NORDIC Council
of Ministers

Masculinity in Nordic gender equality policy 2019–2024

Concepts, perspectives and differences

Content

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The report in brief

Issues relating to men and masculinity are addressed in twelve gender equality policy reports published by the Nordic Council of Ministers between 2019 and 2024. These cover a wide range of topics such as education, the labour market, climate, health and the internet, demonstrating that issues pertaining to masculinity are relevant to gender equality policy in general. The compilation shows that the discussion goes beyond the issue of fatherhood, which has historically been dominant when it comes to men and gender equality in the Nordic region.

The term 'masculinity' is used in a number of different ways in the reports, reflecting a variety of approaches within the referenced scientific literature. Within the reports, there is no clear link between the use of concepts and policy recommendations. However, international analyses show that different uses of concepts can lead in different directions, and as such a clearer awareness of concepts may be preferable. It is recommended that, where possible, essentialist assumptions (that masculinity is always a bad thing or that men always do masculinity) and concepts that downplay men's agency be avoided. Instead, a more flexible view of gender that emphasises how different characteristics, occupations and so on are gender coded as masculine or feminine may be constructive.

There are clear examples of different approaches and emphases in the report material. Several reports focus on *problems men create*, primarily for women but also for society in general. This includes, for example, men preventing women from participating equally in male-dominated industries and democratic discourse or men's preferences for eating meat and driving cars standing in the way of addressing climate change.

Another focus that is also clear in the material is *problems men experience*. This includes, for example, an understanding of norms of masculinity as preventing men from seeking help when they are feeling unwell. It may also include analyses of the unequal take-up of parental leave that highlights what men lose from inequality rather than what they gain. Further examples include descriptions of men's sexist behaviours online that focus primarily on these men's vulnerability and universal human needs.

Several reports emphasise the importance of an intersectional perspective to capture *differences between men (and between women)*, and the complexity involved in the interplay between factors such as class, sexuality, race/ethnicity, ability and age. Age appears to be the most well-represented category, even though none of the reports focus on older men. An intersectional ambition is sometimes difficult to realise in practice. One reason for this is a lack of relevant

knowledge, which is why investing in more research based on intersectional perspectives may be justified.

Research with intersectional perspectives often takes as a starting point the experiences of marginalised groups. However, analyses based on men from minority groups are largely absent from the reports. There is therefore untapped potential in terms of focusing more explicitly on men who belong to various minority groups, including men in economic vulnerability; religious men; gay, bisexual and trans-gender men; men with disabilities; and men who belong to racial, ethnic and national minorities.

Examples of issues that are not addressed in the reports but could be explored in the future are violence and abuse in intimate relationships, including preventive and promotional measures; leisure interests and associations, such as culture and sports; and male-dominated spheres characterised by legal or illegal use of violence, such as the military and criminal environments.

There is a recurring tendency – although this differs between the reports – to describe what could be called a *problem without conflict*. Despite taking the existence of a gender equality problem as a starting point, the reports are reluctant to portray gender inequality as a question of power or potential conflict. On occasions, the implication is present that there is universal agreement that we should all be equal: if men are still unequal, it is more because they have not liberated themselves from traditions than because they gain something from, for example, not sharing parental leave equally. This 'post-political' approach, which is focused on consensus, lacks clear support in current gender research but raises the question of what is most effective in bringing about change.

Introduction

In terms of international comparisons, the Nordic countries emerge as having the lowest rates of gender inequality. At the same time, they continue to exhibit a long list of well-documented inequalities, ranging from issues of education and work to parenting, health and violence. In recent decades, gender equality has also become a prominent policy area in the Nordic region. As part of Nordic co-operation, the Nordic Council of Ministers regularly finances and publishes reports aimed at providing a basis for the development of gender equality policy in relation to various social challenges. Overall, the reports demonstrate a clear ambition to contribute to policy development on a scientific basis and are usually written by researchers or investigators with gender expertise. In many cases, they contain research reviews on areas such as fatherhood, online misogyny, or gender and education at different levels. Some also detail original scientific studies or other investigations.

In recent years, the concept of masculinity has begun to be referenced repeatedly in such publications. Specifically, it is mentioned and discussed to varying degrees in twelve reports published during the period 2019–2024. But what does it mean that men and masculinity are highlighted in these reports? That is what this text aims to explore. This overall purpose is examined through a number of specific questions:

- How are the concepts of men and masculinity used? How does the use of concepts and metaphors – either explicitly or implicitly – relate to current theories and discussions in masculinity research?

- How are problems, causes and solutions constructed in discourses about men and masculinity? How do problem formulations relate to the different emphases that research shows often recur in politics focusing on men and masculinity: a focus on the problems men create, the problems men experience, or a focus on differences among men as a group?

The publication has been produced by Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK), which is a collaborative body under the Nordic Council of Ministers based at the University of Gothenburg. The text has been written by Kalle Berggren, Associate Professor of Gender Studies and Senior Lecturer at the Department of Child and Youth Studies, Stockholm University. It is hoped that the publication will provide perspectives on previous initiatives and a basis for how research can guide Nordic gender equality policy going forward.

Materials and methods

The material analysed in this study consists of twelve reports published by the Nordic Council of Ministers between 2019 and 2024. The reports cover topics such as climate (3 reports), education (3), work (2), the internet (2), parenting (1) and health (1). The reports vary in length, between approximately 25 and 175 pages, with the total material consisting of about 1,000 pages. Overall, the reports show a clear ambition for gender equality policy to be based in research. Several of the reports are research reviews or combined surveys of existing studies and practical initiatives within a particular area. In some cases, the reports detail original research or summarise material presented at conferences, including by politicians, researchers and representatives of civil society organisations. In many cases the reports are written by researchers, but investigators and gender equality experts also appear as authors.

In many cases, the reports provide an educational introduction and easily accessible overview of knowledge and initiatives in various areas of gender equality policy. They often aim to contribute policy recommendations based on a research review or survey of various initiatives, and these are aimed at different levels. A common approach taken is to compare policy and practice between the various Nordic countries and then identify *best practices*, i.e. successful strategies and solutions that can be recommended to other countries.

It should be noted that the purpose of this text is not to re-evaluate the conclusions of the reports or to develop new, better policy recommendations in the specific areas. Instead, the focus is on examining the overall understandings that are brought to the fore through discussions of men and masculinity. However, the prominence of issues pertaining to men and masculinity varies across the reports. In some they are central, such as when the focus is on issues of fatherhood or mental health among young men. In others, norms of masculinity are touched upon briefly within the framework of a more general discussion of gender and inequality.

The material has been analysed qualitatively. The analysis process can be described schematically in five steps (although qualitative analysis work is more iterative in practice).

1. The reports were read, and paragraphs, arguments and formulations relevant to the research questions identified.
2. The extracts were compared to identify similarities and differences.
3. The empirical observations were related to relevant parts of current gender research, particularly regarding politics and masculinity. More specifically, feminist constructivist policy analysis, theoretical and conceptual discussion within masculinity research and a three-part model for analysing emphases in masculinity politics were used.

4. The text was written. Given the focus on existing understandings of masculinity rather than the specific claims made in each report, the reports are referred to in a semi-anonymised manner: R1–R12 (cf. Hemmings, 2011). However, complete references are provided in the reference list for full transparency.

5. The results and analysis were discussed with other people. Fredrik Bondestam and Elin Engström at NIKK read the draft, and the preliminary results were presented during the webinar 'Men and gender equality policies', organised by the Finnish Council for Gender Equality (Tane) and the Central Association of Men's Organisations in Finland in May 2025, and at the Nordic masculinity conference 'Men and Masculinities in Transition', held at Stockholm University in June 2025.

