

# Gender Mainstreaming with an Intersectional Perspective

This material is for anybody who wants to improve gender mainstreaming efforts by incorporating an intersectional perspective. It explains the meaning of intersectionality and what happens when an intersectional perspective is integrated (or not integrated) in the gender equality work. The material explains how gender equality work can be improved with an intersectional perspective.

## **Gender mainstreaming**

Gender mainstreaming is a gender equality strategy aimed to improve the results of an organisation or activity in a gender equality perspective. There is a focus on equality in services provided to citizen/customers/users (external gender equality) and not on staff issues such as gender representation at the management level and salaries (internal gender equality) – although the two types of gender equality work of course are intertwined. Gender mainstreaming is Sweden's primary strategy to achieve the government's national gender equality objectives.<sup>1</sup>

### **Definition**

The Council of Europe's definition of gender mainstreaming is generally accepted in modern gender equality work:

'Gender mainstreaming is the (re)organization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies, at all levels and at all stages by the actors normally involved in policy making.'

## **Gender equality and equal treatment**

The concepts of gender equality and equal treatment are sometimes used synonymously in casual contexts, but technically they do not mean the same thing. Gender equality is used exclusively to describe the relation between women and men. Gender equality has been achieved when women and men have the same opportunities, rights and responsibilities in all areas of life.

Equal treatment is a much wider concept in that it encompasses equality in terms of opportunities, responsibilities and justice among all individuals and groups in society regardless of for example sex, gender identity/expression, ethnic belonging, religion, age, functionality, sexual orientation and class. Sometimes the terms 'equal rights' and 'equal opportunities' are also used.

Thus, gender equality is a critical aspect of equal treatment – a society where all people are treated equally cannot be achieved without gender equality.

### **Equal treatment in national legislation**

In Sweden, all public organisations must promote equality for all people. This is for example provided in the Swedish constitution in the Instrument of Government chapter 1, article 2:

'Public power shall be exercised with respect for the equal worth of all and the liberty and dignity of the individual.'

'The public institutions shall promote the opportunity for all to attain participation and equality in society and for the rights of the child to be safeguarded. The public institutions shall combat discrimination of persons on grounds of gender, colour, national or ethnic origin, linguistic or religious affiliation, functional disability, sexual orientation, age or other circumstance affecting the individual.'

## **Intersectionality**

Norms can be described as generally shared rules and expectations regarding people's behaviour. Sometimes these rules and expectations are implicit and violations are responded to via subtle expressions such as surprised or annoyed facial expressions. In some cases they are also specified in law and violations are punishable by imprisonment.

Society is full of norms regarding gender, gender identity and gender expression, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, functionality and class, due to which people are sorted into categories. Because of this categorisation of individuals, norms lead to variations in people's structural living conditions. If a person is categorised as a 'woman', she will statistically have a lower income, be on parental leave longer and take a larger responsibility for unpaid domestic work than a

person categorised as a 'man'. In Sweden, if a person is categorised as belonging to a non-Swedish ethnic group, the person will statistically have a harder time renting a flat and a higher likelihood of experiencing discrimination at work or hate crime in the public space than a person categorised as an ethnic Swede.

The groups people are assigned to due to this categorisation process can differ greatly in power and authority. This is a result of power structures assigning different groups different degrees of power. When we talk about power structures, we are talking about structural patterns in society. There are individual exceptions. For example, at the structural level men make more money than women, but at the individual level many women make more money than men.

Intersectionality of course stems from the word intersection. An intersectional analysis focuses on the intersections between different power structures. The purpose of this is to explore how different categories interact and how different people and groups are assigned superiority and inferiority, respectively.

An intersectional analysis can for example target the opportunities of same-sex couples to raise children together. While same-sex female couples are legally entitled to both adoption and insemination, only adoption is available to their male counterparts.

In practice, due to widespread unwillingness among adoption organisations, very few same-sex couples end up adopting children. Consequently, it is generally easier to become parents for same-sex female than for same-sex male couples.

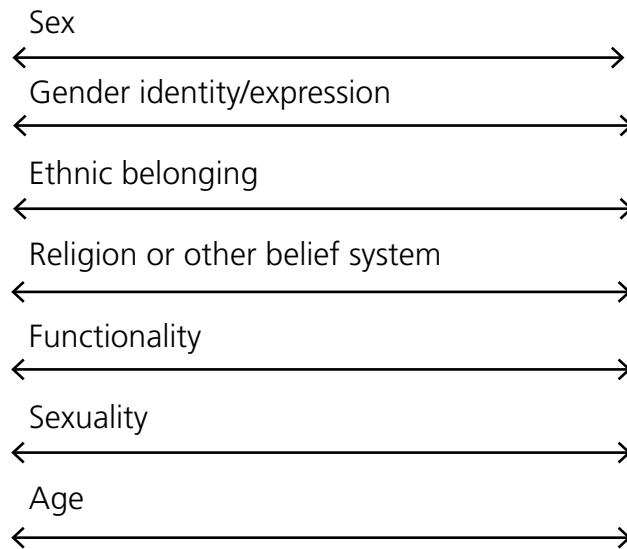
In Sweden, insemination can be arranged through the public healthcare system. However, some counties will charge same-sex but not different-sex couples for this service.

