

MEN TAKING THE LEAD

Employment patterns of women and men in the Netherlands reflect the male breadwinner model. Men work full-time throughout their lives and have little time to spare for the care of their offspring. Women also tend to work full-time, but only until they become mothers. After the birth of the first child, 40% of the women start working part-time and 25% leave the labour market, often for ever. Even if recent research has actually indicated that the 'new' men in the Dutch society are taking their responsibilities as fathers and partners more seriously than in previous generations, the bulk of the work in Dutch households still seems to fall on female shoulders. Obviously, this traditional pattern makes it difficult to follow the Guidelines of the European Employment Strategy (EES) that are urging Member States to attract more people into the labour market and to make work a real option for all. The 2004 Recommendations of the Council require the Netherlands to take action to facilitate transition from part-time to full-time jobs, thus enabling the fuller participation of women in employment, after the early years of raising a family.

ADDRESSING AN ETERNAL PROBLEM: TASK SHARING AT HOME

The '[Journey along cultures](#)' Development Partnership (DP), coordinated by the National Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, was aiming to create more employment opportunities for women by focusing most of its activities on men. The message conveyed through a huge media campaign was clear and simple – *"If more men were prepared to become more involved with tasks in the home, more women would be able to reconcile family and working life."* At a recent European conference entitled 'Working men – caring fathers,' Art Jan de Geus, the Head of the Ministry that initiated and led the EQUAL project, emphasised this message. *"In view of the ageing population, we need all hands on deck,"* he said and he challenged fathers *"to work less as long as your children are small, to share care and homemaking tasks with your partners and to make more use of your rights, as laid down in the Work and Care Act and probably in your Labour Agreement as well!"* At the same time, he urged employers to allow young fathers to slow down their career commitments during the crucial early years of raising their children.

AN INNOVATIVE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR ATTITUDINAL CHANGES

Lasting for one and a half years, the DP's professional media campaign with the slogan of *"Who does what?"*, has stimulated a lot of attention and has also kick-started a national debate in the Netherlands. In fact, three months after its launch, the campaign was known by 55% of the Dutch population. It included commercials on TV and on radio, press conferences, the DP's Internet site (www.wiedoetwat.nl), a talk show (broadcast in two series of 12 programmes) and lots of free tickets for several once-off, spontaneous events.

Men were involved in the earliest stages of its planning and conception and this resulted in a tone that was light and humorous and appealed to the largest possible male audience.



TV commercials were used initially to confront men with the excuses that they offer to avoid taking on more tasks at home. For instance, one of the spots showed a man playing golf and claiming that this enabled him to network with peers, which was an absolute must in terms of his career advancement. It was too bad that his golf ambitions prevented him from picking up the kids at the childcare centre but, of course, he could rely on his wife to bring them home.

The next step in the campaign was to concentrate more

on motivation and inspiration rather than provocation by addressing some of the cultural dilemmas, which are encountered by both men and women. Whilst women may like the idea of their partners taking on tasks at home, they can often get frustrated or even annoyed when these tasks are performed in a typically 'male' way. However, men do not only face female criticism. Employers do not usually react enthusiastically if a man takes on other family responsibilities and perhaps even more off putting is the likelihood he will become the butt of jokes and ridicule from work colleagues and friends. Radio commercials and another series of TV spots were used to portray the fun and satisfaction that men gain from spending quality time with their kids and the difference that this can make to the lives of their children and partners.

The DP's website was, and still is, an extremely important communication tool. It provides factual information on relevant legislation and financial regulations, the lessons that have been learned and the good practices from daily life. With its polls, gimmicks, e-cards and popular games such as 'vacuum victim' and 'how to dream up a good excuse', it is attracting more and more visitors who keep disseminating the messages.

Men were encouraged by the campaign to start a dialogue on the equal division of family tasks with their employers and also with their colleagues and friends. With the project's assistance, this has resulted in many men making 'role sharing agreements' with their partners and/or employers. *"It needs guts to leave an important business meeting early and to say you have to pick up your daughter from childcare,"* said one father but the role sharing agreement he had negotiated with his boss made things a lot easier and also helped the company to develop a positive image as an equal opportunities employer.