Outline

The report consists of five parts. This introductory section is followed by a section presenting the theoretical basis of the study. This is followed by two sections of analysis that correspond to the research questions. The first section of analysis deals with the concepts, metaphors and perspectives used in the reports when addressing men and masculinity. The second analysis section focuses on the emphasis or focus of discussions of masculinity within the report material. The concluding section summarises and discusses the results and analysis, and provides examples of issues to be addressed going forward.

Theoretical starting points

The theoretical perspectives and tools used in this study are feminist constructivist policy analysis, theoretical and conceptual discussion in critical research on men and masculinity, and a triangular model for understanding different orientations and emphases in politics and movements concerning men and masculinity.

Problem – cause – solution

Political scientist Carol Bacchi is a prominent figure in feminist policy analysis and has developed an approach for analysing policy proposals from a constructivist perspective (e.g. Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Bacchi argues that we normally identify a social problem and then try to develop solutions to that problem through politics. Gender inequality in the labour market or men's violence against women are examples of social problems from the field of gender equality policy, and the task of politics is to come up with solutions to these problems. However, Bacchi argues that the descriptions of a problem and its causes are not self-evident, rather they can be understood and constructed in a variety of ways. Policy proposals and action plans introduce solutions, but they also reveal explicit or implicit under-standings of the problems and causes they are intended to address. Bacchi and Goodwin give the example of policy proposals to encourage children to become more physically active:

> If, for example, activity regimes for children are introduced as a way to reduce childhood "obesity", the "problem" is constituted as children's inactivity. By contrast, if regulations are introduced to limit the amount of advertising of fast food during prime time children's television, the "problem" of "obesity" is represented to be aggressive or, perhaps, even unethical advertising. (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016: 16–17)

The solutions proposed in policy recommendations are therefore always closely linked to specific understandings of problems and causes. In relation to the issues of gender equality and masculinity that are the focus of this text, one example could be increasing the share of women in male-dominated industries in the labour market: is it understood as a problem of inspiring girls and women to make different educational choices or a problem of breaking down an exclusionary, male-dominated culture? The analysis in this study is based on Bacchi's critical perspective on how problems, causes and solutions are constructed in policy texts. Particular interest is directed towards the presentation of 'masculinity' as a problem: for example, is masculinity primarily an obstacle for women or for men themselves?

Perspectives and concepts in masculinity research

Critical studies of men and masculinity (CSMM) – like gender research as well as humanities and social sciences research in general – is multi-perspectival in nature. This means that despite certain common views and norms (gender is not an uncomplicated biological fact but rather permeated by cultural and social practices in which issues of power and inequality are central), there are ongoing scientific discussions in which different views clash. One example is research on masculinity and men's violence against women, in which some perspectives focus on how men who have committed violence minimise or justify their actions, while other perspectives emphasise the importance of trying to understand why certain men become violent and how they can change to adopt non-violent behaviours (Berggren et al., 2021).

Also, in the more general discussion about men and masculinity, different perspectives and approaches are taken (Berggren, 2020; Pease, 2025). While some focus on how *men* as a group reproduce their superiority, favouring concepts such as *men's practices* instead of abstractions such as masculinity, others believe it is important to talk about *masculinities* in the plural to capture differences and disparities within the category of men. While some develop new concepts to capture positive developments, such as *inclusive masculinity* and *caring masculinities* (Anderson, 2009; Elliott, 2016), others emphasise that even positive elements can be used in new strategies that actually reproduce inequality in themselves, such as *hybrid masculinities* (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). While some want to develop better, more positive and healthier forms of masculinity, others want to break down categorisations and untangle men, masculinity, women and femininity from each other.

This study examines the concepts and metaphors used in the discussions of masculinity within the reports and how the use of concepts in the material relates to scientific discussions of theory and concepts.

Emphases in the politics of masculinity

When it comes to masculinity and politics, sociologist Michael Messner (1997) has developed a useful model to illustrate common differences in focus and emphasis. Messner's Triangle model was developed based on a study of men's movements in the United States in the 1990s, but it is also applicable more generally in relation to issues of masculinity and gender equality policy (Hearn, 2024). One corner of the triangle, which focuses on issues of justice between women and men, is labelled *stopping men's privileges/seeking gender justice*. The second corner focuses on how norms and ideals of masculinity constrain men themselves, *prioritising the costs of masculinity*. The third corner focuses on differences between groups of men, *highl-*

ighting men's differences. Inspired by masculinity researchers Marie Nordberg (2006) and Keith Pringle (2006), the first two corners are here labelled 'the problems men create' and 'problems men experience' respectively, which also ties in with Bacchi's problem focus. The third corner is labelled 'differences between men'.
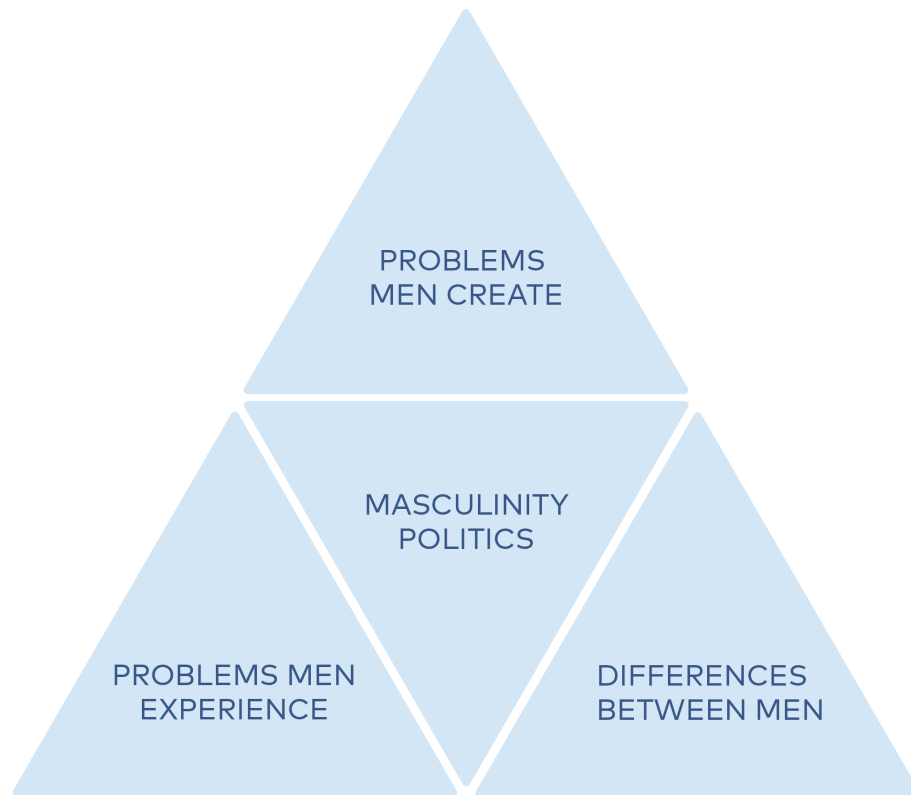

Figure 1. Messner's Triangle with modified labels

The modified Messner's Triangle is used in this study to illustrate the differences between interpretations in the report material.

The following sections present the results and analysis divided into two parts:

- The section Naming men and masculinity focuses on how the concepts of men and masculinity are presented in the reports and how the use of these concepts relates to current research.
- The section Emphases of masculinity politics analyses questions of orientation and how masculinity is constructed as a problem.

