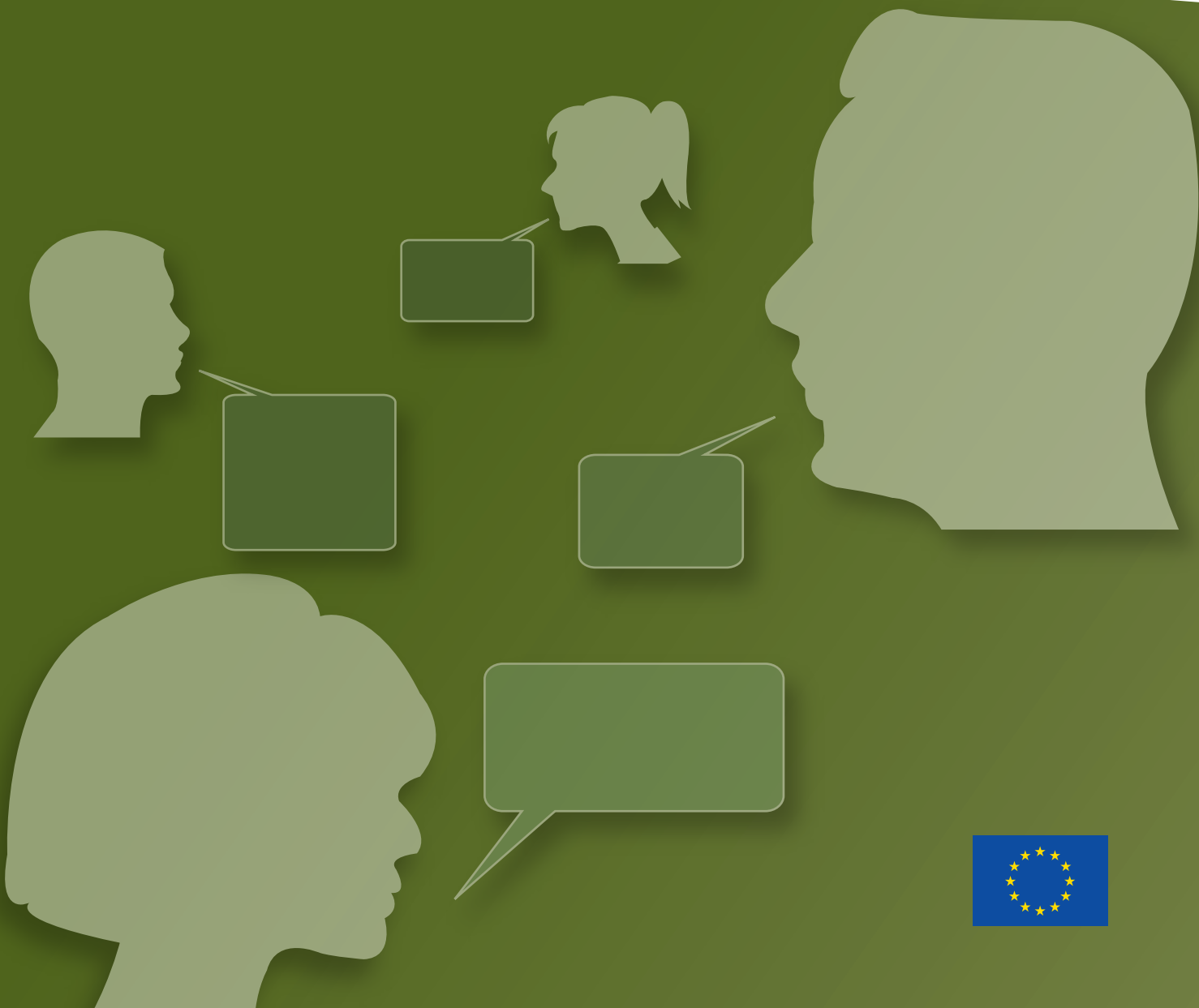


A policy response to gender perceptions

Discussion paper

Prepared by Niall Crowley
For the European Institute for Gender Equality



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For the European Institute for Gender Equality
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Foreword

EIGE has made available online the 'Synthesis report of the study of collected narratives related to gender perceptions'. The report was presented to EIGE by Yellow Window Management Consultants in October 2011. Based on the collected stories from people across the European Union the report covers a broad range of topical issues, including dimensions of gender stereotypes, underlying norms and values, dealing with gender stereotypes, effects of gender stereotypes, intergenerational differences in gender perceptions, the changing meaning of masculinity, actors that trigger or prevent change, the influence of culture and tradition.

