



# 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 –  
Czech Republic



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# Personal engagement, formal base and reluctant structural action

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## Abstract

The Czech comments papers provides a brief historical context of the country approach to gender equality and men's role within it – there is a history to build on. This context together with examples of the Czech policy practice and good practices provide the current picture. It illustrates that it is personal engagement, solid formal (institutional) base incorporating international standards of gender equality implementation, and reluctant political approach to systematic actions challenging the structural status quo on a systematic long-term basis. The examples of Austrian and Irish good practices serve as relevant transferable policies in case the necessary personnel and adequate budget is allocated to them in the country context on a regular, permanent basis. And that depends on political will.

## 1. Relevant country context

### 1.1 The historical context of gender equality and the role of men in it

The current approach of the Czech Republic towards gender equality and the role of men – within it and in breaking gender stereotypes – has been marked by several trends. Historically, “there is no question of women without the question of men” is a quote attributed to the first Czechoslovak president (1918 – 1935), Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (a sociologist and an outspoken feminist himself). During the period of communism, ideologically enforced equality for participation of women in building better socialist/communist future curtailed any individual engagement or feminist movement. The period after 1989 (the breakdown of the iron curtain in Europe) has brought freedom with return to individualism and liberalism strongly impacting also attitudes towards social movements, collectivity and ideologies – with feminism among those harshly criticized. Yet, the accession to the European Union in 2004 meant several institutional changed and implementation of major policies regarding gender equality and equal opportunities then. The general social and cultural Czech context, however, has never been much in favour of feminist ideas and women's movements. The general (historically informed) scepticism towards quotas and evergreen conservative essentialising approaches to the role of women and men in society (gendered division of biological reproduction/care and material

production/paid work/) together with more recent populist or anti gender initiatives still inform current debates and approaches towards gender equality.

## 1.2 Institutionalisation of gender quality and the place of men within

Initiatives bringing up feminist thought and women's movement have been mostly concentrated in civic, nongovernmental organisations. Institutionalising gender equality into state structures and policies as well as research and academic practice have developed partly independently, yet with personal intersections. Regarding the role of men, there is a Working Group on Men and Gender Equality under the [Government Council for Gender Equality](#)<sup>1</sup> since 2012.<sup>2</sup> Men (as subjects and objects of problems) have been labelled as a crosscutting (and emerging) principle in the [previous](#) as well as in the new governmental [Gender Equality Strategy for 2021 - 2030](#).

The Working group (WG) has been established partly on demand of representatives from the civic sector – projects initiatives, NGOs and individual experts/researchers/working on themes and problems related to men and masculinities (author of this comment paper included). Two significant initiatives involved and cooperating in the WG are [LOM](#) (League of Open Men) and [Genderman](#) (project under Open Society). There is a new policy paper on Men in the public sphere (in [CZ](#) and for your eyes only in [EN](#)). The WG has collaboratively worked on reports on topics such as involved fatherhood, education and violences (all available only in Czech).

## 1.3 Collecting data on gender norms and gender stereotypes

The Czech Republic is a county with a rich tradition of statistical (demographic) data collection and informed social-science research (social sciences underwent turbulent development and renaissance after 1989 here). However, the statistics are often published not as an open source data, in their descriptive form, absolute numbers; sometimes not even broken into basic sociodemographic categories such as gender (no crosstabs enabling combination of for example age, education or other status). Annual publication with [gender statistics](#) by the Czech Statistical Office provides at least some basic figures.

Few other data has been collected with the financial aid of the state budget, yet some relevant research projects have been funded by the Czech Science Foundation And Czech Technological Foundation) or European Commission (or Norwegian) funds

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<sup>1</sup> Founded in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/pracovni-skupina-muzi-a-rovnosti-zen-a-muzu/pracovni-skupina-muzi-a-rovnost-zen-a-muzu-121938/>

and projects. The themes included active fatherhood and more recently work with perpetrators of domestic violence.