Naming men and masculinity

Jeff Hearn, a leading researcher in CSMM since the 1980s, argues that men and masculinity is "the elephant in the room" in gender equality policy (Hearn, 2024). By this he means, to achieve change, gender equality issues cannot only concern the subordinate group of *women*; they must also address the dominant category of *men*:

> You might imagine it might be difficult to talk about gender equality and gender power relations, without discussing men and masculinities, but that is not so. There are, for example, many excellent documents on gender equality, but that are silent or virtually so, on men and masculinities. [...] Indeed, it is worth asking how can it be possible to [change] gender inequalities or trans-form gender power relations without changing men and masculinities? (Hearn, 2024: 19)

An important task is therefore *naming men as men* without essentialising what it means to be a man or obscuring differences between men. CSMM offers several different ways of attempting to capture and put words to these issues. There are a number of concepts circulating both in academic literature (e.g., hegemonic, caring or hybrid masculinity) and public debate more generally (e.g., toxic masculinity, macho culture or destructive masculinity norms), and these concepts usually originate from different traditions and express distinct theoretical perspectives with different emphases (Berggren, 2020). This section discusses three different examples of naming men and masculinity that appear in the report material.

Masculinities

One of the most influential ideas in CSMM is that we need to talk about *masculinities* in the plural. This idea is largely associated with the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell (1996). Some of Connell's fundamental ideas are that men are not a uniform transhistorical group but that there are different ways of being or 'doing' man in different contexts, that men are not all equally oppressive towards women and that men can also be subordinate in a society based on categories such as sexuality, race/ethnicity and class. Connell's model (which contained four categories of masculinity) has been used, discussed, revised and criticised since the 1990s and has often served as a reference point for social science research on men and masculinity (although its influence is no longer as dominant, see for example Gottzén et al., 2020). One legacy of this way of thinking is precisely putting words to different, and often new, forms of masculinity/masculinities.

This perspective is clearly represented in the reports by the Nordic Council of Ministers, a few of which reference Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity: "traditional fishing families construct a **hegemonic masculinity** as that of the hunting hero" (R11: 16).

Masculinities are also referenced more broadly in the plural: "Femininities and **masculinities** are relevant to sustainable lifestyles" (R2: 16); "Furthermore, there are different **types of masculinities,** which also explains why some men receive privileges and others do not" (R10: 73); "**rural masculinities** are 'hierarchical, variable, multiple and situational'" (R11: 16).

Different concepts of masculinity are used in the reports to denote specific styles and problems, such as "Schwarzenegger's **hyper-modern masculinity** at the beginning of his acting career" (R2: 45) or some male cyclists being described as "characterised by **a ruthless competitive masculinity**" (R2: 44). Concepts of masculinity are also used to describe more desirable behaviours: "the company expresses **a kind of eco-modern masculinity**" (R2: 45); "It is important to show young men **alternative masculinities** to promote mental health and wellbeing" (R3: 15).

Gender coding

The idea that we can identify different types of masculinity has also been criticised from other perspectives. In practice, this risks leading researchers to focus on cataloguing different types of masculinity, which does not always help us to understand the processes through which gender is created, maintained and challenged (Messner, 2004; Pascoe, 2007). A key aspect of the criticism is that the masculinities approach is often based on the assumption that men always exhibit masculinity – just in a wide variety of forms. Although this approach emphasises differences and diversity on one level, it also reinforces an essentialist link between men and masculinity, according to the critics. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1995) formulated this in the mid-1990s in terms of the importance of driving a wedge, as quickly and decisively as possible, between the two categories of men and masculinity, which are often assumed to be linked.

Essentially, the same critical discussion is still ongoing today. One example is the now popular concept of *caring masculinities*, first introduced by Karla Elliott (2016), used to try and capture positive changes such as men taking greater parental responsibility (for discussion, see Wojnicka & de Boise, 2025). However, critics within queer studies such as Jonathan A. Allan (2023; 2025) point out that it is unreason-able to assume that masculinity is involved when men engage in caregiving, a traditionally feminine-coded practice: "One question to ask is why something like 'caring' must become 'masculine' and not simply be 'caring'? Why must his ability to 'care' become a type of masculinity?" (Allan, 2023: 45). Allan then broadens his criticism to a more general critical observation about parts of masculinity research,

writing: "a lot of things are being made to be masculine as if to help alleviate men's anxieties about the possibility of being perceived as feminine" (Allan, 2025: 2). From this perspective, the point is that while there may be cultural ideas surrounding masculinity and femininity, these do not necessarily need to be enacted by men and women respectively (Halberstam, 1998).

This perspective is also represented in the report material. For example, one report discusses "**which genders** enable sustainable lifestyles **regardless of sex**, and how these can be promoted" (R2: 30). Here, the idea is that while there are different recognisable types of gender expressions – masculinity and femininity – these can be practised regardless of a person's sex. This approach is based on the distinction between sex and gender – which was originally developed in early transgender research – and which has long played a prominent role in gender research (Eriksson & Gottzén, 2020). The aim is to distinguish between the biological and the given on the one hand and the social or constructed on the other, a useful but also long problematised approach, and to argue that "**social norms attribute** femininity to women and **masculinity to men**" (R2: 15). Words such as 'attributed', 'gendered' and 'associated with' are commonly used in the reports to describe gender coding by which specific characteristics have come to be associated with men:

> Professions, interests and areas of knowledge are also **gendered** to varying degrees as feminine or masculine [...] technology and machines are **associated with masculinity**. (R2: 15–16)

> Orienting oneself towards practices other than those traditionally **associated with masculinity** can break patterns that contribute to mental ill health. (R3: 35)

> ... meat is associated with **strength, potency and power**, values that in turn are **associated with masculinity.** (R2: 23)

The concept of 'masculinity norms' is also used in a similar way in the reports: "Professions in forestry and the military are associated with the ideals of **masculinity norms** and strength, which regulate perceptions of who is suitable – and unsuitable – to perform them." (R12: 10)

Traditional masculinity norms

Another term that is used repeatedly in the report material is 'traditional', for example 'traditional masculinity' and 'traditional masculinity norms':

> **Traditional masculinity norms** often emphasise traits such as control, self-confidence and toughness, which can cause young men to hide their feelings and avoid seeking help for mental health issues. (R3: 15)

> **...traditional forms of masculinity** can be considered an obstacle to

> sustainable lifestyles and a green transition, with the preference in food (meat) and means of transport (fossil-powered motoring). (R1: 4)

> Fathers who took longer paternity leave are less likely to adhere to **traditional norms of masculinity** (R4: 10)

> …to create room for diversity and standing up against **traditional and stereotypical gender roles.** (R6: 8)

The concepts of traditional masculinity and traditional masculinity norms are largely absent from interdisciplinary, critical gender research on men and masculinity and are not addressed, for example, in current reviews of perspectives and concepts (Berggren, 2020; Pease, 2025). They are used in psychological research on men and masculinity (Mokhwelepa & Sumbane, 2025); however, this is a type of research that is not particularly well integrated with interdisciplinary discussions on masculinity within the humanities and social sciences.

It may be worth pausing to consider the use of the term 'traditional' to describe undesirable practices and ideals associated with masculinity. In critical discussions of Nordic gender equality policy developed by gender, queer and postcolonial researchers, it has been noted that gender equality has become a value associated with a national self-image, not least in Sweden (Magnusson et al., 2008; Martinsson et al., 2017). Narratives in which gender equality is constructed, for example, as part of or an expression of Swedish values risk reproducing a division between modernity and tradition. 'We Swedes' are imagined to be modern, gender-equal subjects, while 'others' are seen as outdated and stuck in traditional, obsolete and unequal thinking.

