




The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

**The role of men and boys
in advancing gender
equality and breaking
gender stereotypes**
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Comments paper – Croatia



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Engaging boys and men as allies in advancing gender equality in Croatia – Missing policies

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Abstract

In its institutional mechanisms towards combating gender inequality and gender-based violence, Croatia acknowledges the adverse effects of gender norms and stereotypes but largely fails to address them with appropriate measures. Relevant national policies on gender equality and the prevention of violence do not recognise gender-transformative work with boys and men as an effective strategy for advancing gender equality. Consequently, there is no systematic data collection nor government support for interventions in this field. There are some policy advancements in the area of equitable care, with the recent introduction of father's leave. Work in the field is uncoordinated and undertaken by individual actors in civil society who operate largely without government support and in adverse conditions of societal backlash.

1. Relevant county context

Harmful gender norms and stereotypes continue to be drivers of gender inequality and gender discrimination. They have a powerful influence on the lives of women and men, girls and boys, negatively shaping their experiences and limiting their opportunities in various domains of life: education, labour market, care, family life, health, economic welfare, leadership and decision-making ([Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023](#)). Gender norms and stereotypes also play a significant role in perpetuating gender-based violence ([Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#)).

In its institutional mechanisms towards combating gender inequality and gender-based violence, Croatia acknowledges the adverse effects of gender norms and stereotypes but largely fails to address them with appropriate measures. [The National Plan for Gender Equality 2022-2027](#) is the government's principal strategy laying out its commitments towards achieving gender equality. The Plan has not been yet adopted (as of January 2023) but its final draft suggests a limited scope of intervention in the area of combatting gender stereotypes and harmful gender norms. The proposed measures will focus mainly on combatting sexism and stereotypes in the media and the judiciary. In relation to education, the focus will be solely on the promotion of non-stereotypical educational pathways for girls and boys. Additionally,

in order to address the unfavourable position of women in the labour market, one of the commitments refers to the elimination of gender stereotypes about childcare.

Other relevant policies ([National Plan for Combatting Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment 2022-2027](#), [National Strategy of Protection against Family Violence 2017-2022](#), [Civic Education](#) and [Health Education](#) school curricula, [Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence in Schools 2022-2024](#)) also marginalise the issue of harmful gender norms and stereotypes and fall short of addressing them systematically and comprehensively.

Gender-transformative work with boys and men, as a strategy for achieving gender equality and eliminating gender-based violence, is not recognised at all, except for psycho-social interventions with perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence ([Ajduković 2004](#)). Currently, there are no institutional measures in Croatia which encourage and support the work with boys and men to deconstruct traditional masculinity norms and to reshape their relationships with women and girls and other men. The only exception is the recent policy development (August 2022) related to the introduction of [father's \(paternity\) leave](#) which contributes to the work/life balance of all family members and reframes some of the gender norms regarding care work ([Unterhofer, Wrohlich 2017](#)). Additionally, the Central State Office for Demography and Youth has a yearly [call for proposals for projects of NGOs supporting parenthood](#). One of the four priorities of the call is encouraging fathers to take on a more active role in family life and childcare. For example, in 2022, the budget of the call was around 680.000 EUR and a total of 72 short-term projects were selected for funding (in all four priorities of the call). This means that every year no more than a dozen micro projects (worth less than 10.000 EUR) promoting active fatherhood are implemented in local communities around the country. It should be noted that the two interventions (father's leave and the support to fatherhood projects) stem from the government's policies on families and demographic renewal. They are not primarily focused on gender equality but just happen to coincide with that policy area.

Since neither combatting harmful gender stereotypes and norms nor working with men and boys in addressing gender stereotypes are priorities of relevant policies in Croatia, it is not surprising that there is no systematic data collection in this area. This situation creates a loop wherein the lack of data hinders the creation of relevant and effective measures. At the same time, due to the lacking policies, there is no need for data collection to measure the progress and effectiveness of measures.

However, other actors, such as academia and NGOs, produce research which offers some insight into how gender norms are articulated in Croatian society. For example, a large [study on gender attitudes and practices in Croatia](#) was conducted in 2018 by Ivo Pilar Institute for Social Sciences. The findings suggest the presence of more gender-equitable attitudes in the areas of education and work (public sphere), while less equitable, or even patriarchal, attitudes are still present to a larger extent in the private sphere of family roles and care work ([Tomić-Koludrović et al 2018](#)). Also, the [Ombudsperson for Gender Equality](#) periodically issues research data and gender analyses on various topics (gender stereotypes in media, school textbooks, sports;

gender pay gap, unpaid care work, etc.). All this can supplement the official data (what exists) and provide a better basis for targeted policy interventions.

The growing polarisation of the Croatian society gives rise to the “anti-gender” movement and drives strong backlash which erodes the existing commitments to gender equality and the progress achieved. Gender-transformative work with men and boys is also targeted by conservative forces and labelled as “gender ideology”. In June 2022, Status M, an organisation working with boys and men based in Zagreb, was under an attack orchestrated by conservative groups. This involved online harassment, threats of violence on social media and threatening phone calls. This case is one of many – lots of other feminist organisations are also under threat – and only goes to illustrate the growing opposition to gender-transformative discourse and interventions, which might hinder the development of the work with boys and men.

