



European
Commission

The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

**The role of men and boys
in advancing gender
equality and breaking
gender stereotypes**
Ireland, 16-17 February 2023

Comments paper – France



Ein Unternehmen der ÖSB Gruppe.

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This publication is supported by the European Union Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (2021-2027).

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Targeting boys and men in gender equality policies: a need for more and earlier education and prevention in France

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Abstract

This paper aims at highlighting the need to address actions towards boys and men as early as possible at each stage of their trajectory. Prevention and education have to/must be priorities, not only about gender-based violence but also regarding their professional orientation and their sexual and relational education. Collecting data and addressing measures must take into account that gender stereotypes differ according to intersectional relations and that all men have to be targeted.

1. French national context: a need for a more structured national policy regarding men

In France, there is no real collection of data related to gender norms and gender stereotypes structured at a national level. The High Council for Equality (HCE) is an institution devoted to expertise whose members are named by the Ministry of Equality between Men and Women. Its work is based on auditions more than data collection, in order to provide recommendations. Its recent report in August 2022 about “an emergency plan for equality at school” points out the lack of sexual education and its harmful consequences on the wide spreading of the “rape culture” by pornography and videogames online. Its last [publication in January 2023](#) highlights the strength of gender stereotypes among men.

Data collection is led at the level of the [Centre Hubertine Auclert](#), that has led since 2009 diagnosis and studies about gender stereotypes in relation to the Regional Observatory in Ile-de-France. This Centre is more oriented towards educational outcomes, which is of specific relevance.

In the Ile-de-France region too, the [Observatory on Woman Directed Violence](#) has been created in the Seine-Saint-Denis Department. The Observatory was created in 2002, as the fruit of a political leaning that takes a structural approach to what is called “gender violence”. It has witnessed the high level of violence towards young women who have been their main target.

One source of data that is relevant for this topic is the work led within the PIA3 (Project of Investment for the Future) ACCES. This project is funded with subventions of Ministry of Investment and has been obtained by a coordination of three Universities: University of Bordeaux, Bordeaux Montaigne University and University of Pau and the “Pays de l’Addour”. It aims at challenging social inequalities in orientation from high school to universities. Bordeaux Montaigne University is the task leader regarding gender stereotypes in orientation. Researches and actions are intertwined to deconstruct gender stereotypes in high school. A balance of all national actions elaborated by a master’s student, based on a large sample of documentation and interviews, enables us to state that there is no action boy-oriented in France. Many actions address the issue of girls in masculine professions (building, engineering, etc.). Actions that are both girl and boy-oriented mainly focus on girls¹.

This lack of collection of data has to be related with the fact that there is no organic law about gender equality in France comparable to the Spanish one. Nonetheless, some important laws about gender equality and gender-based violence have been voted since 2000. Gender parity in politics has been developed step by step². In 2010, France adopted a law “related to specific violences towards women, domestic violence and their impacts upon children”. Finally, a frame law with a mainstreaming goal in professional, educational and gender-based violence field was held by French Minister of Gender Equality Najjat Vallaud-Belkacem in 2014³.

Regarding the actions towards men, since 2020 and the first quarantine due to Covid 19, a telephone line has been dedicated to domestic violence authors: 08 019 019 11.

Local actions can be considered as good practices (see Chapter 3.)

2. Policy debate

Since 2006, the [Inter-ministerial Agreement for the Equality of the Sexes in the Educational System](#) has been renewed, currently from 2019 to 2024. This Agreement targets two main goals: deconstructing stereotypes in orientation in order to encourage girls to work in scientific fields; preventing gender-based violence also by deconstructing gender stereotypes. It involves several Ministries.

Regarding the first goal, French experts in gender and education have highlighted that orienting girls towards scientific careers was a matter for the labour market more than a matter for gender equality: it results much more difficult to help boys than girls to choose a non-stereotypical scholar orientation, such as a literary one.

