



CarMiA – Caring Masculinities in Action

National Report – Bulgaria

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Introduction

Over the last few years, gender-based violence, intimate partner violence and domestic violence have been one of the constant topics that have attracted media attention in Bulgarian society. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, there is the unfinished debate about the adequacy of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, or the so-called Istanbul Convention, in relation to the Bulgarian social and cultural context. The unstable political environment, in which several parliamentary elections have been held in the last two years alone (three in 2021, one in 2022 and the upcoming one(s) in 2023), makes the issue of the Convention a constant topic of confrontation during political electioneering. Moreover, political forces are mobilizing supporters and attracting sympathizers by petitioning for a national referendum "to ban gender ideology in schools". The NGO sector involved in the issue is stigmatised in the public sphere as 'dangerous' and 'harmful' and is faced with obstacles to work, especially with young people. Secondly, the drastic increase in intimate or domestic violence cases, especially during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021), with an increased number of victims losing their lives, is triggering reactions in society and an attitude that the problem is becoming chronic and needs to be adequately addressed. This has led to an increase in the number of civil society organizations and individuals, especially the youth, engaging in various actions to raise awareness and to challenge public attention to the lack of adequate measures. Thirdly, cases of intimate partner and domestic violence involving media-popular film and music stars are attracting particularly active attention, which, rather than leading to consolidation, is dividing public opinion about the 'cause' and 'blame' for this universally acknowledged ugly phenomenon.

The Protection from Domestic Violence Act, passed in 2005, has been updated several times to meet the needs of victim protection and prevention. However, the changes drawn up by several joint working groups of representatives of institutions and NGOs since 2020 were rejected in January 2023 by the last National Assembly, for various reasons, one of which is the link that the deputies see with the "gender ideology" in the Istanbul Convention rejected by the state. The central administration's annual National Programme for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence has in recent years been formally prepared and reported, is not targeted funded and in practice focuses mainly on the prevention of violence and child abuse.

Adequately addressing domestic and gender-based violence is still a challenge for Bulgaria. The lack of clear legal definitions of gender-based violence and a register of cases as well as the limited capacity of shelters and crisis centres for victims are only part of the problems. There is a lack of meaningful and regular monitoring of prevention, protection, and financial compensation measures for victims, as well as a lack of a vision for further improvement based on an analysis of existing institutional measures.

Unfortunately, the country does not collect uniform statistical information on cases of domestic and gender-based violence. Different institutions collect different types of data in accordance with their statutory duties and professional responsibilities, which should include, inter alia, monitoring, informing, and evaluating the relevant policy and the capacity of the plan or programme designed to implement it.

All of this creates an atmosphere and an environment where the issue of violence against women, as it is recognised in the country, does not problematise male behaviour and is not at all engaged in the topic of masculinity - what it means to be a man in Bulgaria here and now, what male behaviour is socially acceptable, do men and boys have the skills to resolve conflicts in a non-violent way, etc. Even less is it a topic that adolescents in their teens engage with.

In response to the growing need for statistical data on the prevalence of violence against women, the National Statistical Institute (NSI) joined a project initiated by the European Commission to conduct a survey and provide reliable, comparable, representative data on the prevalence, incidence, intensity, and severity of violence against women at national level and in EU Member States, using a common and harmonised methodology. Data published by the NSI in November 2022 show that, according to the relative proportion of interviewees, 36.3% of young women in Bulgaria aged between 18 and 29 have been abused by a current or former partner and 10.2% of women aged between 30 and 44 have experienced physical or sexual domestic violence.

This report aims, based on a desk study of good practices, and based on a survey through focus group discussions of the attitudes of young people and the adults who work with them, to highlight areas of concern and to engage young people of school age, and boys in particular, in different forms of gender-based violence prevention and the adoption of patterns of non-violent masculinity behaviour. The study was conducted using a methodology developed within the framework of the Caring Masculinity in Action project.