In a number of other studies commissioned by EIGE gender stereotypes are depicted as one of the main determinants of gender inequality. For example, the study 'The involvement of men in gender equality initiatives in the European Union' published by EIGE in 2012 found that 'men feel considerable pressure to conform to traditional roles and stereotypes and that men, women and institutions bolster these stereotypes', and that this contributes to apathy or resistance to change towards gender equality. It concluded that 'gender inequality and stereotypical gender roles and norms have damaging effect on the personal life, health and the well-being of men as well as women though in different ways'.

International agreements have underpinned a focus on gender stereotyping as a policy priority for over thirty years. A policy focus on gender stereotypes at European level can be observed in the work of a number of EU institutions, including the European Commission, European Parliament and the European Council. Lately though, the policy focus on gender stereotypes has not been that explicit.

Drawing on the above context, this discussion paper seeks to bring back to the attention of the policymakers across the European Union the importance of gender stereotypes as a policy issue. It uses EIGE's Synthesis report on gender perceptions as a reference and discusses the possible 'triggers for change' - people, institutions or processes that enable change in gendered attitudes.

We hope this paper will inspire discussions, give rise to new insights and ideas for possible policy interventions to tackle gender stereotypes.

Virginija Langbakk
Director of EIGE

Introduction

Gender perceptions encompass the roles we see as being appropriate for men and women. They include how we understand notions of femininity and masculinity. In all the European Union Member States, gender perceptions are found to be rooted in stereotypes of women and men.

These stereotypes involve unchanging, inflexible and over-generalised descriptions of what it is to be a man or a woman. When these stereotypes become embedded in cultural norms and values, society expects women and men to behave in a manner that reflects these descriptions. In this way, stereotypical gender perceptions are one root cause for the persistence of gender inequality in the European Union.

These are the conclusions that can be drawn from a recent study concluded by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). This 'Study of collected narratives on gender perceptions in 27 European Union Member States' involved the collection and analysis of the stories of 216 women and men in all the Member States.

The stories relate to situations in their life where the respondents felt that their being a woman or a man had played a role. These situations covered education; professional life; health; leisure; violence; identity; societal context; and childhood, family life and relationships. The 514 stories collected are available on EIGE's database.

Gender perceptions

The stereotypes that inform gender perceptions stipulate the personality, behaviour, roles, skills and physical appearance to be expected from men and women. This gender stereotyping is overwhelmingly negative in its impact, mostly for women but also for men.

Men and women are deemed to have different personality traits. Women are predominantly seen as emotional, social, more human, empathetic, communicative, intuitive, gentle, dutiful, neat, orderly, weak, manipulative and not smart. Men, on the other hand, are seen as rational, factual, ambitious, strict, tough, strong, disciplined, responsible, and egotistical.

Women and men are supposed to behave in different ways. Women are expected to behave in a manner that is polite, modest, caring (especially for children), delicate and socially apt. Men, on the other hand, are seen as behaving more robustly, directly and at times confrontationally. Men are expected to be risk takers and rule breakers. They are supposed to be more inclined to display violent behaviour. The man is also deemed to be the protector of the supposedly vulnerable and fragile woman.

Women are expected to play different societal roles to men. The roles of motherhood and being a good wife are seen as central for women. Men are supposed to take on the role of breadwinner. These stereotypes generate expectations that women should stay at home in order

to care for their young children and that housework is women's work. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be the stoic providers. It is also expected, as a result, that men should assume authority with women accepting their decisions.

The skills and aptitudes of women are presumed to be different to those of men. Women are seen as more precise and better fitted for fine work and as having a natural ability for caring, especially for children. Men are seen as more knowledgeable about and interested in technical matters and better able to solve technical problems. They are seen as physically stronger and better fit for rough and heavy work. As a result, there are certain occupations and educational paths that are deemed appropriate for women and others that are deemed appropriate for men.

Physical appearance is a focus for these stereotypes in terms of gendered dress codes for children in all contexts and for adults in a professional context. Particular expectations are held in relation to the female body and its display at different ages. Women are expected to adopt male norms for how they look in a professional context.

These stereotypical gender perceptions are increasingly contested and challenged across the European Union. However, they continue to hold significant influence. People react to these stereotypes in different ways. Sometimes they question and reject them, at other times they



embrace them and take advantage of them. People can often feel powerless to act contrary to these stereotypical gender perceptions. Sometimes they are not aware of them but still act and react in accordance with them.

