

## OVERCOMING GENDER BLINDNESS IN CAREERS GUIDANCE

Most people in Denmark believe that equal opportunities for women and men are a reality in their country. In fact, female employment rates stand at over 80%, indicating that there are hardly any barriers to women's access to the labour market. However, a closer look at labour market statistics reveals huge gender gaps in economic sectors and occupations and a disproportionately low number of women in senior positions. In studying the educational system the same divisions appear, as girls and boys tend to choose highly traditional career paths. It appears that despite all of the country's long-standing gender equality policies and equal treatment legislation, gender stereotypes persist and continue to be the root cause of these disparities.

Led by the Danish Research Centre on Gender Equality, which is based at Roskilde University, the EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) '[Unge, køn og karriere](#)' (Youth, Gender and Career) set out to widen the vocational choices of women and men and to break the strong gender segregation in the labour market. The DP focused on the crucial years in the lives of young people when dreams about future careers are turning into more concrete ideas. Careers advisors and teachers in primary and lower secondary schools and also parents were targeted as groups that play an important role during this period.

### NEW INSIGHTS ARE GENERATING INNOVATIVE ACTION

To establish a sound basis of knowledge about the how counselling was provided and the impact that it made, the project carried out two major surveys. One looked into the practices of careers advisors and the other assessed the experiences of young women and men within the Danish school guidance system.

#### COUNSELLING TOWARDS TRADITION OR RENEWAL?

The [first study](#), which was based on interviews with a representative sample of careers advisors, identified three different approaches to counselling:

- **Gender blindness:** gender is 'invisible' and not considered to be a significant factor in the counselling process. Gender-blind guidance counsellors do not reflect on the gender perspective in their work and tend to think and act on the basis of cultural preconceptions and myths about women and men;
- **Gender neutrality:** counselling follows the principle of equal treatment very strictly and provides guidance to pupils on their own terms. The wishes of the pupil are used as the point of departure in the counselling process and ideas about a job or an education that is not directly related to the pupil's own vision are hardly ever proposed;
- **Gender consciousness:** gender aspects are taken into account and seen as decisive factors in vocational choices. This paves the way for the introduction of gender equality considerations which in turn can enhance and multiply the options available to boys or girls. Thus, the prevailing perceptions of what is masculine and feminine can be challenged.

The DP found that most of the Danish counsellors regard themselves as gender neutral but that gender stereotypes are often hidden just below the surface. *"They are not 'neutral' at all in supporting girls and boys in making all kinds of educational and vocational choices", says Aase Rieck-Sørensen, one of the project managers, "they tend to give advice that is in line with traditional male and female occupations. In reality these advisors are 'gender blind'."* The interviews carried out for the study shed light on this phenomenon. Most counsellors claimed to see only the person before them and argued that gender is not relevant. *"But they also see a boy or a girl"* adds project manager Sine Lehn, *"and without knowing or wanting to, they do in fact treat them unequally."* An example from an interview with a male counsellor demonstrates what that means.

Interviewer: *"If you have a female pupil who cannot get into upper secondary school. What other possibilities would you offer her?"*

Counsellor:	<i>“If it should be something still a bit academic, it could be the commercial college, their basic education programme ... In most cases, they would be educated as office assistants or sales assistants. If they continue school for two more years they can become a lawyer’s or doctor’s secretary. But there have been some who wanted to become doctors...”</i>
Interviewer:	<i>“If you meet boys who want to become doctors, but don’t have the abilities – do you also advise them to become a doctor’s secretary?”</i>
Counsellor:	<i>“No. No. The thought would never occur to me, to be honest. But of course I do know that this could also be a man’s job.”</i>

The study revealed that the gender conscious counsellors are in a small minority and fall into two categories. The first of these reproduces gender stereotypes because the counsellors perceive girls and boys as being so different, especially if they have an ethnic minority background, that gender-related occupational choices seem natural and unproblematic. By contrast, the second category views the gender equality perspective as a significant part of their counselling and is very much aware of gender specific barriers to young people’s occupational choices. Those counsellors don’t think that the gender-segregated labour market is unchangeable and are convinced that gender-conscious counselling can support young people in making non-traditional choices in education or training.