Overview of good national practices

Several central and local enforcement authorities have in recent years focused particular attention on working to prevent and protect young people from offending, working with teenagers in schools across the country. For example, the Ministry of the Interior, through its regional structures, is working with school-age children on a variety of topics, extending their reach. Since the beginning of December 2022, the General Directorate of the National Police has piloted the National Programme "Protecting Young People from Crime", recognizing that "Among the crimes typical of youth victimization, sexual abuse of girls and young women should be mentioned. They are also among the most frequent victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, which is often accompanied by physical and sexual violence". A similar long-term educational programme on "Judiciary - Informed Choice and Civic Trust", which aims to prevent and inform secondary school students, including on the topic of domestic violence and protection measures, is being conducted by the Supreme Judicial Council and the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) together with prosecutors, judges, investigators, and court officials in various cities across the country.

Special attention should be paid to the activities of the Prevention Directorate of the Municipality of Varna, which for several years has created and maintained a network of student volunteers who work in the "peer to peer" method. School prevention clubs are a permanent extracurricular organised form of prevention of risky behaviour among students from VIII - XII grade in problem areas such as drugs and other psychoactive substances, risky sexual communication, human trafficking, antisocial behaviour, and online risks. On its website, the Directorate has published a number of guides for young people, parents and teachers in these areas (<http://prevencii.com/index.php/publikacii>), some of which deal with gender relations, gender identity and sexual orientation, gender roles and stereotypes, etc. (see, for example, the "Handbook on Risky Sexual Behaviour, HIV/AIDS and STIs to support secondary educators"), as well as the 'peer educating peer method' (see, for example, "Risky Behaviour on the Internet and Human Trafficking. Peer Educator's Guide"). The peer approach is a well-known method and is practised by teachers and pedagogical specialists in schools, by NGOs when working with young people in many places in the country. However, the municipality has found the approach to strengthen the network of student volunteers working in schools by holding an annual "Peer of the Year" ceremony to reward the most active among them.

Many NGOs in the country have the experience of working with school-age teenagers on various topics related to conflict resolution, social skills and emotional intelligence, gender relations, etc., including the topic of domestic violence. As a result of the projects, NGOs produce and distribute training materials. Such is the collection "Prevention of Domestic Violence. Handbook and practical exercises to help teachers and students", published by the Bulgarian Fund for Women (BFW) in 2018. In addition to the informative part, mainly intended for educational specialists and other stakeholders, which addresses topics such as prevention and protection from domestic violence and how to work in schools on this topic, the handbook also contains a second part with experiential exercises for children and students from 10 to 18 years of age. The exercises cover topics such as privacy, mutual consent, conflict resolution without aggression, what is unacceptable behaviour, relationships, and identity. Without a specific focus on men's and boys' behaviour, the design of several exercises suggests that they can be conducted with boys only and later to discuss with the participants what masculine behaviour is considered not/acceptable. The toolkit has been piloted in the capital and in the country with pupils of different age. According to BFW, the manual, which is available on the organization's website, continues to be actively used by various users - educators, psychologists, etc. to this day.

A good practice is the multi-year package of programmes "Key to School without Fear" (<https://bezstrah.org/>), developed by the Animus Association Foundation from 2016 to 2021 and implemented until today. It includes the internationally recognised Zippy's Friends (for ages 5-7) and Apple's Friends (for ages 8-10) programmes, based on the programmes of the UK Partnership for Children organisation (partnershipforchildren.org.uk), as well as Animus' authoring programmes Class of Friends (for ages 11-13) and Key (for ages 14-17). The programmes have been applied in kindergartens and schools across the country. The model that Animus is developing aims to engage all children from grades 1 to 10 in appropriate prevention activities that change the school climate and create an environment tolerant of differences, non-violent communication and conflict resolution in a way that does not hurt others. The programmes also offer training materials to up-skill teachers who work on these issues with children and students. The methods in the Key Programme are based on experiential learning in groups - practical activities, role-plays, debates, discussions and case studies, and the themes are friendship and love, dominance, and equality between genders and in interpersonal relationships, what is violence in proximity relationships, etc.