Stereotypical gender perceptions have a significant, wide-ranging and negative impact, particularly on women but also on men. This is why they need to be a focus for policy interventions.

The case for action

Stereotypical gender perceptions influence and underpin the persistent gender inequalities that are evident across the European Union. Policy action is still required to address these gender perceptions if the goal of gender equality is to be advanced.

These gender perceptions influence the different choices made by women and men. They disempower women and men by shaping and limiting what is expected of them by the wider society. They lead to discrimination where employers, service providers and other in positions of authority base their decisions on these gender perceptions. Ultimately they contribute to a segregation of men and women that results in a differential status for women and men.

Gender perceptions based on stereotypes impact on equality for women and men in both the public and private spheres. These impacts are interconnected and predominantly disadvantage women.

In the public sphere, labour market disadvantage accrues to women due to stereotypical gender perceptions that hold sway in education and in the workplace. Men and women often pursue educational studies chosen on the basis of what is expected of their gender. Women and men end up being segregated into different fields of study. Men can be encouraged to go further with their studies than women.

Certain professions are viewed as appropriate for women and others for men. This influences the choices made by men and women and contributes to segregated workplaces. Within the workplace, employers can regard women's actual or potential role as mothers as a disadvantage. This influences their decisions in recruitment, promotion, and task assignment within the workplace, and in turn, leads to discrimination. Stereotypes of women can contribute to workplace cultures that enable harassment, including sexual.

In the wider society girls and boys can experience a form of segregation from an early age due to stereotypical gender perceptions. Distinctions are made between

play activities and toys that are for boys and those that are for girls. Social interactions can vary according to gender. Older girls, for example, are more constrained than boys in relation to going out for entertainment. While these situations might not be seen to immediately disadvantage, they do contribute to the conditions that lead to segregation and disadvantage in later life.

Stereotypical gender perceptions can influence public policymaking. Social protection or family leave legislation, for example, that reflects these stereotypes reinforces traditional gender roles in the private sphere that disadvantage women and that limit their participation in and contribution to the wider society.

In the private sphere, women have to deal with expectations that they should get married, have families and secure a male partner to support them. Women are often assigned, or simply assume, certain tasks in the home on the basis of their gender. Men, on the other hand, are pressured to be the breadwinner and to provide for their families.

Women can often put up with unacceptable behaviour from their partners or husbands due to stereotypical gender perceptions. These perceptions can serve to stimulate or even justify domestic violence.

At an individual level pressures to conform to stereotypical gender perceptions are a cause of stress and frustration. This can result in some individuals (mainly girls and women) developing eating disorders. The traditional model of masculinity is under increasing scrutiny but new models are still being defined. This contributes to some level of crisis for men in shaping an alternative identity.

Labour market disadvantage, educational segregation, public policy that reinforces traditional gender roles, domestic violence, the unequal sharing of caring and household duties, and personal stress can all be linked to the impact of stereotypical gender perceptions. These are the core issues of gender inequality across the European Union. They will only be effectively tackled by combating and eliminating the stereotypical gender perceptions that are causal factors.

The triggers for change

Triggers for change are the actors or factors that enable or constrain change in stereotypical gender perceptions. At its core, change in relation to stereotypical gender perceptions is usefully understood as involving a shift away from beliefs based on different and segregated gender roles for women and men, towards beliefs based on shared roles for women and men in both the public and private spheres. It is helpful to identify and understand the triggers for change if policymakers are to intervene successfully on the issue of gender stereotyping.

In the public sphere, employers, educational institutions, the media, civil society organisations and the public policymaking process itself offer triggers for change that are of immediate relevance to policymakers.

Employers can constrain change when the women they employ are undervalued because they have children, when their female employees have to work harder than their male employees to prove themselves, and when the women they employ earn less than the men they employ. Employers can, on the other hand, play roles that enable change when they actively promote more equal outcomes for the women and men they employ, and when they enable new patterns of behaving and relating for men and women in the workplace.

Educational institutions generally appear to constrain change. This results from their treatment of girls and boys according to gender stereotypes. The segregation of boys and girls by institution or by subject studied is a further constraining factor. Curricula and textbooks that communicate and reflect stereotypical gender perceptions also constrain change. Educational institutions can also be key enablers of change when they build awareness of, and skills to challenge, stereotypical gender perceptions and when they enable choices by students that are not shaped by a student's gender.

Media, in particular mass media and advertising, largely appear to constrain change. These media make a significant contribution to shaping the norms and values of society and they provide key sites that create and communicate stereotypical gender perceptions. However, these media have also, in some instances, used their potential to enable change where they have exposed and challenged gender stereotypes and communicated new and more real gender perceptions.

