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



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Current state of affairs and future possibilities to work with men and boys as allies and beneficiaries of gender equality in Belgium

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Abstract

In this paper we take a closer look at the current state of affairs in Belgium regarding engaging boys and men in advancing gender equality and breaking gender stereotypes. First, we consider national data collection on gender attitudes and conclude that (nationwide) data collection is scarce, mostly outdated, and fragmented. Second, we present some of the initiatives currently implemented to include boys and men both as allies and beneficiaries of gender equality. The mapping of the current situation enables us to consider challenges and recommendations for the future, in respect to the national context and in comparison with good practices in other European contexts. It's clear that the importance of involving boys and men is more and more acknowledged, but the current data collection and initiatives are falling short. There is a need for a more long-term, sustainable, and structural anchoring of engaging boys and men in gender equality and the promotion of a culture of equitable, non-violent masculinities. Although the current climate seems ready to make a change for the better, we need to remain vigilant for a more conservative movement gaining popularity and power in Belgium, Europe, and abroad.

1. Belgian context

1.1 Data collection on gender norms and stereotypes

Data collection on gender norms and gender stereotypes in Belgium is predominantly conducted by academic researchers and civil society organisations. Below we will list some studies relevant to the topic of this programme.

1.1.1 Commissioned by the Belgian Government

Belgium's federal Institute for the Equality of Women and Men ([IEWM](#)) aims to promote gender equality between women and men and combat any form of gender-based discrimination and inequality. The research department of this institute gathers data on several topics related to gender (in)equality such as violence, employment,

caregiving, and decision-making. The last study on sexist attitudes dates back from 2013 ([Beyond the Box](#)) and although the report unveiled important insights (for example: sexist attitudes were more prevalent than LGBTQ- and transphobic attitudes) it also had some constraints with regard to generalisation of the findings.

In January 2021 the Flemish government published a [report](#) on the ‘Societal position and participation of men and women’¹ in which a wide range of statistics on demography, education, labour, health, poverty, etc. are included. A section on attitudes and behaviour covers four subjects: people's attitudes towards men's and women's roles in the family and society, the perceptions of men and women in the media, reports of discrimination and reports on perpetration and victimisation of violence and cross-border behaviour.

1.1.2 Academic research on gender norms and gender stereotypes

In 2015 Van Maele, Michalek, Engels, et.al. published an overview of the [Procrustes project](#) results in a book titled ‘[Gender at School](#)’ based on a comprehensive 4-year study conducted in the first grade of more than 60 Flemish secondary schools (2012-2015). A whole chapter was dedicated to mapping gender stereotypes and how these stereotypes interfere with their experiences and functioning in school. The mixed-method project combined longitudinal survey data collected in all schools (teachers, pupils, and guardians) with smaller-scale qualitative approaches such as video observations and video-stimulated recall of teacher-pupil interactions in six schools.

In 2018 Belgian researchers (Van Grootel et. al.)² revealed a phenomenon among young men in Belgium called pluralistic ignorance, which means these men tend to fill in other people's gender attitudes more traditionally than they actually are. The implication is that if men are made aware that other men, just as they themselves, have less traditional gender attitudes, they will be more open to caring and equitable masculinities. Data was gathered through a questionnaire and key-trait description measures.

In 2019 the International Centre for Reproductive Health in Belgium ([ICRH](#)) published the results of the Global Early Adolescent Study ([GEAS](#)) that examines the influence of gender norms on the (sexual) health of young adolescents (11-14 year). The GEAS uses a mixed method-approach to data collection: in-depth interviews resulted in the creation and subsequent testing of a multidimensional scale. The [study](#) reveals that Belgian adolescents often have stereotypical attitudes related to male toughness and female vulnerability and that they adhere to traditional gender norms with respect to (romantic and sexual) relationships. Boys tend to have more stereotypical attitudes than girls.