We have now explored intersections between gender and sexual orientation in relation to child rearing – an intersectional analysis. Our analysis shows that people's ability to have children is affected by both gender and sexual orientation.

## **Power structures**

The illustration on the next page is based on the seven grounds for discrimination specified in the Swedish the Discrimination Act. These grounds are a good starting point for identifying power structures in society. The power structures are illustrated as dimensions, or scales. The left end of a dimension represents the norm and the right end the anti-norm, as follows:

- Sex: man – woman, person who intends to change or has already changed sex
- Gender identity<sup>2</sup>/expression: cis person<sup>3</sup> – transgender person<sup>4</sup>
- Ethnic belonging: person belonging to the Swedish ethnic group – person belonging to a non-Swedish ethnic group
- Religion or other belief system: secular Christian – Muslim, Jewish or other religious faith
- Functionality: full functionality – visible or in other way noticeable physical or mental deviations from full functionality
- Sexuality: heterosexual – homosexual, bisexual
- Age: Just the right age – too young or too old



The model above makes it look like the dimensions are isolated from each other, yet in reality the power structures are closely interrelated. When using the model we also need to remember that identities are subject to change over time.

To develop the understanding of the model further, the following opposites can be applied:

- More power – Less power
- Superior – inferior
- Privileged – Non-privileged
- Norm – Anti-norm
- Majority – Minority
- Overrepresented – Underrepresented

These opposites are, like the model, ideal typical in nature, meaning they represent 'pure' generalisations of how the norm can be understood. This implies that they are not applicable on all conceivable situations. For example, women are not a minority in relation to men, but have less power in many areas of society. There are plenty of individual exceptions, such as individual women with male subordinates.

There are also contextual differences. For example, society at large is characterised by a hetero norm, meaning a norm that assumes that all people are heterosexual, but at a gay bar the norm can be that everybody is homosexual. There is continuous interplay between norms. The homo norm at gay bars would probably not be possible without a hetero norm in society, as without a hetero norm there wouldn't really be a reason to have special gay bars.

Research shows that more categorisations than those falling under the Swedish discrimination legislation can affect people's living conditions. Several of these other categories are protected against discrimination through the Treaty of Lisbon<sup>5</sup>. Geographic location, urban or rural, inner city or suburb, residential area, level of education, socio-economic characteristics (class), occupation, race, colour, belonging to national minority, political views and physical appearance are some other categories than those covered under the Swedish Discrimination Act.

Category	Norm	Disadvantaged	Oppression
Gender	Male norm	Women, persons who don't identify themselves as a woman or a man	Sexism
Ethnic belonging	Whiteness norm, ethnic majority	Non-Whites, ethnic minority	Racism, ethnocentrism <sup>6</sup>
Class	Middle-class norm	Working class, lower class	Class oppression
Sexuality	Hetero norm	Homo, bi, queer <sup>7</sup>	Homophobia
Function	Functional norm	Persons with a disability	Ableism <sup>8</sup>
Gender identity and gender expression	Binary gender norm	Transgender person, intersexual <sup>9</sup>	Cis sexism, transphobia

The model above illustrates the relationships between different categories, norms and disadvantaged groups as well as what the different types of oppression are called. Also this model is an ideal typical description of reality, implying 'pure' generalisations. The nature of a norm, as well as who benefits and who loses from it, differs across different parts of society and can change over time. The model does not show the interplay between norms. For example, without the binary gender norm, which is the reason we divide the population into two genders, the hetero norm (according to which members of two different genders are attracted to each other) cannot exist.

### **Benefits of an intersectional perspective**

In order to apply an intersectional perspective on gender mainstreaming work, one strategy can be to follow the motto that the organisation always works with gender but never with just gender. The idea here is that gender is an ever-present category in all gender equality work at the same time as we know that other factors also play a role.

In both Sweden and the rest of the EU, there is an increasing trend in legislation, practice and research of merging gender equality efforts and more general equality work. One example of this development is that, in 2009, the four former government agencies the Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination, the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman, the Disability Ombudsman and the Ombudsman against Discrimination because of Sexual Orientation were merged into just one agency: the Equality Ombudsman. Also in 2009, the Discrimination Act replaced a number of 'smaller' laws that previously had regulated discrimination in Sweden.

