



LOBBY EUROPEEN DES FEMMES EUROPEAN WOMEN'S LOBBY

The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality

**EWL position paper in view of the 48th session of the
Commission on the Status of Women
March 2004, New York**

1. Context - The move from women-centred policies to 'gender equality' strategies, including gender mainstreaming

The increased focus on the role of men in relation to gender equality work reflects the move towards more 'gender' focused strategies, including gender mainstreaming strategies, and away from a focus on sex-based discrimination. 'Gender equality' as a concept identifies from the start that socially constructed gender roles play a crucial role in shaping women's - and men's - access to rights, resources, and opportunities. Abandoning essentialist notions of 'sex' in favour of a socially constructed 'gender' was seen as a step forward in feminist understanding.

Although this move can be seen as progress, there are some important questions that still need to be addressed in relation to 'gender equality' as a strategic concept. One of the problems with gender focused policies for achieving equality between women and men is that it has often meant excluding 'sex' as a concept, and the policy reaction has been to marginalize, or even make redundant women-centred equality policies¹. Although the original intention was not to abandon these policies, but to use a 'dual strategy' of specific measures/programmes **and** gender mainstreaming, recent shifts in policies show that women-centred policies are less accepted in the policy process. There is a tendency of policy-makers to decrease funding for women-centred projects and strategies, and transfer funding to male-centred actions – in the name of gender equality. It is important to keep in mind that in many EU countries, the lack of basic services for women and girls is still a reality, and that governments continuously fail to recognise the need for specific services and projects for women. Parallel investments in women and girls must therefore be ensured.

In conclusion, gender as a concept, and gender mainstreaming as a strategy, have proven to have ambivalent results in achieving equality between women and men, and in redressing the unequal power relations between women and men.

There is a need to reinforce the 'dual strategy', and ensure the safeguarding of women-centred, empowering strategies – including specific bodies and programmes - which remain essential to counteract and addresses the systemic, structural inequalities between women and men.

2. Integrating men and boys into the work to achieve equality between women and men

¹ Sari Kouvo (2003), "Mainstreaming Gender and Integrating Men in the United Nations Equality Politics"; Faculty of Law, University of Gothenburg

The purpose of gender-based strategies – with an equal focus on women and men- is to contribute to a deconstruction of the current unequal power relationship between women and men and to break the cycle of gender-based inequalities. Making the link between **our knowledge about the gendered constructions of ‘women’ and ‘men’ to real and concrete policies that contribute to achieving equality between women and men is still proving difficult**. An increased interest and knowledge about how male identities and masculinities are produced and reproduced in different social, cultural, and political contexts, does not in itself contribute to greater equality between women and men. It has proven difficult to make political progress in solving such structural problems as men’s violence against women, even with the help of a better understanding of the construction of masculinity, its relationship to female identities, and how this contributes to and perpetuates gender inequalities.

In analysing male identities and masculinity there is a need to reinforce the political and strategic importance of working towards gender equality. A structural analysis along with actions that aim to redress the unequal power relationship between women and men, and that aim to redefine the relationship between women and men must be placed at the centre of the strategy.

2.1. Different male -centred strategies²

- **Win-win approach/Partnership approach**

This strategy is based on the understanding that women and men should work together to achieve equality – and that men would also gain from increased equality between women and men. However, the approach has sometimes proven to be over-consensual, making it difficult to address issues of power, and to redress inequalities in access to resources, decision-making, and the issue of men’s violence against women.

- **Awareness-raising among men**

This approach focuses on men and boys and aims primarily to increase men’s understanding of themselves and their gender. This awareness-raising work is important, but often the link to political or strategic questions is too weak, i.e. on how to build upon this increased understanding to implement programmes and policies that would put an end to structural inequalities between women and men.

- **Focus on the relationship between the genders**

This approach largely takes feminist and gender theory as a basis of analysis, and recognises that inequalities between women and men can only be addressed through working with both women and men. In this context, the increased understanding of the processes of gender construction aims primarily at dismantling the unequal relationships between women and men. It is this approach that comes closest to what feminist have argued to be the important components of a ‘gender equality’ agenda for research and policies.

² This categorisation is based on the article “Mainstreaming Gender and Integrating Men in the United Nations Equality Politics” by Sari Kouvo (2003), Faculty of Law, University of Gothenburg

2.2. Overcoming men's resistance

Men's resistance to change and their resistance towards the feminist project has been studied by several researchers. Although there might be gains for men in a society with equality between women and men in terms of life quality, some researchers³ underline that men's support for gender equality is firstly placed on an ethical level – as a moral obligation to take action that will lead to increased equality. Therefore, male-centred approaches must firmly be based on **men's responsibility to support equality** between women and men, to equally participate in parenting and care-giving, to stop men's violence against women, etc. This ethical-political obligation and commitment apply to governments as well, as governments have the responsibility to create policies that encourage more equal gender relationships, including policies aimed at changing men's behaviour.