¹ Noppe, J., Vanweddigen, M. & Weekers, K. (2021). Maatschappelijke positie en participatie van mannen en vrouwen. Statistiek Vlaanderen.

² Van Grootel, S., Van Laar, C., Meeussen, L., Schmader, T. & Sczesny, S. (2018). Uncovering Pluralistic Ignorance to Change Men's Communal Self-descriptions, Attitudes, and Behavioural Intentions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9.

1.1.3 Research conducted by civil society organisations

Civil society organisations are an important actor in producing data on gender norms and gender stereotypes. There is a recent study focussing on masculinities that is worth discussing. In [2022](#) Plan International Belgium looked into the impact of masculinities on the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence in which they collected data among youth on gender stereotypes and norms and specifically regarding masculinities. Quantitative data was collected through an online survey in which 700 young people, aged 10 to 24, throughout Belgium participated. To gather more qualitative data Plan International Belgium organised three focus groups with youth (2 in Belgium and 1 in Senegal) and several in-depth interviews with national and international experts. The results are hopeful: more than 70% of young men believe that men should pay more attention to the position of women and that men should talk more about their emotions. 70% of all respondents favour more equal gender roles in household tasks, decision-making and childcare and think that more attention is needed to tackle toxic masculinity. Despite the optimistic trend, defying traditional gender norms remains challenging since more than 60% of respondents indicate that they feel pressure to conform to gender norms, especially young men.

1.1.4 Conclusion

We can conclude that in Belgium data collection on gender norms and gender stereotypes in Belgium is limitedly commissioned by the Belgian Government and this data is outdated. Data collection is often project-funded which means that different instruments are used, and longitudinal data is lacking. Additionally, data often represents only part of the Belgian population since there is a strong division between the North of Belgium (Flanders) and the South (Wallonia) in addition to language barriers that are challenging to conduct nationwide research. Therefore, data is fragmented, scarce, and difficult to compare. There is little to no (nationwide) data collection with the goal of monitoring changes in gender attitudes.

1.2 Working with men and boys in addressing gender stereotypes and harmful gender norms

For several years there has been a **strong interest from Belgian civil society** to include boys and men as both allies and beneficiaries of gender equality. Not only do feminist organisations acknowledge the importance of engaging men and boys in their work, but also organisations focussing on mental and physical health, violence prevention, sexual health, and sexual and gender diversity are focussing more and more on addressing masculinities and gender equality.

Following a close [project-based collaboration](#) two civil society organisations, *Movement against Violence – vzw Zijn* (vzw Zijn) and *RoSa vzw – Centre of Expertise on Gender and Feminism* (RoSa vzw), launched a joint initiative in 2021, called [MoveMen](#). Through MoveMen, these two organisations implement projects that engage boys and men in the promotion of gender equality and the prevention of violence. In addition, MoveMen coordinates the Platform MoveMen, the Flemish network of organisations working on gender equality and equitable masculinities with

boys and men from an intersectional perspective. Both [vzw Zijn](#) and [RoSa vzw](#) are members of the international MenEngage network.

Alongside civil society, different **government actors** on various levels (federal, regional and municipal) show a keen interest in engaging boys and men in transforming dominant gender discourses. That interest is often translated into official policy texts (such as the national action plan to tackle gender-based violence) and funding within the departments of welfare, equal opportunities, and justice. Until now, funds have only been allocated on a project-level and structural funding had been lacking. Furthermore, the scope of projects depends on the funding government and their jurisdiction and often limits projects to a specific region. This approach often reduces the possibilities for collaboration with partner organisations.

2. Policy debate

There are internationally widespread discussions and trends surrounding working with boys and men on gender stereotypes and norms that are reflected in the Belgian context as well. First, there is currently a **rising conservative anti-feminist and anti-woke movement** that aims to appreciate and restore traditional ideas on masculinity and femininity. For this movement feminism and gender equality are considered a threat to their perception of the 'natural' order of things. These ideas are gaining popularity both among the population and (mostly right-wing) politicians.

