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The promotion of gender equality through education and the role of men and boys: a reflection on the current Portuguese policies and good practices

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Abstract

This paper presents some of the main ideas about the Portuguese position for promotion of gender equality throughout education inside the framework of current public policies, which are aligned to international legal guidelines. Several core principles of what may be recognised as 'good practices' are discussed, with a particular focus on the role of men and boys in breaking gender stereotypes. A comment on the Irish (IE) and Austrian (AT) reports is made, considering the commonalities of the measures and their potential transfer to our country. Some recommendations, related to the topic of the seminar, are proposed, based on the Portuguese experience.

1. Relevant country context

1.1. Brief historical background

Portugal has been a democratic country since 1974; after 48 years of a dictatorial regime - the Military Dictatorship (1926-1933) and the "New State" (1933-1974) - that persisted for decades with t high levels of poverty, low rates of literacy and almost no opportunities of understanding the core values of citizenship and human rights. Following the 'epithet' of 'God, Homeland and Family', strongly associated with the influence of the Catholic church, society was organised around traditional gender stereotypes, the men being the 'breadwinners' and the women, the 'domestic providers', having the main responsibilities of being mothers and taking care of family needs.

With the so-called "Carnation Revolution", that occurred on 24th, April, 1974, the country began its road to democracy, a process that implied crucial legal and cultural changes, in order to restore to the Portuguese people, fundamental rights and freedoms. In 1976, the 13th article which related to the 'principle of equality' was approved by the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, stating that *all citizens are*

equal before the Law (n. º 1) and no one should be privileged, benefited, discriminated against, etc., due to ancestry, sex, race, language, territory of origin, political or religious conditions, economic situation, social condition, among others belongings (n. º 2).

1.2. Portuguese educational system: some current data disaggregated by sex

Focusing on the current educational context, teaching in Portugal is co-educational both at public and private schools. All compulsory schooling (12 years from 6 to 17 years) is free. Based on data from 2022¹, Portugal currently has 8,241 educational establishments, 5,587 being public schools, 1,361 schools of state-dependent private education, and 1,293 schools of Independent Private Education. Of this total, private education (dependent on the state and independent) counts for 32% which are predominantly preschool institutions (22% of the total educational establishments in Portugal are private).

The number of students covered by state and private schools is 79% in public education and 21% in private education. Only in preschool is the ratio of the private sector significant: 46.1% (53.9% for state sector). In the remaining levels of education, the portion of the private sector varies between 13.5% in 1CEB (1st four years of compulsory schooling), 11.9% in 2CEB (5th and 6th grades), 12% in 3CEB (7th to 9th grades) and 24.3% at secondary level (10th to 12th grades), the latter due to the volume of the private professional schools.

In conclusion, teaching in Portugal is predominantly state run (about 87% of the school population), except in preschool, as mentioned before.

Concerning the available data on gender norms and gender stereotypes, there are still inequalities in vocational choices during the compulsory school period, and in the transition to higher education and, after that, to the labour market. Horizontal and vertical segregation remains a problem to be counteracted, with female students and adult women more concentrated in domains related to education, social services and health. In the education sector, according to the data from 2021/2012, the percentage of female educators working in kindergarten was 99%, and, during the twelve years of compulsory schooling, from 86,7% (1st cycle) for the first four years to 71,8% for the 3rd cycle and secondary level². Male students in higher education and adult men in the labour market remain predominant in some areas of engineering and technologies, such as areas related to robotics and artificial intelligence. For example, in 2020, the proportion of women in information and communication technologies (ICT) in Portugal was higher than the EU27 average. However, the percentage of male ICT employees always remained higher than the percentage of female employees. It is important to recognise that despite strategies to attract more girls and women for these higher-paying jobs of higher social status, progress at this level has

¹ Source: Education in Numbers. Portugal 2022. Available at: [DGEEC_DSEE_2022_EE20202021.pdf](#)

² Source available at: [DGEEC_DSEE_2022_EE20202021.pdf](#)

suffered some setbacks: the number of women ICT graduates recorded a sharp decrease between 1999 and 2009, from 26% to 17%³. Boys and men continue to choose, more than girls and adult women, courses in the field of technology and digital world, which are crucial for the future and economic development of the coming decades and with greater potential for innovation and remuneration. This fact will maintain the gender pay gap, and uneven visibility of females in positions of leadership and in public spaces of action.

