



# The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

## Preventing domestic violence with Men and Boys: Challenges and Opportunities


Sweden, 16-17 September 2019

Comments Paper - Belgium



*“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 Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020).*

*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: [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants1/programmes-2014-2020/rec/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants1/programmes-2014-2020/rec/index_en.htm)*

# Preventing domestic violence with Men and Boys in Belgium

Katrien Van der Heyden  
Nesma Consulting

## Abstract:

The 'Belgian National Action Plan against Gender Based Violence' has not given a lot of specific attention to the implication of boys and men as relevant actors in the fight against gender based violence. However, civil society organisations have recently picked up the topic by creating a Belgian MenEngage Network and piloting projects on prevention of gender based violence by working with high school boys. These projects are transferable to other countries and settings and have been already transferred to a number of EU and other countries. It is indeed necessary to exchange on these topics to mutually learn from these experiences.

## 1. Relevant country context: Belgium

Since 2001 Belgium has a National Action Plan (NAP)<sup>1</sup> on gender related violence. This plan is renewed with every political legislation and focuses on: awareness raising, training, prevention, protection of victims, victim and perpetrator care and implementation of an efficient judicial framework. The latest action plan is the one from 2015 – 2019. There have been elections in May 2019 but no new government has been formed and so there is no renewal yet of the NAP. The plan focuses on diverse types of gender related violence: Partner violence, FGM, forced marriages, honour related violence and sexual violence.

In total, the NAP contains 235 new measures to fight gender related violence. These measures can be grouped as followed: integrated policy, data collection (qualitative and quantitative), violence prevention, victims protection and support, research on protective measures, gender dimension in migration and refugee policies and fight against violence on an international level.

Interestingly enough, the word 'boy' is used only ten times in the NAP and in 7 out of those ten times, it is as 'loverboys', an extremely negative connotation of men exploiting the sexuality of girls and women. The word masculinity is never mentioned. These little facts are but symptoms of a wider problem showing the lack of

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://igym-iefh.belgium.be/nl/publicaties/nationaal\\_actieplan\\_ter\\_bestrijding\\_van\\_alle\\_vormen\\_van\\_gendergerelateerd\\_geweld\\_2015](https://igym-iefh.belgium.be/nl/publicaties/nationaal_actieplan_ter_bestrijding_van_alle_vormen_van_gendergerelateerd_geweld_2015)

involvement of boys and men in gender equality and the fight against domestic violence, as well as the lack of commitment to work on topics like (toxic) masculinity. Despite this lack of governmental commitment to tackle the topic, civil society organisation have been able to put it on the agenda. This will be elaborated upon in the first good practice case.

## 2. Policy Debate

In 2016 in Belgium there were 37.852 complaints registered at the police with regards to 'domestic violence'. The number of complaints went down 7% as compared with 2013 (40.141). However, only the complaints about psychological abuse have gone down during that period, the other types of violence (physical, sexual and economic) have gone up. Amongst the 37.852 complaints, there are 20.537 of physical violence, 15.802 of psychological violence, 139 sexual violence and 1.374 economic violence.

A major concern about the prevention of domestic violence is the integration and efficient collaboration between diverse partners and organisations. Several 'policy letters' (COL 4/2006 and revised in oct 2015 and by the col 06/2017) have been aiming at the closer collaboration of all actors concerned.

Another focus of the current policy debate concerns the **collection of data**. Harmonising existing data sets and collecting more data is necessary as well as getting more specific data on each care/legal step taken. Also, a list of indicators to be in line with the EU and national policy has been developed. Specifically with regards to the involvement of boys and men there is a growing attention towards the need to also document rather rare forms of gender based violence connected for example to male prostitution.

The **collaboration with non-governmental organisation** on gender-based violence is also quite important via subsidies and expertise exchange. It is specifically in these civil society organisations that new trends can develop and come to fruition. One such example is the Belgian MenEngage network that was set up in 2018 to include men and boys in gender equality. This can be found as the first good practice example.

Another concern in the policy debate is the **prevention of violence**. A lot of awareness raising still needs to be done to fight gender stereotypes related to the phenomenon of '**rape culture**' whereby violent men's behaviours are condoned by claiming 'boys will be boys'. Diverse campaigns have been done, quite many focusing on street violence and harassment, (<http://www.seksueelgeweld.be/straatintimidatie> or [www.ikgrijpin.be](http://www.ikgrijpin.be)) and rape ([www.seksueelgeweld.be](http://www.seksueelgeweld.be)). A specific focus to tackle the problem of rape culture was also done to focus on students as partner violence and sexual violence is particularly high among this population.

