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Emilsen, Kari (2026). **From Chance to Career: Recruiting Men into Norwegian ECEC and Keeping Them There.** Paper presented on the 34th Annual EECERA Conference, Funchal/Madeira, Portugal, 26.8.2026.

Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore how men are recruited into Norwegian ECEC, what supports retention, and which practitioner-identified measures may increase men's participation. Men remain a small minority in Norwegian ECEC. Recent national figures show 10.9% men in core staffing (ssb.no). Research on men in ECEC highlights persistent gender imbalance and the importance of organizational conditions, professional status narratives, and gendered expectations (Emilsen et al., 2023; Brody et al., 2021). We draw on gender-as-practice to analyze how everyday interactions and role expectations shape "organizational fit" (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and we connect this classic framework to contemporary ECEC scholarship on men, gender flexibility, and workforce sustainability (Warin, 2019; Brody et al., 2021). An ecological perspective frames recruitment/retention across individual–workplace–system levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). We used an interpretivist qualitative design. One focus group interview with three male ECEC practitioners and a researcher/moderator; audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. Coding was structured deductively by Recruitment–Retention–Measures with inductive sub-themes. The research was conducted with informed consent, encrypted data storage, anonymisation, and no collection of personal data. Men's entry was often contingent (substitute work, civil service, reskilling), rather than a planned early career choice. Retention pressures were tied less to pay than to workload, staffing constraints, and moral stress from "not meeting expectations," which also made positive recruitment messaging difficult, alongside gendered role assumptions (e.g., practical/physical tasks) affecting daily fit. Implications was pair pipeline initiatives (school outreach, structured youth placements) with retention-first reforms (staffing and sustainable work organisation) to make recruitment messages credible.

Keywords

ECEC, men, recruitment, retention, gender-as-practice, Norway, thematic analysis, workforce policy

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From Chance to Career: Recruiting Men into Norwegian ECEC and Keeping Them There



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Norwegian ECEC context

A universal welfare-state institution for children aged 1–5

- Integrated care, play, learning, formation and democratic participation
- A nationally regulated pedagogical sector with a mixed professional workforce
- **Men constitute approximately 11% of core staffing**
- Gender balance concerns representation, participation and professional diversity—not only staffing

Research aim

To explore how men are recruited into Norwegian ECEC

To identify what supports—or undermines—retention

To examine practitioner-identified measures that may increase men's participation

Guiding question:

How does an initial, sometimes accidental entry become a sustainable professional career?

Relationship to previous research

Men's participation in ECEC remains persistently low across many countries

Recruitment and retention are shaped by professional status, workplace culture, leadership and gendered expectations

Men may be welcomed as 'male role models' while simultaneously being positioned in narrow professional roles

A central gap is practitioner-informed knowledge about how entry, recognition and retention connect

Theoretical framework: gender as practice

Gender is not treated as a fixed attribute that men bring into ECEC

Gender is produced and negotiated through everyday interactions, expectations and divisions of work

The analysis asks what gender does in professional practice

Connell's perspective on multiple masculinities helps avoid treating men as a homogeneous group

Analytical concepts

POSITIONING

How are men placed
in everyday work?

RECOGNITION

Are they seen as
professionals—or
mainly as “the
man”?

ORGANISATIONAL FIT

Who is perceived as
suitable for ECEC
work?

BELONGING

What enables men to
participate, develop
and stay?

Paradigm, methodology and methods

Interpretive qualitative approach

Primary empirical frame: LUG (Teachers without borders) focus-group material on recruitment, retention and diversity

Supplementary material: MoMEC Norway survey (N = 138), including open-ended responses

Thematic analysis focused on entry routes, gendered positioning, support and retention

Reflexive interpretation informed by gender-as-practice

MoMEC Norway: respondent profile

138
respondents

61.6%
more than five
years in ECEC

52.9%
ECEC teacher
bachelor

87%
work with other
men

Finding 1: Entry often happens by chance

Substitute work, personal networks and first-hand experience function as gateways into ECEC

“I later began working in ECEC by chance, because a family friend needed a substitute. I have not applied for another job since—I enjoyed it so much.”