1.3. Main public policies on education and the promotion of gender equality

The work that has been done in Portugal to promote gender equality has been following, in recent years, the Portuguese Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination (ENIND) (2018-2030). This legal document was approved by the XXI Constitutional Government (Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 61/2018), aligned with European and international guidelines, and considering the promotion of public policies of equality and non-discrimination as a core condition of progress and development. The strategy entails three National Action Plans: (1) National Action Plan for Equality between Women and Men (PNAIMH); (2) National Action Plan for the prevention and combating of violence against women and domestic violence (PNAVMVD); (3) National Action plan to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual characteristics (PNAOIC).

These three plans should be monitored over a four-years period, until 2030, and the execution of measures should be developed based on the principles of: intersectionality and the consideration of pervasive effects of multiple discriminations; territorialisation and the recognition of potential idiosyncrasies of contexts; and establishing partnerships with several entities of civil society. Dialogue, cooperation and subsidiarity are values that should also anchor the practices towards the promotion of gender equality, always in mixed contexts, working with girls and boys of different ages and in different environments.

In strict relation to public policies that guide the educational system, ENIND measures have been developed in the alignment with the National Strategy for Education for Citizenship (ENEC, 2018); the Profile of the Student at the end of Compulsory School (PASEO, 2018); and the Decree - Law No. 55/2018 (Autonomy and Curricular Flexibility), which establishes the curriculum of basic and secondary education and the guiding principles of the evaluation of apprenticeships. This latter document challenges schools to use their autonomy to create dialogue with students, families and with the community, towards a curricular organisation that better fits the students' needs.

The curricular component 'Citizenship and Development' that was introduced in 2018, following ENEC, has, as its main goal, the promotion of active civil conduct from students, prepared to critically reflect on current issues of their daily lives and

³ Source available at: [A igualdade de género em Portugal e a transição digital - CIG](#)

equipped with permanent abilities to face future challenges. For the first time in the curricular organisation of the Portuguese educational system, gender equality became part of the curriculum: one of the six compulsory themes of citizenship education for all levels of schooling.

Considering that both state and private schools in Portugal are co-educational, the projects and initiatives are always developed with girls and boys working and reflecting together. In fact, schools are seen as a 'living laboratory' for playing and rehearsing positive roles transferable to daily life. The involvement of boys and men in projects, programmes and other occasional initiatives that are supported by the Portuguese Government to promote gender equality, always valorise the role of men as co-partners and allies for change. The notions of shared space equal privilege and social visibility, co-responsibility in public and private spheres of life, ethics of self-care and of care of others, autonomy and self-determination as conditions of freedom, among other aspects, are central in involving boys and men, together with girls and women of all different ages.

Approaching fracturing themes in a positive way, recognising the benefits for boys and men, and for girls and women, of a social organisation based on the principles of gender equality has been crucial for the success of the initiatives. Of course, the production and use of data disaggregated by sex has been a very successful strategy to helping students of all genders and different age groups – and teachers – to gain awareness of the 'geography' of problems, and depart from an analysis of actual-life conditions of people and groups to describe a future that is still possible.

2. Policy debate

In the last two years, activities have been carried out in Portugal within the framework of the European Council (anti)sexism campaign, which involved schools, local authorities and other entities. All public policies to combat inequality and sexual discrimination have been made after a period of public consultation. All campaigns are carried out by public bodies and NGOs, often in partnership.

It is important to highlight that more and more the higher education institutions are involved in promoting a gender-sensitive approach in accomplishing the mission. The implementation of institutional plans for equality, teacher training initiatives, dissemination of good practices and research on gender issues are among several of the examples that could be presented to illustrate the current situation in Portugal regarding the promotion of gender equality. Some NGO's have been designing campaigns specifically for boys and men in some critical issues; there have been some schools developing projects related to the combat of sexism, beginning in the preschool years and the first years of compulsory schooling. There are some good practices in schools that promoted the ENEC's thematic crossover, i.e., approaching gender equality in its intersection with other areas of content such as sustainable development, sex education, entrepreneurship, and so on. The training of strategic audiences on gender equality issues, within the framework of public international financial support, has been including teachers. Some calls on education projects that

received support from EEAGrants were open to working specially with boys, in themes related to areas more sensitive for males.

