





# Focus on Gender – Working Toward an Equal Society

Nordic Gender Equality Co-operation  
Programme 2006–2010

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Nordic Gender Equality Co-operation Programme 2006–2010

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## **Nordic cooperation**

*Nordic cooperation* is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and three autonomous areas: the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland.

*Nordic cooperation* has firm traditions in politics, the economy, and culture. It plays an important role in European and international collaboration, and aims at creating a strong Nordic community in a strong Europe.

*Nordic cooperation* seeks to safeguard Nordic and regional interests and principles in the global community. Common Nordic values help the region solidify its position as one of the world's most innovative and competitive.

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# 1. New challenges in Nordic gender equality politics

During three decades of working toward gender equality, the Nordic Council of Ministers has continued its efforts toward achieving full gender equality in Nordic societies. Indeed, the Nordic democracies have distinguished themselves through their active work to promote gender equality in each country.

Equality between the genders means that power and influence are divided equally between women and men and that both women and men share the same rights, obligations and opportunities in all areas of life. It also translates into a society that is free of gender-related violence.

In a gender-equal society, both women and men contribute their skills and resources equally. In addition, gender equality plays a role in the formation of shared values and the developments that take place in national political areas, including welfare, working life and economic development.

Gender equality also touches upon fundamental human values, such as respect, equality, understanding, quality of life and identity. The Nordic countries and the autonomous regions cooperate in the field of gender equality on a common platform of shared traditions and mutual benefits, because they face many of the same issues and challenges. It is natural for the Nordic welfare societies to exchange experiences, make use of one another's knowledge and skills and encourage and engage in political debate.

Right now, Nordic gender equality cooperation is facing new problems that reflect the growing globalisation of their societies and that complement more traditional areas of gender equality work. The new challenges include changing views among young people concerning their

opportunities as regards gender; an ageing population; the restructuring of working life; globalisation; and multiculturalism.

People who live in the Nordic countries differ from one another in terms of ethnic identity, social and regional background or origin, generation, family situation, sexual orientation or physical health. A current challenge for gender equality politics is to address this broad spectrum of viewpoints and to get each group involved in decision-making processes and public debates – the basis for what constitutes gender equality politics.

The Nordic focus on men and gender equality is unique in an international context and provides a good example of the advantages and necessity of including all groups in gender equality work.

Taking into account the different skills, knowledge and experiences of men and women influences and enriches the development of all areas of society. Both men and women must have an opportunity to take on new tasks and responsibilities while turning over others, both in working life and at home within the family. In order to achieve our goal of creating an equal society, it is absolutely essential that men are active participants in gender equality work. This entails an even greater challenge: involving men of different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds in working toward gender equality.

The opportunities of Nordic women and men to combine parenthood, caring responsibilities, working life and political participation are closely connected to the development of the welfare state and the politics of care work.

Since the 1960s, the establishment of the Nordic welfare states as well as legislative efforts to attain gender equality have helped to achieve many of the goals that have been set for gender equality. Other important issues, not least among them working life, remain unresolved. The labour market, education sector and economic life of the Nordic countries and the autonomous regions continue to be plagued by gender divisions. The top posts in industry and commerce are dominated by men, and the same is true in the research field. In spite of the positive changes that have taken place in men's participation in child care, often women still bear primary responsibility for the home and children – in the family, in the official care institutions and in pre-schools. In most of the Nordic countries and autonomous regions men also make scant use of the parental

leave available to them. Further, violence against women and children and prostitution-driven human trafficking remain grave problems affecting also the Nordic countries.

The politics of gender equality is a continually evolving process and is influenced, on the one hand, by overall social development, and on the other hand, by various operators who are engaged in gender equality work on behalf of the government, labour organisations or civic organisations. An evolving society requires a gender equality policy that is also constantly adapting to a new operating environment. The Nordic Council of Ministers intends to work toward the inclusion of the many different players in the gender equality field in the formation of gender equality politics.