One problem with this approach is that it runs a high risk of reproducing a hierarchical division based on race/ethnicity, something sociologist Minoo Alinia (2011) has termed "gender equal racism and barbaric immigrants". In a similar vein but with a focus on men, masculinity and youth researchers, Lucas Gottzén and Rickard Jonsson write: "The idea of gender equal masculinity is maintained, we believe, by portraying non-Swedish men as *more traditional* and unequal." (Gottzén & Jonsson, 2012: 11; italics added)

Another aspect of this is that inequality is attributed a historical position and rendered a remnant of the past, rather than being understood as a social problem in the here and now. To the extent that the problem of inequality still exists, it is something we should have left behind; it constitutes a kind of *cultural lag* that is no longer relevant in our time. The implication is that the reason for men being sexist or unequal today is that they have not liberated themselves from tradition rather than because they gain certain advantages or a more comfortable life through various forms of inequality. In other words, we are dealing with an understandable remnant of history rather than a conflict of interest today. Talking about traditional masculinity thus runs the risk of downplaying men's agency in this context (cf. Waling, 2019b).

Conceptual implications

It is clear that the concept of 'masculinity' is used in different ways in the reports. On the one hand, 'masculinities' is used in the plural to indicate different forms or types of men´s practices, highlighting differences between men. At the same time, this approach is generally based on, and reproduces, the assumption that men always exhibit masculinity. On the other hand, masculinity is used in reference to different things, characteristics, professions, etc. that are often associated with men. Both approaches are represented in current gender research, with the first being common in masculinity research specifically and the second more so in gender research more broadly, for example in research on how the labour market is gendered and in queer research which calls into question assumed connections between gender identity and gender practice. In addition, the word 'traditional' is used relatively often to describe undesirable behaviours, appearing in psychological research on men and masculinity but not in interdisciplinary and critical gender research.

What are the consequences of using the concepts of men and masculinity in one way or another? In some cases, it has no real practical significance. The intention may be to contribute to changing men and, for example, make them more caring, less violent, more active as parents or better at seeking help when they feel unwell. However, this can be advocated irrespective of whether it is termed developing new, alternative or caring masculinities or described as being more feminine or androgynous, distancing oneself from masculinity or breaking with traditional norms. In the report material analysed here, there are no major or decisive differences in focus or policy proposals that can be linked to specific ways of talking about men and masculinity.

However, differences in the use of concepts could potentially have a greater significance in gender equality policy initiatives aimed at men. In Australia, for example, there is currently discussion about promoting the development of *healthy/healthier masculinities* (Roberts et al., 2019). One risk with this type of framing is that programmes and interventions will continue to encourage boys and men to be masculine, even if in new ways (Waling, 2019a). An opposing position is to define masculinity as something inherently bad that men should be encouraged to distance themselves from, which can also be problematic, not least from a trans perspective. Such a view risks leading to trans men's identification as men being questioned, if the claim to being a man (masculine) is interpreted as upholding the patriarchal order (for an example of such an argument, see Schwalbe, 2014). Traits are also valued differently in different contexts and situations. Waling (2019a) points out that traditionally masculine traits – such as being stoic – can be harmful in some situations but valuable or desirable in others, such as when making decisions and trying to save lives in emergency situations.

Instead of starting from the essentialist view that men always exhibit masculinity, or that masculinity is always unequivocally bad, it may be more constructive to take a more flexible view of gender. Masculinity then refers to various things and characteristics associated with men, which can be problematic but not necessarily always so. A quote from one of the reports illustrates this in emphasising the importance of boys and young men developing resources to resist social pressure to conform to restrictive norms about how to be a man: "Good health is a basic prerequisite for coping with the challenges of school and working life and **resisting negative, restrictive masculinity norms**" (R3: 52). But going your own way and being able to 'resist' collective pressure could also be interpreted as an expression of individual strength, a masculine-coded trait. The wording suggests a flexible view of gender, in which certain masculine-coded traits can be valuable in addressing more problematic aspects.

Conclusions

Men and masculinity have been described as "the elephant in the room" and an "absent presence" in terms of gender equality policy (Hearn, 2024). An important task is therefore to name men and masculinity in gender equality policy. This can be seen in the use of the concept of masculinity in twelve reports on gender equality by the Nordic Council of Ministers during the period 2019–2024.

However, there are several ways of talking about masculinity, both in research and in broader social debate. The report material includes a number different understandings, which are used directly by the authors of the reports themselves and also appear in the research to which they refer. This is not surprising in itself, as research is conducted in different academic disciplines and is based on different theoretical perspectives. In this context, however, the different understandings do not seem to give rise to any major differences in terms of policy proposals. However, international discussion shows that different uses of concepts can lead in different directions, which is why a clearer awareness can be valuable.

For further discussion on gender equality policy initiatives aimed at men, it is recommended that essentialist assumptions (that men always act in a masculine way, or that masculinity is always a bad thing) and concepts that risk downplaying men's agency (traditional masculinity) be avoided in the first instance. Instead, it may be more constructive to adopt a more flexible view of gender that emphasises how different characteristics and practices are gender-coded or associated with men and women.

Emphases of masculinity politics

Political movements, discussions, interventions and proposals pertaining to issues of men and masculinity can vary greatly in their focus and emphasis – and there is no such thing as a single, unambiguous 'masculinity perspective'. Masculinity politics can include feminist and pro-feminist analyses and positions, and in the Nordic countries, a central issue has been trying to get men more involved as parents (Klinth, 2002; Järvklo, 2022). Masculinity politics can also be conservative and strive for re-masculinisation, i.e. re-establishing male superiority and a form of masculinity that is simultaneously assumed to be essential and to have been lost (Gottzén, 2025). Furthermore, perspectives and political priorities may vary depending on which men's experiences are explicitly or implicitly centred (Messner et al., 2015; Peretz, 2018). This section analyses the focus and emphasis of policies addressing issues surrounding men and masculinity and how masculinity is portrayed as a problem.

Problems men create

Gender equality policy is generally about trying to address inequality, i.e. the fact that men as a group have more power and resources than women. Although people with different gender identities may be involved in creating and maintaining inequality, it is not particularly surprising that gender equality policy discussions focus on men's role in these processes. The report material analysed here contains several clear examples of how men's practices pose a problem for others: men cause problems primarily for women but also for society at large.