¹ See : <https://acces-ubm.notion.site/Genre-et-Orientation-Projet-ACCES-120376c913484f64a7aad8c739a0b385>

² See : <https://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/decouvrir-l-assemblee/role-et-pouvoirs-de-l-assemblee-nationale/les-institutions-francaises-generalites/l-egal-acces-des-femmes-et-des-hommes-aux-mandats-electoraux-et-fonctions-electives2>

³ See: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000029330832>

The experimental measure called “ABCD of equality” proposed by Najjat Vallaud-Belkacem with the Ministry of Education triggered an eventful public debate. It aimed at deconstructing gender stereotypes at school. The violent attacks against this experimentation came from religious and right-wing groups. Nonetheless, experts emphasise that there was a class and ethnic bias in addressing this policy towards schools in “priority educational zones”, which gather working-class and migrant people (Masséi, 2021). In France as well as in other countries (Spain, Germany, etc.), gender-based violence is related to a “cultural” or “ethnic” feature of Muslim and African men.

During the first government of President Macron, in 2018, a [law](#) has created the delete of “sexist or sexual insult” to struggle against street harassment.

Femicides have become more visible in the public debate and space with the action of the activists named “Feminist Collages”. In 2021, 122 women were killed by their (ex)partner; 110 in 2022. Public debate is much more focused on the consequences of domestic violence since this phenomenon has been put into light by journalists and activists with more emphasis in the past few years.

3. Good practice examples: taking into account the local level

The Observatory in Seine-Saint-Denis implemented an action called “Youth Against Sexism” in secondary school. They initially made use of a theater-forum on relations between the sexes established by local family planning bureaus, followed by creative art workshops headed by artists, to challenge limits of classical sex education. They took advantage of the action to disseminate information about useful contacts when a student witnesses harassment or assaults. When I studied it ten years ago, the limit of the action was to focus on couple relationships and to promote positive figures of masculinity that were quite stereotyped with class bias. It remains difficult to deconstruct stereotypes without creating new stereotypes that reinforces class bias.

The most successful action is clearly the “violentomètre”: it takes the form of a slide rule with graduating colours from green to red in order to identify gender-based violence continuum in young couples. This tool is inspired by Latin American cardboard supports. It targets young women so as they become aware that some behaviours, such as controlling their smartphones, are warnings. The “violentomètre” was created by both the Observatory of Seine-Saint-Denis and Paris’ Town Council.⁴

⁴ See: <https://www.paris.fr/pages/lutter-contre-les-violences-faites-aux-femmes-18035#les-outils-de-l-opvf>; <https://cdn.paris.fr/paris/2020/01/22/2c71131827d671654bf4caef034610e2.pdf>

These actions mainly target girls. More recently, since 2016, men (including students) have been targeted by the implementation of trainings to make them conscious of violence when they have committed assaults for the first time.⁵

An evaluation of the training in Toulouse city emphasises how important a multidisciplinary approach is: educational, psychological and sociological. This last approach is typical of Toulouse. The authors of the evaluation advocate for social sciences as a support to deconstruct the stereotype of “natural” masculinity.⁶

They created a “violentomètre” addressed to perpetrators.

4. Transferability aspects

4.1 Collecting data about gender stereotypes and organising them: advocating for an intersectional approach

Ireland has set up a working group to standardise the classification of gender norms in collecting data. This group brings together key stakeholders of public service and civil society as well as research bodies. The composition itself is relevant as the mere participation to the group provides a training to gender norms and stereotypes: indeed, the formation of stakeholders is highly recommended in European structural change projects in the Academia. Promoting gender equality in institutions requires trainings of stakeholders in order to disseminate these values inside the institution. Here, the interesting point is to enable the debate between stakeholders that are not specifically committed to gender equality, and civil society members with opposite points of view they stand for in the public debate.

As underlined in the paper, gender norms have to be classified according to social spheres. For example, the characteristics of the dominant masculinity differ dramatically between school and other social spaces, and even in school, it depends on the moment of the scholar career. Being a good student is not required for young boys, and this cultural capital can lead to a deny of their masculinity, and consequently, expose them to bullying and gender-based harassment or violence. On the contrary, such cultural capital plays as an advantage when becoming a student in high school, in university and then in professional fields, including in private life.