To this end also **campaign and training** was done with primary and high school students to integrate education on relationships, sexuality and violence into the school curriculum. **Professionals are being trained** as well to react appropriately to situation or complaints about domestic violence.

An important new focus is about dealing with the perpetrators.

Last but not least, the policies also focus, not just on prevention, but also care of victims with a specific focus on vulnerable groups in the Belgian society like **refugees and migrants**.

### 3. Good Practice examples

In this section, two good practice examples will be looked at. The first is the start of a Belgian MenEngage network. The second good practice example is a project (EQUI-X) that has the aim to prevent gender-based violence by organising session with (predominantly) boys in high school setting.

#### 3.1 Good Practice example 1: MenEngage Network Belgium

Throughout the last decades, increased attention has been given towards the role of men and boys in the prevention of violence. Indeed, most people know victims of violence, but hardly anyone knows a perpetrator. There is still a huge taboo to openly work with the perpetrators and to question or discuss the gender based stereotypes linked to domestic violence, i.e. that most victims are female and most perpetrators are men. Almost all perpetrators are male, but not all men are perpetrators and precisely in this huge difference lies the stepping-stone to the discussion of harmful/toxic masculinities and the need for more caring masculinities in our societies.

Belgium is in line with most European countries when it comes to the taboos surrounding gender stereotypes of masculinity and since domestic violence can never disappear unless men are made part of the solution, a group of individuals and organisation in Belgium decided in 2018 to create a network of organisations that would work around the involvement of boys and men in gender equality with the aim to prevent gender based violence.

Since similar networks already existed around the world that have produced interesting material and training programmes, the Belgian network decided to become part of a larger worldwide network of MenEngage organisations (<http://menengage.org/>).

In Belgium this network was launched on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018 and quickly grew to bring together more than 30 organisations, which are all committed to do joint projects to include and engage men and boys for gender equality.

The strength of the network is in the diverse organisations it brings together with a wide variety of expertise (sexual health, women's organisations, youth organisations, policy makers, etc...). This raises the chance of developing an integrated approach, right from the start. The objectives of the network are to raise awareness in the involvement of men in gender equality, to collaborate on projects and to exchange expertise.

### 3.2 Good Practice example 2: EQUI-X project

The Equi-X project is an EU funded project that runs in different countries, amongst others also in Belgium. The focus in Belgium is to work with high schools boys on the prevention of gender-based violence, by doing long term and frequent (12 in total) sessions with them on topics like relationships, love, sexuality, gender, identity, etc.... The aim is to pilot innovative strategies based on training modules developed and tested by The ProMundo organisation<sup>2</sup>. These modules were not only translated into Dutch (Language spoken in the North of Belgium), but also adapted to the topics currently under discussion about masculinity in Belgium (transgender, non-binary thinking, homosexuality, etc.).

After piloting the sessions among the different groups of high school boys, the training modules were finalised and handed over to teachers for use in high school setting, accompanied by a training on how to use them.

## 4. Transferability aspects

When it comes to **violence prevention**, the Swedish case presents programmes to work with primary and high school students. This approach has also been recently piloted in Belgium (see EQUI-X project) and seems indeed like a practice that can easily be transferred in different settings. In fact, one objective of the EQUI-X project is precisely to investigate how easily these modules can be adapted to the local settings.

Experience during the Belgian pilot showed that adapting to the local context means much more than translating the material to the local language, it also entails fitting it into school curricula, adapting it to the session times available, adding topics which are popular in that setting (ex: homosexuality or transgender persons). Throughout the process of local adaptation, it is crucial to stay in touch with similar projects in different context to learn from each other.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://promundoglobal.org/programs/program-h/>

Therefore, indeed, transferability seems very likely, as long as a balance is found between local adaptation to the context on the one hand and sharing ideas, challenges and solutions in a wider community of practices.

## 5. Recommendations

One major challenge presented in the Swedish Paper, is the difficulty in **measuring the outcomes of the prevention programmes**. Indeed, often the outcome can only be measured over larger periods of time than the limited time frame of a project.

However, the second good practice case presented (EQUI-X project) has based its evaluation system partially on **an evaluative scale of masculinity that has been used in a wide variety of countries and settings. It is called the Gender-Equitable Men (GEM) scale<sup>3</sup>**. The GEM scale was developed by Population Council/Horizons and Promundo to directly measure attitudes towards gender norms. The scale is designed to provide information about the prevailing norms in a community as well as the effectiveness of any programme that hopes to influence them. Though the scale was developed for young men aged 18-29 years of low-income communities, it has been successfully adapted with different age groups ranging from 10 years to 59 years, including women and girls in schools and middle/high income communities in various countries.

