

# Parenthood, Violence Prevention and Masculinity Norms

A Factsheet about Men and Gender Equality in the Nordic Countries



# Manhood and Masculinity

## Research, Policy and Initiatives in the Nordic Countries

**In order to achieve gender equality, men need to get involved in the efforts and masculinity norms need to be challenged. The policy area of men and gender equality is given high priority in the Nordic countries, and a number of measures are implemented accordingly, focusing on everything from men's violence to parenthood and a revision of the male gender role.**

Nordic gender equality reforms have often focused on the situation of women. They have usually aimed at making the unfair distribution of power and resources between the genders more even. The changes have typically been instigated by the women's movements, yet in order to achieve the goal of gender equality, men, too, need to step up to the task and be included in the gender equality work. Attitudes about gender that affect and limit women also influence the lives of men. Restrictive masculinity norms affect the male gender role and the conditions men face in life. Men are overrepresented in leadership positions, but also in for example the suicide, substance abuse, violence and crime statistics. Changed male gender norms would have positive effects for both the men themselves and society at large.

These issues – which concern men and gender equality – are of central importance in Nordic gender equality policy. Some issues in this area have been assigned particularly high priority, including efforts to end men's involvement in violence, both as perpetrators and victims, finding ways to help men balance family life and work and challenging destructive masculinity norms.

### **The Evolution of Masculinity Research in the Nordic Countries**

The Nordic countries are often mentioned as a strong region when it comes to gender equality and gender equality policy. Investments in research have been of key importance to the development of these fields, and one research domain that has made many important contributions is masculinity research. In contrast to the research on men, which had almost been a paradigm in social science research, masculinity research is a relatively new phenomenon. The field emerged in the 1970s when the view of masculinity and manhood started to be problematised and discussed more deeply. Inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's view that 'nobody is born a wo-

man; you become one', masculinity researchers became interested in how masculinity is constructed socially and culturally. In the Nordic countries, the masculinity research has largely been developed in close cooperation between national and Nordic networks of activists, researchers and policymakers. The work has centred around the Nordic welfare state, with its strong emphasis on gender equality-oriented family policy. Fatherhood has long been a recurring theme in the research, as all Nordic countries have worked hard for several decades to increase fathers' utilisation of the national parental insurance.

### **Differences between the Countries**

Although the Nordic countries have many things in common, there are also some differences when it comes to research and the emergence of the field of men and gender equality. Denmark was a Nordic pioneer in masculinity research. In fact, the first seed was planted already in the 1920s through the publishing of academic degree projects focusing on the topic of homosexuality and manhood. More recently, the research has been revitalised through a number of studies concerning for example ethnicity, social marginalisation and the under-performance of boys in school.

The Norwegian masculinity research has been of key importance to the development of the field in the Nordic region, through a large number of publications and studies. In both Norway and Sweden, research themes have evolved in line with the needs and family policy reforms of the welfare state.

Until relatively recently, Swedish studies largely focused on for example men's responsibilities in the household sphere, divorced men's parenthood and the development of fatherhood-related policy. Lately, however, the integration with the field of gender research has become increasingly clear in both Sweden and Norway.

In Finland, researchers in the field have had a stronger focus on violence and social marginalisation than in the other Nordic countries. The fact that Finland has a higher prevalence of interpersonal violence than the other Nordic countries may be a possible reason for this, although the connection is much more complex than that. Studies of men who have problems with for example alcohol and isolation have been common in the area.