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MAINSTREAMING THROUGH A POWERFUL ALLIANCE OF KEY PLAYERS

Joining forces with enterprises was the key to mainstreaming the DP's idea about role sharing agreements in the business world. After all, men seeking to play a more pro-active role as fathers and homemakers need more flexible working time arrangements instead of rigid fulltime schedules. Companies that supported the DP's action developed awareness raising strategies that stimulated their male employees to consider a more even distribution of care and other family tasks. The Apple Computer Corporation, for instance, decided to integrate the topic of reconciling work and family duties into their regular communication activities. This company developed an Internet project involving all Apple users and employees in the Netherlands. The main question that it addressed was *"How do men judge and benchmark themselves and others*



when it comes to fatherhood?" Moreover, the DP was cooperating closely with the most important Dutch business schools. With the support of the project, these schools have now included the topic of role sharing in major business conferences and their management training and education. The Chambers of Commerce and the National Association of SMEs have also followed suit. All this activity has further increased the number of role-sharing agreements between men and women at home and those between employers and employees at work

Through NGOs, such as 'Milli Görüs,' a Turkish social and religious movement and the Foundation for the Participation of Turks in the Netherlands, the DP reached out to ethnic minority groups and the issue of role sharing has even been raised in Mosques during the Friday afternoon prayers. This has triggered passionate discussions about male and female role patterns in immigrant communities, particularly amongst young people. Role sharing messages were even packaged as rap songs and presented in the framework of a special programme broadcasted by the FunX radio station that gives a voice to city youngsters from multicultural backgrounds.

Targeting the future generation of parents was another major concern of the DP. This involved secondary and vocational schools organising discussion forums using a TV talk show format that had been prepared by the DP. Young men and women negotiated on the division of family tasks, and thus the traditional career guidance process was expanded to include advice and suggestions about the combination of work, looking after young children and social involvement.

Even primary school children were targeted by the campaign. Mini-courses for classes visiting the Amsterdam Zoo were prepared, to compare the behaviour of animals with that of humans. For example, chimps have a handy system of childcare because the grandparents look after the babies when their parents are busy! Needless to say, these visits stimulated the children to discuss their own ideas about adult life and being mothers and fathers. Inevitably, this led to further discussions at home and to parents being confronted with their own performance in terms of role and task sharing.

Kidsweek, the Dutch magazine for children agreed to carry a feature in each issue over a period of a whole year and because this publication is also very popular among parents and adolescents, the DP 'was killing two, or maybe even three, birds with one stone.'

Last, but certainly not least, the DP teamed up with several well-known and popular personalities such as a captain of industry, a football star and an artist. These 'celebrities' all attended meetings and other once-off events, delivered lectures and gave interviews to newspapers and magazines.

The impact of the media campaign was monitored in great detail. Using a representative sample of 700 individual men and women the DP measured the changes in their attitudes and perceptions from the beginning to the end of the campaign.

- Three months after its launch, the campaign began to demonstrate its impact. During this period, a change of attitude was recorded in relation to the statement, *"If young children are part of the family, a mother should not have a job."* In January 2003, 40% of the respondents who had lower educational qualifications agreed with that statement, compared to only 25% in April of the same year. For those who had completed tertiary education, the figure was 38% who agreed in January but this had dropped to 30% in April.
- According to the final analysis in May 2004, 59% of men and 52% of women were reported to have discussed the division of family tasks at least once a month. Agreements on sharing those tasks were mentioned as the most frequent result of such discussions. The last telephone survey also revealed that between April 2003 and May 2004, the number of men who had negotiated task-sharing agreements rose from 67% to 88%, whilst the percentage among women remained stable at 72%.

Implementing a mainstreaming strategy from early on was the key to generating lasting change. Without the commitment of a large variety of partners representing the different worlds of education, business and the civil society, the media campaign would certainly have raised interest but would not have been able to create the kind of chain-reaction that is now happening in the Netherlands. Companies, schools and other educational institutions, sports clubs, cultural associations and grass roots groups are promoting the continued development of many of the activities that have been initiated by EQUAL.

"At the end of the day," says Project Director Marjan Jellema, "we did not change the world in just one and a half years. But the facts emerging from our monitoring exercise speak for themselves. Clearly, they are proving that our mainstreaming strategy has triggered change – even if it will take time until it develops its full impact."

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Journey along cultures

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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](#)