## Bibliography

National Action Plan to combat all forms of gender-based violence 2015 – 2019

Intermediary report on the NAP Belgium: Instituut voor de Gelijkheid van vrouwen en Mannen: Tussentijds rapport over de uitvoering van het nationaal Actieplan ter bestrijding van gendergerelateerd geweld 2015-2019 (end 2017).

UN Women, Making women count; An annual publication on Gender and Evaluation, p 61 – 99; 2013.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://promundoglobal.org/resources/measuring-gender-attitude-using-gender-equitable-men-scale-gems-in-various-socio-cultural-settings/#>

## Annex 1: Project fiche of Good practice: Equi-X project – Belgium

This project<sup>4</sup> aims to engage boys and young men in gender equality programmes. EQUIX adds value to the European level by addressing the gap of gender-programming that includes boys and young men.

This will be done by engaging boys to discuss and question gender inequities and reflect about the ways that gender inequalities may disadvantage women/girls in the socialisation process. Alongside, the specific needs that boys have in terms of their health and development because of the way they are socialized will also be incorporated. This means, for example, engaging boys in discussions about substance (ab)use and risky behaviours and helping boys understand why they may feel pressured to behave in certain ways.

Based on understandings of the need to take a **gender-synchronised approach** to gender equity and violence prevention **Instituto Promundo** developed and continue to adapt and build on, H|M Programmes. These are evidence-based methodologies grounded on **gender transformative pedagogical approaches** that question gender roles, identities and norms amongst girls and boys and women and men. They are designed in such a way that they are adaptable to different country contexts and have been implemented across Latin American, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asian contexts.

H|M Programme was born from the **necessity to engage both girls and boys** in strategies that aim to **change gender inequalities** and **prevent the use of violence**. EQUI-X will adapt and pilot Programmes H|M at the national level in Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Germany and Croatia. Furthermore, EQUI-X and the institutions engaged in the implementation of the project will produce recommendations and a proposal for an EU wide strategy to implement H|M Programme across the Union.

Adapting and piloting Programmes H|M are thus a step to scaling up the project and producing material that can be implemented across a number of different areas relevant to contemporary EU concerns, creating a consolidated strategy applicable to multiple stakeholders that works towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5, 'Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women.

Taking into account the current state-of-the-art of gender-based violence prevention, EQUIX project goes a step beyond the existing strategies by focusing on one real point of the European initiatives, namely the **lack of engagement of boys and young men** in the prevention intervention actions, so that they can be really synchronised.

---

<sup>4</sup> The introduction is based on information provided on the website of the project: <http://equixproject.eu/>



The beneficiaries of the project are:

- **Young men and women** (ages 12-21) in compulsory schools, in juvenile detention centres, in housing or shelters, refugees and migrants.
- **Professionals** and caregivers working with the targeted groups.
- National and European **policy makers** and gender equality counsellors and advocates.
- **Academia** and **NGO** that address gender equality.

The project has the following objectives:

- Young **women empowerment** and men engagement in gender-based violence prevention.
- Promote **innovative-strategies** that address the **construction of genders** and promote **non-violent models of masculinity**.
- Bring to EU a **new approach to prevent gender-based violence** amidst girls/women and boys/men, from different ages and backgrounds.
- **Strengthen relations** between **EU Academia and NGO** for gender-based violence awareness and prevention programmes.

These objectives are reached by doing the following activities:

- Creation of **methodological tools: HIM Programmes**.
- Based on the HIM Programmes methodology developed by Promundo, the Equi-x project will elaborate **methodological tools based on a gender-synchronised approach** towards gender based violence prevention in young woman and men.
- **Training of professionals to promote gender equity and violence prevention** through courses on the methodologies and tool developed in EQUI-X.
- **Dissemination** of findings through: final conference, final report, national and EU HIM Programme, national and EU campaigns, and national publications, EQUI-X Networks.
- **Research, monitoring, evaluation**, diagnostic analysis of strategies and tools for gender based violence prevention at the national and EU levels.

The expected results are:

- 5 national and 1 EU HJM programmes.
- 15 training courses.
- 5 national and 1 EU campaign

The following stages are planned in this project:

1. Start-up
2. Development of the pilot phase
3. Implementation of the trainings
4. Training of professionals
5. EU campaign and dissemination
6. Development of the toolkit

## **Annex 2: MenEngage network Belgium**

Contact details:

The network is hosted and chaired by organisation:

Vzw ZIJN  
Middaglijnstraat 10  
1210 Brussel

T : +32-2 229 38 70

Contact person: Koen Dedoncker

Koen@vzwzijn.be