

GENDER EQUALITY AND YOUTH

THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE YOUTH SECTOR

The Youth Department of the Council of Europe, and in particular the European Youth Centres, have long worked on integrating a gender equality dimension in their policy, educational approaches and practices. Thanks to a co-management system, youth organisations have introduced themes ranging from fighting discrimination against LGBT people to measures for combatting sexism and violence against women, domestic violence and gender-based violence, the recognition of gender identities and challenging heteronormativity. The Youth Department has also ensured a practical approach to integrate considerations of gender equality (e.g. gender balance in educational teams and participants). The Youth Department also supports the inclusion of a gender equality perspective in its policy work. The Agenda 2020 indicates that the aim of the Council of Europe's youth policy is *"to provide young people – girls and boys, young women and young men – with equal opportunities and experience which enable them to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies to play a full part in all aspects of society"*.

WHAT DOES THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND THE EUROPEAN YOUTH FOUNDATION AND JOINT COUNCIL DO ABOUT GENDER EQUALITY?

The European Youth Foundation (EYF) has a dedicated webpage on gender with resources developed by the Council of Europe and youth NGOs, as well as links to relevant tools and actors. The EYF is actively promoting the integration of a gender perspective in the youth projects it supports, and has a toolbox on gender equality. This hands-on guide proposes methods to use in a youth activity to ensure that stereotypes and heteronormativity are not

perpetuated. The EYF also supports youth projects that explicitly address gender as a topic and raise awareness on or explore gender-related issues. All youth NGOs submitting a grant application to the EYF are asked to explain how they will include a gender perspective in their project.

The Joint Council on Youth adopted in 2017 a set of Guidelines on integrating and mainstreaming gender equality into the intercultural youth activities of the Council of Europe and its partners; developed in consultation with youth organisations and input of youth leaders, youth workers and experts. The guidelines support organisers and educational teams of intercultural youth activities in ensuring gender equality in all phases of an activity/project.

► **The guidelines cover the following aspects:**

- a human rights-based approach,
- gender-balanced participation in youth activities and measures to ensure the participation of young parents,
- gender inclusive language and representation in materials related to educational activities,
- gender-sensitive educational approaches,
- creating safe environments and practical concerns: accommodation, working facilities, access to toilets, etc.

The Youth Department of the Council of Europe understands working with young people on issues relating to gender and gender equality, as the equality of all genders, as a central part of human rights education, defined as educational programmes and activities that focus on promoting equality in human dignity.

EXAMPLES

The No Hate Speech Movement was set up in 2012 to mobilise young people in awareness-raising and reacting on issues related to hate speech and human rights violations online. Based on the fact, that women and girls are confronted with sexist hate speech on a daily basis both online and offline, the campaign had a specific action day against sexist hate speech both in 2016 and 2017. A seminar on Combating Sexist Hate Speech took place in February 2016, in order to deepen the understanding of sexist hate speech and to identify appropriate responses. The manual Bookmarks – combating hate speech online through human rights education include a thematic focus on combating hate speech against women in video games.

The European Youth Centres host annually various study sessions on gender equality including the issues related to LGBTQI persons and young women, gender equality is addressed within study sessions that are not explicitly on gender issues. The themes of more recent study sessions include a variety of gender related issues, such as: working against gender based violence, social exclusion of LGBTQ young people and homelessness, supporting young disabled people to explore sexuality and relationships, empowerment of young Roma women, using technology for young women's empowerment, exploring gender equality in environmental projects.

As a rule, all activities at the European Youth Centres must secure gender balance among participants, *“except in the cases of single-sex partner youth organisations and of activities that are specifically planned for single-sex groups and this is specifically explained and requested in the application form”* [Criteria for study sessions].

The Youth Department develops manuals for multipliers working on human rights education with young people, in which the theme of gender equality is included, for example Compass, Compasito, Gender Matters, Bookmarks and Mosaic (T-Kit on Euro-Mediterranean youth work).