Some reports discuss male-dominated industries (R5, R10, R12). Here, it is noted that many practical measures and initiatives have been taken to increase women's interest in choosing and remaining in male-dominated education programmes and professions:

> The methods themselves vary, but what many of them have in common is that they target the underrepresented group. Sometimes, they are encouraged to pursue vocational education and training with the help of role models who show that it is possible to partake and work in the profession and undertake vocational education and training even if they belong to the underrepresented gender. Sometimes they are attracted to vocational education and training through opportunities to try out the educational or professional practices included in the programme in the hope of arousing interest and, not infrequently, based on an explicit or implicit assumption that individuals in the underrepresented group have not tried anything similar before. In other cases, those who have already chosen an unconventional path are encouraged to

remain in vocational education and training and in the profession with the support of a network of other underrepresented individuals in the profession and in vocational education and training. (R5: 46)

The focus is on role models, mentoring and networking, as well as practical experience, and the target audience is women. It is women who, in various ways, are required to adapt, as they are assumed to lack self-confidence, networks and experience. To a significant extent, it is about 'fixing women' and, to a lesser extent, about 'fixing organisations' or 'fixing knowledge'. (R10: 7)

The reports thus take a critical perspective on many initiatives undertaken in the name of gender equality. They argue that the focus on changing girls' and women's choices implicitly constructs an image in which women are the problem: "there is a risk that the initiatives create an understanding that girls make the wrong choices" (R5: 46). Rather, the real problem should be understood as men maintaining an exclusionary culture within which it is difficult for women to feel at home, for example through informal social norms:

In this industry, there is always sauna baths. As soon as there is social activity of some sort, sauna bathing happens. … When I came into the sauna, a number of naked men over the age of 50 were sitting there. … the first time I met some of my co-workers, they were naked and sweaty. […] after that time, I stopped participating in sauna baths. […] When I meet them later, I always feel left out. (R12: 34)

The understanding that emerges from these reports is therefore that men create problems for women in the labour market and that gender equality policy should focus on changing the exclusionary norms that men uphold rather than changing the choices made by women and girls. This shift in perspective may also be relevant to research, as in the case of sexual harassment in the labour market. It is noted that there is established knowledge in this area about the experiences of victims, but "at the same time, there are essentially no studies on the perspectives and experiences of perpetrators." (R12: 24)

The view that the focus should be on the problems that men create for others, especially women, is also reflected in discussions about men's sexism and misogyny online. One report emphasises that men's sexism and misogyny online is a democratic problem, primarily caused by men, that prevents women from participating in an open political society on equal terms:

Women are subject to more online hate than men. Hate directed towards women focuses on their appearance or is often sexual harassment. Online hate is a threat to democracy. **Online hate is mostly perpetrated by men**. (R7: 4)

Furthermore, it is argued that abuse conducted by men online should be understood as part of a larger pattern of men's violence against women: "...the term online violence should be used to describe the phenomenon and [...] online violence should be regarded as part of the continuum of violence against women." (R7: 4) Later in the paper, a completely different understanding of men's sexist practices online will be analysed, but the understanding presented here is that this is a problem caused by men that affects women.

Men can also cause problems that affect society as a whole. The clearest example of this is the reports on climate change (R1, R2, R8). These reports emphasise that men, to a greater extent than women, constitute an obstacle to the transition to a sustainable lifestyle in climate terms. On a structural level, the sectors with the greatest impact on the climate are also male-dominated: "The most carbon heavy sectors – energy, transport, agriculture/food, and construction – are all male-dominated" (R8: 93).

On an individual level, men have a greater climate footprint due to their consumption preferences, particularly when it comes to food and transport:

> An average single man has a larger carbon footprint (10,000kg/year) that an average single woman (8,100kg/year), which is not due to expenditure levels (single men spend on average only 2% more than single women), but rather expenditure patterns. Men tend to spend more money on carbon intensive products and services such as fuel and meat, whereas women spend more money on lower-emitting products and services such as furniture and clothing. (R8: 44)

> Women as a group are more oriented towards the health aspects and calorie content of food, eat more fruit and vegetables and tend to follow dietary recommendations, meaning a lesser climate impact [...] Men as a group are more oriented towards enjoyment and eating what they perceive as tasting good, which, combined with norms that associate meat with masculine ideals such as strength, power and dominance, results in higher meat consumption. (R2: 28)

The reports show that men present problems for the climate and the reorientation of society in line with the climate through excessive meat consumption and driving. Additionally, the reports refer to research showing that men create obstacles for women who want to reduce their environmental impact. For example, men who choose to cycle instead of driving may still do so in a reckless manner that limits "wider groups' access to this climate-efficient mode of transport" (R2: 46), while heterosexual women may perceive "their male partners as the biggest obstacle to a more sustainable lifestyle." (R2: 33)

Overall, there are several clear examples in the report material that focus on problems that are created directly or indirectly by men. These are mostly problems for women – such as exclusionary workplace cultures or online harassment that hinders their participation in public and political life – but they can also be problems for society and the climate, such as men driving more or not following dietary advice to eat more plant-based foods.

Problems men experience

When men and masculinity are discussed in relation to gender equality, the focus is often on problems caused by men. However, research on men's movements and masculinity politics has shown that this is not the only framing of masculinity issues (Hill, 2007; Ekström, 2012). Another approach focuses on problems men experience. Within such an understanding, masculinity is discussed as an obstacle or limitation for individual men. This view is also clearly represented in the report material. For example, one report on mental ill health discusses that men may find it difficult to seek help when they are feeling unwell, with masculinity cited as one reason for this:

> **Masculinity norms affect men**'s health in **a negative way** (R3: 11)

> **Men find it more difficult** to seek help for mental health issues **due to** norms and stigma associated with **masculinity.** (R3: 4)

Here, masculinity (and its associated norms) is presented as something that limits men themselves. Traits coded as masculine such as control and self-confidence can stand in the way of men expressing their feelings and seeking support from others. Masculinity thus constitutes an obstacle for men when it comes to seeking help, support and care, which ultimately affects their health and wellbeing. Masculinity norms not only prevent men from seeking help when they are already unwell but also discourage them from practices that promote health in general:

> Traditional **masculinity norms [...]** also **constitute an obstacle** to valuing contexts and relationships that increase wellbeing and resilience against many forms of mental ill health. (R3: 3)

Solutions may therefore include lowering the thresholds for seeking help as well as a broader proactive reorientation towards expressing oneself and showing care for others:

> **Orienting oneself towards other practices** than those traditionally associated with masculinity can break patterns that cause mental ill health. **Commitment and care for others, training emotional skills and [...] the ability to express oneself** are part of processes that promote the health of young men. (R3: 35)

Another case in which one could argue the emphasis is on problems men experience is in a report on fathers and parental leave (R4). Increasing men's involvement as parents has long been a priority issue in Nordic gender equality policy (Klinth, 2002; Järvklo, 2022). It is therefore interesting that only one of the twelve reports analysed in this study deals with parenthood. This shows that aspects related to masculinity are relevant to a number of different gender equality policy issues and should not be treated synonymously with parental involvement.

Despite the fact that the present and involved father has become something of a flagship for Nordic gender equality policy, the actual take-up of parental leave by men ranges from 11 to 30 per cent (R4: 7). This raises the question over why men still do not take a larger share of parental leave. The report discusses the potential obstacles to more equal uptake, such as norms about men as the main breadwinners and women as the primary caregivers. At the same time, paternity leave is emphasised as something positive:

> **Paternity leave is an opportunity for fathers to both develop a close relationship** with their children and also to **develop the skills** they need to feel confident in their role as caregiver. (R4: 38)

> ...it is abundantly clear that when fathers take longer leave, they experience **a range of benefits**, from **better relationships** with their partners, greater satisfaction with the involvement they have with their children, to even experiencing a **higher level of life satisfaction**. (R4: 7)

> **These insights should hopefully inspire fathers** to assume a greater share of the parental leave they are eligible to take. (R4: 8)

Paternity leave is described here as something unambiguously positive. It is an *opportunity* for men to develop and improve close relationships with their children and partners, develop their own skills and achieve greater satisfaction in life. The report seems to suggest that men have everything to gain from becoming equal parents and that an awareness of the benefits of involved parenting should inspire them to that end. The fact that men are not equal parents thus appears to be something that is primarily detrimental to them. It is a problem men experience – fathers are presented to be somewhat ignorant and tired and in need of insight and inspiration.