There are few academic institutes that conduct research stressing gender inequality, some of their projects concentrating on or including also men and masculinities (Gender and Sociology at the Czech Academy of Sciences, NKC Gender and Science, and two university programmes – Gender Studies FHS UK, Gender Specialisation FSS MU). All these initiatives depend on individual research interests of the involved research teams, there is no institutionalised strategy for collecting data on gender norms and gender stereotypes. Generally, some often rather implicit of formal change is brought about by adopting Gender Equality Plans and other measures by these academic institutions in order to be eligible for funds coming from the EC.

#### **1.4 Working with men and boys in addressing gender stereotypes and harmful gender norms**

To my best knowledge, there are these three initiatives, the Governmental WG, Genderman and LOM that explicitly work with and address gender inequality, gender stereotypes and gender norms in their work not distancing themselves (or even declaring allegiance) to feminist thought. They do so on a long-term basis. There have been several projects addressing gender norms in the education system (underachieving boys vs. complex system of gender regime), recently some attention is directed towards issues of gendered aspects of health (as well as mental health).

## **2. Policy debate**

The key policy document is the [Gender Equality Strategy for 2021-2030](#). Gender stereotypes and norms are addressed there in general and in various segments of the social structure and decision making. The topic of men and boys is explicitly brought up in chapters regarding health implications after COVID-19 (greater toll for men, p. 10), impact of gender stereotypes on men and boys interested in “women’s activities” (p. 13), there is a whole chapter on the role of men in promoting gender equality (p. 14-15) against traditional division of labour, involvement of men in childcare and household tasks, and change in horizontal segregation at the labour market. Gender inequality takes its toll on men in custody decisions after divorce (p. 20), neglect of health prevention and preventable deaths (p. 20), increasing their participation in care (p. 27) as only btw 1,5 to 2 per cent take on parental leave (no change since 2018), homelessness (81 % men, p. 30), long-term overrepresentation of men in decision-making (public and business) bodies and in politics (p. 49) as well as science. The issue of violence received its attention in the Strategy, men mostly as perpetrators. Men take higher risks due to their structural position in the labour market (injuries, accidents) and commit suicides more often. Other health issues include substance abuse. The list could be continued along the contents of the Strategy, yet, this strategic – and well produced – document runs short in its application phase. The budgetary negotiation along the person-power of the

respective offices and departments is an evergreen topic. Similarly, NGOs supplement the lack of structural state provided services and analysis in this respect, striving for own existence in neoliberal and constraining circumstances.

The populist government has been replaced by a democratic, yet conservative one in 2021. The controversy over several strategic documents regarding gender equality continues, as is the one over the Action against violence against women and domestic violence (the so called Istanbul convention), its ratification has been put on hold.

So, there are several engaged people pursuing involvement of men in combating gender inequality, harmful gender norms and stereotypes, there is some solid formal and institutional base of strategic offices and documents here (and approval of some of them missing or neglected and even met with resistance) and quite some strategic reluctance to implement and finance the long-term change.

There is a significant international tool helping to promote the agenda of gender equality – including implicitly the role of men in promoting gender equality, and that is the GEI (Gender Equality Index) annually published by [EIGE](#).

### 3. Good practice examples

The initiative [Genderman](#) has gain some attention in the public debate by awarding men who have significantly contributed to promoting gender equality in the respective year. (Still, the award is not without controversy regarding reproduction of public appraisals to men.)

Projects of the NGO LOM target mostly middle-class higher income intellectual men (open for reflection and investment into wellbeing), they also have initiatives called Patron enabling better (re)socialisation of boys (and children) leaving children's homes. Their newest endeavour is to work with perpetrators of violence (this is an ongoing activity, not evaluated yet). NGOs [LOM](#), located in the country capital, Prague, together with [Spondea](#), from Brno in the southeast corner of the country, that helps victims of domestic violence both adult and children, are the only organisations working with perpetrators of domestic and/or sexual violence.

The most influential and systematic policy document by far is the [Strategy](#) and its relevant Action Plans, yet, in its annual assessment, practice is lagging behind the form. Nevertheless, and again, there is a bunch of state officials together with representatives of the civic sector improvising in changing the status quo.

