



Workshop 3: Involving men in gender equality

The last workshop in a series of three, conducted in the context of the Study on the Role of Men in Gender Equality, held controversial discussions on “How to address men’s issues in gender equality?” The cost of masculinity, resulting in problems such as health hazards for men, boys’ underachievement at school and men acting violently, were examined with a focus on finding ways out of such “dark sides” of dominant masculinity. Involving men in gender equality was regarded as a strategy to be further developed by taking into account the different cultural, regional and historical circumstances as well as embracing a vision of new forms of masculinity transformed for a gender equal society.

1. What is the boys’ crisis about?

Michael Kimmel pointed out in his analysis of underperformance of boys at school, the “boys’ crises” as it is presented in the US media, why gender equality is in the interest of men.

The closer analysis of underachieving boys and their lacking engagement at school shows that a simplistic focus on gender is not sufficient to explain it. Socio-economic class and ethnic group play a significant role. The real crisis is revealed when looking at violence, where gender plays a bigger role, for example in bullying, where peer group pressure reinforces stereotypical male behaviour among boys.

The relevance of these findings for Europe was discussed in connection with the Europe 2020 Strategy, for which a reduction of early school leavers is a core target. If traditional ideas of masculinity prevent boys from succeeding at school, this is a clear starting point for improving schools in a more gender equal way.

2. Working groups

2.1 Health: Is men’s health a gender inequality issue?

Alan White examined the state of men’s health in European countries and stated a higher rate of premature death and suicide and a high number of overweight men as examples of inequality concerning men’s health. Research has revealed the interconnecting influences on men’s health by their working conditions, socio-economic context and family circumstances. To address men’s health issues, those differences need to be considered. Efforts made towards improving health services have to address the fact that many men are not aware of their health problems. Successful measures reaching out to men have to take into account their different backgrounds and recognise different needs across the lifespan.

The risk of health projects to involve men with health issues linked to typical “male” activities, such as projects which work in cooperation with football clubs, was discussed critically, as they could lead to reinforcing stereotypes.

2.2 Violence: How to create pathways towards non-violent masculinity?

Carol Hageman-White explained the interplay of factors that can lead to different forms of violence. Discussions at the workshop focussed on good practice examples and on crucial parameters for effective interventions. Projects working with groups of boys showed how important it is to include their environments, like schools, and to build on their personal background and experience.

2.3 Engaging men in fatherhood as a strategy to engage men in gender equality

Erich Lehner laid out a critical question of men's involvement in gender equality by pointing out examples of men's mobilisation which turn against feminist movements. He also raised the problem of redirecting scarce resources back to men. Despite these risks he considers it necessary to involve men.

A study he conducted in Austria examined the general conditions, motivations as well as the barriers for men to take paternity leave. His research revealed a persisting fear of loss of income and of negative effects to their careers as obstacles hindering men's engagement in fathering. To foster changes at the organisational level all practices of HR management have to be included to develop more gender equal leave arrangement. Only if fatherhood and measures to support paternity leave are developed in the frame of gender relations and gender equality paternity leave will be seen as a strategy to engage men in gender equality.

2.4 Gender equality needs men, men need gender equality

Jouni Varanka, former member of the Subcommittee on men's issues of the Finnish Council of Equality, pointed out crucial points to understand the "Finnish way" of treating the topic. In 40 years of gender equality policy in Finland, where gender equality can build on a high level of agreement in society, men's role was debated right from the start. Finland demonstrates that gender equality policies need an institutionalized and coherent perspective on men. The inclusion of controversial issues in this process has proved to be crucial for the development of gender policies. In general, the Finnish inclusive approach seems both ambitious and pragmatic because different actors search for good, practical solutions in a joined process.

3. Round table: potentials for change

The final round table triggered an intense discussion about the potential of change through "Involving men in Gender Equality".

Victor Seidler highlighted the importance of having a notion of vision of a different kind of masculinity. Mieke Verloo reinforced this aspect by bringing up various forms of caring masculinities.

Jeff Hearn raised the question of developing suitable policy and practice at the same time. Some policy developments require "naming men as men" whereas other policy developments require recognising differences amongst men. Another aspect to consider is how policy areas relate to each other, for example, between promoting health, and opposing violence by and between men and boys. Health can be a policy arena for policy opposing violence, and anti-violence policy can be an arena for promoting health policy. Bringing together policies on fatherhood and anti-violence policy was raised as a further challenge. Overall, one clear message was to promote care and caring men and boys, through caring masculinities.

The issue of contextualizing measures which work in specific countries with a specific history was given a high priority when discussing transferability. From an Eastern European perspective, Katarzyna Wojnicka makes out a big barrier in the negative connotation given to gender equality policies in many part of the society. Carol Hagemann-White pointed out that policy strategies need to be based on cultural variety, which makes transnational recommendations hard to be transferred.