

# Men taking the lead

Employment patterns for 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 looking after the kids. Women tend to work full-time until they become mothers but then start working part-time or leave the labour market altogether. Even if recent research shows things are starting to change, the bulk of the work in Dutch households still seems to fall on female shoulders.

The "Journey along cultures" Development Partnership (DP), coordinated by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, aimed 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."*

## A nationwide audience

Lasting a year and a half, the DP's professional media campaign with the slogan of "Who does what?" has stimulated a lot of attention and also kick-started a national debate in the Netherlands. Three months after its launch, 55% of the Dutch population was aware of the campaign. It included commercials on TV and radio, press conferences, a website ([www.wiedoetwat.nl](http://www.wiedoetwat.nl)), talk show and several one-off events.

Men were involved in the earliest planning stages, resulting in a tone that was light and humorous appealing to the widest 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 adverts showed a man playing golf and claiming that this enabled him to network with peers and advance his career. 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.

## Getting the positive message across

The next step in the campaign was to concentrate more on motivation and inspiration rather than provocation by addressing some of the cultural dilemmas 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 when these tasks are performed in a typically "male" way. Similarly, employers are often unenthusiastic about male employees taking on extra family responsibilities. Radio and TV commercials 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 website was an important communication tool. It provides factual information on relevant legislation and financial regulations and good practices from daily life. With its polls, 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 division of family tasks with their employers and also with 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 takes guts to leave an important business meeting early and say you have to pick up your daughter from childcare," said one father, but the role sharing agreement he negotiated with his boss made things a lot easier and also helped the company develop a positive image as an equal opportunities employer.*

## Employers are crucial

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 proactive role as fathers and homemakers need more flexible working time arrangements instead of rigid full-time 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 DP also cooperated closely with Dutch business schools. With the support of the project, they have now included the topic of role sharing in major business conferences and their management training.



Through NGOs, such as "Milli Görüş" – 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 Friday afternoon prayers. This has triggered passionate discussions about male and female role patterns in immigrant communities, particularly amongst young people.

### Shaping the attitudes of tomorrow

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

Implementing a mainstreaming strategy from early on was the key to generating lasting change. Companies, schools, sports clubs, cultural associations and grassroots groups are now continuing many of the activities 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 our mainstreaming strategy has succeeded in triggering change – even if it will take time until it develops its full impact."*

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](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm)

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