One way to describe this understanding is as that of *a problem without conflict*. There is an obvious problem in that men are still not close to taking equal parental leave, despite decades of policies aimed at "making fathers with children". At the same time, there is no conflict in the issue. Above all, there is no conflict of interest between heterosexual fathers and mothers over who should perform unpaid reproductive work and who can instead free up time to devote to their work and career, civil society, political engagement, friendships or leisure interests. Nor is there any conflict of values among men themselves, between, for example, wanting

to be an equal parent and wanting to devote the time and commitment necessary for a successful career. In this way, the report can be said to appeal to men's self-interest in becoming more involved as parents (and thereby achieving greater life satisfaction) but not their potential willingness to share parenting more equally out of a sense of solidarity.

A rich history of feminist thought and gender research has analysed the gendered division of labour in various ways as a question of power and inequality. In this tradition, one could also ask what men gain from inequality and not just what prevents men from being equal parents. While there may be positive aspects to committed parenting, there may equally be desirable aspects to letting someone else take primary responsibility for reproductive work, thereby freeing up time for other things. For example, the report highlights what women would gain from more equal parental leave: "better opportunities for career advancement and to thrive also outside the home" (R4: 7). It would not have been inconceivable to discuss such advantages in relation to men as well. Perhaps the problem is not solely psycho-logical (men's lack of inspiration) but also related to the greater opportunities for career development and fulfilment outside the home that men (who live in relationships with women) can achieve through unequal parenting.

A third example of understanding problems men experience can be found in the report material on men's misogyny online. As described in the previous section, one report focuses on men's digital violations constituting an obstacle to women's participation in democratic discourse (R7). However, the problem can also be framed in terms of the problems men experience, which is clear in another report on the same theme (R6). Here, the focus is primarily on understanding the men who engage in misogyny online and the social and psychological problems they experience:

> ...many of the users had originally **sought emotional and social support** from the forums. (R6: 8)

> ...it is for these reasons, **not any** derived toxified or **malicious intent**, that the men initially seek them out. (R6: 30)

According to this understanding, men choose to engage in misogynistic internet forums to access emotional and social support, and the report states emphatically that there are no underlying malicious intentions. Furthermore, men's misogyny online is discussed as a matter of fulfilling basic human needs:

> **The psychological motivation** to be part of something bigger than the individual stems from **a fundamental human motivation** to engage in meaningful, enduring relationships – **to belong** – in order to not experience feelings of loneliness and social jealousy. (R6: 18)

> ...active usage [of forums] might be perceived as boundary seeking behaviour, and a morbid **curiosity rather than a misogynistic statement.** (R6: 19)

In its quest to understand sexist men, the report offers a sympathetic interpretation of their motivations. It focuses on the basic human need for belonging and views participation in misogynistic forums as an expression of curiosity. The report argues that men in the Nordic countries – despite all the talk of gender equality – still live in a reality that does not accept men who are sad, vulnerable or seeking support and validation. In this light, seeking out internet forums appears to be "an obvious and healthy solution and coping strategy" (R6: 19), as the forums can offer "a place to belong, and a source of recognition, respect and confirmation". (R6: 20)

Although these internet forums are certainly anti-democratic, men's involvement in them is primarily treated as a question of how men deal with their own susceptibility and vulnerability: we should understand this as "anti-democratic coping strategies" (R6: 38). Even when one user on an incel forum compares being socially rejected to being raped and calls himself 'JosefMengelecel' (referring to the Nazi chief physician at Auschwitz), the report emphasises: "it's also understandable" (R6: 19).

It becomes clear that this understanding centres on the problems men experience: they are sad, vulnerable or socially rejected. It is basically understandable that they engage in misogynistic forums to fulfil their basic human needs for belonging, affirmation and curiosity. Although the internet forums are described as anti-democratic in the report, there is also clear sympathy for the men who are active there.

The question of how far one should go to understand men's sexism has long been debated in feminist research on violence. Although there are different points of view, some have long warned that an uncritical focus on perpetrators' psychology risks portraying men as the real victims (Lundgren, 2012). A current example is the concept of 'himpathy', which has begun to be used in the wake of #metoo to describe excessive sympathy for perpetrators at the expense of the women who have been victimised (Manne, 2019; Uhnoo et al., 2024). On the one hand, it may be important to understand how certain men develop sexist or violent behaviours for those who, for example, want to design effective preventive measures. On the other hand, a focus on underlying, universal human needs can obscure certain dimensions, not least why it is through misogynistic online communities specifically that socially rejected men seek refuge. On this point, critical gender perspectives can contribute an important dimension.

Overall, there are several clear examples in the report material that can be said to address problems men experience. In some cases, masculinity is explicitly stated as being an obstacle for men themselves: something that prevents them from seeking help and support when they are feeling unwell. In other cases, the report only describes the potential benefits for men from a shift towards gender equality – such as taking more parental leave – making no mention of how they benefit from the current division of labour. This risks creating the impression that it is primarily

men who lose out as a result of gender inequality. In a third case, a discussion about misogyny online is framed as an issue that primarily concerns men's own social and psychological problems and unfulfilled general human needs, i.e. the emphasis is more on the problems men themselves experience than the problems men cause for others.

Differences between men

The third corner of Messner's Triangle of masculinity politics concerns differences between men. 'Men' are not a homogeneous group, and men's life situations vary according to factors such as age, generation, location, class and economic resources, sexuality, religion, ability and race/ethnicity. This means that some men have a great deal of power, resources, influence and status, while others find them-selves in more vulnerable positions. Given the significant differences that can exist between different groups of men, the American cultural theorist bell hooks (2000) asks: to which men do women actually want to be equal?

Simply talking about gender equality risks obscuring other dimensions of inequality that are, in practice, intricately intertwined with gender constructs in complex ways. In terms of issues concerning men and masculinity, this could be which experiences and perspectives of men explicitly or implicitly colour the understanding of problems and solutions that become relevant. In an illuminating study of men's activism for gender equality in the United States, *We're not equipped*, sociologist Tal Peretz (2018) analyses precisely this problem. The group he studied, which focused on combating inequality between men and women, did not have the tools to deal with issues specific to gay or religious men, who therefore went on to form their own groups. The gender equality group and its views and working methods were thus implicitly rooted in the experiences and perspectives of secular and heterosexual men, and their approach proved not to be generally applicable to all men as had been assumed.

Several of the gender equality policy reports analysed here emphasise the importance of an *intersectional perspective* to highlight that women and men are heterogeneous categories:

> Gender, an expression of the social signifiers of sex, is understood through **an intersectional approach, which also includes power structures such as class, ethnicity, functional variation and sexuality.** (R10: 5)

> Nordic women are not a homogeneous group. Neither are Nordic men or people who define themselves between or beyond the binary gender system. How **gender identities are combined with statuses such as socioeconomic background, ethnicity, disabilities, age, sexual orientation, and gender expression** plays a crucial role in terms of an individual's situation and position in society. (R8: 21)

> The needs of **marginalized women, such as women with disabilities and trans women, need to be mainstreamed** in all support services. (R7: 4)

Although there is a clear awareness of the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective, there are also knowledge gaps that make it difficult to base policy recommendations on intersectional knowledge:

> But **no information or initiatives were identified that discuss the gender implications of the energy transition among the Sámi**, nor the different gendered perspectives and experiences across regions, age groups **and other intersectional dimensions.** (R8: 58)

> **…a striking silence within the field of research** and a 'colour blindness' regarding what the categories of women and men look like, what their backgrounds are and whether they are covered by any of the grounds for discrimination other than gender and age. Studies of sexual harassment **mainly include white women and men** […] Focusing solely on gender and age can therefore lead to **knowledge** about sexual harassment in the workplace in the Nordic countries becoming **fragmented**. Intersectional perspectives on vulnerability in the lives of individuals and groups could increase knowledge about sexual harassment in the workplace in the Nordic countries. (R12: 12)

The reports thus identify shortcomings both in relation to gender equality initiatives and in research that make it difficult to translate intersectional approaches into knowledge-based policy proposals. Therefore, it seems justified to invest in more intersectional research in the Nordic countries.