The Gender, Education, Research and Technology (GERT) Foundation's initiative on "School without Violence and Gender Stereotypes" (2013-2018), which aims to change the traditional attitudes and understandings of gender roles that most young people face, both in the family, at school and in society, and which lead to limiting their opportunities for fulfilment, is a good practice. The programme includes trainings for teachers and students, as well as peer educators, on different aspects of gender equality (girls and boys) and experiential learning activities to raise awareness of gender-based violence and the manifestations or lack of gender equality at school and beyond. Parents have also been actively involved in project activities through joint parent-child competitions, joint preparation of exhibitions and other events related to project themes. A continuation of this initiative is the project "Dating violence - the uncovered face of adolescents' human rights violation" (2015-2016). Forty boys were trained as peer educators on topics related to the equality of girls and boys (women and men) in dating and the prevention of violence in romantic relationships, including the recognition and management of forms of partner violence through experiential and non-violent communication. They, in turn, have trained 1,000 of their peers (grades VIII - XII) from five schools as part of the "Class Hour". Also have been trained 10 school psychologists, pedagogical counsellors, and teachers whose main task was to support the trainers during the preparation and delivery of the peer trainings.

The students prepared and conducted in the five participating schools an information campaign (through the development of comics and brochures) on the theme "There is no violence in love".

An example of good practice is the international project "New Generation" with the participation of the Association "Pro-European Network", within the framework of which "Journey. Towards engaging young people in processes of learning and action against gender-based violence" (2020) has been developed. The handbook is intended for people who work with young people: youth workers, teachers, members of civil society organisations, youth leaders, peer educators, etc., and describes educational approaches and exercises for use in school or out-of-school activities. The focus is on working with young people on the topics of gender and gender-based violence: through education to action, addressing concepts such as gender roles and norms, sexism, sexual orientation, gender-based violence, etc. The project has trained 1,600 boys using the peer-to-peer method, who have been educated during an all-boys youth camp and prepared an information campaign on the topic for their classmates.

Focus groups with experts, youth workers and teachers

In accordance with the methodology adopted by the project for the purpose of the study, two focus group discussions were held - one online on 07.12.2022 with four experts and NGO representatives from Sofia who have experience of working on the project topic, and a second in-person on 08.12.2022 with six pedagogical specialists (two teachers each from primary and secondary education, a school psychologist, and a pedagogical counsellor) from a large secondary school in the town of Karlovo, where children from settlements all over the municipality study.

Participants in both groups received formal invitations with a brief description of the project's objectives and activities, as well as the Focus Group Interview Guide for practitioners developed within the project, translated into Bulgarian. Consent forms for participation were collected via emails and in person before the respective session. Participants in both groups had experience of participating in focus groups and there was no need to explain the rules of group discussion in detail. They were informed in advance and consented to the interviews being recorded.

The selection criteria for the participants in the first group were the long-standing focus of the organisations they represented on the issue of domestic violence, and their experience of working with school-age youth on the topic of teenage violence and aggression, including gender-based violence. The participants in the second group were selected both by the school principal and through the personal contacts of the moderator of the discussion and according to their willingness to participate in the project activities.