Although there is resistance from some men, it is important to acknowledge that men (as women) are not a homogenous group, and that there is a potential to mobilise more men in support of gender equality actions and policies. It also seems that men are more interested in or ready to support some issues rather than others. Research shows that younger men have a higher level of consciousness and support for a culture of gender equality. Policies must build on this positive force and include men and boys in the movement towards gender equality through partnerships and through critical reflection on gender relationships, in order to raise children in a culture of gender equality and to marginalize those men that want to hold onto their privileges and power.

3. Some concrete measures focusing on men and boys aiming at achieving equality between women and men

3.1 Violence against women

The extremely widespread phenomenon of male violence against women is a violation of women's human rights and fundamental freedoms, an obstacle to women's full participation in economic and social life and a direct contradiction to the goal of equality. Violence against women is an expression of "(the) *historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of women's full advancement.*" (Paragraph 118 of the Beijing Platform for Action). **Male violence against women impacts on all women as it is part of the reality of women's lives.** It encompasses many forms, including but not limited to: domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, prostitution, trafficking, pornography and other sex "industry" related acts. Male violence against women is a continuum of physical, verbal and sexual assaults and acts of sexual violence committed by men against women with the explicit aim of hurting, degrading, intimidating and silencing; taking away their ability to control their life situation and, in extreme situations, killing women.

Male-centred responses to male violence against women

Increasingly, policies that aim to address male violence against women are being dealt with by focusing on conciliatory measures, which obscures the structural dimension of male violence against women. Examples of these policies can be seen in practices such as:

- **Mediation:** There is growing concern that mediation is being promoted, and in many instances is replacing criminal justice sanctions in cases of violence against women, particularly in situations of male domestic violence. This is happening despite research findings that show that disclosure by women in situations of male violence must be handled very carefully as it can lead to further violence and death. **Mediation as a means of resolving violence should never be proposed as an option** as it

³ For example Michel Kimmel, researcher on masculinities and male identity.

presupposes that both women and men are equally responsible for male violence against women.

- **Perpetrator programmes:** Perpetrators programmes for men who are violent to women are now seen as a new way to prevent and eliminate men's violence against women. The term "treatment" is often misleading, as men who are violent to women are not generally mentally ill, they are consciously using their power and physical and psychological violence to control women. Moreover, the evaluation of these programmes indicates that their impact is limited. Further evaluation is needed, where their positive impact (or not) should be determined on the basis of whether they ensure the **safety of women and girls**. However, perpetrator programmes should never be designed in a vacuum, but **only as one component of an integrated strategy on violence against women with the overall aim of keeping women safe through different systems, i.e. police, judiciary, primary health care services**, prevention and education to men and boys about equality and respect of women, and sanctions to perpetrators.

Trafficking in women and girls and prostitution – ending men's right to buy women's bodies

Trafficking in women and prostitution are violations of women's human rights. Prostitution stands in complete opposition to women's social, economic, sexual and political empowerment. One of the most important root causes of prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation of women and girls is the persistence of patriarchal ideologies - and men's perceived right to buy access to women's bodies. **Therefore, changing the behaviour of men and boys is key in order to counteract the sexual exploitation of women.** Policy-makers must be prepared to take a stand against the sexual exploitation of women, including prostitution, through **challenging also the demand side of the industry**, i.e. the (male) buyers of sexual services. This must apply not only within countries, but also to men serving abroad for example in military or civil capacity, especially in areas of conflict and humanitarian crises.

- **Legislation, which puts an end to men's right to buy access to women's bodies by criminalizing the buying of sexual services should be adopted.** In parallel programmes and funding to promote alternatives for women in prostitution must be established.
- International and national institutions have a responsibility to develop rules, which **prohibit male sexual exploitation of women when their employees serve in military or civil capacity abroad**, especially in peacekeeping and humanitarian aid missions.
- **Sex tourism must be brought to an end** through legislation and through programmes and actions that increase men's awareness about the human rights and dignity of all women.

3.2 Equality between women and men in employment and at home

Inequalities between women and men in the home and in employment are intrinsically linked. Women have historically been assigned to carry the main responsibilities for care and domestic work and still carry most of it today, while men have been working outside the home defined as the "breadwinners" for the family. This distinction has been underpinned not only by gender stereotypes, religious beliefs and traditions and by conservative education, but most importantly by public policies. A culture where both men and women are equally considered as carers and as actors in the paid economy must be encouraged. In order to break with the inequalities in the home and at work, there is a need for proactive public policies in both the area of employment and in the area of family/care.

