

**United Nations**  
**Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) in collaboration with**  
**International Labour Organization (ILO)**  
**Joint United Nations Programmes on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)**  
**United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)**  
**Expert Group Meeting on**  
**“The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality”**  
**21 to 24 October 2003**  
**Brasilia, Brazil**

**”The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality” –  
Some Swedish and Scandinavian Experiences**

**Prepared by**  
**Lars Jalmert\***

---

\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

The basic idea and overriding goal for gender equality politics is that men and women shall have equal rights, responsibilities, obligations and opportunities in all areas of society. (This is actually in total accordance with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights) Contrary to that idea we have so far seen how unequal power relations between women and men, the gender power order, form our lives with definite obstacles to the strive for equality between women and men.

So far gender equality issues have mostly been the concern of women which is not surprising since it is always the oppressed that first sees the oppression. Men have very often regarded gender inequalities as beneficiary for them and therefore have continued, actively or passively, for upholding the unequal power relations.

We have however, come to realise that also men very often are the victims or losers in the traditional gender power order and will have to engage in the strive for equality in order to get better lives. It is not just that men get gender related diseases, early deaths and a high rate of suicides but also that men do not develop the ability to relate to women in a sensitive way including mutuality and caring.

Men's lives – as well as women's – could actually be enriched by a changed gender order towards equality and give men richer, fuller, more humane lives. Ending men's violence against women and a more active role in the families and the daily lives of their children would give huge benefits also for men.

Men and boys have to engage in work to achieve equality and during the last decades there have been some efforts directed to men in order to promote this. In this paper I will present a number of initiatives carried through in Sweden – but also from other Scandinavian countries.

When presenting the following examples I also try to draw some conclusions about what can be learned from the changes made.

### **Early father child contact**

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fathers-to-be weren't allowed to stay in the delivery room when their wives were giving birth. Almost all deliveries took place in state run hospitals since there were no private hospitals and therefore very few fathers attended their children's births. In the 1950s however a few doctors in charge allowed the fathers to attend the childbirths. Not many but a few. Still this can be seen as an early change in the policy aiming to get fathers establishing an early contact with their newborns.

In Sweden we very often talk about the launching of the parental leave system as the first important step in trying to make fathers get closer to their children and haven't highlighted the fact that there is a history before the parental leave system.

## **The parental leave system**

From the middle of the 1950s the Swedish social insurance system included a maternal benefit. In 1974 however the Swedish Government launched a parental leave system stating that both mothers and fathers were allowed to stay at home with their newborn child – although not at the same time. The state compensated the income loss with 90 per cent of the qualifying income which was the same as in the sick leave system. In 1974 you were allowed the parental benefit for 180 days.

The underlying idea behind the reform from a maternal leave benefit to a parental leave benefit is that of equality. Both women and men should have the same opportunity to combine paid work and parenthood. It is thus important that men take greater responsibility for unpaid work involving household duties and child care. Only then will conditions be created that allow women to get established and develop their talents in working life on the same conditions as men.

This idea is still governing the strive for equality and there are some progress made. In the European Union we have during the last decades seen an increased participation of women in the labour force at least in a simple statistical respect. In some countries we have also seen an increase in the amount of time that fathers spend with their children although not corresponding to how women have increased their participation in the labour force. In Sweden we have seen an increase in fathers making use of the parental leave system.

When launching the parental leave system the Swedish Government, led by late Prime Minister Olof Palme, was in the forefront of striving for equality. The launching of the parental leave reform was met by harsh opposition and was actually introduced many years before the attitudes in the society was positive to it. Having today almost 30 years perspective on it we can conclude that it was very important that the governing politicians carried it out and that it has had positive effects.

Although there have been different Governments in Sweden since 1974 there has been a consensus in trying to support men in their role as fathers. The Government's efforts to get more men involved in the gender equality issue have focused on persuading more fathers to take out parental leave but also on boosting the number of men working in schools and childcare and on supporting men involved in the work against violence.

The parental leave system has undergone a number of changes through the years and today the system looks as follows.

