



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 –
The Netherlands



Ein Unternehmen der ÖSB Gruppe.

The information and views set out in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Commission. Neither the Commission nor any person acting on the Commission's behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Justice



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

This programme is implemented by the European Commission and shall contribute to the further development of an area where equality and the rights of persons, as enshrined in the Treaty, the Charter and international human rights conventions, are promoted and protected.

For more information see: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/programmes/cerv>

New Perspectives on/for Men And Masculinities

Jens van Tricht

Emancipator (Netherlands)

Abstract

Engaging men and gender equality in The Netherlands has a long and fragmented history and present. Policy debates focus on work-care and economic independence for women on the one hand, and on gender based violence prevention on the other hand. In recent years the awareness among policy makers, professionals and organisations in the field of gender equality has risen that it is important to make boys and men part of the solution. One organisation was established with engaging boys and men in gender justice as their main goal, other organisations have developed more or less explicit campaigns and other initiatives appealing to boys and men. We need to formulate new perspectives on men and masculinities, but we also need to formulate new perspectives for them!

1. Country Context

1.1 Data on Gender Norms and Gender Stereotypes

General data on gender inequality in The Netherlands are published every two year in the [Emancipatiemonitor](#). Data on gender norms and stereotypes can be found in [Views about sexual and gender diversity in The Netherlands and Europe 2022](#) and [Free to choose? Gender Stereotypes and the Life Cycle](#). The report [Experiences, behaviour and gender attitudes of men in The Netherlands](#) presents collected data from many different kinds of research data, sampling and presenting information about the most important gender equality related topics in relation to men and masculinities.

Data on (sexualised) and gender based violence come from the 2014 EU FRA report [Violence against women: an EU-wide survey](#), and it's subsequent [translation to the Dutch context](#). The 2020 report [Which Violence Counts? Dutch attitudes about partner violence](#) showed that almost 1 in 3 Dutch people find intimate partner violence acceptable under certain circumstances, and that men were more tolerable of violence than women. Similar outcomes were revealed in a [youth survey](#) in 2022. Recently the [Prevalence Monitor Domestic Violence and Sexually Transgressive Behaviour](#) was published. The Council of Europe's [GREVIO](#) report gave important feedback on the Dutch gender-neutral approach, especially on the need to review the gender-neutral policy approach which masks the gendered nature of violence against women.

1.2 Working with Men and Boys

The Netherlands has a relatively long but also fragmented history of engaging boys and men in gender equality. The main organisations for women's rights in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's – *Man Vrouw Maatschappij* (MVM, 1968-1988) and *Dolle Mina* (1969-1978)– were mixed organisations of men and women working together for gender equality. Writer Joke Smit, founder of MVM, acknowledged in her writings that men have a lot to gain from gender equality. Her poem, 'There is a land where women want to live' (1981), for example, contains a whole couplet 'There is a land where men want to live'.

Since those days, many policies and initiatives to work with boys and men have come and gone, on such wide ranging topics as violence prevention, sexuality, household chores, etc. There have been initiatives for father centres, school interventions to teach boys no means no, campaigns urging men to take on household chores, there was a *Plan for the Man* and a *Modern Man Prize*. From 2010-2012 the *Man 2.0 Program* supported 23 initiatives for emancipation of socially marginalised men. And many local initiatives started, developed and closed down again.

Currently, we can still see that the work is fragmented, often along pillarized policy lines that distinguish between different kinds of violence, between primary, secondary and tertiary prevention, between children and adults, between education at home and at school, and so on. Also, there is a tendency to differentiate between target groups, and between needs and responsibilities of men. So, for example, in the same local community, there can be different initiatives for domestic and sexual violence prevention, for care and support systems for victims/survivors, against street harassment, for engaged fatherhood, for LGBTQI+-acceptance, for sexual education and consent training – without the involved policy makers, organisations and professionals really collaborating on the underlying aspect of the roles of boys, men and masculinities.