Even if the Icelandic research in the field has not been

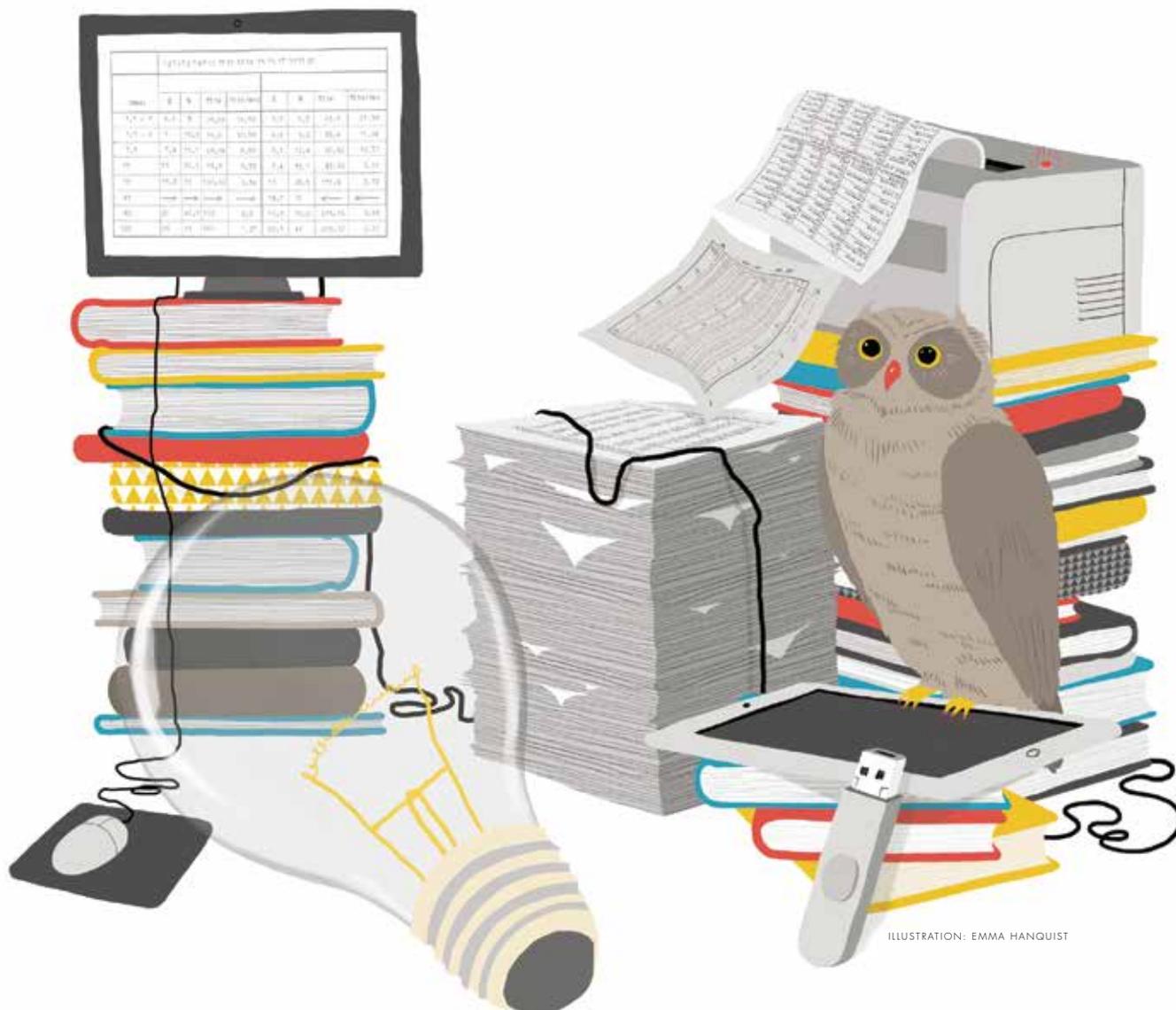


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very extensive, it is pointed out as being of great importance. One key theme in their research is fatherhood and parental leave, and Iceland has also implemented the most progressive political reforms in this particular area.