MoMEC Norway, open-ended response, Q11; translated by the authors

Finding 2: Gender is practised through task allocation

Men may be welcomed into ECEC while being assigned gendered tasks

Repeated expectations can narrow the professional role and affect recognition

“Because you are a man, you are expected to do all the carrying and physically demanding work in ECEC. The distribution of roles can often become uneven.”

MoMEC Norway, open-ended response, Q11; translated by the authors

Finding 3: No single way to be a man in ECEC

Men are sometimes recruited into ECEC to fulfil a predefined ‘male role’

Participants emphasised competence, interests and relationships—not presumed masculinity

“We need to show that there are many kinds of men and no single correct way of being a man.”

MoMEC Norway, open-ended response, Q12; translated by the authors

Finding 4: Recognition, guidance and belonging support retention

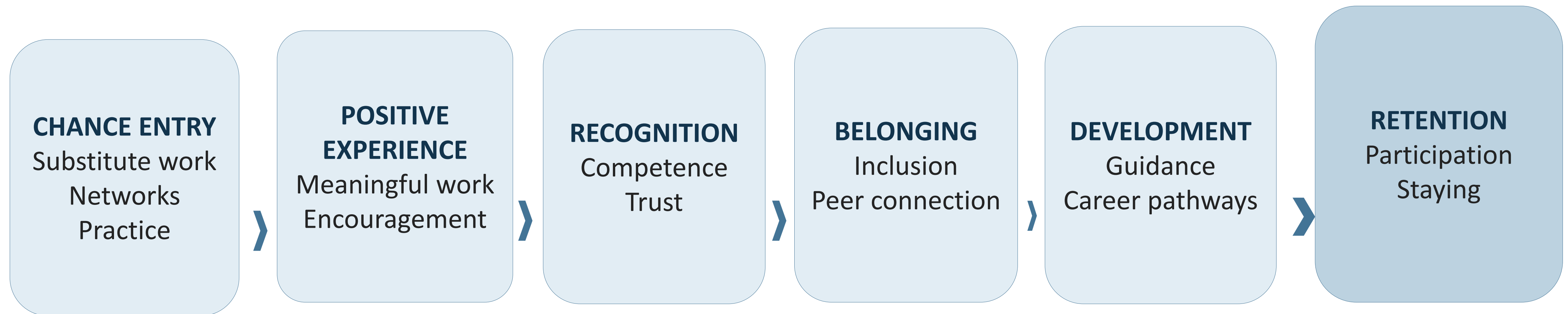
Respondents ask for clear professional expectations, guidance and opportunities for development

Support should respond to minority positioning without constructing men as fundamentally different workers

“They need the same professional guidance as everyone else, perhaps combined with additional support and recognition. Knowing that the same expectations apply to them as to any other employee is reassuring.”

MoMEC Norway, open-ended response, Q12; translated by the authors

From chance to career: an analytical model



Barriers across the trajectory: low status · gendered expectations · isolation · weak mentoring · limited career narratives

What to bring home

ACCESS

Routes through practice,
substitute work and early
exposure

RECOGNITION

Value competence - not a
predetermined 'male role'

SUSTAINABLE PARTICIPATION

SUPPORT

Guidance, mentoring and
professional development

CULTURE

Challenge gendered expectations
through leadership and
reflection

Recruitment opens the door.

Everyday professional practices determine whether entry becomes a career.

Conclusion

Recruiting men is not enough

Retention depends on recognition, belonging and opportunities for professional development

Gender balance becomes meaningful when different men can participate as legitimate professional contributors

**The goal is not simply more men
but more inclusive and sustainable ECEC professional communities**

From chance entry to professional belonging

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