share of Catholics is small and Muslims numbered only 1,508 persons. The predominant majority of them come from countries, where female genital mutilation is not practised.

Although there are representatives of approximately 150 different ethnicities in Estonia (primarily in the capital Tallinn), these are in most cases people from the republics of the former Soviet Union and therefore from the same cultural space as the Estonians. For example, the share of immigrants to Estonia from West Africa can be estimated as very marginal.

The above explains why phenomena like female genital mutilation (FGM), arranged marriages, honour killings and other harmful traditional practices have been unknown in Estonia until recent times. While specialists were aware of these phenomena, it was generally believed that they would not concern Estonia.

2. Harmful traditional practices. Current situation

2.1. Collection of data

While preparing the present material we approached the Republic of Estonia Ministry of Justice, the Police and Border Guard Board and the Estonian Health Insurance Fund for data on the registration of the so-called harmful traditional practices. The answers revealed that the court, police and medical registers do not provide information on honour killings, arranged marriages or female genital mutilation.

2.1.1. Female Genital Mutilation

Interviews with specialists revealed that gynaecologists and midwives in Estonia have had some experience with FGM. Examination of patients has shown in individual cases that women have undergone genital mutilation. Made Laanpere, MD, President of the Estonian Association of Gynaecologists, has knowledge of a couple of cases, when women with genital mutilations have given birth in Estonia. In her judgement, the births had involved complications, but ended well for the mothers and children. There have been no incidents in Estonia of anyone approaching medics with a plea to have her genitals mutilated. However, this does not rule out travels from Estonia to the countries of origin to have the procedure carried out there.

In 2014, the Estonian Institute for Open Society Research carried out a nationwide survey of medical professionals within the project “Building an integrated system for combating intimate partner violence in Estonia” funded by the Norwegian financial mechanism, which received responses from 200 medical professionals (general practitioners, gynaecologists, midwives) all over the country. The questions to gynaecologists and midwives included the following:

“Have you in your practice encountered female genital mutilation?”
As many as 13.5 % of respondents gave a positive answer.

2.1.2. Arranged marriages

Interviews with representatives of non-profit organisations dealing with ethnic minorities allow for the conclusion that arranged marriages are somewhat more frequent than FGM. This occurs primarily in the communities of Trans-Caucasian ethnicities of Christian background, e.g. the Georgians and the Armenians. The author of this paper is aware of a case, when a Georgian girl of marriage age (who had grown up in Estonia) was sent to Georgia after graduating from secondary school because the family had arranged her marriage with a Georgian man of suitable background.

2.1.3. Honour killings

According to Karmen Kukk, leading specialist of the prevention and criminal investigation office of the Police and Border Guard Board’s development department, it cannot be stated with complete conviction that no killings classifiable as honour killing have been committed in Estonia. Such cases would have been treated as regular manslaughters or murders and would not have been specifically registered in the police statistics.

2.2. Legislation

According to the answer of Anne Kruusement, advisor of the Republic of Estonia Ministry of Justice penal law and procedure division, the Estonian legislation does not include specific terms as female genital mutilation, arranged marriages or honour killings. These are currently not classified as specific crimes. At present, these cases are classified as manslaughter, murder, causing serious injury or physical maltreatment. As legislation does not specifically outline these terms, such cases cannot be registered or included in statistics.

2.2. Training and schooling programmes

In 2014, the Estonian Institute for Open Society Research in cooperation with the universities of Tallinn and Tartu launched new classes on domestic and gender violence within the project “Building an integrated system for combating intimate partner violence in Estonia” funded by the Norwegian financial mechanism. These courses also address the so-called harmful traditional practices.

The classes are primarily meant for the students of social work and law, but are also open to students of other faculties.

The Estonian higher educational institutions have previously provided such training to the students of gynaecology of the University of Tartu medical faculty and to future police personnel at the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences.

Various NGOs in Estonia have organised advanced training on domestic and gender-based violence for practicing specialists like police personnel, medics and social workers for years. However, most of these programmes either completely ignored “harmful traditional practices” or paid insufficient attention to them; the training programmes mainly concentrate on domestic or sexual violence.

3. Prospects for the near future

The “Strategy for preventing violence for 2015-2020” was drafted in 2014 on the initiative of the Estonian Ministry of Justice and with the involvement of various stakeholders. The Estonian Institute for Open Society Research recommended at that time to address the “harmful traditional practices” in the strategy since Estonia would almost certainly encounter these phenomena in the coming six years and should be prepared for them. Unfortunately, it was not considered necessary, since these phenomena were marginal for Estonia at that time. Hopefully, the new strategy to be developed will pay sufficient attention to the prevention of these phenomena.

Estonia, represented by the then Minister of Justice Andres Anvelt, signed the Istanbul Convention in the end of 2014 and intends to ratify it by the end of 2017. Several law amendments are planned in that connection. The Estonian Ministry of Justice has currently drafted a bill of amendments to the penal code and law enforcement act. The intended law amendments address among other things female genital mutilation and arranged marriages.