### **A NEED FOR MORE ENCOURAGEMENT OF NON-TRADITIONAL CHOICES**

The survey on young peoples’ experiences of counselling, gender, and occupational choices explored different aspects. These included the limits of ‘free choice’ when opting for a career path, gender as a dimension in the decision-making of boys and girls and the counselling



experience of those who had considered non-traditional training or education. Some 800 young people, all of whom were born in 1982, responded to the DP’s questionnaire and, in addition, 25 had face-to face interviews. The majority of these young people felt that their choices were mainly based on their personal aspirations and were not influenced by other factors such as family background or gender. Almost all of the respondents were convinced that both women and men can successfully undertake the same jobs and careers. On the other hand, 55% of the women and 62% of the men believed that there is a strong connection between gender and

skills, as *“Men are more competent in certain areas, women in others.”* In general, it appears that more young women (35%) than men (16%) have been contemplating a job or an education in an area that is dominated by the other sex. Both boys and girls think that the most important feature of their future career is that it provides a personal and professional challenge.

About half of the sample had a very clear idea about how they would proceed with their education after the end of lower secondary school. Unsurprisingly, these young people saw the counselling received in school as not being significant in influencing their choices. Amongst the other half that had no such view, 20% found that the counselling meant a great deal to them. They said that the counsellor had some, or even much more, influence on their decision and had been able to offer them better support than their parents, and this was particularly true when the parents had no or low educational attainments. Women and men with non-traditional inclinations were over-represented amongst those respondents who had not been offered sufficient counselling or felt they had stood alone in making their choice. Like Hans who wanted to become a hairdresser and explained *“I had no knowledge of the trade. I talked to my parents and my class teacher because the educational counsellor got so annoyed when I said I wanted to become a hairdresser, that she wouldn’t give me any information about the conditions”*.

## TRAINING SEMINARS AS EYE OPENERS FOR COUNSELLORS AND PARENTS

Based on all these insights, the DP developed a training programme for careers advisors and teachers that aimed to raise their awareness of the gender dimension in their work and to improve their knowledge of the mechanisms that reproduce segregation in the labour market. Implemented throughout the country in 2003 and 2004, the programme attracted a large number of participants. Counsellors presented their own cases which were discussed in the light of the DP's findings. Whilst a fairly high degree of understanding concerning women's interests in non-traditional occupations emerged, a lot of mental blocks were discovered when it came to offering career paths in traditional female domains to young men. Many counsellors expressed doubts such as *"Will boys even think about a job in those areas, given the low status and pay, say, in the health and care sector?"* or *"Are these jobs really suitable for men?"* The group discussions stimulated further reflection on the nature of male employment in the future as traditional male jobs, particularly in the industry, are disappearing due to globalisation.

In parallel, the DP ran courses for parents of students in forms 7 to 10 of lower secondary school. These were organised in cooperation with school counsellors and teachers and provided parents with information on current and future labour market perspectives with the aim of stimulating them to become less stereotyped in their thinking about educational choices. Before each course, pupils brought home a form to be filled in separately by the young person and her or his parents. The idea was that this would trigger a 'family discussion' about the pupil's future. This exercise was then followed-up during the course when parents were helped to reflect on their child's own competencies and career aspirations, as compared to their expectations. Parents responded very positively to this method which often generated an on-going dialogue at home. *"Mothers and fathers were keen to learn more about the implications of the changing labour market for their children's future and, in many cases, they were astounded about the gender division in training, education and employment,"* reports Aase Rieck-Sørensen, *"In spite of many years of work experience, most of them were not aware of the disparities in their own workplaces."* This project manager is convinced that the courses stimulated new insights and helped to change the attitudes and perceptions of both parents and guidance counsellors. *"Even if it will take time to see the impact in terms of behaviour, she says, "we can conclude that gender is now on the agenda of a large number of counsellors who, before, had not seen it as being important for their work."*



## INFLUENCING THE REFORM OF THE DANISH GUIDANCE SYSTEM

From the earliest stages of planning and scheduling its activities, the DP has been strategically targeting the reform of the Danish guidance system. The aim of this reform, which was completed in 2004, was to improve the quality and effectiveness of careers counselling and to streamline the existing guidance services. Consequently, the DP sought to influence both the legislation process and the intended creation of new guidance centres, as well as the future training of careers advisors. The policy debate about such changes appeared to be an ideal moment to introduce gender mainstreaming.

For years, gender equality had not been an issue in the context of guidance and counselling. *"In 2002,"* explains Aase Rieck-Sørensen, *"things began to move. With emerging skills gaps caused by demographic changes, both the careers counsellors and the Ministry of Education showed a*

*growing interest in developing the potential of all young people, and hence, in adopting a new gender sensitive approach, which makes it possible.”*

In December 2003, the Minister of Education brought together a number of experts and stakeholders to participate in an ongoing ‘Dialogue Forum’ in order to inspire and follow the development and implementation of the reform. Two partners in the EQUAL DP, the Research Centre on Gender Equality and the Danish University of Education, were nominated to join the forum. In addition, following the dissemination of the results of the DP’s two surveys, the project managers were invited to speak at numerous policy events that accompanied the reform process.

