



Workshop 1: Do men care? Equal Involvement on Men in domestic and Care Work

“Do Men Care?” This was the question which EU, governmental, and stakeholders representatives, as well as acknowledged researchers on gender equality and masculinity, examined on 26 September 2011. This was the first workshop in a series of three, in the frame of the EC-financed study on The Role of Men in Gender Equality.

The European Commission, represented by Ms Daniela Bankier, Head of the Gender Equality Unit at DG Justice, opened the workshop highlighting the European Commission (EC) approach of gender equality. For many years the EC has stressed that gender equality implies changes for women as well as for men and that it is essential that both men and women actively participate in facilitating the reconciliation of professional and private life. The “Strategy for Equality between Women and Men 2010-2015” underlines the need for an active contribution and participation of men to advance gender equality.

1. Making changes visible

1.1 Developing a new gender equality view

Prof. Øystein Gullvåg Holter, from the University of Oslo, described his approach to strengthen the role of men in gender equality. He developed a change model with three basic steps: a first step where men’s change towards gender equality is limited; a second step with greater acceptance but also increased conflict; and a third step where gender equality attracts major support.

Prof. Sophia Belghiti-Mahut, from the University of Montpellier, stressed the divergences between European countries when dealing with the reconciliation of the professional and private lives of parents. Many northern European countries have adopted an egalitarian policy and a time allocation favouring parents to obtain a balance between family and professional life. Parental leave allowance is mainly income related and incentive measures for fathers are implemented. On the other hand in many central, eastern and southern European countries, a “family model”, based on a single bread winner and relying on the central role of the family and the mother in care work, is still prevalent.

1.2 Caring masculinities

Prof. Jeff Hearn, from the Hanken School of Economics (Finland) / Linköping University (Sweden), focussed on the difficulties in developing policy on men, care and gender equality. The issue of care is not just about families and fathers. It is also about men’s relations to care. Men’s relations to care and caring need to be understood within a broader approach at care and the “care economy.”

Men’s caring is about caring for others – parents, people with disabilities, spouses, friends, work colleagues, and so on – not only children, and certainly not only the fathers’ own children. This is especially true in the context of the upcoming demographic changes and the increasing ageing population. The main policy implication here is the need to promote caring masculinities.

Secondly, the context of changing family and household structures should be taken into account. Focussing on change within the heterosexual norm is necessary, but this should not hide non-heterosexual (gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) and diverse (nationality or migration status) families and households.

Thirdly, policies on men, care and gender equality should also target boys, their upbringing and education; which is essential for the future.

Finally, policies about parenting should consider issues of violence. Unsurprisingly, unequal relationships are more likely to lead to violence and abuse. The resulting implication for policy is that more gender equal relationships mean less violence.

2. Working groups

2.1 Paternity/parental leave issues as an index of change: earmarking of leave package and financial compensation

Experiences from European countries show big differences in the entitlement to paternity/parental leave. The Icelandic model with a (still) high percentage of men taking parental leave illustrates how paid parental leave makes it possible for an increasing number of fathers to effectively take a paternal/parental leave. Financial compensation is therefore fundamental for increasing the number of men taking up parental leave. Non-transferable leave package (“use it or lose it” - quotas) for fathers is especially effective in encouraging them to use a greater part of this leave.

2.2 Putting a gender-equal managing of post-divorce situations on the agenda

When discussing conflict on the road towards gender equality a topic of special importance is what a gender equal post-divorce situation should look like – including a gender equal custody regulation system. There are no easy solutions, but programs which encourage boys to practice non-violent conflict-management and to deal with negative feelings might be a prerequisite for a gender equal adult life. This would also be helpful for men to better cope with divorce situations and for finding agreements on shared childcare responsibilities. Suggestions therefore include expanding programs including workshops, trainings for men and boys and professionalization for multipliers for encouraging boys and men to practice non-violent conflict management as well as creating better mediation systems and adjusting different services (such as crisis centres) also aiming at supporting gender equal divorce schemes.

3. Round table: Approaching equal involvement of men in care work

Prof. Michael Kimmel, from Stony Brook University, New York, pointed out that it is necessary to see the changes already taking place: e.g. men have cross-sex friendships; men are dedicated fathers and accept dual careers as the normal pattern. He stressed that a wider meaning of care should be taken into account as well as the variety of masculinities with all the differences among men. He pointed out to the benefits of more equal relationships for men who would enjoy healthier and happier lives and also benefits for children and wives.

Mr. Klas Hyllander from MenEngage Alliance also favoured a multi-level approach and highlighted the importance of sending out positive messages: men should not be seen as a problem or as a cause of problems; they also suffer from existing gender inequalities. Benefits for both sides should be stressed.

Prof. Iva Šmídová, from Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic, highlighted that women tend to be left out of the discussions on men and inequality. But as gender is a relational concept, a change for equality for one category (for example men) affects the other one (women) as well.

Alan White, author of the recent “Report on Men’s Health in Europe”, stressed the importance to develop a healthier gender equal society.

Aurel-Viorel Ciobanu-Dordea, Director of Directorate D-Equality from DG Justice at the European Commission, focussed on the need to reduce the gap between legal and policy discourses and the reality. Education and the media especially could play a crucial role in changing the mind set and getting rid of stereotypes.