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## **A few remarks on men in child care and gender aspects in Sweden**

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Short presentation: I am a teacher in the recently renewed teacher education (for all students heading for work in pre-school, primary school, school-age childcare, secondary and upper secondary school and adult education). My research interests are on children and their development. During the years I have also put some attention to the issues of men as workers in child care and early childhood education.

In the row of speeches at this conference I have been put under the heading "Mother Natures son". It sounds nice, but since I will pick up the issue of gender aspects in pre-school, I would say that gender is not from nature, it emanates from our social and cultural interactions.

I will start my speech with some basic facts on child care and education in Sweden to give you an impression of what I am talking about. The system of child care and education has the following parts:

	<u>Age of child</u>
Pre-school (full day service)	1-5
Pre-school ("general" 3 hours/day)	4-5
Pre-school Class (3 hours/day)	6
Compulsory School	7-16
School-Age Childcare (before + after school)	6-12
Open after school activities	10-12

During the last 30 years there has been a strong increase and development of child-care services in Sweden and in the last years of the 20th century we reached the situation that all children, if the parents so want, may get a place in pre-school and school-age childcare (at least up to the age of 9). The following percentages show the proportions of children of different age-groups who have a place in childcare settings:

### Proportion of children enrolled 2003

#### **Pre school**

1-3 year olds                      67 %    (+ 7% in family day-care)

4-5 year olds                      86 %    (+ 8% in family day-care)

#### **School-Age Childcare**

6-9 year olds                      74 %    (+ 1% in family day-care)

10-12 year olds                    10 %

These figures are on national level.

In the larger city areas the proportions concerning children aged 1 - 9 may be over 90%

The topic of equality and equal opportunities is a fairly prominent issue on the public agenda concerning child care and early childhood education.

Not least, it is clearly stated in laws and national curriculums. The national curriculum for pre-school specifies the values, norms and educational goals for early childhood education. One of the highlights are on issues of gender and equal opportunities:

*The ways in which adults respond to boys and girls, as well as the demands and requirements imposed on children contribute to their appreciation of gender differences. The preschool should work to counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles. Girls and boys in the preschool should have the same opportunities to develop and explore their abilities and interest without having limitations imposed by stereotyped gender roles.*

The national curriculum for the compulsory school says essentially the same things with somewhat other words.

Quite clearly expressed. But it is not problem-free. There are several different theories and assumptions in operation when issues concerning similarities and differences between men and women, boys and girls are being addressed. This is not the place to review such theories or assumptions. But obviously facts and experiences may be understood in very different ways. Gender issues concern deep and basic aspects of personality and identity. Gender issues also concern power, influence and opportunities, and they are important factors in the social and cultural structures and discourses. Discussions concerning gender aspects often evoke strong emotions and "everyone" has an opinion about what is "normal" and how it should be. Many people consider these matters to be private values and personal beliefs that should not be questioned or imposed on anyone.

But, this paragraph of the National Curriculum for Pre-School means that matters of gender is not at all optional. Pre-school staff may not choose to pay attention to gender socialisation or not. They are obliged to pay attention and to do something about it.

In pre-school services with mixed gender groups of staff children might experience men and women work together on an equal base. But in single-gender groups it may be harder to meet the goals of the curriculum "... to counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles".

Concerning the number and proportions of men in the groups of staff I am sorry to tell that nothing have changed since last year we met at a conference like this.

<u>Staff</u>	Women	Men
Pre School	97,5 %	2,5 %
Pre School Class	93,9 %	6,1 %
School-Age Childcare	83,8 %	16,2 %
School, grade 1-3	97,2 %	2,8 %
School, grade 4-6	73,1 %	26,9 %

There are some 1700 men working in pre-school in Sweden. It gives a somewhat better feeling to say 1700 than to say 2.5%, but the actual situation still is that most children do not meet any men in pre-school or in the lower grades of school. But they may meet some men in school-Age Childcare settings.

In this perspective pre-school may be perceived as a conservating force concerning gender roles. Whereas in Swedish families nowadays, fathers are increasingly engaged in the care of their children and in sharing more of household tasks and other family obligations with the mothers, in most preschool settings the care, upbringing and education of young children are still almost entirely the responsibilities of women.

But things are changing. Not very fast concerning the numbers and proportions of men working in early childhood education and care, but gender perspectives are high on the agenda of discussions, research and development work. I would say that differend kinds of gender analysis are the most salient features in development work in Swedish pre-school today.

These trends and tendencies are also found on national level and in the government. One example is the governmental committee called The Delegation for Gender Equality in Pre-School. It was appointed by Lena Hallengren, Minister for Pre-School Education, in December 2003 and shall report to the minister in the summer 2006.