At the same time, discussions among careers counsellors increased in both numbers and intensity throughout the country and this engendered a large interest in participating in the DP’s seminars and visibility events. The mid-term conference in February 2003 on ‘When dreams come true - about young people’s educational and vocational choices and the gender segregated labour market’ attracted 250 participants with another 200 applicants being placed on the waiting list. All this debate created pressure from the bottom-up, a pressure that had a great influence on the decision-making process. As a result, a gender dimension is now firmly enrooted in the reformed Danish careers guidance system. Also, the Ministry of Education has ensured that the new higher education programme, which has replaced the large number of different and relatively short sector-specific training courses for guidance counsellors, now integrates the gender equality aspects of counselling in a structured and professional way.

The reform dismantled the rather complex structure of the Danish guidance system that had had 26 different types of guidance services offered by municipalities, the public employment services and educational institutions such as primary and lower secondary schools that were at the heart of the DP’s work. Since August 2004, there have been only two types of guidance services - [Youth Guidance Centres](#) with responsibility for the transition from compulsory school to youth education at upper secondary level and [Regional Guidance Centres](#) that are in charge of guidance for the transition from youth education to higher education and also serve the needs of adults. The new Youth Guidance Centres are, however, continuing to provide counselling in schools, and some of these are keen to join the DP’s second round EQUAL project.

The Danish Government is very aware of the expertise accumulated by the DP. It is currently promoting a range of activities, many of which involve the Gender Research Centre in Roskilde and make use of the EQUAL achievements. For instance, the Ministry of Education is a partner, amongst others, in a new EQUAL project, which is extending the focus of gender and guidance by including ethnicity and is also building on the first round EQUAL outcomes. *“The Minister for Gender Equality took up the issue at a ministerial meeting in the Nordic Council of Ministers and as a result several Nordic activities will be implemented during the autumn of 2005. The focus of the activities will be awareness raising amongst parents, teachers and pupils”,* reports Vibeke Abel, the Deputy Secretary General at the Ministry for Gender Equality. *“In addition”,* she says, *“our Ministry has formed an inter-ministerial working group with the participation of all the relevant ministries as well as the social partners. The working group will publish a report with concrete proposals on how to overcome the gender segregated education and career choices, as well as the segregation of the labour market.”*

## **LEARNING FROM TRANSNATIONAL DIFFERENCES**

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Five countries, five labour markets and even more different ways of addressing the persistent gender gaps in employment were the points of departure for the Transnational Partnership [EQUAL Voices](#) that linked the Danish project to partners in [Austria](#), [Finland](#), [Spain](#) and the [United Kingdom](#). Whilst partners followed different avenues to dismantling the gender division of the labour market such as training girls and young women in non-traditional occupations (Austria and Finland), supporting women to become entrepreneurs (Spain) or gendering careers guidance (Denmark and the UK), they all shared a common commitment to tackling gender and ethnic stereotyping. Getting new insights and ideas through exploring the different cultural contexts, national education, training and labour market systems and also the various levels of advancement in terms of gender equality was one of the most important outcomes of transnational exchange. *“This learning process helped us all to develop a better understanding of*

*the concept of gender mainstreaming and of the continuing need for specific actions for women and, in many cases, also for men,” concludes Aase Rieck-Sørensen.*

She feels her partnership has benefited particularly from the new methods developed by the UK partner. One example that sparked off similar ideas in Denmark was a DVD about non-traditional choices of boys and girls. By selecting different arguments on the screen, viewers can support the different characters and thus influence the end of the story. It has proved to be an excellent tool to start discussions amongst students! Another strategy which the Danes find impressive is a database containing video portraits of young people who have made non-traditional career choices and who can serve as role models to others. *“The most important lesson we learned from our English partners is that careers advisors themselves must be role models. This is something that had not occurred to us,”* admits the project manager, *“we will promote and recommend this strategy that requires recruitment policies aimed not only at establishing a gender balance amongst guidance staff, but also a critical mass of counsellors with ethnic minority backgrounds.”* With the Ministry of Education as a partner, the new EQUAL DP is in a good position to push for the implementation of this approach.

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[Link to EQUAL database description](#)

A short version of this "Success story" and other "Success stories" are available on the [EQUAL website](#)