The budgetary restraints (not prioritising gender equality over other issues) is the long term political obstacle to any solid moves forward.

### 4. Transferability aspects

It was pleasure to read the examples of Austrian initiatives targeting involvement of men (and boys) in gender equality as well as the systematic relevant data collections in the Irish case enabling structural policy redefinitions using solid data.

The Austrian discussion paper presents a series of policies (supported organisations and/or projects) funded from the federal level. The activity range and geographical scope of their activities combines central as well as decentralised approaches, most of them target individual men in various life stages and situations. I assume all the involved organisations are informed and have adopted the gender inequality perspective, which in its effect encourages not only working with individuals but with institutionalised gender norms (in education, at labour market, in media, politics etc.) and on the symbolic and normative system levels (in laws, language). It was not clear to me from the paper itself if the described initiatives work to challenge these levels of gendered structures besides the (also very relevant) individual assistance to those men who seek help or those willing to invest in (neighbourhood) wellbeing. Yet I assume the decades of experience in work with perpetrators of gendered violence informs the current practice under the umbrella organisation that takes patronage over the involved projects.

I find all the questions asked by the AT team regarding the measures and assessment tools of the currently running projects very relevant. I find the idea of the umbrella organisation for various kinds of institutions and initiatives working with men tempting, however more information on how they organise their work and what is the organisational and decision-making structure would be needed (and how is it funded, too). This would enable re/thinking of its potential transferability to different country contexts.

The Irish example(s) of the good practice represents a different take on the issue of gendered violences and men's involvement in challenging problematic gender norms and stereotypes. For one, the citizen led deliberation on gender equality established by the Irish Parliament indicates a country political consensus on the relevance of the topic. I also agree that partnership, collaboration and co-design are decentralised means to promote good practices as is described in the Irish country report (discussion paper). However, I find the regular measurement, the Statistical Spotlight as the example of good practice helping solidify and provide international comparisons that should be the easiest for transferability to the Czech context. As already noted, there are many Czech statistics collected and made publicly available, yet the selection of tables and data collected in current publications is very ad hoc. Thus, a systematic approach inspired by the Irish case using the OECD indicator framework. I think the use of such indicators and replicate the Irish model practice can serve well the national state agency, Czech Statistical Office (publishing the [Focus on Women and Men](#) report) in revising its current publication plan and content of the brochure and provide an internationally comparable source of information measuring gender inequality.

Yet again, in both the Austrian and Irish cases, transfer of their practices involves allocation of personnel and budget, and doing so on a regular basis. I am open to tips and tricks from the countries present at the seminar on how to persuade the political representation to do so. And to do so beyond the timeframe of one election period.

So generally, I assess each one of the suggested good practices, the Irish good practice (data collection on gender norms and stereotypes) and Austrian good

practice (targeted measures such as awareness raising, counselling, helplines for men and boys, etc.), as relevant and useful tools to help rethink local (national) endeavours and current practices in dealing with similar systematic/structural (gender) inequalities. As for the Czech context, however, the issue of budget (funding) of such projects is an evergreen topic of harsh political debate.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

I understand men's involvement in gender equality is both crucial and tricky issue as well. Putting men on the spotlight (again) may obscure and hinder the structural misbalance in paying attention to those in disadvantaged and vulnerable situations. However, men are not a homogenous group, so paying attention to either problems that men suffer (as a result of their structural position – both the powerful and the powerless ones) or those that their actions cause or reproduce, is a crucial agenda. Heterogeneity of men, masculinities and their structural positions is to be considered in a similar way as those of any other gender or category of human experience.

Generally, exchange of ideals, critical reflections and organisations of seminars as is the one where we exchange good practices regarding the role of men in gender equality are very valuable opportunities for partnership, collaboration and co-design (as states one of the Irish cases of good practice). It is both important and tricky to transfer the results of our discussions at the seminar to the relevant institutionalised offices that have the leverage (power), resources and/or authority to implement them into state and or political practice. Good luck to us all in this.