



Exchange of good practices on gender equality

The role of men in
gender equality
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Comments Paper - Ireland

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Men in Gender Equality - Ireland

Niall Crowley,
Independent Expert

1. Introduction

1.1. A European Level Standard?

The 2006 Opinion on Men in Gender Equality of the Advisory Committee for Equality between Women and Men¹ in effect establishes a template against which to assess work on men in gender equality. The Opinion set out that 'the primary objective for work on men in gender equality must be to strengthen the role and contribution of men in challenging and changing the structures, institutional policies and practices, and culture (including stereotypical attitudes) that generate and sustain the inequalities experienced by women'.

It recommended a strategic approach to meet the following challenges: Develop an institutional infrastructure adequate to develop and drive forward a strategic approach to work on men in gender equality; Develop an adequate knowledge base to underpin work on men in gender equality; Build solidarity and leadership from men for equality for women; To stimulate and support men to play caring and family roles; Support new labour market roles for men including through seeking to shape and inform choices made by boys and young men; Facilitate the emergence of new models of masculinity and new thinking about and expectations of men, men's behaviour and the role of men; and Identify and meet needs specific to men as men.

2. Policy Context

2.1. Men in Gender Equality

The core gender equality strategy in Ireland is the National Woman's Strategy 2007-2016². Progress reports have been published for 2007/2008, 2009 and 2011/2012 and a mid-term review in 2014. The Department of Justice and Equality is responsible for preparing and coordinating this strategy. The approach in developing a National Woman's Strategy as opposed to a National Gender Equality Strategy is not conducive to including any significant focus on men in gender equality.

The strategy does include a focus on 'the significant role played by women in the provision of unremunerated caring for both the nuclear and the extended family'. However the focus then moves to 'the availability of childcare and supports with

¹ Opinion on Men in Gender Equality, Advisory Committee for Equality between Women and Men, European Commission, Brussels, 2006 - http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/other-institutions/advisory-committee/index_en.htm

² National Women's Strategy 2007-2016, Government of Ireland, 2007 - <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/National%20Womens%20Strategy%20PDF.pdf/Files/National%20Womens%20Strategy%20PDF.pdf>

other caring needs are central supports to women who most frequently have to meet the challenge of linking family responsibilities, sometimes including extended family, with work commitments'. The focus on work-life balance draws from socio-economic goals and goals of wellbeing rather than any focus on more equal sharing of caring and domestic responsibilities. The strategy does point to the need for cultural change 'within the family where greater sharing of caring responsibilities and domestic chores between partners is required' but without associated actions.

The strategy suggests that subject choice in second level education requires attention. It commits that "in evaluating the work of individual schools, Department of Education and Science inspectors will continue to highlight gender imbalances in subject uptake at individual school level and advise on ways of addressing such imbalances'. It points to the role of guidance for students to assist in the choices.

A focus on men in gender equality is most evident in policy and programmes related to gender-based violence. COSC is the National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence. It has provided grants to three different organisations working to change the attitudes and behaviours of perpetrators of domestic violence and has established a Perpetrator Intervention Programme Committee. However, these programmes cater for small numbers of men each year, a tiny proportion of abusive men. COSC has also provided grants to an organisation to raise awareness of domestic violence experienced by men.

A range of men's organisations has emerged in Ireland. They include organisations that essentially contest feminism, in particular those working on father's issues or issues of domestic violence experienced by men. They include organisations offering some form of solidarity with feminism, in particular those working with perpetrators of domestic violence. It includes organisations responding to particular needs of men including health needs, rural isolation and long-term unemployment.

2.2. Care

The unequal sharing of caring responsibilities between women and men has not been addressed in policy or practice. The Department of Justice and Equality and, more recently, the Equality Authority³ have commissioned and assessed time-use studies to highlight these inequalities. The Equality Authority found that women's committed time is 39 minutes higher on average per day than men's, one extra month per year. On weekdays men spend considerably more time in paid employment/study than women and women spend substantially more time on caring and household work. These patterns were replicated on weekends.

Maternity leave is well developed in Ireland. Parental leave can be taken by either parent and is available for each child for a total of 18 working weeks per child since 2013. The 2013 regulation also empowers parents returning to work after this leave to ask for a change in their work pattern or working hours for a set period. The employer must consider such a request but is not obliged to grant it. Parental leave is unpaid. There is no paternity leave. Statutory leave entitlements are still premised on women being primarily responsible for caring for young children.