### Central Theme in Gender Equality Policy

The strengthening of women's financial independence was a central issue in the Nordic countries throughout the 20th century. In recent decades, gender equality policy has had a strong focus on getting women to enter the labour market, and thereby create solutions for family life. These efforts to create a dual-breadwinner model in the Nordic countries also increased the focus on men. In the 1990s, the role of men in the gender equality work started to receive increasing attention in all Nordic countries. Men's committees were formed in Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Finland, and special officials in charge of men's issues were appointed in Sweden. Family laws were amended to ensure that children would have the right to be taken care of by both parents. In addi-

tion, reforms were implemented to encourage fathers to take more parental leave. Since the turn of the millennium, the field of men and gender equality has continued to grow and has increasingly gained a foothold in the policymaking arena. Several countries have made active efforts to recruit more men to care-related occupations, and Norway's work to increase the share of men in the preschool sector has been particularly successful in this respect. Boys' risk of becoming marginalised in the educational system has been another central issue. At present, all countries are to varying degrees addressing the field of men and gender equality in their national policy objectives and have appointed special committees and working groups to this end.

### Focus on Men's Violence

So what does the work in the area look like in the Nordic countries? At the request of Nordic Council of Ministers, NIKK (Nordic Information on Gender) has written a report on initiatives made in the policy area of men



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and gender equality during the period 2005–2015. The report points out covered areas, of which one is men’s violence. It usually concerns men’s violence in close relations, often targeting a partner, while a significantly smaller part of the work concerns other forms of men’s violence, such as human trafficking and hate crimes. Efforts to prevent men’s violence is one dimension of this work. All Nordic countries have actors and organisations, often crisis centres, in place to help men who resort to violence against people in their surroundings change their behaviour. Their work is often based on the Norwegian so-called Alternatives to Violence model, which focuses on psychiatric treatment of perpetrators of violence.

### **Masculinity Norms and Macho Cultures**

The questioning and challenging of norms related to masculinity and a macho culture are recurring themes in the interventions made. Several of them aim to bring attention to both explicit and widely accepted and invisible and more implicit attitudes and expectations regarding gender. Many focus on boys and young men in particular, with a goal of changing patterns early in their lives. Examples include the teaching and coaching of norm-critical ways of thinking and efforts to prevent the vulnerability of young people to violence. The initiatives are implemented by both government agencies and organisations. Some are of a one-shot nature and others are more continuous. Sweden and Norway have large, partly state-funded non-profit organisations that work actively with these issues: MÄN and Reform – Resource Centre for Men.

### **Fatherhood and Men’s Participation**

The Nordic countries have launched many initiatives to increase the focus on men in the gender equality work, and to make gender equality an issue of stronger concern to men than in the past. This work has largely focused on the issue of parental leave. Central topics include how changes in the parental insurance, such as making a certain number of months of parental leave non-transferable to the other parent, affect men’s use of parental leave and what fathers’ use of parental leave looks like in the Nordic countries. Reviews and statistical comparisons are commonly occurring initiatives. The central

aim of the more qualitative work is to encourage men to utilise a larger portion of the parental insurance when they become parents.

### **Challenges**

The view of men can sometimes become a bit too generalising when gender equality issues are discussed. One problem in the field of men and gender equality is that boys and men are described as a homogenous group. By talking about the group in this way, the large diversity in the conditions men face in society is neglected. There is for example a risk that LGBTQ persons, men with disabilities, older men and racialised men fall between the cracks. This in turn affects the interventions made and makes it more difficult to achieve gender equality. The work against men’s violence is an example of an area where intersectional perspectives are often lacking and men and women are treated as homogenous groups. As a consequence of this, factors such as age, where financial independence may be an important factor among older women, may be ignored or violence in same-sex relationships overlooked.

Another risk is that interventions targeting men as a group may reproduce perceptions of gender differences rather than challenge them. According to research, it is therefore important to question and work against norms related to gender – only then is it possible to redefine the predominant male gender role.