2. Policy Debate

The most important issues around men and gender equality in The Netherlands are about work and care, violence and safety, and gender and sexual diversity. These are addressed in the 2022 [Emancipation Note](#). Besides that, the recently published [National Action Programme Sexual Violence and Sexual Transgressive Behaviour](#) stresses the importance of cultural change, reflection on norms and values, legislation, organisational adequacy, bystander interventions and support and care for victims/survivors. And it expresses explicitly the need to work with boys and men on these issues.

The debate on work and care often focuses on increasing women's participation in paid labour in order to increase their economic independence. Women are stimulated to work more hours in order to earn more money and as a solution for the growing scarcity of employees in many traditionally female occupations. Issues like gender

pay gap and pension gap are also debated. And of course the underrepresentation of women in STEM and in top and leadership positions.

From the debate about the 'unused labour potential' of women, it is and it isn't a very big step to also debate the 'unused care potential' of men. Paternity leave arrangements in The Netherlands have improved in recent years, we are now seeing both the fruits and the challenges of implementation. We need men's care potential in those vacant jobs in for example health and childcare, like we need women's labour potential in STEM vacancies. We also need caring masculinities to take responsibility for the necessary culture change in male dominated organisations and professions, as mentors and advocates, but also as allies, partners and stakeholders.

Gender based violence is problematised in many different ways, e.g. domestic violence, sexual violence, honour related violence, street harassment, and so on. Approaches have been different, and the main focus in many cases has been on secondary or even tertiary prevention; stopping violence when it happens and dealing with the consequences – supporting victims and treating/prosecuting perpetrators. Until 2022 central leadership and coordination on these issues have been lacking. Now, with the already mentioned National Action Programme and the supervisory role of the specially appointed government commissioner, we may hope this will lead to a more integrated approach of all gender based violence. The government is also still working on new sex legislation, in which active consent is likely to become an important factor.

3. Good Practice Examples

3.1 Emancipator

Emancipator was founded in 2013 as the Dutch organisation for men and gender justice, inspired by the [MenEngage](#) Global Alliance. Emancipator has been working to prevent violent masculinities and promote caring masculinities, while celebrating the diversities of men and masculinities and inviting their humanities by a gender transformative approach. By networking, capacity building and advocacy, Emancipator has made visible that different topics, target groups, professionals and organisations have to do with traditional, stereotypical and harmful notions and practices of masculinity.

In 2016, Emancipator brought the internationally successful [White Ribbon Campaign](#) to The Netherlands, in which men speak out and act up against violence. IMAGINE workshops facilitate conversations with boys and young men about gender, masculinity, violence, sexuality and consent. Training weekends for male change makers and capacity building activities for organisations, professionals inspire new activities engaging boys and men in violence prevention and gender justice. The Dutch adaptation of the global [MenCare](#) campaign has contributed to improved national parental leave arrangements, to the development of an inspirational guide for professionals in and around education, to the development and implementation of future orientation workshops for boys in schools, to the My Normal website and

campaign about life cycle work life balance tipping points, and to a project pioneering with new forms of men's counselling.

In all these activities, the most important question became this: [what kind of man do you wish to be or see in the world?](#) Adapting Mahatma Gandhi's adage 'Be the change you wish to see in the world' to 'Be the (hu)man you wish to see in the world', Emancipator integrated this question in all activities, interventions and campaigns, and launched the [social media campaign](#) to allow men themselves to invite each other to become more human.

In 2023-2027, Emancipator will participate in two new programmes with women's organisations. In *Become Who You Are*, we aim at integrating a broad agenda for gender equality and safety in educational institutions. And in *Equal Representation In Politics*, we strive for equitable distribution of power positions in politics for women and other marginalised groups – pointing out how this is also of ultimate importance for boys and men.

3.2 Act4Respect Unlimited

In the past 5 years, [Act4Respect](#) has been focusing on campaigns, capacity building of professionals working with young people and interventions for youngsters who are at risk of becoming either victims or perpetrators of sexual violence. Addressing men and masculinities has been an integrated part of the program. The programme was run by an alliance of [Atria](#) and [Rutgers](#), and will continue for another period of 5 years including new partner [COC](#) – extending the name with Unlimited. With the *Generatie ja ... en?* (Generation So What?) campaign, Act4Respect invites young people to discuss and broaden gender norms, explicitly also asking questions about masculinity.

