

Overcoming gender blindness in careers guidance

Most people in Denmark believe that equal opportunities for women and men already exist in their country. The female employment rate stands at over 80%, indicating that there are hardly any barriers to women's access to the job market. However, a closer look at the statistics reveals huge gender gaps in different sectors and occupations and a disproportionately low number of women in senior positions. Similar divisions exist in education, where girls and boys tend to choose highly traditional career paths. It appears that despite the country's long-standing gender equality policies and legislation, disparities remain, with gender stereotypes at their root.

Led by the Danish Research Centre on Gender Equality 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 break the strong gender segregation in the jobs market. The project focused on the crucial years in the lives of young people when dreams about future careers turn into more concrete plans. Careers advisors and teachers in primary and lower secondary schools were targeted along with parents as groups that play an important role during this period.

Careers advisors are key actors

To start with, the project wanted to establish a sound knowledge basis about how careers counselling was provided and the impact that it made. The DP therefore carried out two major surveys: one looking into the practices of careers advisors and the other assessing the experiences of young women and men within the Danish school guidance system.

On the basis of the studies, the project developed a training programme for careers advisors and teachers – aiming to raise their awareness of the gender dimension in their work and improve their knowledge of factors leading to occupational segregation. Implemented throughout the country in 2003 and 2004, the programme attracted a large number of participants. Counsellors presented their own cases and discussed these in the light of the DP's research.

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. The group discussions stimulated further reflection on the nature of male employment in the future as many traditional male jobs, particularly in industry, are threatened by globalisation.

Promoting family discussion

In parallel, the EQUAL project ran courses for parents of students in years 7–10 of lower secondary school. These were organised in cooperation with school counsellors and teachers and provided parents with information on current and future job market perspectives, with the aim of stimulating them to become less stereotyped in their thinking about educational choices. Before the course, pupils brought home a form to be filled in separately by the child and his or her parents, with the idea of triggering a "family discussion" about the pupil's future. This was followed-up during the course when parents were encouraged to think about their child's career aspirations as compared to their own expectations. Parents responded very positively to this method, which often generated an ongoing dialogue at home.

From the earliest stages of planning and scheduling its activities, the DP aimed to have an influence on planned government reforms to streamline the Danish career guidance system. This policy debate seemed to be an ideal opportunity to encourage gender mainstreaming. Consequently, the DP sought to influence both the legislation process and the planned creation of new guidance centres, as well as the future training of careers advisors.

For years, gender equality had not been an issue in the context of guidance and counselling. "In 2002," explains Aase Rieck-Sörensen, "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 partic-

ipate in an ongoing "Dialogue Forum" 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.

Integrating the gender dimension in careers guidance

At the same time, the DP's events helped provoke a broad debate on gender and career choices which brought a bottom-up influence to bear on the decision-making process. As a result, a gender dimension is now firmly enrooted in the reformed Danish careers guidance system. The Education Ministry is one of the partners in a new EQUAL project to extend the focus of gender and guidance by including ethnicity, building on the first round EQUAL outcomes. It has also formed an inter-ministerial working group to report on concrete proposals to overcome gender segregation in education and career choices, as well as the labour market.

The DP feels it has particularly benefited particularly from new methods developed by transnational partners, under the EQUAL Voices partnership involving other projects from Austria, Finland, Spain and the UK. *"The 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, one of the project managers.

A more detailed version and other EQUAL success stories can be found at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm



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