GENDER EQUALITY ASPECTS

A gender equality perspective is an inseparable aspect of youth projects, whether the people involved are aware of it or not. Therefore, it is the first step to identify the ways in which gender is already embedded both in the content of youth activities and policies, and the relationships between the people involved in the activities and the processes of policy-making. There are varying levels in which the youth organisations apply gender mainstreaming measures such as having separate working groups or programs and peer consultations on gender equality. Especially the issues around sexuality and understandings of gender beyond the gender binary roles (women/men) are new issues for many organisations that do not directly work on gender. Overall, efforts to mainstream gender have increased in recent years in many organisations.

Questions for consideration

► To be considered when developing a project for young people and beyond:

- How are the positions in youth organisations, movements and youth councils divided among genders? Who has the leadership positions?
- Who talks more during the meetings/seminar/residential training? Why do they talk more? Who interrupts more? Who are more silent in the activities?
- Do the ways of communication and expression (language) allow one gender to speak up more than others? Or discourage some genders from taking the floor?
- How inclusive are the youth organisations' activities in practice? Are we able to make the learning spaces safe or inclusive for all genders?
- Do the speakers, trainers and youth workers enforce people to fit into one of the binary categories of women or men? Is the content and are the activities reviewed to ensure that they do not reproduce any traditional gender roles, binary categories or normative assumptions? Are the trainers, speakers and consultants able to develop gender-inclusive solutions?
- What happens when there is sexual harassment or an assault case among volunteers/members/participants in a youth organisation or youth activity? Is there a set of rules which is clearly explaining what to do in such case?
- In what ways are the volunteers, participants and consultants informed about their rights in cases of sexual harassment? Are there mechanisms to protect their rights?

► Youth organisations often raise the following aspects in relation to gender equality in youth policy and youth work:

- combating discrimination, awareness-raising or combating any form of direct or indirect discrimination of youth groups on the basis of gender, including intersectionality,

- challenging invisible inequalities or actively promoting equality of opportunities; this refers to giving visibility to groups, issues or forms of understanding gender that justify discrimination (e.g. heteronormativity).

Both aspects are obviously interrelated and are mutually supportive. Young people are particularly vulnerable to gender-based discrimination; they are less likely to be consulted or taken seriously and the impact of discrimination can mark them for the rest of their lives.

► **Experience shows that invisibility and prejudice remain among the strongest issues supporting gender-based discrimination in youth projects including, for example:**

- restrictive laws or de facto administrative practices that discriminate youth organisations advocating for gender equality, for example because of their size (fewer members, poorly “representative”, not campaigning for public interest) or their legal status (not recognized, not able to access public funding, not invited and not informed),
- self-censorship or “good obedience” resulting in not inviting or supporting those youth organisations because “it could cause problems”,
- stigmatisation of support received from abroad,
- pressure from social media use to conform to negative gender stereotypical images and identities which include hyper masculinity and hyper sexualised images and behaviours,
- ignorance of the issues or of the organisations, hence perpetuating ostracisation and invisibility.

A relatively recent issue is the fact that women youth leaders are over-represented in (human rights) education activities which may denote a form of professional assignment (or stigmatisation) based on gender.

DEFINITIONS

Commonly used definitions in the youth sector

The definitions were taken from the [Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young people website](#).