2. Policy debate

In 2022, the relevant actors were involved in a debate around the [National Plan for Gender Equality 2022-2027](#) – a long-awaited strategic document which will determine goals and measures to address gender inequality in Croatia in the coming years. The previous national plan was in place from 2011 to 2015, which means that, effectively, the country has had no gender equality strategy for the past seven years. The new National Plan has not been yet adopted by the government although its validity refers to the five-year period starting in 2022. The process of its drafting was assessed by a number of independent NGOs as non-participatory and non-transparent. In the consultations with the interested public, several NGOs and independent experts referred to its final draft as incoherent, unambitious and lacking in many respects. There were several suggestions to amend the draft of the National Plan so that it has a more comprehensive approach, with targeted measures, to combat harmful gender stereotypes and norms, especially through education and youth work, but they were not accepted. It was noted that the final draft of the National Plan completely failed to acknowledge the importance of engaging men and boys as actors and allies in the struggle for gender equality. A proposal to include and support gender-transformative work with boys and men was also rejected.

In August 2022, the government amended the Maternity and Parental Allowances Act and introduced [father's leave](#) in compliance with the [EU Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers](#). All fathers in Croatia are now entitled to fully paid paternity leave of 10 or 15 days, depending on whether they have one child, twins or more children born at the same time. This novelty also sparked public debate involving NGOs, independent experts and parents. There was unanimous support for the introduction of father's leave, as an important step towards more equitable care. However, many actors assessed the new measure as unambitious and suggested that the leave be mandatory. This would minimise the potential for discrimination against fathers from the side of employers. It was also proposed that the leave be longer in duration and more flexible in its implementation. However, the leave was introduced in its minimal form. The Central State Office for Demography and Youth,

the government body which proposed the original amendment, announced that it would monitor closely the implementation of father's leave and make further modifications to the measure accordingly.

3. Good practice examples

Since there are no institutional interventions in the area of working with men and boys in advancing gender equality, we will focus on good practice examples in the civil society sector.

[Status M](#) is the only organisation in Croatia that works with boys and men on the deconstruction of harmful gender norms and stereotypes and the transformation of traditional masculinities. Their programmes cover the following:

- gender-transformative work with boys and young men (mainly in schools) through long-term workshop cycles, focusing on the prevention of violence and the promotion of gender equality;
- gender-transformative work with men promoting equitable parenthood and the involvement of men in unpaid care work;
- raising the capacities of professionals to work with different target groups (boys, young men, adults) with a gender-transformative approach, addressing the prevention of violence, elimination of gender stereotypes and the promotion of gender equality.

Here are some of Status M's projects tackling harmful gender stereotypes and norms which are unique and innovative in the Croatian context:

- [KINDER](#): The project is implemented in Croatia, Portugal and Spain and it is focused on professionals working with children in kindergartens and elementary schools. The goal is to provide teachers and educators with gender-responsive and transformative tools, allowing them to respond to the specific needs of children in the teaching process from a gender equality perspective.
- [X-MEN – Masculinities, Empathy, Non-violence](#): The project is implemented in Croatia, Portugal and Spain. It is targeting vulnerable young people (migrant youth, boys and girls in correctional institutions) with the goal of promoting nonviolent masculinities and the development of strategies that break cycles of violence while fostering tools and interventions that aim to promote gender equality.
- [Fathers' Festival](#): This is a national [MenCare](#) campaign which focuses on the change of gender norms about parenthood and care. It promotes gender equality by encouraging men to take on equitable parenting and care responsibilities. The campaign's central activity is a photo competition and a follow-up exhibition which has been touring the country for the past five years. In 2022, the campaign produced three videos on [engaged fatherhood](#), [father's leave](#) and [equal care and domestic work](#).

4. Transferability aspects

Both the Irish and Austrian good practice examples would be interesting in the Croatian context, as similar interventions do not exist in Croatia.

I would like to refer more closely to the Austrian case of counselling and helplines for men and boys. Given the escalating mental health crisis ([WHO 2022](#)), and the fact that mental health is also gendered and that the traditional norms of masculinity negatively affect help-seeking behaviour ([EIGE 2021](#)), it is reasonable to make a case for counselling and helplines for men and boys, with a special emphasis on the prevention of violence. However, one should bear in mind that the [latest report](#) of the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality states that services for survivors of domestic violence are still underfunded and some are operating in uncertain conditions. Therefore, it is important to secure that counselling and helplines for men and boys should not be introduced at the expense of services for women.

The Irish example of measuring gender norms based on the OECD indicator framework is also very interesting. The strategy of the authors of the Irish report for addressing the existing data gaps, which consists of using the available data from various sources and constructing proxy indicators for the missing data, could have a potential for transferability to the Croatian context.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Over the last two decades, the importance of working with men and boys to advance gender equality has been increasingly recognised and evidence shows that interventions with a gender-transformative approach are effective (Edström et al 2015). Decision-makers at all levels should take work with men and boys from the project level to policy and institutional levels. Achieving tangible change at the societal level requires all-encompassing interventions targeting large numbers of boys and men so they become allies in dismantling the system which subjugates girls and women. This should be complemented by robust data collection in order to track progress and adjust approaches.

Decision-makers should also make sure that the work with boys and men to advance gender equality does not take resources away from women and actors in this sector should strive to build cooperation and alliances with women's organisations.

Gender-transformative work with boys and men is perceived as "gender ideology" and is often targeted by reactionary and conservative groups. All involved actors should find viable strategies to counter backlash and ensure that our societies do not revert back from the already achieved progress in the area of gender equality.