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# Nordic co-operation on men and gender equality

**The importance of men's involvement in the gender equality work has been emphasised in the Nordic co-operation for several decades. The Nordic Gender Equality Fund has supported the launching of numerous new collaborations in the area.**

For over 40 years, the Nordic countries have collaborated in the area of gender equality under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Already the very first co-operation programme, for the period 1989–1993, included the following theme: 'Possibilities for women and men to combine paid work with family life'. All subsequent co-operation programmes, upon which all Nordic co-operation is based, have also addressed issues concerning men and gender equality specifically. One prioritised aim has been to develop the Nordic research in the field. In the early 2000s, a Nordic men's research coordinator was therefore appointed at the Nordic Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Research, with an aim to establish a joint Nordic platform for research in the field. The several coordinators who held the position over the years initiated Nordic cooperation projects in the form of conferences, publications and networking.

Today, the co-operation is focused around the gender equality challenges that men as a group are assumed to experience. The field has transitioned from a focus on men's participation in the women's struggle for gender equality to an emphasis on men's specific gender equality problems, for example in terms of health, marginalisation or fatherhood. Through the Nordic Gender Equality Fund, which is administered by Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK), the Nordic Council of Ministers funds various co-operation projects that are intended to advance the development in the Nordic countries. Here are some of the projects that focus on men and gender equality.

**Focus on the Perpetrators' Cycle of Violence**  
Gender-related violence is a widespread and persistent problem in all Nordic countries. The focus has traditionally been on the victims, but Kristín Pálsdóttir from the Institute for Gender, Equality and Difference at the University of Iceland points out that it is important to bring attention to the perpetrators and how to change their behaviour.

'The pattern of violence can only be changed through a focus on the perpetrators. In order to change their behaviour, it is important to work against gender roles and destructive masculinity. Only then can we achieve more gender-equal relations and eliminate the harmful attitude that women are the property of men. Gender-related violence is often rooted in those types of views,' she says.

According to Pálsdóttir, a lot is going on in this area. She is also contact person for a Nordic project funded through the Nordic Gender Equality Fund. The organisations involved in the project arranged a conference in autumn 2016 titled *Confronting Gendered Violence: Focus on Perpetrators*. The aim of the conference was to bring together various Nordic actors in order to compare and discuss how this issue is being dealt with. What treatment options do the different Nordic countries have for perpetrators? What does the research in the field suggest? A report showing which models are used in the Nordic countries to help perpetrators of gender-related violence break the cycle of violence was presented at the conference. The questions concerned which types of treatment are offered, challenges and results.

'The conference was a really good meeting with representatives from various relevant occupational sectors, experts on violence prevention, researchers, police officers and many others,' says Pálsdóttir.

One intention with the fund project was to establish a Nordic network for sharing of experiences and



...of the nurses in Iceland are men. In Denmark the share is 3.5 per cent. Through a project focusing on the nursing programmes they hope to recruit and keep more men.

improving the practices used in the Nordic countries. According to Pálsdóttir, there is a great need for co-operation, not least in order to develop the field.

‘It’s an important step if we want to solve this problem. Today the network is in place and we are seeing that there is widespread interest in these issues, among both professionals and policymakers,’ she says.

### **Nordic Men’s Organisations Want to Change the Male Gender Role**

The predominant male gender role is problematic in many ways. In modern popular culture, men are often portrayed as strong lone wolves who will not hesitate to use violence. MenEngage Norden wants to start a discussion about the norms, change the male gender role and break the pattern of violence. The network, which places gender equality at the top of the agenda, was created in 2014 through a project funded by the Nordic Gender Equality Fund.

‘We felt that there was a need for a platform for sharing of ideas and strategies. At the time, the main focus was on building a movement. Men and gender equality is a young field, it is important to define oneself before we start talking to others,’ says Tomas Agnemo, former coordinator.