Feminist ideas and *civil society organisations* are important enablers of change in society, within relationships and for individuals. Feminist ideas, by definition, challenge stereotypical gender perceptions. Civil society organisations play key roles in articulating these ideas and making this challenge. They can work with other relevant organisations to combat stereotypes in sectors such as education, the workplace and the media. Feminist ideas and civil society organisations can also constrain change, for women and for men, where the ideas are seen as too radical, and, for men, where men feel anger aimed at them.

The *public policy process* can stimulate and support new social patterns, norms and values that run counter to stereotypical gender perceptions. The design of public policy interventions can enable change. Welfare policies, parental leave policies, divorce legislation and child custody policies, for example, can be designed in a manner that reflects and contributes to shared roles for men and women. On the other hand, when the public policy process fails to consciously break with stereotypical gender perceptions, policies in these areas become a barrier to change by underpinning the expectations of men and women that flow from such perceptions.

In the private sphere, individual people themselves offer triggers for change that could be of immediate relevance to policymakers. Partners and parents also offer particular triggers for change.

The *individual herself or himself* can enable change as an active agent, aware of their situation, and consciously defining her or his own practices and behaviours. Higher educational levels and greater financial independence enable individuals to take such steps. *Individuals* can also choose to accept and take advantage of stereotypical gender perceptions. Others feel they have no option but to submit to dominant norms.

The *partner* in a relationship can constrain change by limiting a woman's choices to act freely outside the private sphere. This can be done by inaction, through leaving household tasks and childcare to the woman. It can also be more active where the partner forbids or prevents the woman from doing something. Partners, in these instances, generally refer to a male partner in a relationship, due to their greater autonomy. The partner



can also enable change where both partners share the household tasks and childcare duties.

Parents transfer norms, values and behaviour patterns within a family that are internalised by their children. Parents constrain change when they treat their children differently depending on their gender and when they

transfer traditional stereotyped values to their sons and daughters. If they adopt the traditional male breadwinner family model in their own relationship, this too can constrain change. Parents can enable change where they do the opposite in how they treat their children, the values they espouse and communicate to their children, and the roles they chose to play.

A policy framework

A specific policy focus on combating stereotypical gender perceptions is needed if the goal of gender equality is to be effectively advanced. EIGE's study provides new insights into this policy focus. A framework of policy objectives, policy fields, policy processes and policy priorities can be established based on these.

Policy Objectives

The combating and elimination of stereotypical gender perceptions should be established as a specific policy objective. Policy initiatives are required to build awareness of stereotypical gender perceptions and to enable public institutions and individuals to challenge and change these gender perceptions.

Gender equality objectives seek to achieve change in the situation and experience of women. However, complementary action to change the cultural and social values in society, that shape contexts of inequality for women and men, is required if these objectives are to be realised.

The combating and elimination of gender stereotypes should also be established as a named dimension to all policies designed to advance gender equality objectives.

Policy Fields

Policy that is developed to address stereotypical gender perceptions should be focused on the triggers for change identified in this field. Policy should be designed in a manner that strengthens the enablers for change and weakens the constraints on change that have been identified.

In relation to the *public sphere*, policy could focus on stimulating and supporting action on this issue by employers, educational institutions, the media, and civil society organisations. Policy initiatives should build the

awareness, provide the means, and establish the stimulus so that these different groups can be enablers for change in relation to stereotypical gender perceptions. Policy would thus enable change in the workplace and the labour market, in education and training, and in the wider society.

In relation to the *private sphere*, policy could focus on enabling individuals to be the authors of change in this issue. Policy initiatives should be developed to promote awareness and personal development. Such measures would enable people to be critically aware of gender stereotypes and how they operate, and to be skilled in challenging and changing such stereotypes in their own behaviours and attitudes. Individuals also play the roles of partners and parents and can bring their new awareness and skills to bear in how they play these roles.

Policy Processes

Two policy processes in common usage across the European Union have served policy objectives that aim to combat and eliminate stereotypical gender perceptions. These are gender mainstreaming and social dialogue. An explicit focus on this issue should be renewed and made more visible within each of these policy processes.

Gender mainstreaming ensures evidence based policy-making in relation to the potential impact of policy on women and men. The process of gender mainstreaming, with its emphasis on evidence, should eliminate the potential for stereotypical gender perceptions to influence decision making by policymakers. Gender mainstreaming involves an assessment of the policy under consideration for its impact on women and men. This impact assessment takes a range of current differences between women and men into account, including the social norms and values that shape gender roles. This focus for gender mainstreaming on social norms and values needs to be further developed and made more

visible within the gender mainstreaming process if all public policies are to contribute to the elimination of stereotypical gender perceptions.