The well-established and by now smoothly functioning cooperation on gender equality will continue to have a strong basis in cooperation between the Nordic countries and the autonomous regions. Moreover, a dynamic and robust gender equality politics that works so well within the framework of Nordic cooperation should also play an important role in our neighbouring countries and in the role that the Nordic countries play in a European context.



## 2. Integrating gender equality at the Nordic Council of Ministers

Traditionally, the Nordic Ministers for Gender Equality have had primary responsibility for spearheading and safeguarding gender equality efforts within the Nordic Council of Ministers. In 1997 the Council of Ministers adopted an action plan to integrate gender equality work into the broader array of Nordic cooperation. The action plan was followed by a second one in June 2000 and contained a resolution by the Ministers of Nordic Cooperation that stipulated that the individual councils of ministers would henceforth bear final responsibility for advancing gender equality within their particular areas of cooperation and within their institutions. Each council of ministers would, in an annual report, account for the ways in which gender and equality were being taken into account in their areas of operation.

The Council of Ministers in charge of gender equality issues (known by the acronym “MR-JÄM”) has been responsible for launching special initiatives to promote gender equality in areas where it has been determined that a special gender equality focus is needed.

Apart from making each council of ministers responsible for evaluating their own activities from the standpoint of gender equality, a host of concrete initiatives to integrate gender equality have been launched at the Nordic Council of Ministers. The Ministers for Cooperation have resolved that the budgets of all councils of ministers must include a breakdown of all resource allocations from a gender and equality standpoint. Gender and equality must also be incorporated into all communications and public education contexts as well as in decision-making processes – for example, by regularly issuing statistical data that is divided according to gender.

Further, easy-to-understand guidelines have been developed to ensure women's and men's representativeness in various cooperation areas and units. All high-level units and departments within the Nordic Council of Ministers are responsible for integrating gender equality in their own activities.

To ensure that the integration of gender equality proceeds uninterrupted within the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Ministers for Gender Equality will monitor the work of the other councils of ministers. Toward that end and at the request of the Ministers for Gender Equality, a report will be presented each year to the Nordic Council detailing the integration of gender equality into Nordic cooperation.

## 3. Priorities in 2006–2010

The scope of the work to promote gender equality in the Nordic countries is quite broad, and it is therefore not possible to focus equally on all areas at all times. The Nordic Council of Ministers has elected to prioritise two primary areas of Nordic cooperation in gender equality in 2006–2010: *Gender and power* and *Gender and young people*.

Both efforts and the initiatives therein will address issues where the Nordic countries and autonomous regions share common interests. Annual action plans will detail concrete projects within the scope of the Nordic cooperation programme on gender equality. These will be presented for approval to the Gender Equality Ministers (MR-JÄM).

New groups of women and men, with different social, cultural, ethnic, sexual and identity-related backgrounds, are constantly entering Nordic societies and help shape the expectations that all work for gender equality must address. In order to achieve gender equality among every group that participates in Nordic societies, the Nordic Council of Ministers must ensure that a systematic minority perspective is incorporated into all future initiatives in the area of gender equality.

In developing Nordic approaches to gender equality work, whether dealing with newcomers or older Nordic citizens, the development of today's multicultural societies must be taken into account.

### 3.1 Gender and power

Despite good outcomes and advances made in many areas, it continues to be essential to identify ways to promote a just and fair balance of representation between women and men.

In recent years, power and influence have been the subject of analysis and evaluation in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. The Nordic Council of Ministers has also financed a number of research projects to analyse gender and politics in the Nordic countries. One example is the book “Equal democracies?”, which describes the Nordic models and tells the story of women’s political mobilisation in the Nordic countries.

All of the research points to the same finding: gender continues to be a factor that has a structural effect on how politics, working life and family life operate. And while substantial advances have been achieved in creating a more just division of power and influence between women and men in some areas, others lag behind.

The clear picture that emerges in most organisations, whether privately-owned businesses, political organisations, research institutions or public institutions is that the higher up the hierarchical ladder one climbs, the smaller the number of women. Only a handful of exceptions exist to this rule, and while it is possible to cite many reasons for this, considering the kinds of challenges that will face us in the future, it is worth our while to contemplate the shortage of resources that this kind of unequal division will create in the Nordic countries.