- **Gender** refers to the socially constructed set of expectations, behaviours and activities of women and men which are attributed to them on the basis of their sex. Social expectations regarding any given set of gender roles depend on a particular socio-economic, political and cultural context and are affected by other factors including race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and age. Gender roles are learned and vary widely within and between different human societies, and change over time.
- **Gender identity** refers to the gender to which persons feel they belong, which may or may not be the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. It refers to each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender and includes the personal sense of body and other expressions, such as dress, speech and mannerisms.
- **Human Rights Education** – learning about, through and for human rights –essential in preventing human rights violations and in making democracy a sustainable way of life. Human rights education is in itself a right, enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. ([Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education](#)). People often have their human rights violated on the basis of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Human Rights Education is fundamental to promote gender equality with young people, because it does on the principle of equality in dignity and universality.
- **Sex** refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that differentiate women and men. We are defined as female or male at birth, which becomes a social and legal fact from that point on. Some people are born with atypical combinations of physical features (body characteristics) that usually distinguish girls from boys at the time of birth. These persons may be referred to as "intersex".
- **Sexual orientation** describes a pattern of emotional and sexual attraction to females, males, both or neither.
- **Transgender** is an umbrella term which is often used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences; it usually refers to persons who have a gender identity which is different from the gender assigned to them at birth and those people who wish to portray their gender identity in a different way from the gender assigned at birth.
- **Young people:** Young people are persons 13 – 30 years old. For the purposes of European youth policies, this age is used both by the European Commission and Council of Europe ([Glossary on youth](#)). However, there is not a common definition of the age range applicable to all member states and sectors of governance. The [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2017\)4](#) recognises this: "The age range of those who benefit from youth work provision should reflect the legal and constitutional framework and existing practices in each of the member States".
- **Youth policy:** A strategy implemented by public authorities with a view to providing young people with opportunities and experiences that support their successful integration into society and enable them to be active and responsible members of their societies, as well as agents of change. It involves four dimensions referring to all aspects of young people's lives:
 - a. being in a good shape (physically and mentally);
 - b. learning (informal, non-formal and formal);
 - c. participation; and
 - d. inclusion.Youth policy may combine different means of intervention (legislation, specific programmes, etc.) and integrates a long-term educational perspective. Youth policy targets all young people but should pay special attention to those who are socially, economically or culturally vulnerable. ([Recommendation CM/Rec\(2015\)3](#)).
- **Youth work:** A broad term covering a wide variety of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people, in groups or individually. Youth work is delivered by paid and volunteer youth workers and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes focused on young people and on voluntary participation. Youth work is quintessentially a social practice, working with young people and the societies in which they live, facilitating young people's active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision making. ([Recommendation CM/Rec\(2017\)4](#)). Youth-work settings often provide a unique and crucial safe space for young people to discuss and share their thoughts and experiences on gender and sexuality. Young people are often not able to ask questions frankly and debate such sensitive topics with their families, and may not be encouraged to in formal education settings. Open and aware youth work settings may provide a supportive learning environment to empower and challenge attitudes.

DO NOT FORGET

- A human rights based-approach to youth work and non-formal learning
- Youth work and non-formal learning as practised and promoted by the Council of Europe are based on human rights values and principles. Universal human rights provide the ethical and normative frameworks to prevent combat and overcome any form of discrimination grounded on sex, sexual orientation or gender identity. Achieving gender equality is not about “special rights” but about promoting everyone’s right to freedom and equality in dignity.
- Gender balance in intercultural youth activities
- Gender balance in intercultural youth activities should be considered at all stages and should concern the following aspects:
 - balance of all genders should be encouraged in organisational and educational teams, and the participants’ recruitment should ensure equal participation of women and men and inclusion measures towards under-represented genders;
 - the end of a binary system of reference (female/male) in application forms (inclusion of the option ‘other’ for those who do not fit the female/male categories or an empty field) and omission of gender-normative titles (e.g. Ms/Mr) in formal documents to participants;
 - same-sex activities may still be important in limiting the gender equality gap and should be clearly advertised as such.

Gender equality considerations need to be tailored to the different types of interventions carried out through co-operation projects:

EXAMPLES

AWARENESS RAISING

► Online Action Day against sexist hate speech:

On 8 March 2016, the No Hate Speech Movement called on young people to counter sexist hate speech through education and advocacy, raising awareness on the impact it has on women and men, human rights and gender equality. This turned out to be one of the most participated days of the campaign. It was repeated in 2017.

European Youth Forum members developed a tool called Gender Watch, to map the gender dynamics of meetings and events. It involves observing the gender balance from the organisation stage (participants present, speakers, panellists, other power positions) to the language /body communication during the meeting (lack of gender sensitive language, non-verbal communication, reactions, sexist comments...) and it is used to raise awareness about the space taken by young male and non-male participants.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

Are there NGOs or informal groups who are de facto excluded as a result of indirect discrimination based on gender? For example, are they invited or consulted on any processes or needs assessment? Are they excluded, discriminated or intimidated by quantitative or qualitative

criteria – e.g. by concerns of promoting “sexual education” or “attempting against morals” that bar them from accessing education institutions?

CAPACITY BUILDING

The Youth Department supports capacity-building by developing and making available educational resources and manuals such as Gender Matters, Compass and Compasito. Especially the latter two are available in a wide range of languages. Specific capacity-building activities are organised for youth leaders, youth workers and trainers in non-formal education at the European Youth Centres and in bi-lateral activities within the Youth for Democracy programme.