For an equal sharing of care and domestic responsibilities between women and men

In order to achieve a more equal sharing of care and domestic responsibilities, some key policies need to be addressed. Men's responsibility for the care and upbringing of their children must be reinforced through public policy.

- **Substantial parental leave rights must be accorded on an individual basis also to fathers**, as is the case for mothers today. Campaigns and policies giving incentives to fathers to use their parental leave rights should be put in place in countries where substantial legal provisions exist already.
- Policies that reinforce traditional gender roles and division of work should be avoided, for example fixed and low levels of benefits for home carers. Instead, quality, and affordable **childcare facilities and care facilities for other dependent people should be developed** in order to give men and women a real choice about how to share child rearing and other caring responsibilities.
- In cases of separation between two parents, the time and energy invested in the actual upbringing of children should be applied as criteria to determine custody rights and grant residence time, rather than emphasising biological parenthood. **Custody policies that automatically give rights to one parent on the basis of his/her biological parenthood, rather than their proven commitment to actively participate in the upbringing of their children, are counterproductive and** do not encourage increased active parenting by fathers.
- The elimination of stereotypes about gender roles in the home, including domestic work should be encouraged in the media, education material, toys etc. Research on the influence of those stereotypes and how to counteract them should be promoted and publicised.

Gender equality on the labour market

Without the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women on the labour market (including the gender pay gap, unequal representation in decision-making, the question of part-time work, pensions etc) gender equality goals will not be achieved. However, the work place and the institutions linked to the workplace (trade unions, etc) continue to be mainly a men's world. Strong legislation for gender equality is necessary to abolish discrimination of women in the labour market.

- **Gender equality plans should be established at the level of the workplace.** These should be developed in **consultation with male and female workers**, in order to contribute to a reflection on the whole structure of gender equality in the work organisation.
- Both workplace policies, as well as public policies, must **address the childcare needs of employees** (men and women).
- In order to break the gender segregation in the labour market, mechanisms to counteract choices based on gender stereotypes must be integrated into the educational and lifelong learning programmes. Stereotypes, often embedded in social legislation, not taking into account women and men's actual capacities must be abandoned, including those related to physical capacity. **Men should be actively encouraged to choose professions and educational programmes currently dominated by women** (health sector, education, etc).

Furthermore, women need to be fully and **equally represented at all levels in trade unions and employers associations**, in order to enable a more critical reflection on the role and position of women and men in the labour market.

3.3 Breaking gender stereotypes

Breaking gender stereotypes is a long process, which must be supported by more firm public policies in all areas (parental leave arrangements, legislation on women in decision-making, etc). However, in order to mobilise men for gender equality, some particular areas and actors can play an essential role in breaking gender stereotypes.

Sports

Sport is still a male dominated domain, both when it comes to athletes and coaches, but also as spectators and consumers in the sports entertainment industry. On the other hand many children, both boys and girls, are involved in sports at an early age outside their school activities and many women are interested in and/or involved in sports.

- **National and international sports organisations** (the International Olympic Committee, various international sports federations, etc) should develop programmes for gender equality, including positive actions, if needed; and ensure that they do not reinforce gender stereotypes. These organisations could and should also play a role in disseminating alternative realistic images of men and women.
- **Integrating a critical gender equality reflection in sports associations** is an opportunity to reach young boys and girls. Sports clubs and associations with activities for boys and girls should develop their knowledge and skills in detecting and counteracting gender stereotypes, and formulate gender equality action plans for the association.

The media and advertising

The media and advertising can play an important role in promoting alternative images of men and women based on equality. However, in the absence of strong policies and commitments to gender equality, the media can unfortunately also contribute to increased stereotyping and sexism.

- **All media should develop a code of conduct and action plans for gender equality, including more women in decision-making in the media.** These plans should address how men and women are portrayed, what issues are raised and how, and in which ways the information provided support or not gender equality developments, and the breaking of gender stereotypes. **Public service media should be taking a lead in this process.**
- Specific training on gender equality issue and the treatment of the image of women and men should be given in journalists' schools and other media related training establishments.
- **Sexism in both advertising and the media should be prohibited** as racism is prohibited in national legislation in many countries.

3.4 Education systems

Intervention in the education system is a very important tool to raise awareness and influence boys and young men, and eventually to change men's behaviour towards one that supports equality between women and men.

