

## **Work and life challenges and gender change**

### Synopsis

Gender in the broad sense of gender equality in society differs from gender in the narrow sense. It is the broad dimension of gender equality and inequality that now emerges as a key link for social progress and development. In the Nordic region, especially, researchers conclude that gender equality is important for welfare development. Fertility and economic innovation are other associated dimensions. Increasingly, gender equality emerges as linked to better economic performance, fertility and quality of life (see overhead presentation for source examples and diagrams).

However, the challenges of changing European labour markets, institutions and culture in order to facilitate gender equality and work/family balance are formidable. A change of norms and culture can be observed, yet economic gender disparity remains. Interview studies with men find a typical “main sequence” of events that illustrates this conflict. New conditions in private life often emerge as the starting point. These conditions include a partner or spouse with a more professional orientation and more education than before; birth of a child or other caring tasks, and the men’s own reorientation towards active fathering and related life quality and health issues. In this situation, men’s attempt to change working conditions are often blocked by traditional organizational structures and cultures that continue to valorize non-caring while caring is devalued (“sprinkle system”) and is still linked to male norms (“preference principle”).

These external problems combine with many men’s (and women’s) own ambivalence towards change, with the net effect that conditions remain much more traditional than e.g. opinions would indicate. Recent studies also indicate, however, that changes are possible and that employers as well as employees and communities can benefit from them.

### Main sources:

Holter, Øystein Gullvåg: Can Men Do It? Men and gender equality - the Nordic experience. TemaNord 2003:510, Copenhagen

Holter, Øystein Gullvåg 2006a: Men's work and family reconciliation in Europe. Men and Masculinities (in print)

Holter, Øystein Gullvåg et al: Welfare, Masculinity and Social Innovation – A Nordic five country study. In print (Gidlund publisher, Sweden)

Puchert, Ralf; Gärtner, Marc; Höyng, Stephan et al 2005: Work Changes Gender - Men and Equality in the Transition of Labour Forms. Barbara Budrich Publishers, Leverkusen