Gender mainstreaming is a well-proven strategy that has yielded a great deal of knowledge over the years. As new knowledge is gained and new research produced the practical gender equality work is developing because of the strategy. The gender equality work becomes more effective if we can see that women and men are not static or homogenous groups, and if we acknowledge that not everybody identifies themselves as a woman or a man.

Women, men and persons who don't identify themselves as a woman or a man face different conditions in life and society depending on ethnic belonging, age and functionality, to name a few key variables. An intersectional perspective can help develop the gender equality work so that more people are included, affected and reached. It can also add important nuances to the analysis, for example that not all women are subordinate to all men, and improve the achievement of the national gender equality objectives. The opposite is also true. If we don't apply an intersectional perspective on our gender mainstreaming work, we risk missing categories of women and men.

Since power structures are intertwined, inequalities are most successfully dealt with together. Organisationally, the responsibility for gender equality and other equality issues is often placed within the same unit, implying a good potential for synergies.

This helps prevent crowding of perspectives, where horizontal perspectives such as gender equality, public health and children's rights crowd each other out. It must however be ensured that increased coordination does not lead to a situation where fewer individuals are expected to do more work – where staff who used to focus on only gender equality work suddenly is in charge of all of an organisation's work in relation to horizontal perspectives. It is also important to ensure that all power structures are given the attention they need, to prevent that certain perspectives are marginalised, and that the total resources allocated to the work are not reduced.

### **Practical intersectionality work**

If you want to integrate an intersectional perspective in your gender mainstreaming work, you need to be knowledgeable about intersectionality and then continuously ask the question 'How can the work be developed and improved with an intersectional perspective?' Below is a list of examples of how an intersectional perspective can be applied in gender equality work.

### **Assessment and analysis**

- When designing questionnaires, add a third gender option besides woman/man (for example 'other/none', 'other gender identity' or 'other gender'). Also ask yourself which background variables might be relevant (for example age and area of residence). Adding a third gender option enables people who don't identify themselves as a woman or a man to respond correctly to the questionnaire. It may also be a good idea to enable respondents to mark more than one alternative since some people identify themselves as having two genders or a variable gender
- If you don't collect your own survey statistics but instead order them from somebody else, make it standard practice to ask for the data broken down into three gender alternatives and whatever background variables you see as relevant
- In cases of too small samples or insufficient resources or knowledge to carry out a more extensive study that includes more categories than gender or when it is deemed unethical or in other ways problematic to ask a question, complement your study with national or inter-

national data or research. It may also be a good idea to complement quantitative statistics with qualitative data from focus groups and interviews

- When more categories than just gender are introduced into an analysis, the work may substantially increase in size. Remember to set reasonable limits to your study based on knowledge, experience and previous research. Maybe two categories are relevant in your particular analysis; maybe three are relevant in another
- Start small. All development is a learning process. The first time we attempt an intersectional analysis in the gender mainstreaming work, we can add one category besides gender. Next time we can add another

### **Revision of regulatory/policy document**

- It must be specified in regulatory documents that the provision of services is to be of equal quality for all receivers/users regardless of sex, gender identity or expression, ethnic belonging, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation or age
- Neutral descriptions such as 'citizens', 'users', 'clients' and 'customers' encompass not only groups of people with various experiences related to gender but also other relevant categories, including age, ethnic belonging, socio-economic characteristics etc. It is important at regulatory documents are written with this in mind
- When gender mainstreaming regulatory/policy documents, a common approach is to assign genders to objectives and aims, which means that a document may refer to 'women and men' rather than gender-neutral target groups such as 'citizen' and 'users'. The point is that if the aims are gendered, the follow-up work will be gendered too; in other words, progress in relation to the aims will be evaluated for both women and men. Since not all people identify themselves as a woman or a man, the gendering of aims and objectives may be a problematic strategy with an excluding effect. However, it is easy to add a gender equality perspective in the specification of an objective without assigning a gender. For example, compare the wordings of the following objective: 'Services must be provided equally for women and men' vs. 'Service must be provided equally regardless of gender'

### **Events**

- Always consider the representation issue when arranging an event. What representation do you want? Does it reflect the target group, the population or the profession? Can you use the event to give special attention to traditionally underrepresented groups? Does everybody have an opportunity to participate in the event? Through what channels is the event advertised and promoted? Who do you reach through these channels? For example, remember that facilities used must be accessible to everybody regardless of functional capacity

### **Citizen dialogue**

- Ensure proper representation of relevant groups when establishing for example focus groups
- Is your experience that only certain groups make their voices heard in the citizen dialogue? Can the speaking time be distributed more equally using a moderator and a stopwatch? Change the meeting format? Change the timing of the dialogue? Offer to look after children while their parents attend a meeting? Change venue? Invite particularly underrepresented groups to special forums? Invite participation via alternative forums? Simplify the language used or have multilingual staff attend the meetings?