Leave of absence with parental benefit in connection with childbirth is provided with a total of 480 days, *to be divided between the parents*. Of these days, 60 are reserved for the father and 60 days are reserved for the mother. These days cannot be transferred. Single parents are naturally allowed to take the full parental leave themselves. The compensation level is 80 per cent of the qualifying income for 390 days. There is a fixed daily rate of SEK 60 for the remaining 90 days. Utilisation of parental benefits may be

deferred or spread over a period extending to the child's eighth birthday. Benefits may be used in different ways – staying at home on a full-time basis or working part time for a longer period. Parents who were not gainfully employed prior to the birth of a child receive a flat daily rate of SEK 150 for the first 390 days and then a flat daily rate of SEK 60 for the remaining 60 days.

In addition to these benefits, all fathers are entitled to a ten-day leave with parental benefit when a child is born. Either parent or another insured person may also take temporary parental leave for the care of a sick child (120 days/year/child) with compensation for loss of earnings.

All changes in the parental leave system from 1974 and onwards are, of course, made in order to support both mothers and fathers in their possibilities to combine paid work and parenthood.

In 2002, fathers utilised 15.5 per cent of parental insurance benefits, which is the highest percentage ever. Surveys also show that more than 50 per cent of fathers utilise their right to paid parental leave during the child's first year. Since the first change in the system saying that some days aren't transferable came in 1995 we probably will see a further increase since fathers tend to use the system late – and it actually covers the child's first eight years.

The sharing of temporary parental benefit for the care of a sick child is much more evenly divided between the parents. In 2002, 43 per cent of days were used by fathers. About 80 per cent of fathers take advantage of the paid leave to which they are entitled immediately after the birth of a child and on average they use nine of the ten days.

Parental leave systems have been launched in most Scandinavian countries (Finland, Iceland and Norway). Although they differ in their design the common overwhelming impression is that there is an increase in the fathers' use of the systems.

To sum up and conclude from the experiences of parental leave systems it is easy to see that one of the most important things is that this is a way for the political leadership to show their will to strive for equality. It is also a way that in the long run follows by changes in peoples attitudes and actions.

The critical opponent may of course say that the changes take too long a time - but still they are there.

### **Early research on men**

In the late 1970s the Swedish Governmental Committee on Equality between the Sexes decided to try to get more knowledge about Swedish males. A couple of years earlier they had conducted a scientific study on Swedish women. A representative sample of Swedish women had answered questions about their participation in paid work, about time spent

and duties fulfilled in family, about equality issues and in short a sort of state of the art for Swedish women at that time.

The Committee was very satisfied with all the obtained knowledge and wanted eagerly to know more also about men's lives. So they asked me to conduct a similar scientific study on Swedish men.

Reformulating some earlier used questions, formulating new ones, getting information from totally new areas and by asking a large, representative sample of Swedish men we collected an enormous amount of data. (This was probably the first scientific study in the world on the modern man).

Of course we obtained a lot of results that were of more or less importance. Just to mention a few; Swedish men are very interested in sports, they did not share the family duties with their wives in an equal way, they had higher salaries and so on and so on. Lots of information.

The most striking result was however one that we obtained concerning many questions and became almost a summary of Swedish men's lives. They were very eager to live a life based on equality, they definitely were pro equality – but for many and different reasons this hadn't really worked out in their own lives. Either he couldn't stay at home since his salary was larger than hers, or “she wanted to stay at home with the kids” or “she is better doing these things” or “I just haven't had the time” or.....

When publishing the report of the study some called this lip say and I myself called Swedish males “in-principal-men”. Of course you could say that men's attitudes are more favourable to equality matters than their actual behaviour but you could also say that there has to be a positive change in attitudes before actual changes. Without a change in attitudes there will definitely be no actual change. So despite the instant feeling of not having come far I have re-evaluated the results from the old study and can today say that this positive attitude change in favour of equality was a very remarkable step in the right direction.

There is also the possibility that many men, then and now, live in a kind of misunderstandings of majorities. Many men want to live their lives in a more gender equal way but they think that other men want them to uphold the traditional unequal ways of living. And in our patriarchal societies men listen more to men than to women. So the outcome may be a way of living that most people do not want but instead is based on old patriarchal values.