According to Agnemo, the Nordic countries have somewhat different traditions when it comes to men’s involvement in gender equality issues. In Sweden, MÄN (a non-profit, feminist organisation founded as a platform for men to take action against men’s violence against women) was formed already in 1993. In Norway, Reform – Resource Centre for Men opened in 2002. The organisations in the other countries are younger.

‘One important task of Men Engage is to question the patriarchy and what it means to be a man. Another central element is the discussion on how to encourage men and boys to get involved in these issues,’ he says.

In 2017, the network organised the conference Making the Invisible Visible: Transforming Social Norms among Boys & Men for Gender Justice in Practice in Oslo to spread the organisations’ knowledge to more people. The programme included workshops on how to engage males in the anti-violence efforts and how to deal with negative gender ideals for men. The participants consisted of municipal representatives, gender researchers, activists and politicians. An overarching aim of the conference was to reduce the rate of gender-related violence in society.

‘The violence issue is very important, as almost all perpetrators of violence are men. It is a symptom of a dysfunctional society,’ says Agnemo.

### **More Men in the Care Sector**

The gender-segregated labour market is a challenge all Nordic countries share. The care sector is dominated by



women, and men are hard to find in Nordic nursing programmes. In Iceland, only 2 per cent of all nurses are men. In Denmark and Norway, the shares are 3.5 and 9 per cent, respectively. A project funded by the Nordic Gender Equality Fund takes a look at the nursing programmes and what they can do to recruit and keep more men.

‘More men in the care sector is important in order to make the labour market more gender equal. It also helps make the workplace more diverse,’ says project leader Hedda Hakvåg, senior adviser at Norwegian Reform – Resource Centre for Men.

According to Hakvåg, there is a shortage of labour in the care sector, at the same time as many young men avoid ‘gendered’ jobs like nursing. In the project,



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two gender equality centres and two universities will explore the underrepresentation of men in the Nordic countries. Hakvåg says that they will look at things like how the nursing programmes are promoted and what course literature is being used.

‘We are going to interview programme coordinators about everything from the general atmosphere in the programme to the programme design. What are they doing well? What works and what doesn’t?’

The existing research in the area will also be reviewed in the project. Based on the outcome, recommendations for how to recruit and keep men in nursing programmes will be developed. The results will be presented in a report.

‘We hope that the study will have a political impact and contribute to change,’ says Hakvåg.

### **Review of the Parental Insurance Systems**

Through a variety of different reforms, the Nordic countries have tried to increase men’s use of paid parental leave. But despite the efforts, Nordic women are on parental leave much longer than their male counterparts. Within the framework of a co-operation project funded by the Nordic Gender Equality Fund in 2017, the parental insurance systems in the Nordic countries will be reviewed to find out how their design affects women’s participation in paid work and men’s use of parental leave.

‘Gender equality in parental leave is important to strive for as it would have big effects in many areas of society. When men take more responsibility for their children, it makes relationships more gender equal and helps change the gender norms. It also affects the situation of women in the labour market, for example in the form of more gender-equal pay and pensions,’ says Johanna Dahlin, project manager at the Swedish Women’s Lobby.

The fund project is a collaboration between women’s organisations in Sweden, Norway and Iceland. The member organisations have already met several times and have started reviewing the systems and the latest research in the area. The results will be presented in a report that will also include recommendations for how the systems can be improved to increase the gender equality.

‘One aim of our project is to help Nordic policymakers take the next step. We will arrange a conference for Nordic ministers in autumn 2018.’

She says that although the parental insurance and men’s use of it has long been a key issue for the women’s movement, the progress in the area is very slow.

‘It’s about time we change that. We want to identify the best methods and formulate demands that the organisations can push for nationally in their respective countries.’



**ABOUT THE FACT SHEET:**

This fact sheet is produced in 2018 by NIKK, Nordic Information on Gender, which is a Nordic cooperative body under the Nordic Council of Ministers. It explains priorities and efforts made by the Nordic countries within the field of men and gender equality. The fact sheet is based both on reports and interviews with researchers.



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