These countries are known for their proportionately high representation of women in national parliaments and in government – the result of a historically active women’s movement in each country. Although women have established their influence in national and local political decision-making processes, it is absolutely necessary that we also achieve equality between women and men within all of the institutions and political organs of the Nordic democracies.

It is a well-known fact that women have a hard time gaining the top positions, not only in private industry and commerce, but also in the public sector. Beyond, it is important to direct attention to women’s under-representation and men’s over-representation in top positions also in areas such as public and private research, media, culture, religious organisations, sports, the courts, the judicial system and national defence.

Other critical areas that require a continued focus include the gender-divided labour market and ensuring a realistic possibility for women and men to combine career and family.

“Gender and violence in the Nordic countries” is a Nordic research program administered by NordForsk (previously NorFa) during the 2000–

2005 cooperation period. It has yielded a wealth of useful knowledge that can be utilised in efforts to end violence against women. Beyond, it is also extremely important to direct our focus toward the minority groups living in Nordic societies, to make certain that support for victims is directed at all women, and that all groups of men who use violence against women are taken into account.

We must also continue to combat human trafficking, particularly when it comes to working against the prostitution-driven selling of women. The Nordic governments and the Nordic Council of Ministers have made significant investments in this area, but better coordination of the many initiatives being implemented in the Nordic countries will strengthen Nordic cooperation in this area.

### *3.1.1 Action areas*

All of the areas within the theme “Gender and power” selected by the Nordic Council of Ministers for the new cooperation period involve the incorporation of a minority perspective. They include the following initiatives:

- Launching cooperation on welfare models and challenges in gender equality politics – in collaboration with the Council of Ministers for Health and Social Affairs. Findings from the welfare research programme will be used in this work to the extent that the findings are relevant to gender equality work.
- Launching cooperation to address topics such as the rights of parents with small children, family policy in the Nordic countries, participation and influence in working life, the gender-divided labour market, and the division of labour in care work – in collaboration with the Council of Ministers for the Labour Market and Working Life Policy, the Council of Ministers for Legislative Issues, the Council of Ministers for Finance and the Council of Ministers for Industry and Trade.
- Launching cooperation on economic ownership and activity and the top-tier positions in trade and commerce – in collaboration with the Council of Ministers for Industry and Trade and the Council of Ministers for the Labour Market and Working Life Policy.

- Continuing to work, in collaboration with the Council of Ministers for the Finance, to incorporate gender and equality into the national budget of each country.
- Arranging a Nordic conference to discuss gender, power, the impact of the gender equality policies implemented thus far, and whether legislative measures and policies have created more equal Nordic countries.
- Continuing Nordic cooperation to stay focused on male violence against women.
- Continuing to cooperate on initiatives to combat prostitution-driven human trafficking in collaboration with the Council of Ministers for Legislative Issues, Health and Social Affairs and Education and Research.

As a complement to the efforts to incorporate gender and equality into Nordic cooperation, the Nordic Council of Ministers for Gender Equality will continue to follow up on the Nordic Council's work to strengthen and improve women's and men's fair representation in Nordic cooperation bodies within the Nordic Council of Ministers.

### 3.2 Gender and young people

During the 2006–2010 period, the Nordic Council of Ministers will prioritise activities that address young people, gender and gender equality.

Gender identities among boys and girls are changing. We need more information about how media, social background, cultural and ethnic background, consumer choices and young people's own expectations influence their gender identity and gender-determined choices – and whether we will face a new type of gender stereotyping among young people. The impact of socialisation and the choices that boys and girls make in the early part of their life are issues that require further study.

Reports produced in the Nordic countries show unequivocally that Nordic labour markets continue to be divided according to gender and characterised by stereotypical notions of “women's jobs” and “men's jobs”. A sharp gender divide in areas of specialisation, occupations and hiring practices are obstacles that prevent full equality between women

and men in the workplace. To open up the gender-divided job market, measures must be put in place to catch young people before they make decisions about their future occupation. The focus is therefore on educational and occupational guidance and practical job training for boys and girls.