The main aim of the delegation is to emphasize, reinforce and develop the gender equality activity in Swedish pre-schools. The main focus is on the daily life of children in pre-school services, what they meet, what they see and hear and what activities they take part in and how these experiences may influence the children's constructions of identities, norms and development of abilities.

The instruction for this committee was formulated by the government in ten items:

- 1 Highlight and reinforce educational gender equality work in pre-school by distributing funds to gender equality projects.
- 2 Select, follow and document gender equality work in a number of pre-schools and spread the knowledge and experience of these pre-schools.
- 3 Highlight and reward gender equality work of good quality in pre-school
- 4 Spread knowledge about successful gender equality work in pre-schools in other countries.
- 5 Develop tools to enable pre-school staff to examine and analyse educational aids, play materials and children's literature in a gender perspective.
- 6 Highlight good examples of action taken in Sweden and in other countries to stimulate more men to apply to training programmes for work with children and in pre-schol and to retain men who already work in pre-school.
- 7 Compile current knowledge and proven experience of gender and gender equality and ensure that it reaches pre-schools and also identify needs and shortcomings concerning knowledge, research and professional development for gender equality work in pre-school.
- 8 Compile information in dialogue with providers of teacher training programmes about what education future pre-school teachers are offered in gender equality and gender studies.
- 9 Propose appropriate action to develop and reinforce long-term gender equality work for pre-school.
- 10 Report any financial impacts of its proposals and the means of financing the proposals.

I will not enter deeply into these tasks right now, but as you see the tasks number 4 and 6 are of interest in connection to this conference, which is a reason why some of the members of this delegation take part in this conference.

Another thing to mention is tasks number 1 and 2. The delegation have some money available for financial support to development work. It is not any huge amounts, but 34 local development projects has got some funding. Most of them are led by staff in single pre-school institutions and some by local authorities in municipalities and regions. A few of these specially address the issues of men in childcare.

There are yet no results to present. The delegation is right in the middle of the work. One preliminary report was presented last december and the final report will be presented next summer (2006).

So what is the meaning with a committee like this, what good may it do? Recommendations of the committee may result in governmental bills, and they may be adopted by the National Agency of Education or some municipalities or by the teacher training and education. But you never know. In any case the delegation puts the issues on the agenda and there probably will be some moves to implement ideas and perhaps to change some structures.

### **Some other recent and present developments within gender issues in early childhood education and care**

During the last 30 years of strong increase in access to public child care services various efforts have been made to develop more equal opportunities for boys and girls. The efforts often have dealt with educational methods and activities, often in the form of supplying girls with more "technical" and constructive material, activities and guidance. There have also been efforts to break up ingrained opinions and habits among the children, both by systematically organized joint activities in order to get boys and girls to cooperate, respect and appreciate each other, and by separate activities for girls and boys in order to stimulate both boys and girls to try new activities and practice other abilities than what has usually been the case in the frequently occurring "gender-labeled" activities taking place in the early childhood settings.

This kind of development work have raised the awareness on equal opportunities, but still it may be questioned how widely spread such working methods are in the everyday activities of early childhood care and education. In many places it is "business as usual", and a large proportion of the staff members express the opinion that due to their individualistic approach to meet the needs and interests of every single child they do not differentiate based on gender and, hence, do not see the need for special attention to be given to gender equality issues.

In more recent research focus has been placed on how staff members act in relation to the children. In general terms, the results quite clearly indicate that the teachers do interact with boys and girls in different ways. There is an obvious risk that an individualistic approach conceals that girls and boys as groups are treated differently and that these conditions effectively contribute to conserve traditional gender patterns.

In the last few years much attention has been paid to self-evaluative methods for teachers to observe and analyze their own actions. One focus has been on gender issues and the staff members often realize with astonishment how they, without being aware of it, respond to and deal with boys and girls in quite different ways. This raise of awareness often also leads to an interest in disclosing the ways in which the physical design of the pre-school institution, as well as materials and activities restrain the childrens construction of identities and abilities,

and how changes might give the children opportunities to develop a wider range of their personalities.

To reveal ingrained gender behavior may also give gender mixed groups of staff reason to examine their interaction patterns and division of labour and avoid getting stuck in traditional gender roles. The Swedish researcher Margareta Havung found in her research on men in child care work that the fact that men works in a child care centre does not automatically change gender defined habits and structures. On the contrary she found that the female and male colleagues often took on the traditional dominating gender roles and patterns. And, if so, what have we won by getting men to work in child care services? Again, pre-school may be a conservating force if we don't realise and analyse the gender structures and orders and our own ingrained gender behavior and habits.

But, if we do realise, analyse and take steps to change, mixed gender groups of staff may be strong forces to change and to give boys and girls better opportunities to construct their identities and develop their rich capacities without too strong gender labeled restraints.