There are some conservative movements that do value gender equality and women's rights, often fuelled by white-supremacist ideology. Gender equality and women's rights fit into their narrative as being threatened by migration processes and multiculturalism, contribution to the 'othering' of gender inequality.

There's also a second group that focuses on **men's rights**, centring inequality and discrimination that men are facing, such as mental health institutions that are not tailored to men's needs, the lack of parental leave and family courts favouring mothers, recognition of male sexual violence victims, etc.

There is an overlap between the men's rights movement and the feminist stance, in that we can agree that current patriarchal structures and norms are harmful to both men and women. The third, the **(pro-)feminist movement**, differs from the men's rights movement in that it acknowledges the existence of male privilege that benefits men over women in a systemic way. Central to this movement is the questioning and de-construction of dominant ideas about masculinity and femininity and the idea that gender equality benefits everybody.

3. Good practice examples

So far, MoveMen has successfully developed, implemented and evaluated several projects in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium. MoveMen has worked on **gender equality, non-discrimination and violence prevention** with boys and men in secondary schools, in men's prisons and with young fathers in precarious situations.

Based on the H|M|D programme of [Equimundo](#) (former Promundo), MoveMen uses a combined method of educational sessions, campaigning and policy advocacy. Evaluations of these project show a positive result in transforming attitudes and behaviours.

The success of these projects is related to the **intensity and duration** of the interventions. Each of these projects engages a relatively small number of participants (maximum 20 participants per group) in a series of educational sessions which helps to gain participant's confidence and to increase the group safety. The group safety is also key in the success of the project since a lot of the learnings are based on participant's own experiences with gender norms, discrimination and violence. We have noticed that the support and engagement from the broader context (for example: teachers, principals, management board, healthcare providers) is a key success factor. In developing these projects, it has been essential that experts from different fields and organisations provided input in the design and the content of the project.

In doing these projects, MoveMen has learned that there's a lot of work to be done with professionals and institutions (the secondary target group) surrounding the participants involved in the educational sessions. A more profound cultural shift with specific attention to intersectionality is needed if we want to achieve a transformation towards more caring and non-violent masculinities and gender equality. We also add that gender transformative work needs to be done starting from an early age and in a way that trickles down in every area of life and society.

The **main challenges** for projects such as these are that there is a lack of follow-up due to project funding, which limits the project to one or a few years but does not support longevous work. MoveMen has tried to make the outputs of the projects more sustainable by creating a manual for professionals to autonomously replicate these educational sessions. The elections of 2024 and the threat of an extreme right-wing government will also be decisive for the continuation of this work.

Besides the MoveMen projects, there are several initiatives that have been or are being developed by civil society organisations such as [Liminal](#) (talking groups for men in Brussels), VLESP ([suicide prevention campaign for men](#)), Plan International Belgium ([engaging boys and men for gender equality and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence](#)), etc. Although valuable on their own, these are often one-time initiatives, some of them small-scaled and underfunded and mostly centred around international men's day.

4. Transferability aspects

4.1 Transferability of the Irish good practice

The initiative of applying the OECD framework in the national context seems very promising, especially in combining attitudinal data with other social indicators and using it as a benchmark to measure future progress. Creating and distributing a standardised methodology and dataset could also take the pressure off of smaller organisations to produce data. If it were to be applied in the Belgian context, it's

important that it's organised on a **federal level** so that the data represents the whole of Belgium. The federal Institute for the Equality of Women and Men ([IEWM](#)) could possibly play an important coordinating role given their expertise and multilingualism. The implementation of the OECD framework could also uncover differences between regional governments and their data collection so that it's clear where data collection should be adapted to align with other data and where there are data gaps.

The past years the **managerialist trend** is very strong and policy makers emphasise the importance of quantitative evidence-based decision-making. Although this has its merit, it's not the only way to gather knowledge and it has its limitations to fully capture the complexities and nuances of social issues. Qualitative research and narratives of lived experiences can add value and nuance to the global image created by quantitative analysis. It is particularly important to understand how gender norms intersect with other social determinants.