It is also important to consider the meaning of gender in working life if we want to improve the lifestyle, wellbeing and health of boys and girls and be able to target preventive efforts accurately and effectively. Young people should be encouraged to debate amongst themselves about their wellbeing and health from the standpoint of gender, since the initiatives carried out so far have proven insufficient. At the same time, it is important that the dialogue with boys and girls take place on conditions that they themselves set and takes place from their standpoint.

Narrowly defined and stereotypical images of men and women in the media, along with strict contemporary requirements to have an “attractive” body and appearance and competitive behaviour, offer boys and girls a slim array of role models and activities to choose from as they go through the process of developing their own identities. With the proliferation of sexualised images in the public sphere, it is inevitable that a severely limited definition of sexuality and often stereotypical images of gender will influence the way boys and girls live their lives. In this context, a particular challenge is to gain knowledge about conceptions of gender among young men and women in ethnic minority groups in the Nordic countries.

Too many boys and girls have to witness violent behaviour, and some experience it almost daily. Young people also use violence against other young people, are themselves victims of violence, or see it used in schools and in the streets. Many young people experience bullying and are left with lifelong trauma. Young people also see violence on television, in movies and in computer games. Violence plays a role in the lives of both boys and girls, but is more dominant among boys. We know that there may be a connection between violent behaviour and violence experienced in the early part of life, and that people who have experienced violence sometimes adopt the role of victim later in life. By incorporating the concept of gender equality into efforts that address bullying and violence in young people’s lives, the occurrence of violence in later life can be prevented.

### 3.2.1 Action areas

The Nordic Council of Ministers has selected a number of areas of special attention within the theme “Gender and young people”. All incorporate a minority perspective. They include the following initiatives:

- Launching cooperation to examine girls’ and boys’ educational, career and lifestyle choices and gender roles – in collaboration with the Council of Ministers for Higher Education, School Cooperation, Research, Culture, and the Citizens’ and Consumer Rights Committee.
- Launching cooperation on young people, gender and influence – in collaboration with the Council of Ministers for Higher Education, School Cooperation, Children and Young People, and the Nordic Committee for Cooperation.
- Launching an inquiry into the content and development of computer games from an equality standpoint in collaboration with the Council of Ministers for Culture and the Council of Ministers’ Committee for Children and Young People.
- Launching cooperation on young people and health from a gender standpoint – in collaboration with the Nordic Council of Ministers Committee for Young People and the Council of Ministers for Health and Social Affairs.
- Disseminating information about the findings of the Nordic project “The impact of the proliferation of pornography on perceptions of gender among boys and girls” and invite the Council of Ministers for Industry and Trade and the Council of Ministers for Culture to collaborate on issues pertaining to gender and pornography.
- Disseminating information about the findings of the Nordic research programme “Gender and violence in the Nordic countries”.

## 4. Gender, culture and communication

Supporting the arts and folk culture, artist exchange, and coordinating Nordic art and cultural life have been important aspects of Nordic cooperation. Incorporating gender equality into this central area of cooperation can help reinforce and renew cultural cooperation. Gender clearly has significance when we consider what art produces and who creates it. Gender can also be meaningful in the ways in which art and culture get transmitted.

At the same time, art is a transmitter of certain kinds of socially structured elements, including gender, ethnicity and cultural models. Often, art takes a critical or eye-opening look at these phenomena. It is therefore especially important to pay attention to how art and culture deal with themes like gender and gender equality.

Radically transforming family constellations are also part of contemporary Nordic culture. Young people come of age with different perceptions of gender and new expectations of how gender will be perceived in the future. Young people's identities are shaped by the gender roles that mass media, computer games, culture and other communication channels offer. In mass media and mass communication women and men are characterised as different from one another, as determined by their ethnic, cultural or other affiliation. One central issue we must examine is how gender stereotypes (and other such structural categories) are transmitted, perhaps even reinforced, in art, media and pornography.