### **Governmental men's groups**

After my study had been published in 1982 the Minister on Equality took the initiative to set down a Governmental group, the Working Party on the Role of Men, in which I became a member. The group worked with information and opinion-moulding activities

in order to influence attitudes to male issues in different sections of society. These activities dealt with such questions as what happens when men become fathers or grandfathers, or choose their education or profession. The working group published a number of reports, arranged seminars and initiated several projects

The group of course also acted as advisor to the minister and tried to influence the politics of the Government. The groups work probably led to a continuing change of attitudes. The fact that it was a Governmental group and that its members were both women and men may have supported the idea of attitude changes in men.

A similar group was established in Norway in 1986.

When Sweden had elected a new Government in 1992 the Working Party was replaced by the Working Group on Fathers, Children and Working Life, which focused on the question of men's parental leave. The Groups final report was submitted to the Government in 1994 and they proposed that three "father's months" should be introduced into the parental insurance system.

As mentioned one advantage with these kinds of groups is that they reflect the will of the Government and also that they have the knowledge and the arguments. From my point of view it was also an advantage that there were both women and men that were members – in the first mentioned group that is. In the second there were only men. As far as I see it, it is important to show that women and men work together in order to change the gender power order.

### **Strengthening fathers**

During the years much focus in the Swedish debate has been on fathers. This has actually been the most important area in efforts to try to change men's roles. By strengthening the role of fathers the basic idea has been that this will lead to a change in the male role generally. A number of private initiatives have taken place trying to emphasise the role of the fathers.

Even the Government has taken steps in this direction since the mid-1980s. Fathers' training projects were carried out on a trial basis in five of Sweden's 21 counties, within the framework of existing parenthood training programmes aimed at informing both parents of the physical and psychological implications of parenthood. Fathers and fathers-to-be met in groups led by men, to discuss men's needs and interests in connection with childbirth. They were briefed on issues related to childbirth, their rights to parental leave, how their role might change in the family and possible conflict situations that may arise and affect the family after childbirth. Follow-up evaluations indicate that these meetings were well received and that on average, participating fathers took longer parental leaves than those not participating. The long-term aim was that fathers' programmes should become a regular complement to existing parenthood training programmes. This is now the case in some municipalities.

From a gender equality perspective it is however important that such father's programmes do not stress the differences between women and men but instead are just a part of the *parenthood* training programmes. Critique can be raised against some programmes where fathers and fathers-to-be have met for a long period in single-sexed groups and thereby strengthening the idea that fathers and mothers should have different roles. Such arrangements often build on the notion that fathers are especially important for sons and mothers for daughters. Instead we want both sexes to broaden their repertoires. So, again, it is important that such programmes do not stress the differences between the sexes but instead the similarities. And this goes as well for the contents of the programmes as for the design of the programme.

Although I myself am positive to educational programmes for fathers I see no point in exaggerating the effects of them. In the groups that have been working so far it may very well be that the fathers that have participated are interested fathers who would have taken longer parental leaves anyway.

### **Actions in preschool**

Fathers are important for the children as well as mothers are. Especially in times when gender roles differ much it is important for children to see the whole humane repertoire. For this reason it is also important that children meet both women and men during their growth, for example in preschool. A number of attempts to recruit male staff to preschools in Sweden have taken place but with no success. The ratio of male staff is today only 3 per cent. One explanation to this is that both the status and the salary for this profession are low in Sweden. A comparison with our neighbour country, Denmark, shows a much higher ratio of male staff there – and a higher status and salary.

In a small number of preschools there are very successful attempts made in order to broaden the children's repertoires. Based on an educational idea from Iceland the staff in two Swedish preschools started to film the daily activities and found out, to their own surprise that they were themselves actively supporting the development of very traditional gender roles in the children. Having realised that they instead deliberately started to act in order to support new patterns. So far this acting seems to lead to very positive changes. An evaluation from teachers in regular schools says that these children when entering schools already at the age of seven show a broader repertoire than children from other preschools.

### **Conclusions**

There are probably many conclusions that can be drawn from the Swedish experiences concerning efforts to achieve gender equality. To my mind there are two especially important ones.

The outspoken will from highest political level is definitely of importance.

Analyses of gender relations must include the power relation, must see the unequal power relations between women and men, the gender power order.