3.3 Are you Okay?

[Rutgers](#) runs the [Ben je oké?](#) (Are you okay?) campaign to prevent unwanted sexual behaviour in clubbing and during concerts and festivals. It promotes bystander awareness, responsibility and action by offering the simple question 'Are you okay?' as a tool to inquire if someone is okay with someone else's behaviour and to show that there are other people around to help if necessary.

3.4 Let's Talk About Yes

Amnesty in The Netherlands runs the [Let's Talk About Yes](#) campaign to promote that sex should be based on equality, voluntariness, and consent. They are starting conversations everywhere, are advocating for good new sex legislation and urging educational institutions to take their responsibility to better protect their students.

3.5 Change from within 2.0

[Change from within](#) is another government funded programme that has been working for 5 years already and will continue for 5 more years as 2.0. The programme is committed to promoting safety, equality and acceptance of women and lgbtiq+-

persons within closed communities. Breaking stereotypical ideas about femininity, masculinity and relations is an important part of their work.

4. Transferability

4.1 Data Collection

As an academically trained activist and practitioner, I very much welcome action research, data collection that at the same time engages and empowers the people being researched. The Irish good practices of citizen led deliberation on gender equality seem very inspiring examples of co-creating knowledge while also changing the normal course of affairs, in that citizens are invited to participate in science and science thus participates in civil society. I would be very interested to learn more about the gender dynamics and particularly the contribution of men within these processes!

Of course, it would be interesting for The Netherlands to apply the OECD indicator framework used to measure masculine norms to existing Dutch data, as it was done in the Irish Spotlight study. We see that comprehensive data on men's experiences, behaviour and gender attitudes of men in The Netherlands and Europe are still lacking, even though it is possible to extract data on the role of men and boys in gender equality from existing reports. Emancipator has been pleading for a Dutch or European version of the [International Men And Gender Equality Survey \(IMAGES\)](#), such as have been successfully carried out in more than 40 countries worldwide. It would be an important contribution to our insights for policy, programme and intervention development.

4.2 Targeted Measures

The diverse and complementary interventions presented in the Austrian paper were very close to the heart and hands of our work with Emancipator. We would like to learn more about the integration of men's counselling and helplines in the work for gender equality and violence prevention. In The Netherlands we often see that men's counselling initiatives focus more on men's needs and less on their responsibilities, and thus seem to shy away from the necessary social and political dimensions.

Boys' Day is an interesting concept that has come up many times in our collaboration with [VHTO](#), the organisers of Girls' Day in The Netherlands, but always with mutual hesitation about the risks of asymmetrically copying the concept from girls to boys. It would be interesting to discuss and explore possibilities to do something like Boys' Day in a gender transformative way while taking into account the sensitivities there may be around such an event in The Netherlands.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

To end gender based violence and achieve gender justice, we need an integrated, holistic gender transformative approach with interventions on all different levels in society; individual, interpersonal, organisational, community and institutional – in

accordance with Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model. Also, we need to work on the root causes and not just on the symptoms level of problems related to gender based violence and gender inequality. Often we don't need to start doing all kinds of new things, we need to encourage everyone to start doing the things they do differently – in gender transformative ways, questioning and changing and transforming masculinities instead of tacitly and often implicitly reproducing and reinforcing them. We need to fix the system, not just individual men and women.

We need to develop and offer new perspectives *for* boys, men and masculinities, not just new perspectives *on* boys, men and masculinities, but also, and especially, *for* them. Yes we need to include them in gender justice and violence prevention, we need to fundamentally see them as partners. Gender norms and stereotypes may offer boys and men power and privileges, patriarchal dividend, and other benefits, but they pay a severe price on the level of personal dehumanization, deprivation and isolation. Masculine gender norms and stereotypes are detrimental for boys and men, for women, for children, and for the world at large. We need to acknowledge and spread awareness about the reality that boys and men and masculinities are as diverse, complex, and changeable as girls, women and femininities, so we can hardly continue generalizing and homogenizing them as if they all and always are the same. We need to start asking ourselves and each other, what men do we wish to see in the world, what men we wish to be, and invite each other to become the humans we wish to see in the world.