³ The Distribution of Caring, Housework and Employment among Women and Men in Ireland', Russell H. & McGinnity F., Equality Authority & ESRI, Dublin, 2008 - <http://equality.ie/Files/Gender-Inequalities-in-Time-Use.pdf>

The mid-term review of the National Women's Strategy⁴ identified that while 'Ireland offers the opportunity for flexible work arrangements which are open to men and to women, there is a significant need to increase the uptake of fathers of these leaves. This could be achieved by legislative means, making the sharing of some leaves mandatory, as is happening to a growing extent in other jurisdictions'. It also noted the 'need for awareness raising campaigns to increase the numbers of men engaging in family friendly leave arrangements'.

An innovative approach to supporting work-life balance was The National Framework Committee for Work/Life Balance Policies. This Committee was chaired by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and involved Government Departments, the social partners and the Equality Authority. It organised an annual work-life balance day, published research in on the provision of, uptake of, and attitudes to work-life balance, provided supports of training and advice to employers to put work-life balance initiatives in place, and provided funds for social partner organisations to take action on this issue. This Committee was terminated in 2010.

2.3. Segregation

Segregation in education reflects choices by boys and girls and women and men in the disciplines and subjects they pursue in education. These choices can be influenced by gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles.

In 2006 the Department of Education and Science published Equal Measures⁵. This was to 'support school communities by providing resources for exploring and reflecting on gender practices and relations within the school'. It provides guidance on developing a gender equality policy for the school and offers three templates to audit the full spectrum of situations in a school from a gender equality perspective. It notes that 'a central aim of education is to ensure equality of opportunity for all children. Expectation, based on stereotyped gender roles can inhibit the child's educational development'. It provides a wide range of exemplar lessons for all classes that enable an exploration of gender issues and gender stereotypes.

Guidelines⁶ for the provision of guidance to students in second level schools define that 'the guidance and counselling process aims to help students to develop an awareness and acceptance of their talents and abilities; to explore possibilities and opportunities; to grow in independence and to take responsibility for themselves; to make informed choices about their lives and to follow through on those choices'. They state, 'the school guidance programme throughout junior cycle should enable students to begin their exploration of career options. The programme should encourage consideration of a wide range of educational, training and career choices, not bounded by traditional considerations of gender or social stereotyping'.

⁴ National Women's Strategy 2007-2016, Mid-term Review, Prepared by the Gender Equality Division of the Department of Justice and Equality, 2014 - <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/FINAL%20Mid-Term%20Review%20of%20NWS.pdf/Files/FINAL%20Mid-Term%20Review%20of%20NWS.pdf>

⁵ Equal Measures, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin, 2006 - www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Equal-Measures.pdf

⁶ Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9(c) of the Education Act 1998, relating to students' access to appropriate guidance, Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2005 - http://www.ncge.ie/uploads/pp_guidelines_second_level_schools_9c.pdf

3. Policy Debate

3.1. Economic Crisis

The economic crisis has had a negative impact on the pursuit of gender equality, and within this, on any focus on men and gender equality. Gender equality is largely invisible in public and political discourse.

The infrastructure for gender equality has been diminished. Gender equality units in the Department of Justice and Equality and in the Department of Education and Science funded under the National Development Plan 2000- 2006 have been closed. The National Framework Committee for Work-Life Balance Policies ceased. The budget of the Equality Authority was reduced by 43% in 2009. The budget of the National Women's Council of Ireland was cut by 35% in 2012.

Educational infrastructure that enabled gender equality has been diminished. The removal of the ex-quota Guidance hours has meant that school principals have to choose between subject provision and guidance counselling. There has been a reduction of guidance and counselling services in schools as a result. Many young people cannot access the assistance of Guidance Counsellors when needed.

3.2. Flexible Working Arrangements

The Public Service Agreement between Government and public sector trade unions marked a low point in relation to commitment to work-life balance. Government put forward a position that was hostile to reconciliation in the Agreement and trade unions were unable or unwilling to resist it.