Beyond the social spheres’ specificities, we can also stress out important differentiations in gender norms according to class relations (see Skeggs’ works). The intersectional approach has shown that claim process for women that are victims differ if they are racialised (Crenshaw, 1991). So, I would stress the risk of promoting “positive masculinities” that would carry class and race bias. I would also highlight the

⁵ See: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000033586137>

⁶ See: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-empan-2022-4-page-120.htm>

importance of the geographical frame of life: living in a rural zone create very different conditions at the time to denounce gender-based violence.

It seems difficult to transfer this approach to France at a general level. It could be implemented at the scale of a department, like the Observatory of Seine-Saint-Denis, or a little Region.

4.2 Addressing men's responsibility issue

4.2.1 Transferring campaigns, the Boys' Day and gender-sensitive work

Three good practices of Austria seem to me of great relevance for transferability:

- the campaign on the issue of male violence that "addresses men directly not as perpetrators, but as men who intervene when they witness assaults".

I made the statement in my own research about male students that they are more likely to help victims of harassment or assaults in public space; on the contrary, they tend to not accept to hear their female friends speaking of having been assaulted by boys they know. It seems to me that this campaign helps men to make a first step in acknowledging violence about a type of male violence they are more likely to struggle against. I think important that men should be encouraged to react not only physically, as a virile way of intervening, but also by knowing the right institutions to direct the victims to (as a caring way of taking in charge the victims). According to me, this action is transferable to France as special attention is currently paid to such campaigns, including at the local level. Several cities develop these campaigns on 25th of November and 8th of March, but would like to extend them all over the year.

- the Boys' Day – Career Orientation Day for Male Youth

It seems that this action would be linked to an European project, "[Boys in Care](#)", which took place in Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania and Slovenia from 2017-2019. The programme has implemented formations and pedagogical tools to deconstruct gender stereotypes about care occupational fields with teachers, psychologists in charge of students' orientation, students themselves and their families. I do agree with promoting "Caring Masculinities", not only to prevent male violence but also to educate them to being co-responsible in their future. Indeed, the lack of men taking in charge caring tasks also impacts women's professional careers as well as their health. Moreover, it makes men more aware of health issues, including sexual health (contraception, protecting their partners from sexual diseases, etc.). It does not replace sexual education, but it could strengthen the implementation of a more relational-oriented sexual orientation.

- Gender-sensitive work with boys and male youth

Following this action, I would recommend to implement same-sex focus groups of young men and also young women to challenge masculine stereotypes by discussing about podcasts and social media campaigns, for example in high-school. I have shown that students can identify gender stereotypes in the medias and cultural goods they are used to consuming (<https://journals.openedition.org/ges/351>). It would make

them used to talking about subjects that impact their intimacy without feeling uncomfortable.

4.2.2 Funding access to counselling for men: a gender-budgeting issue at stake

The measure offering low threshold access to counselling is a good one in itself. This proposal does exist in France, but I am not sure that it is well-known. A campaign about it could be a step to pay more attention to preventing violence. Maybe it would trigger a public debate regarding the public funds inverted towards the women as victims and the men as perpetrators. But it would be an opportunity to discuss how to balance the budget between men and women in actions.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

- All measures discussed stress that addressing prevention actions towards boys and men allows to make them more aware of gender-based violence. A prevention-oriented approach would introduce actions at school early, paying attention to the frame chosen to justify it in the public debate. “Deconstructing gender stereotypes” may not be the right design ([Collet, 2021](#)).
- Changing the frame of sexual education towards a relational education would make boys more responsible of all aspects of gender-based violence and inequalities.
- Formations to identify the whole sample of gender-based violence should be implemented in universities and workplaces for new students and colleagues. In universities, it can be related to scientific integrity and obligatory as well.
- I would recommend to follow what is being implementing in Buenos Aires Region where the Ministry has developed a field on action about “Masculinities”.