Both groups were very active during the discussions. They responded to the moderator's questions and spoke without prompting, ready to share as much as possible about their practices and projects, the observations they have about students, teachers and school leaders, and parents.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT:

Participants in both groups noted that in the last few years it has been more difficult to work within the education system and with young people on issues related to gender and sexuality education and upbringing. CSOs noted that the positive examples of working with school-age children and young people and good practices are mostly from before 2018, when the campaign against the Istanbul Convention began. Today, they are therefore forced to change the focus of their work by modifying some of their activities and working on, for example, 'conflict prevention and resolution', 'peer mediation', 'non-violent relationships', 'developing sustainable life skills', 'mental health and healthy emotions', etc. According to a recent survey of students,

violence in schools exists because some students, mostly boys but also girls, dislike "different" because of race, gender, disability, etc. The study of school curricula also shows that basic topics such as democracy and human rights are not well represented in civic education as a subject. There is interest in these topics in schools for additional work, but school principals and teachers are reluctant to engage in initiatives on gender equality and gender-based violence.

For their part, the teachers said that the topic actually not only interested them, but they wanted to develop competences to work with students on the issues raised by the project. According to them, there is a lack of adequate programmes to work on the prevention of gender-based violence that can be implemented in schools and help to tackle the problem at an early stage. Schools have a Violence and Aggression Prevention Committee that works according to a certain algorithm and documents that each school adapts according to its needs, but the work of this committee is too limited and insufficient to deal with the problems that arise. The programme of the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Ministry of Education (MoE), which made it possible to introduce a free-choice health education lesson at school, for example on topics such as intersex relationships, sexuality, gender identity, etc., has been cancelled. The topics are now dealt with in other subjects, but there is no opportunity for discussion there. Teachers said that they are not allowed to talk to students about topics such as gender diversity, different identities, and sexual orientation. Even if they can afford it, they must be very careful with the terminology and language used. "Class Hour" is currently used to discuss topics such as tolerance, peer violence, family violence, online violence and cyber safety, peaceful conflict resolution, behaviour change, self-reflection, working with families, community outreach, stress and affect management, sports, and hobbies, but this time is not enough. Every teacher encounters problematic situations in their students' relationships on a daily basis, but not all teachers have the necessary knowledge of how to respond. Many families also do not help to deal with the problems that arise because they do not talk about the subject with the children. Teachers feel that such education is lacking in families altogether, everything is passed on to teachers. The demands on teachers are enormous and they do not always manage to cope with everything, especially when there is difficulty in communicating with parents who also refuse to hear the teachers' point of view.

BOYS AS A SPECIFIC TARGET GROUP:

CSOs work on topics and activities on gender-based violence prevention, aggression and bullying at school and how to overcome them, etc. usually with mixed groups of girls and boys. There is no specific research on the school environment in terms of whether it is appropriate to work only with boys. However, some organisations have experience of working on similar issues with boys and consider this to be an essential part of gender-based violence prevention. All the experts observed that when working with boys, the group is divided into sub-groups, with dynamics of competition - competition for attention and power of divided, polarised and opposing opinions and behaviours. In the experts' experience, it is very difficult for schoolteachers to formally separate boys and girls in school time to work in two separate groups. It is more successful to organise a group of boys of different ages, from different classes, who could attend such a group of their own volition, outside school hours, in a neutral place/space.

Teachers' observations, on the other hand, are that students should not be separated on any basis when working on violence prevention, based on gender. In their view, working in mixed groups is much more effective as different issues can arise among students and be resolved peacefully through discussion. Teachers have also observed acts of intolerance and misunderstanding by some pupils - and boys, less so girls - towards their peers with different sexual orientations. However, it is important for teachers, and they prefer to work in mixed groups of girls and boys, to consider the perspectives of both sides. They shared that they encourage students to play

sports, dance and have fun together. They observed a strong interest of girls in football. The psychologist, on the other hand, shared that boys are very often influenced by appearance trends from the internet. They take everything for granted and do not have the critical thinking to evaluate things properly. They like men with muscles and beautifully sculpted bodies and want to look like them. They go to the gym to look like their internet idols. Teachers report no aggressive behaviour among these boys and even notice that they pass on the good example of sports and healthy eating to their classmates. They define this as a good, positive practice.