3. Good practices: examples

Different projects and initiatives have happened in Portugal, in the last decades, to tackle gender stereotypes, always considering co-educational contexts and the sharing of responsibilities between the sexes and across the lifespan. Also, all the projects designed for school-age children and adolescents are based on a whole-school approach. Those involving individuals of both sexes and older ages, respect a systematic view of social functioning, including the involvement of families, and highlight the importance of establishing partnerships. Only some of the projects will be mentioned here, focusing on the role of boys and men.

- The “Co-education Project: from the principle to the development of a practice” (1999-2000), which led to the establishment of the network of co-education experts. This project produced a set of guidelines that were easily used for teacher training (especially initial one) and for general public information about gender stereotypes, gender-sensitive approach in pedagogical practices, coeducation and equity in learning, etc.
- The “Project Education Guides on Gender and Citizenship: a strategy for gender mainstreaming in the education system” (2008-ongoing) focuses on the integration of equality between women and men in all disciplines and their contents, in teaching practice and in school organisation and culture. This project involved several initiatives for teacher training across the country, in direct cooperation with institutions of higher education. All the proposals for initiatives and the contents proposed in the five Guidelines produced, one for each school level, including the preschool years, are strictly articulated with the official curriculum. The focus is on specific questions that are problematic for both sexes.
- The “Little School Project” (Projeto a Escolinha) (2018-2022): it was a project developed in a private institution, involving all the school levels and respecting a whole-school approach. It fostered in all the participants the notion of a common space and a common notion of ‘ethics of care’, which involve co-responsibility for each other and for the environment. Also, in this project, it was intentional to use recreational activities to foster, in children, the engagement in a collective space. The diversity of activities promoted respect for the diversity of people and playful activities, especially for boys, and proved to have positive effects on their concentration in the classroom and engagement.
- The “Project Intersections” (2020-2021). This project integrates the notion of caring for others and the world as a whole, mobilising the ethics of care in development. Also, it gets both sexes to understand to what extent motherhood is socially penalising for women, while parenting can benefit men, and the consequences of such effects for younger generations being freedom of choice about future decisions.

- The “MaRvel Project: Masculinities (Re)veiled” (2021-2024): this project is being developed by an NGO and is sponsored by the EEAGrants Programme. It involves 6 other NGOs, 7 public institutions and 32 schools, in the region of Porto, the second largest city in Portugal. It consists of bringing to 32 public schools a programme of debate sessions with a documentary about the views and experiences about the masculinity of 24 boys aged 13 to 18, in a situation of marginality institutionalised in educational centres (for young people who commit crimes under the age of 16). The training of teachers and other professional groups supports the project and its continuity.
- The “KINDER Project - Challenging gender stereotypes in education and early childhood: building an Inclusive Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education”. It is a project funded by the Justice Programme (JUST) of the EU, developed by the Center for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, in partnership with the CEPAIM Foundation (Spain) and the NGO STATUS M (Croacia). It focuses on the age groups of 3 to 12 years and on the training of professionals working with children of this age, on gender stereotypes and educational practices aimed at equality between boys and girls in formal and non-formal education. A diagnosis on representations and practices of families and teachers supports the materials produced and the methodologies used in the initial training of different professionals.

4. Transferability aspects

Good practices from Ireland have many similarities with some existing Portuguese practices that have been ongoing on a regular basis for the last decades, in concerns over data collection on gender norms and stereotypes. The official organisation that monitors the implementation of gender equality policies, the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) has been supporting and widely disseminating systematic data⁴ from national surveys and with several findings from scientific research that are crucial for advocacy for public policies and policymakers. Learning from Irish proposals, it would be recommended to the Portuguese government to reinforce the financial support for scientific research on specific topics more sensitive in boys and men – but also issues equally problematic in girls and women's lives – regarding the promotion of gender equality. This will allow it to regularly draw a clear picture of the population and its subgroups' attitudes and perceptions about gender roles, in strict relation to public policies and with regular monitoring.

Also, as Irish document suggests, statistical data (the products) should be complemented with more interpretative methodologies (the processes) of scientific research, that may create opportunities for male and female participants to express their voices and help scientists and policy makers to go deeper into the hidden and structural causes of inequalities, that are not visible through mere statistical information. This is also a way of involving citizens in the creation of collaborative

⁴ Available at: [Indicadores - CIG](#)

scientific knowledge that may feed political decisions, what may be called 'citizenship science'.