Implementing such an extensive data collection will require a lot of funds, in a field where funds are generally scarce and diminish every year. It's important to have data so that policy and interventions can target specific issues, but the funding of such a project might leave less funding for applying the subsequent policy decisions and interventions. The goal should be clear and the emphasis should remain on actual change, not just mapping the possibilities for change.

4.2 Transferability of the Austrian good practice

The **gender-sensitive workshops on violence and toxic masculinity** with boys and male youth presented in the discussion paper strongly resembles the work that MoveMen is doing in secondary schools. An independent researcher positively evaluated this work with a qualitative research design. It would be valuable to share our experiences more extensively and compare challenges and success factors.

Separate **mental healthcare initiatives for men**, such as men's counselling and a men's helpline, require a large investment. It could be more feasible to include a more gender-sensitive approach in existing services. Specialised training of mental healthcare professionals on masculinities, gender stereotypes, violence prevention, and gender equality is currently lacking and could prove to be very important. Besides specialised training, it's essential that the stigma of help-seeking for men is reduced and thresholds to mental healthcare services need to be eliminated, starting for example with a nationwide awareness and visibility campaign of the proposed specialised approach for men.

The campaign 'Men speak up' would possibly be relatively easy to implement in the Belgian context. While working with youth, MoveMen facilitated **youth-led campaigns** in secondary schools and we've noticed that **(sexual) violence prevention** was the most popular topic young people (of all genders) wanted to work on. It was obvious that once they were aware how much violence is present in their daily lives, they felt empowered to change this and design violence prevention campaigns, often including a focus on bystander intervention.

The 'Boys' Day – Career Orientation Day for Male Youth' seems to be an important initiative that is also currently lacking in Belgium. The focus on career days currently lies with encouraging girls to choose STEM disciplines, rather than encouraging boys for non-stereotypical (often bottleneck professions like care and teaching) studies and careers.

The community-based project to stop partner violence would probably be the most difficult to implement. We would expect similar obstacles as mentioned in the discussion paper.

We've noticed that both in the Austrian and Belgian context, funding governments direct their efforts to target socially disadvantaged boys and men. Although an inclusive and intersectional approach is desirable, a sole focus on disadvantaged boys and men brings with it the risk of 'othering' problems with restrictive masculinity and stigmatising an already disadvantaged group. We would like to advocate for interventions **targeting both privileged and disadvantaged boys and men**. This is especially important in the rise of many right-wing nationalist politicians, voters, and (groups of) youngsters alike that reinforce sexist views and traditional and harmful ideas about masculinity.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Although a full picture of the current state of gender norms and gender stereotypes is difficult to compile, the data that are available inspire a **hopeful** image of the future. In addition, working with boys and men has reaffirmed that transforming masculinities, gender equality and violence prevention are hot topics and that there's a willingness to change. Nevertheless, a counter-movement is gaining popularity and traditional gender norms and restrictive masculinity ideas remain persistent.

There is an obvious **need for nationwide data collection, interventions and campaigns** that target men and boys while being mindful to specific local contexts, intersections with other social determinants and the specificity of the target group. We advise being mindful of targeting all boys and men: including more privileged boys and men – who are often overlooked. They too are prone to traditional gender ideas and might be more susceptible to white supremacist ideology. Additionally, it are the most privileged men who hold power to effectuate change.

We advocate for **long-term structural government funding** for standardised longitudinal research that can be frequently repeated to monitor changes and sustainable transversal initiatives focusing on the individual, communal, institutional and societal level (in every domain of life, starting at an early age). For standardised data collection we suggest a strong coordination with a single point of contact on European level.

We also suggest investing in existing international networks, such as MenEngage Europe and MenEngage Global, that provide opportunities for sharing best practices, international collaborations and coordinating international initiatives.