The Nordic Council of Ministers will make broad efforts to include in the Nordic agenda any issues or problems that are connected to gender, culture and communication.

Further in the same context, it is relevant to consider how we, through art and culture, can work toward integration and equality in the future.



## 5. The structure behind Nordic cooperation on gender equality

Over the last three decades, the Ministers for Gender Equality in each Nordic country have worked together to resolve issues that are of common Nordic interest. As a rule, Nordic cooperation is carried out in areas where each country stands to benefit concretely. Nordic cooperation on gender equality is structured and organised within a framework of collaboration between the Council of Ministers for Gender Equality (MR-JÄM), the Executive Committee on Gender Equality (ÄK-JÄM) and the councils of ministers for all other areas of Nordic cooperation.

### 5.1 Nordic cooperation partners

During the new cooperation period, the Council of Ministers for Gender Equality will develop cooperation with other councils of ministers in politically timely issues. The intention is, as part of the process of integrating gender and equality into all activities (the mainstreaming strategy), to direct focus on gender in areas that have been previously ignored, or to launch cooperation by working across different areas.

The Nordic equality branch works in conjunction with departments and ministries, national authorities, gender research institutes, women's and men's organisations and researchers in all Nordic countries.

The Nordic Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Research, or NIKK, initiates, promotes and coordinates research about women's, men's and gender research within and outside of the Nordic countries and contributes to the creation of a common research platform for gender research.

Effective dissemination of information about findings, research and data on gender research in all of the Nordic countries represents a critical aspect in the process toward a more equal society.

## 5.2 International cooperation partners

There is a lot of international interest in Nordic gender equality politics. This points to a growing worldwide awareness of the importance of gender equality in families, at work and in society at large.

Within Nordic cooperation on gender equality, the area that is of particular significance in the European context is the participation of women in economic life and in decision-making process.

Apart from working together with institutions of the European Union, including the upcoming European Institute for Gender Equality, the Nordic countries and autonomous regions also engage in cooperation with international organisations, including the Council of Europe, OECD, OSCE and IOM to the extent that is relevant.

In the United Nations the Nordic countries and autonomous regions participate with gender equality initiatives and by helping to uphold the *Platform for Action* for women's rights that was created and adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

## 5.3 Cooperation with neighbouring countries

The Nordic Council of Ministers is involved in close regional collaboration with EU countries Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The cooperation is characterised by dialogue and equality and has its basis in the *Nordic-Baltic Cooperation Programme on Gender Equality*, adopted at a meeting of the Nordic and Baltic Ministers for Gender Equality.

The goal of Nordic-Baltic collaboration in the area of gender equality is to further incorporate gender equality into political decision-making process at the local, regional and national levels, and to exchange and benefit from the experiences of other countries.

Nordic-Baltic cooperation entails the involvement of researchers, women's organisations and other non-governmental organisations, or

NGOs. Cooperation with the Baltic countries is geared toward mutual benefit to both the Nordic and Baltic countries.

Cooperation with Northwest Russia is founded on multilateral relations between individual countries. The Arctic Sea region is also included in the cooperation.

Multilateral relations between Nordic and Baltic countries and Northwest Russia are aimed at developing good-neighbour relations against the backdrop of a common desire to strengthen democracy in the whole region and create an open and pluralistic environment. Equality between the genders is an important aspect of such an environment.

In certain respects, compared with the Baltic countries or Northwest Russia, the Nordic countries have elected to follow different paths in their efforts to work toward full equality between the genders. The cooperation benefits from Baltic, Russian and Nordic expertise in the various issues that are connected to gender equality and works out strategies to implement programmes that share similar objectives. Simultaneously, it continues to be critically important to promote women's active participation in democratic institutions in the entire region.

The European Union's *Northern Dimension* is focused on issues that affect the northern parts of Europe. The Nordic Council of Ministers continues to prepare a strategy for working alongside the EU's Northern Dimension. All of the work that takes place within the framework of this collaboration must reflect the perspective of gender and gender equality.