Although intersectionality is broadly concerned with understanding the mutual embeddedness of different vectors of power (Hill Collins, 2019; Alinia & Berggren, 2023), there are differences in how it is applied in activism and social movements (Evans & Lépinard, 2020) and in research (McCall, 2005). Perhaps the most common approach in intersectional research is to start from the experiences of a subordinate group at the intersection of two or more categories. A prime example of this is that intersectional perspectives have been developed based on the position of Black women in the United States, where it has been pointed out that black women's experiences are specific to them and do not necessarily coincide with the experiences of either white women or black men (Crenshaw, 1991). This approach can also be used in relation to other marginalised groups, for example by highlighting young LGBTI people with disabilities (Toft & Franklin, 2020).

In the report material, age appears to be the category that is treated most inclusively, with the reports covering everything from early childhood education to young men's mental health and adult men in working life (although older men are absent from the reports). There is also some representation of place, as one report focuses on 'geographically isolated labour markets' (R11). In contrast to intersectional research, which often draws on the experiences of marginalised

groups, the report material contains few analyses that explicitly take subgroups or minorities within the category of men as a starting point. There is therefore significant untapped potential in taking a more direct approach based on different minority groups within the category of men and their specific experiences and situations, such as: transgender men; homosexual, bisexual and pansexual men; men with disabilities; men living with low economic standing; men belonging to indigenous peoples and national minorities; religious men; Afro-Nordic men and men from other racial/ethnic minorities.

Overall observations

In this section, the gender equality policy reports are analysed using Messner's Triangle of masculinity policy orientations and emphases. Unsurprisingly for a discussion of gender equality policy, several of the reports focus on problems men create. These are primarily problems that men create for women, such as limiting women's participation in public democratic discourse through online misogyny or maintaining exclusionary informal workplace cultures that mean women do not feel comfortable on the same terms. Other problems are those that men create for society at large, not least hindering the green transition by preferencing meat over following dietary advice to eat more plant-based foods, driving cars more than using public transport, or cycling with a lack of consideration for other road users, thereby resulting in fewer people choosing this mode of transport.

Another perspective is presented in a number of the reports that focuses on problems men experience. This includes (norms of) masculinity limiting men themselves, for example the ideal of self-sufficiency causing men who feel unwell to avoid seeking support and care. Similarly, a discussion about fathers taking parental leave to a much lesser extent than mothers only highlights the positive aspects of parental leave, making it appear that it is men who suffer from inequality (while the benefits to men from women doing unpaid work are not mentioned). Finally, misogynistic men on the internet are discussed in relation to their own social and psychological vulnerability, with sympathetic interpretations presented that downplay sexism and focus on men's curiosity or universal, basic needs for belonging.

Discussions on gender equality policy focusing on men and masculinity need to strike a balance between the problems men create and the problems men experience. The risk of focusing too much on the problems men create is condemning their actions without looking at the processes through which they develop sexist beliefs and behaviours. It can be important to understand these when developing effective measures to prevent or remedy gender equality issues. On the other hand, the risk of focusing too much on the problems men experience is that the broader context of inequality disappears from view. In an effort to understand men, unequal and sometimes illegal actions can be legitimised or

excused, creating the impression that men/perpetrators are the real victims. The balance between the problems men create and the problems men experience therefore needs to be analysed.

Several reports reveal a clear awareness that men and women are not homo-geneous groups and that factors such as race/ethnicity, class, sexuality and ability are important to consider in analyses, which therefore need to have an intersectional perspective. Several reports highlight the existence of knowledge gaps in terms of intersectional perspectives, which is why a research initiative to strengthen intersectional research in the Nordic region could be justified. Age is the best represented factor in the reports. For intersectionality to be translated into policy recommendations, much would be gained by focusing more clearly on the various minority groups within the group of men, such as religious, national, racial/ethnic and sexual minorities, as well as men with disabilities or men experiencing economic precarity.

Conclusions

The background to this paper is the introduction of 'masculinity' as a concept in gender equality policy documents in the Nordic countries. It examines 12 reports published by the Nordic Council of Ministers during the period 2019–2024 in which the concept appears. The aim was to investigate what is signified when men and masculinity are highlighted in these reports. Specifically, the analysis focuses on how the concepts of men and masculinity are used; how the use of these concepts relates to current scientific discussions; how problems, causes and solutions are constructed; and the emphasis or focus of reports in writing about men and masculinity.

Issues concerning men and masculinity have been referred to as the elephant in the room in gender equality policy; as Jeff Hearn (2024) points out, it is difficult to imagine a change in the direction of gender equality without men and masculinity changing. In the Nordic countries, masculinity politics has long been associated with the issue of "making fathers with children", i.e. getting men to take greater responsibility as parents, thereby levelling the playing field for women's and men's participation in working life (Klinth, 2002; Järvklo, 2022). Against this background, it is interesting in itself that only one of the twelve reports deals with parenthood. This can be interpreted as a shift in perspective, with issues relating to men and masculinity now considered relevant to a wide range of gender equality policy issues such as climate, education, the internet and mental health.

The political implications of concepts

The concepts of men and masculinity are used in different ways in research. One approach that has been prominent in masculinity research specifically is the discussion of types of 'masculinities', in the plural, to describe different practices in which men engage. The assumption is often that men always exhibit masculinity, but in different forms. A common approach in gender research in general is to talk about gender coding, i.e. that different professions, characteristics, etc. are coded as either male or female. The starting point is then that women can also engage in male-coded activities, and vice versa. Differences in terminology can have an impact on political initiatives and practical interventions, for example if they lead to a strong emphasis on either promoting new, healthier masculinities or on men distancing themselves from and ceasing to engage in masculinity. However, in the reports analysed here, the different understandings are not used in a consistent manner, nor do they appear to lead in clearly different directions in terms of policy proposals.

One term that is used repeatedly in the reports, however, is 'traditional masculinity'. This term is largely absent from interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences on men and masculinity but is used to some extent in the more limited field of psychological research. One criticism that can be levelled at the use of the term 'traditional' to describe undesirable behaviours by men is that it suggests they are a result of men not having liberated themselves from tradition rather than benefiting from continued inequality between men and women.

What is the problem?

Policies focused on issues relating to men and masculinity can have different emphases or orientations (Messner, 1997). Several reports can be said to focus on the problems that men create, primarily for women but also for society at large. These include men's sexism online, which limits women's participation in public discourse, and informal workplace cultures created by men, which discourage women from feeling comfortable on equal terms. They also include men's preferences for driving and eating meat, which hinder climate change mitigation. A focus on the problems men create is expected in a gender equality policy context, where the focus is on addressing inequalities between men and women.

