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The Co-Construction of Gender and Innovation – The Case of Vinnväxt

Abstract

The overarching research question of this paper is to explore how ‘gender’ is constructed in relation to innovation in government policies as well as in industrial practises. Of particular interest is the meanings ‘gender’ is given and how it is related to other phenomena. In order to answer the research questions of this paper some intersects of gender and innovation in government policies and industrial practices have been studied. Such intersects have been found in policies on both gender and innovation as well as in industrial practise. This study focuses in particular on the Swedish Agency for Innovation Systems Vinnova, its programme Vinnväxt which promotes sustainable regional growth by developing internationally competitive research and innovation environments in specific growth fields, and the regional initiatives which have received support from Vinnväxt, the so called Vinnväxt winners. The themes of this study have been explored via document studies, dialogues with the programme directors of the Vinnväxt programme and focus group interviews including representatives from the management groups of the innovation systems supported by Vinnväxt. The empirical findings are used to discuss the construction of ‘gender’ in relation to innovation. The study is part of a larger research project titled “Gender Equality for Sustainable Growth”, in which gender equality and work for change within the innovation systems supported by Vinnovas programme Vinnväxt are studied. It is an action oriented research project where not only the programme managers of Vinnväxt and the representatives from the innovation systems supported by Vinnväxt but also colleagues in academia participate in the processes of mutual learning and change. The project is inspired by an approach that combines feminist research and action/interactive research. As gender equality issues have entered the realm of innovation both in policy and practise there has been a shift of perspective from ‘gender’ as an irrelevant “non-issue” to ‘gender as a “seed of change” necessary to ensure national – and regional – competitiveness in the global economy by overcoming the inefficiencies caused by pervading gender stereotypes. In this context ‘gender’ as an intellectual tool of analysis has been accompanied by ‘gender’ as a useable tool of improvement. The need for and opportunities in improvements are discussed on many levels e.g. the innovation systems, the innovative processes, and the innovations which are the outcome of these processes.