The Agreement states that the number and variety of work-sharing patterns in place, in some sectors of the public service, have created a significant management challenge and overhead. This is impacting on the capacity of organisations to deliver their services. The Agreement sets out that work-sharing arrangements are to be reviewed on an annual basis and that management reserves the right to refuse access to the scheme, to require a person to vary their work-sharing arrangements, or to require a person to resume full-time work. It states that it is necessary to revise flexible working arrangements to better reflect the current needs of the organisations in the context of falling numbers in the public services and changing demands. This Agreement is a setback for a public sector that had been an acknowledged leader on issues of reconciliation in Irish workplaces.

3.3. Statutory Leave

Family Leave legislation is promised for 2015. The political debate on this has been promising and suggests potential to achieve some change in relation to statutory leave arrangements from the perspective of men in gender equality.

In a recent speech the Minister for Justice and Equality, Frances Fitzgerald, stated that 'the sharing of family and caring responsibilities is a pre-requisite to promoting true gender equality in the labour market and to allowing both parents to undertake a caring role within the family' and that the 'most glaring flaw I see in our current legislation is the lack of support for fathers around the birth and early days of their child's life'.

The new legislation is to consolidate maternity, adoptive, parental and carer's leave. The Minister highlighted, the 'most glaring flaw I see in our current legislation is the lack of support for fathers around the birth and early days of their child's life' She suggested, 'we could address this through a dedicated period of paternity leave'. She noted that 'another option is to examine parents sharing existing maternity leave' which would 'enable working fathers to take a more active role in caring for their children'.

4. Transferability

4.1. Leave Arrangements

All three papers reference parental leave arrangements as a key site for making progress on men and gender equality. The paper from Finland describes a Governmental package moving towards a sharing of parental leave and an equal split in income received from the State for caring at home for children. The paper from Iceland describes legislation providing three months of relatively flexible paid paternity leave. The paper from Austria describes the introduction of unpaid leave for a month for fathers at various levels of the public administration.

This emphasis on paternity and parental leave holds potential for transferability to Ireland. New family leave legislation and the evident commitment of the Minister for Justice and Equality offer opportunity. There is potential to introduce paternity leave and sharing of other leaves. Cost issues pose a challenge The Minister, in her speech, stated, 'of course finding the money's going to be hard, whether in the public or private sector. But we mustn't start there. It's our duty to aim at the idea, not be halted by negative possible situations'.

4.2. Infrastructure

The paper from Finland describes a reorganisation of the gender equality machinery to combine the Men's subcommittee with that on Women's and Men's Images in the Media and the publication of a Government paper on Men and Gender Equality. The paper from Iceland describes a working group on engaging men in gender equality established and reporting under the Action Plan on Gender Equality. The paper from Austria identifies the Department for Men's Politics, situated in the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs.

There is some institutional infrastructure developed in Ireland on men and gender equality in the fields of men's health and of domestic violence. However, it is unlikely that the infrastructure described in the three papers would be transferable given the current state of, and approach within, gender equality strategies.

4.3. Flexible Working Arrangements

There is little reference to flexible working arrangements in the three papers. The paper from Austria describes legislation entitling parents to parental part-time work. This is unlikely to be transferable to Ireland. On the other hand the practice of the former National Framework Committee for Work-Life Balance Policies could be considered for transferability and for re-establishment in the Irish context.

5. Conclusion

5.1. A Strategic Approach?

The Irish situation is rendered more complex and difficult due to the economic crisis. However, at no point, has it reflected the strategic approach as recommended by the Advisory Committee on Equality for Women and Men. The institutional infrastructure has been diminished but has never been designed with a view to enabling a strategic approach to work on men in gender equality. While some men in positions of prominence have taken positions of leadership and solidarity for gender equality, there has been no concerted effort to build this leadership and solidarity. There has been little attention given to the need to stimulate men to play caring and family roles. New models of masculinity have not been promoted.

There has been a focus on the choices made by boys and young men in relation to their education. However, the guidance supports that could have been deployed in this area have been cut back. There have been a number of initiatives in relation to men's health including a National Men's Health Policy⁷. Some non-governmental organisations have raised issues of rural isolation and mental health for men.

⁷ National Men's Health Policy 2008-2013, Department of Health and Children, 2008 - <http://www.mhfi.org/menshealthpolicy.pdf>