Another understanding focused on the problems men experience also emerges in the report material. This includes (norms of) masculinity constituting an obstacle for men themselves, such as when ideals of self-reliance prevent them from seeking help for mental health issues. It also includes the taking of parental leave being described in solely positive terms to inspire fathers to become more involved as parents. However, this paints men as the big losers in unequal parenting, especially if there is no mention of the ways in which they benefit from inequality, such as time to devote to leisure interests or their careers. A focus on the problems men experience also emerges in discussions of men´s sexism on the internet; in some cases, the framing of these discussions captures men's own psychological and social vulnerability and need for belonging rather than the effects of their actions on women and democratic discourse.

Differences between men

Men are not a homogeneous group, and men find themselves in different life situations depending on a range of factors such as class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, age and ability. Several reports highlight the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective to capture this complexity. Variations in age and across the course of men's lives is the best represented factor, with reports focusing on everything from early childhood education, young people, education and mental ill health to sexual harassment of adult men in the workplace. However, none of the

reports deal with older men as a group. Several reports highlight the lack of sufficient intersectional research as a limitation in terms of developing policy proposals, and investment in more intersectional research in the Nordic countries therefore appears justified.

The reports themselves are based on specific issues such as vocational training or climate change rather than minority groups, which are often the starting point for intersectional research. A clearer focus on different subgroups and minorities within the group of men – such as religious men; transgender men; gay, bisexual and pansexual men; men with disabilities; men experiencing economic vulnerability; and men belonging to racial, ethnic or national minorities – appears to be a priority if an intersectional ambition is to be realised and form a more comprehensive basis for the development of gender equality policy.

More questions to focus on

The analysis of the report material can also provide some guidance on the issues to focus on in the future. The topics addressed in the reports to do with *the problems men create* primarily concern the public sphere, such as education, work and politics. Here, greater interest in the problems men create in other spheres of society could be envisioned. For example, violence and abuse in intimate relationships and within families is an important issue, one that is not addressed in the report material analysed here, which could be relevant in highlighting how the various Nordic countries tackle issues related to support for victims and perpetrators, what violence prevention methods look like and how a more long-term promotion of respectful relationships and sexual consent could be developed.

Other areas that could be explored in more detail are leisure interests and club activities, such as sports and culture. These areas involve aspects such as personal commitment and belonging but also entail organisational considerations with regard to clubs, organisations and companies. What are the gender and equality issues in the Nordic countries in these spheres? To what extent, for example, are boys and men socialized into gender norms and sexism within the world of sports (Messner & Sabo, 1994) and what opportunities are there to develop more inclusive and less homophobic environments instead? (Anderson, 2009) What lessons can be learned in terms of organisation and leadership to promote equal opportunities, including working methods that promote, prevent and remedy?

When it comes to other male-dominated spheres of society, arenas involving the legal and illegal use of violence are prominent in public debate. As a result of the changed security situation in Europe, efforts are being made in the Nordic countries to strengthen military capacity. What problems and opportunities exist in terms of gender and equality in the military sphere in the Nordic countries, and how do

defence initiatives affect issues of masculinity and equality? At the same time, there are ongoing debates and initiatives to tackle gang-related crime, another male-dominated sphere that creates problems, not least in the form of acts of violence. What are the issues surrounding gender, masculinity and gender equality in criminal environments in the Nordic countries and what lessons can be learned from both preventive and remedial efforts?

When it comes to *problems men experience*, closer attention could be paid to the various forms of discrimination, stigmatisation and violence that affect different groups of men. Men may be vulnerable, for example, as homosexual, bisexual, queer and transgender persons; as members of national, religious or racial/ethnic minorities; by living with chronic illnesses or disabilities; and/or by finding themselves in precarious situations economically and in the labour market. An intersectional perspective can capture the fact that men's (and women's) life situations are characterised by a wide range of factors other than gender, with the interaction between these often presenting *specific* opportunities and challenges. Although several reports emphasise the importance of an intersectional perspective, more could be done to focus specifically on the experiences of different minority groups.

A problem without conflict?

One of the starting points for this study has been Bacchi's critical perspective on the construction of problems in policy texts (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Overall, it can be said that there is a recurring tendency in a number of reports, though not all, that can be described as presenting *a problem without conflict*. Although the reports deal with various issues of gender equality, there seems to be a reluctance to articulate conflict (cf. Wendt, 2002). Conceptually, the term 'traditional' is often used, suggesting that the cause of gender inequality is that men have not liberated themselves from tradition not that they benefit from unequal arrangements. In identifying the problem of men eating more meat and driving more than is sustainable for the climate, an argument is made against campaigns focused on gender, masculinity and climate When discussing the unequal uptake of parental leave, only the positive aspects of committed parenting are highlighted, with nothing said about the potential conflict over who should perform unpaid reproductive work (R4). Parts of discussions focused on men's misogyny on the internet focus on this behaviour being fundamentally understandable given men's own vulnerability (R6) rather than the consequences for women's political participation and democratic discourse in general (R7).

These examples paint a picture of a focus on consensus, suggesting that in principle there is agreement over equality, even though certain obstacles remain. However, this does not always involve challenging the practices that men engage in or

highlighting what men gain from inequality. This is reminiscent of what political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2005) has termed a 'post-political' approach. This is characterised by a belief that a universal rational consensus is possible in politics, through which one can "reconcile all conflicting interests and values" (Mouffe, 2005: 3). In contrast to the post-political approach, Mouffe argues that there are always different perceptions, interests, desires and proposals pertaining to how society should look and change, and that it is important for democracy that the fundamental antagonistic dimension of politics is recognised and nurtured.

The post-political approach is also not particularly compatible with gender research, which often understand constructions of gender as related to power and inequality. Were policy discussions to be research based (cf. Rudnicki & Wojnicka, 2024), it is conceivable that they would more clearly articulate potential conflicts of values and interests. At the same time, it is perhaps an open question to what extent a focus on either consensus or conflict is most effective in bringing about social change.

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Appendix 1: The reports

Publ. no.	Title	Publisher, year and number of pages
R1	Climate, youth and gender: Inclusion strategies for Nordic youth movements	Nordregio report 2024:19 (39 pages)
R2	Klimat, kön och konsumtion: En forskningsöversikt med genusperspektiv på hållbara livsstilar	Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022 (78 pages)
R3	Unga mäns psykiska ohälsa i Norden: En forskningsöversikt om psykisk hälsa i relation till utbildning, arbetsliv och pandemi	Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023 (72 pages)
R4	State of Nordic fathers	Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019 (49 pages)
R5	Yrkesutbildning i Norden: Kunskaper och insatser för att motverka könsuppdelning	Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022 (55 pages)
R6	The angry internet: A threat to gender equality, democracy & well-being	Centre for Digital Youth Culture, Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020 (112 pages)
R7	Preventing online gender-based violence in the Nordics: Key takeaways from the conference 'Gender-based hate, threat and harassment on the Internet' on 10–11 June 2021	Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021 (24 pages)
R8	How climate policies impact gender and vice versa in the Nordic countries	Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022 (122 pages)
R9	Ändra föreställningar och bryt traditioner! Kön och jämställdhet i småbarnspedagogiken i Norden	Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021 (121 pages)
R10	Genusperspektiv på framtidens högteknologiska arbetsliv: En nordisk forskningsöversikt om utbildningsval inom STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics)	Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021 (176 pages)
R11	Equality in isolated labour markets: Equal opportunities for men and women in geographically isolated markets in Laesö (DK), Suduroy (FO), and Narsaq (GL)	Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020 (111 pages)
R12	Sexuellt trakasserad på jobbet: En nordisk forskningsöversikt	Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020 (79 pages)

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