Social dialogue draws together the key actors in the workplace and the wider labour market in a dialogue with Government about a broad range of policy issues and workplace practices. The issue of stereotypical gender perceptions has been a focus on the social dialogue agenda and for joint action by the social partners at European and Member State level. This has stimulated leadership for change in the labour market and in the workplace from employer associations and trade unions. It has supported new workplace practices based on changed perceptions about women and men. This focus within the social dialogue should be renewed and enhanced.

New policy thinking should be deployed in public policymaking. This would ensure that policy does not sustain or contribute to traditional gender roles. The dual earner/dual carer model of household should be at the heart of this new policy thinking and should be established as a guiding concept for policymaking.

Public policy should be concerned with the cultural norms and values held by the general public. This is not always the case in more traditional approaches that confine public policymaking to a narrow public sphere. Stereotypical gender perceptions operate to the utmost effect when they are hidden and when people are unaware of their influence. This is bad for society and its members and should be a concern for public policy. Awareness raising policy initiatives are the foundation stone for tackling stereotypical gender perspectives and ensuring they do not sustain gender inequality.

Policy Priorities

The issue of stereotypical gender perceptions is prevalent in so many different arenas that it is useful to identify a limited number of strategic policy priorities to combat and eliminate these perceptions. These policy priorities should be chosen for their capacity to have a ripple effect on the issue that goes beyond the immediate field of policy or policy action prioritised.

At EU level the gender equality objectives established by the European Commission in the Strategy for Equality between Women and Men 2010-2015 should each be assessed to identify the extent to which, and the manner in which, stereotypical gender perceptions act as a constraint to their effective realisation. The actions developed in pursuit of each of these objectives could then be

designed to include measures to combat and eliminate the stereotypical gender perceptions that hinder progress in relation to the particular objective.

The European Commission have, over the past decade, taken and supported a wide range of policy initiatives and actions that directly seek to achieve change in stereotypical gender perceptions. These policy initiatives and actions should be assessed to identify effective practice in achieving change in the social and cultural values and norms that constrain gender equality and to support new policy initiatives that have a capacity to effectively combat stereotypical gender perceptions.

The media, and the mass media and advertising in particular, can be a controversial focus for public policymakers at Member State level. The European Commission has demonstrated some capacity to engage these sectors in a policy dialogue at a European level. These initiatives should be renewed and further developed to build leadership and capacity in both the mass media and advertising to contest the creation and communication of stereotypical gender perceptions.

At Member State level education authorities should review policy initiatives taken to combat the influence of stereotypical gender perceptions on the educational system and the manner in which the educational system can reinforce such perceptions. This review would include an assessment of how education is structured, the practice and content of education of educational establishments, and the choices made by girls and boys in this field continue to reflect stereotypical gender perceptions. This review should provide the basis to develop and implement further innovative responses to this issue in the education system and in all educational establishments.

Member States should develop awareness raising campaigns to create an understanding of the nature and influence of stereotypical gender perceptions prevalent in their society and to establish the reality of the dual earner/dual carer model. These campaigns would question the social and cultural value base of the society and would enable people to challenge and change stereotypical gender perceptions.

Civil society organizations that promote equality between women and men should be encouraged and supported by the Member States to develop actions to combat stereotypical gender perceptions. These actions would have a focus on specific arenas where such perceptions hold influence, including the workplace, educational establishments and the media.



Using the study materials

The full collection of 514 stories from the 'Study of collected narratives on gender perceptions in 27 EU Member States' has been put onto a database. This is a valuable resource for policymakers at European and Member State levels.

Each of the 216 people interviewed for the study provided at least two stories. Two people in each Member State (one woman and one man) were interviewed in four age categories (18-24, 25-40, 41-60, and over 60 years of age). The database contains the full stories told by people in their national language. It includes selected fragments from each of these stories translated into English. The fragments give a good representation of what is contained in the whole story with a particular focus on those sections of direct relevance to the study.

This rich source of material should be used to:

- Develop educational materials on gender perceptions and the stereotypes that shape them;
- Provide content for awareness raising campaigns to promote knowledge and understanding of gender perceptions and the stereotypes that shape them;
- Enable further research on stereotypical gender perceptions, in particular research that contributes to a better understanding of how these are transmitted and how they change over time.

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