## **Grounds for discrimination**

The seven grounds for discrimination specified in the Swedish discrimination legislation can be explained as follows:

1. Sex – Women and men, including persons who have changed or intend to change their sex
2. Gender identity or gender expression – Persons with a gender identity or gender expression that continuously or sometimes deviates from the prevailing gender norm, such as transvestites and intersexuals. Gender expression and gender identity have to do with a person's clothing, body language, behaviour etc.
3. Ethnic belonging – Ethnic belonging refers to national and ethnic origin, skin colour etc.
4. Religion or other belief system – The term religion or other belief system refers to all existing religions and belief systems, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and atheism
5. Impairment – A lasting reduction in a person's physical, mental or intellectual ability that is present today or can be expected to emerge. Examples of disabilities include allergies, dyslexia and hearing/visual impairment. The concept used in legal contexts, disability, can be understood as a something that emerges in an environment presenting obstacles to individuals with impairments
6. Sexual orientation – The three sexual orientations protected under the Discrimination Act are bisexuality, heterosexuality and homosexuality
7. Age – Refers to how old a person is

## **Communication material**

- Remember the representation issues when developing communication material
- When reviewing text, pictures and illustrations to identify gender norms conveyed by the material, also pay attention to norms regarding age, sexual orientation, ethnicity and functionality
- Does the sample reflect the target group/population? Can you give special attention to under-represented groups? In which ways are underrepresented groups presented? Who is portrayed as a victim and who is portrayed as a perpetrator? Who is portrayed as passive and who is portrayed as active? Are any groups portrayed in a way that may reinforce stereotypes? Can you use the material to challenge stereotypes? Is the communication material available in several different formats (such as braille, DAISY format or converted to a simplified language)? Is the material available in several different languages? Do websites (if any) comply with the web guidelines developed by the Swedish e-delegation for accessibility?

## **Professional development**

- When staff are trained on gender and gender equality, ensure that the training is permeated by an intersectional perspective or at least that it includes a special section on intersectionality



## Notes

1. Read more about the Swedish government's gender equality objectives at [www.regeringen.se](http://www.regeringen.se)
2. Gender identity or gender expression refers to a person's identity or expression in terms of clothing, body language, behaviour etc. Source: [www.do.se](http://www.do.se) 5 August 2014.
3. Cis is Latin for 'on the same side'. A cis person is a person whose sex, legal gender, gender identity and gender expression are coherent and always have been coherent according to the norm. For example, people born with a penis see themselves as males, are seen by others as males and are officially registered as males. The term concerns gender identity and gender expression and has nothing to do with sexual orientation. Source: [www.rfsl.se](http://www.rfsl.se) 4 August 2014.
4. Transgender person is an umbrella term usually referring to individuals who deviate from the gender norm through their gender expressions and/or gender identities. Examples include transvestites, transgenderists, drag kings/ drag queens, transsexuals, intergender and intersexuals. Source: [www.rfsl.se](http://www.rfsl.se) 6 August 2014.
5. Article 21. Non-discrimination. 'Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited. Within the scope of application of the Treaty establishing the European Community and of the Treaty on European Union, and without prejudice to the special provisions of those Treaties, any discrimination on grounds of nationality shall be prohibited.'
6. Ethnocentrism is judging another culture solely by the values and standards of one's own culture. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnocentrism> 4 August 2014
7. Queer is a broad term that can mean several different things but that in essence implies a questioning of the hetero norm. Many people see their gender identity and/or sexuality as queer. Queer can mean a wish to include all genders and sexualities or to not have to identify/define oneself. Source: [www.rfsl.se/?p=410](http://www.rfsl.se/?p=410) 5 August 2014.
8. A form of discrimination or social prejudice against people with disabilities. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ableism> 4 August 2014.
9. This term refers to a variety of conditions and diagnoses. Refers to a person with a congenital condition where the sex chromosomes, testicles or ovaries or the genital development is atypical. 'Inter' is Latin for 'between', so 'intersexual' means 'between the sexes'. Source: [www.rfsl.se](http://www.rfsl.se) 4 August 2014.

### About this material

This material was developed by Mikael Almén at the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research within the framework of the Gender Mainstreaming in Government Agencies project.