Considering the good practices presented by Austria and its potential of transferability, in the Portuguese context, it would be feasible to implement measures designed specifically for boys and men. Concerning counselling hours for men, with the specific target of prevention of violence, the new Portuguese Action Plan for the Prevention of Domestic and Gender Violence, foresees counselling for men without a criminal record, without convictions for practices of violence. It is also possible in Portugal, namely, in the framework of the Portuguese education system, to develop gender-sensitive work with boys and male youth about the problems of violence and toxic masculinity, through projects in schools from different territories, in curricular component such as in "Citizenship and Development", focusing on boys' problems and needs.

Campaigns such as the "Boys Career Days", associated with the career development process, could be done through public channels of communication and broadly disseminated. These campaigns should include diverse male models/examples to highlight potential multiple discriminations suffered by some subgroups of boys and men. In schools, specific projects for boys related to care and parenting issues should be developed as there is already an equivalent project, being developed, for attracting girls to ICT ("Engineers for a Day Project"). Projects like "StoP - Neighbourhoods without Partner Violence" are also feasible, but it implicates the reinforcement of NGO staff and offering specialised training in gender issues, in order to be possible for these entities to work directly with communities. Also, the "help line" for boys and men, namely through public health services designed for young people may be useful for helping them tackle particular difficulties such as the expression of emotions, doubts and questions about sexuality, health and self-care issues, among others.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Concerning the topic of the seminar and considering the Portuguese experience, some recommendations should be outlined, in order to continue working on breaking gender stereotypes and including boys and men as co-responsible for the changes:

To use a positive approach to the need to change the prevalent masculine privilege in all the social arenas, which tend to be built on the basis of being opposite to that which is considered feminine and proper to the female world.

- To highlight the gains also for boys and men, in private and public life, of the co-responsibility in dividing time, tasks, power, visibility, voice, etc.
- To recognise the potential heterogeneity of men as a social group, taking into account the idiosyncrasies of some subgroups, based on factors such as ethical issues, socioeconomic background, nationality, religion, among others. Such diversity may be connected with the danger of multiple discriminations and their intersections.

- To debate the potential vulnerabilities of boys and men that is caused by their learned values about what it means to be masculine and 'behave as a 'man'.
- To develop projects from early childhood, bearing in mind a vision of a full lifecycle: some of the gender socialisation differences between boys and girls, in early years, may have a profound impact on individual life in later years, either for women and men.
- To work with a strategic perception of continuity and discontinuity in human development (the notion of having more control over the occupied space in childhood, in playgrounds, etc., prevailing into the older ages, with adult men feeling, in general, more able to appear and act in public spaces than women with equivalent sociologic characteristics), seeing both girls and boys as able of learning and constructing their visions about the world in a positive manner.
- To use statistical data disaggregated by sex in several and current issues to illustrate the importance of debating daily life inequalities in the classroom.
- To foster from the early years the notion of care (self-care; caring for others), as a way of empowering boys and men also to take care of themselves (individual axis of citizenship), of their family (interpersonal axis of citizenship), and of the other cultures, countries, and the natural resources (social and intercultural axis of citizenship).
- To help boys to mobilise their notion of citizenship with the 'ethics of care' intrinsically incorporated, in order to prepare them to participate as full citizens in current and future ageing societies: "care is the daily management of one's own and others' well-being; contains activities of direct transformation of the environment, but also surveillance activities that require, mainly, availability and prove compatible with other simultaneous activities (Durán, 2020, p. 126)⁵.
- To strengthen mandatory paternity leave and create positive initiatives for men to share parental leave as a way to advance men's involvement in care.
- To create and implement strategies for the territorialisation of gender equality policies involving men and boys, involving the state and civil society.
- To carry out broad campaigns in partnership with the media centred on the deconstruction of toxic masculinity and on valuing, among and boys and adult men, the dimensions of care and the skills of sharing and co-responsibility.
- Integrate the issues of equality between men and women in the training of professional educators and other professional groups that work with younger generations.

⁵ Durán, M. Á. (2020). *La riqueza invisible del cuidado*. Col·leció Honoris Causa, Universitat de València.

- To involve girls and adult women always as allies – as they should act in society – in measures specially designed for boys and men, in specific topics, to tackle gender stereotypes and other forms of disadvantage that led to inequalities.
- To help boys and girls to acquire an awareness of the fact that breaking gender stereotypes is also a form of broadening their freedom as citizens, living together and in democratic societies.