- **Ministries of education should develop a gender equality plan**, which covers the whole range of issues related to the educational system. The plan should clearly indicate how a gender perspective be integrated into all educational activities and material at all levels, and in the educational organisation (recruitment, staffs' skills development, etc). The plan should demonstrate how the educational system would play its role in socialising boys (and girls) towards behaviours and values based on gender equality.

- **Specific courses on gender equality issues**, should be developed at all levels in the education system, and integrated into the obligatory curricula. Specific gender equality educational actions and courses, targeting boys and girls respectively as well as together, should be developed. These courses must include equality between men and women in relation to sexual behaviour and practices.
- **Pre-school pedagogy based on gender equality** should be put in place and apply to all subsidised childcare institutions.
- **Specific courses on gender equality as well as the integration of a gender equality perspective in all areas** should be obligatory in all teachers' education programmes. Training for teachers on gender equality as part of their life long learning should also be put in place.
- Institutions of **higher education** should develop gender equality- and feminist perspectives in all fields, including in research activities.
- Educational institutions at all levels must ensure that girls and women enjoy a non-sexist learning environment. Sexual harassment and all expressions of male power over women, including **degrading language and sexist insults, must be prohibited in schools.**

3.5 Sexuality, and reproductive rights and health

Gender identities and the relationships between women and men are closely linked to the construction of sexuality and sexual practices, and also of sexualised violence. Many women around the world are denied control over their bodies from a very early age and throughout their whole adult lives. International laws define the human rights for both men and women to be informed about, and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice. The sexual experiences and reproductive life of women are too often determined by men, often denying women the possibility of a satisfying and safe sexual life. Therefore, addressing issues of the sexual behaviour and the sexual practices of men is relevant to shape more equal relationship between women and men.

Prevention of HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

In order to take effective action to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and STDs, policies targeting men's sexual behaviour and responsibility must be put in place. Good practices developed in this area should be shared and spread between countries, and adequately funded.

- Programmes working towards **developing greater responsibility among men in relation to their sexual behaviour**, including a commitment to protect the health and choices of their sexual partners should be established at international, national, and local levels.

Reproductive rights and health

Patriarchal ideologies are at the heart of denying women's rights to control their own bodies when it comes to deciding freely if and when to have children.

- Campaigns and laws breaking with patriarchal ideologies must be put in place, to **ensure that men fully recognise and respect women's rights to decide if and when to have children**, and that women have access to the contraception of their choice, and access to safe and legal abortion.

Changing men's perception on male and female sexuality

The way men and women's sexuality is socially constructed serves to maintain inequalities between women and men. Pornographic production is sometimes the only 'sexual education' of boys, and is totally contradictory to the aim of constructing a male sexuality based on equality and respect for women. Actions that challenge stereotypes of men's (and women's)

sexual behaviour are essential, in order to develop a culture where women's and men's sexuality are equally valued, where women and men have equal choice, and where the safety of women and men is guaranteed.

- **Sex education programmes** should be put in place for boys and girls as an obligatory part of the education curricula – focusing on the social construction of sexual behaviour, and gender identities. These must include a zero tolerance for all forms of male sexual violence, and be based on the principle of equality between women and men in sexual relationships.
- **Male perpetrators of sexual violence should be increasingly pursued and convicted** for their crimes in order to give clear signals to men that violence against women is always unacceptable behaviour. All professionals involved in the process (police, prosecutors, judges, etc) must be fully aware and trained to fulfil this task.

3.6 Civil society and social movements

In recent years there has been increased attention (and funding) given to men organising together in relation to gender equality issues. **Some of these projects have been successful in promoting a greater awareness among men of gender equality issues, while a few have been used as platforms to work against the gender equality agenda and/or to distort the concept of gender equality.** For example, in some cases men's groups have been arguing that they have been 'marginalized' in the movement towards greater equality between women and men, arguing that men are 'discriminated' against in the movement towards gender equality. In reality, very few men have yet seriously been interested in mobilising for equality between women and men, and women's activists have often welcomed the ones that have done so with great enthusiasm.

Support to civil society, and in particular to women's organisations, is vital to create greater awareness in society about issues of equality between women and men. Supporting actions that target and/or involve men and boys in the move towards equality between women and men is an important part of a strategy that must remain multifaceted.

- In order for actions by men or targeting men to build further and develop the legitimate claims for equality as expressed by the women's movement, **male initiatives should indicate how they work in partnership with women's organisations and feminist actors.** This would also guarantee that we do not support networks that organise as men in order to act as obstacles to a gender equality agenda.
- More **space for meetings and partnerships between men** interested in supporting the gender equality agenda, **and women's associations/ feminist actors**, should be made available at all levels.