

Conference “How Generations and Gender Shape Demographic Change”

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Moving towards gender equality

Ladies and gentlemen,

The roles of women and men are starting to change. Today their plans for the future as well as the realities of their everyday life are more multifaceted than ever before. In addition, it has become a socially desirable norm to favour gender equality. This constitutes a great achievement of the gender equality policy pursued over the past 20 years – even if the implementation and realization of gender equality in everyday life (still) leaves something to be desired.

A major study commissioned by the Federal Government (“Ways to Equality of Treatment – Today and Tomorrow”) has examined the attitudes of the German population towards gender equality. Linking both qualitative and quantitative elements, the survey is based on the Sinus-Milieus[®], which – by the way - have been established for most European countries. These milieus group people according to socio-economic data as well as basic values and attitudes concerning work, family, leisure, money and consumption. Thus, the Sinus-Milieus[®] turn the focus of attention to the individual and her or his whole lifestyle – in a very large sense of the word – and social environment. At present, there are ten different milieus in Germany which can be plotted in a diagram with the social status forming one axis and the basic values forming the other. There are points of contact and overlapping between the different milieus. Using the milieu approach, it was possible to identify different attitudes of the various social milieus towards issues of equal treatment. The aim of the study was to discover how gender equality policies are appreciated by women and men in the different milieus and which – milieu-specific – approach to the implementation and realization of gender equality policies has the highest prospect of success.

The survey shows that the idea of gender equality meets with general approval and that the gender equality policy pursued over the past 20 years is assessed as a success.

However, the various social milieus differ in their acceptance of gender equality and of gender equality policy. Values like “gender equality” and “partnership” are of small significance both for milieus characterized by traditional attitudes and for milieus with low income and low educational achievements. Well-educated young women and men, however, (the so-called *lead milieus* in this study) are geared to emancipated role perceptions and concepts of life based on partnership. For these women and men, gender equality isn’t an abstract ideal, but something they want to practice in real life.

Besides, there is a significant gap between visions of gender equality and role allocations practiced. Milieus which have internalized the “idea of gender equality” are hit by disillusionment (at the latest) when the first child is born. From then on, traditional role models very often are practiced again. Even couples who used to share household chores “on an equal

footing“ often change their behaviour after the birth of a child: i.e. in most cases it is the woman who goes on parental leave and takes care of child and household often full-time, whereas the man tends to even increase his volume of work. This re-traditionalisation, however, is not appreciated by the majority of women.

Nevertheless, this pattern is a widespread one and leads to a problem highly characteristic of (West) Germany: the issue of job re-entry.

After having stayed at home for family reasons, many women wish to return to their jobs. However, depending on the individual situation – and often subject to the number of children – more than ten years may have elapsed since they gave up their job.

For society (also in the light of demographic change) these women constitute an important potential. But still, their way back to employment often is a stony one. Here, three aspects play an important role:

1. Job re-entry isn't an isolated incident, but a process normally extending over several years (from first considerations till successfully completing re-entry), and its success is dependent on a number of different factors.
2. Expectations of women and employers as to re-entry aren't automatically compatible. This begins with the question of working hours, touches on the issue of appropriate and necessary further training, and does not end with the search for "suitable" fields of duty of the new employee.
3. Re-entry affects (and makes demands on) both the woman and her entire family. More than 80 percent of the women who could potentially return to work are married, and their re-entry can't succeed against or without the support of their partners. And yet, a high percentage of the men surveyed in the Sinus study believes that their partners' job re-entry "has no bearing" on them.

The ideal of a "good mother" spending all her time on her children (an ideal which is still going strong) is one of the major reasons for the situation described. Following from this particular image of women and mothers, the infrastructure of external child care is quite poorly developed in Germany. So, women experience a social – and often even internalized – pressure to be a "good mother". On the other hand, there are only limited day care offers outside the family so that a return to work turns into a difficult balancing act. This is why the Federal Government has launched an extensive programme to expand day care facilities for children which will contribute substantially to the improvement of the situation.

In addition, many companies haven't yet recognized the high potential of those returning to work. They are fixated on staff members who work full-time and are flexible as to working hours and place of work. And in their perception, this only applies to men. Besides, the informal qualifications acquired during the "family phase" are undervalued and underrated.

The problem of women returning to work makes clear that modern gender equality policy can only be successful if men are also taken into account.

While the ideal of a "good mother" has persisted in Germany – more or less – since the time of Romanticism and is continuing to have an effect on all social milieus, there is no comparable role model for fathers. Fathers can be the "strict, just father" or the "older brother" or the "pal".

This means there is no male role model which really impedes the modernisation processes of role allocations, but it also leads to a certain disorientation of men.

Over a long period, the terms "gender equality policy", "equal rights", "gender" or "gender mainstreaming" have had a female connotation. Talking about gender equality policy meant thinking – more or less consciously – of affirmative action programmes for women. In practice, gender mainstreaming – designed as a strategy to regard the concerns and interests of both sexes – has often been perceived as particular consideration and enforcement of women's issues.

Women's lives have become more multifaceted and colourful and for women numerous new possibilities are on offer, whereas the perception of men being the breadwinner of the family still dominates the male image in many milieus. The so-called "new man" who wants to be more than just a breadwinner, who wants to be a caring father, partner and son, and also finds fulfilment in vocational fields which have so far been perceived as rather typical of women – this "new man" has so far remained rather a rare species. At the same time, men are realising that in a radically changing world old certainties are no longer valid and that they need to find new ways for new male concepts. Against this background, the active involvement of men constitutes a major task of modern gender equality policy.

In order to meet the great challenges of the modern world (globalisation, demographic change) we need to tap the full potential of all people – women and men alike – without reducing anyone to a single aspect of his or her personality.