GENDER STEREOTYPES/IDEAS OF MASCULINITY:

Several issues were discussed with the NGO experts, such as how the theme of masculinity is addressed in their projects and how they have involved boys in prevention work, because they usually avoid getting involved in such initiatives. The group participants had different experiences. NGOs often prefer to work on gender issues primarily in smaller towns and in remote areas where they feel there is less understanding of these issues. Introductory training on gender equality, gender roles etc. has always been part of the work in both mixed groups and groups with boys. Masculinity or femininity were not specific themes in some of the practitioners' projects, but conversations about them emerged naturally. For some organisations, the theme of masculinity was always present in their projects for students aimed at preventing violence. Special workshops have also been organized just for boys. The aim is to provoke boys to talk about gender and masculinity, to define what masculinity means to them, what it means to be a man, etc. In the course of their work, examples of very toxic behaviour are observed, which is explained by traditional (patriarchal) culture. The roots for this are in certain family patterns where boys are considered "something special" and are brought up to believe that they are allowed more than girls are allowed. It is hard to expect that school as an institution can fully challenge such family values. Observations over the past few years suggest that the culture of toxic masculinity - whereby one can use violent behaviour to get attention and impose one's will on others - has not been overcome, is even more common today and well accepted by some boys. One conclusion is that working with boys on the issue of gender-based violence should be seen by society as a pressing and urgent societal task. Practitioners presented examples of good practice: for example, a collection of essays on masculinity - boys of different ages who had participated in a project had written essays on masculinity, collected in a book. Another participant shared an example of good practice: a male facilitator leads a conversation about masculinity in a mixed group, but only with the boys, while the girls listen, and later vice versa. An interesting effect of working with teenagers was observed by one participant: in the same age group, understandings of femininity and masculinity are shared equally by almost everyone and reflect their knowledge and experience at that age. The situation is quite different if the same teenagers participate in a role-play when playing the role of parents. The implication is that they reflect femininity and masculinity more relaxedly through care and caring. Defining what masculinity is for them is more difficult than defining what it means to be a father.

One teacher shared the view that in many families the roles are reversed. Many women, in addition to having to handle all the household chores, raising the children, have to work, sometimes in several jobs, to earn a good income. There is a trend for more and more girls to go into typically 'male occupations'. It can therefore be said that girls are becoming the 'strong' sex. Teachers have observed that communication and relationships between boys and girls have changed a lot recently, most probably because of the social isolation from the pandemic in the last two years. There has been an escalation of aggression among girls. They are becoming more emancipated, more assertive and determined to stand up for their opinions, whether right or wrong, without taking advice. According to the teachers, stereotypes and roles of men and women come from the past, folklore and traditions, as Bulgarian society is patriarchal and therefore children are taught to work according to their gender. In this respect, boys are

disadvantaged from an early age because both parents and school instil in them that they should not show their feelings because men "do not cry" and should not show weakness. It is observed that the absence of a man in the family due to divorce, death or other reasons is a big problem for children. It is reported that boys with deceased fathers are much more emotional, cry often, do not have many friends, but seek protection from older boys and men. Nowadays, children who grow up in liberal families where there are no male and female jobs do not accept stereotypes. But there are also many families where gender stereotypes are not rejected and are passed on to children. Teachers have observations of family upbringing, more common in the Turkish ethnic group of their region, where boys are put on a pedestal by their families and from a young age acquire a self-confidence that they are very valuable and important, and a feeling that everyone must obey them and fulfil their wishes. If these boys work together with their peers from other ethnic groups where equality between girls and boys is a family value, it can have a good effect on rethinking their behaviour. Children's behaviour at school is largely influenced by the behaviour of their parents and this is very evident in their attitudes towards classmates and teachers. When the father in the family is attentive, loving, respects the woman beside him and loves his children, this is clearly evident in the children's behaviour. Boys from such families are tolerant and respect their classmates and teachers, they are not ashamed to show feelings. But sometimes following the example and behaviour of parents can be very harmful to children, especially if they are different in temperament and character from their parents. In this case, the male child feels misunderstood, suppressed, confused, without support and understanding from the family. He often cries and seeks the support of his teachers. His classmates accept him, but he fails to find himself. According to the participating teachers, more and more boys have recently shown non-violent, positive, and caring masculinity. Boys are thinking in a different direction and don't want to be stereotyped, don't want to be pigeonholed, this is a generation that has the power to change the world. Teachers support and encourage this kind of behaviour among boys. Boys, on the other hand, are not afraid to choose typically "female" professions - teachers, educators, even nurses. Aggressive and violent behaviour is observed in younger boys in grades V - VII, while positive masculinity and following a good example is more common in older boys. There was more aggression among girls and of girls against boys, with girls usually being the instigators. More cases of self-harm among girls are reported. There have been cases of fighting between girls, observed by both girls and boys, but no one is quelling the tension.

NEEDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

It has been observed by some experts that for teenagers, issues such as sexuality and gender relations are considered taboo, especially when related to issues of sexual and gender-based violence. At this age teenagers encounter and have to deal with issues such as fear of death, fear of loss. Often, they go through deep turmoil as a way of dealing with depression and through issues of sexuality to find their own identity, to grow up, to develop or to gain power over others and to achieve everything through violence. The "peers to peers" approach can be used on these topics as well, but practitioners' observations and conclusions are that it is important to what extent peers are empowered, as the "we will teach you because we know better" phenomenon can have the opposite of the expected outcome. Another difficulty in expressing one's feelings and fears comes from the fact that young people spend a lot of time in the digital world. When they talk about their emotions and feelings, they prefer to express themselves in English rather than their native language. They watch podcasts, videos, participate in forums and communicate with teenagers from all over the world, no age, gender, race, etc., because their goal is to better understand their emotions and feelings, to overcome their own difficulties in communicating with others, to overcome their loneliness. The conclusion is that parents are not aware of this and are not able to support their children in the internalisation of emotions. The pandemic period

exacerbated these communication difficulties of teenagers because all kind of corporeality was lost as physical bodies were isolated and many natural signs of feelings such as touching, kissing, hugging were missing. In conclusion, we observe very confused teenagers. They often cannot even go deep into the meaning of words like - masculinity, sexuality, identity, gender, attraction. They like everything and everybody or hate everything and everybody and can be very soft, tolerant, accepting, and fragile as well as rigid and inflexible and have trouble finding their inner balance, which often leads to depression, to stress and tension, to aggressiveness.

The experts' recommendation to the project is to develop a methodology based on modern approaches and technologies that is easy to use, not complicated and does not require much additional preparation time. In the implementation of the project, work closely with the parents, if possible, to get their support by providing information on how the project will contribute to the development of new skills, knowledge and competences by their children and will be a good opportunity for a meaningful leisure time. The approach taken by some of the organisations is not to present the negative characteristics of violence but the positive characteristics of non-violent behaviour and to develop a process of emotional social learning about the core values of a democratic society - such as non-discrimination, gender equality, freedom from violence, etc. The role of the educators is to observe how these values are understood, internalised, and contribute to changing students' attitudes towards their own rights and the rights of others.

So far, the teachers participating in the group discussion have not received any specific training as part of their professional qualification related to the prevention of gender-based violence and specifically related to boys, men, and masculinity. They consider that the way and methods taught in universities in the field of adolescent psychology are outdated and inapplicable, not in line with their practical experience. Teachers conclude that it is much more important for them to teach children to be socially competent than to be excellent in all subjects.

Teachers want to get ready-made materials that are easy to use because many refuse to work on these topics with children due to lack of time - so they also need adapted materials on the subject that do not require a lot of preparation time. Teachers explicitly state that they need practical training outside school. They think that even mixed training for teachers and students would be very useful to test different methods of outreach. According to the participants, the topic of dealing with and preventing violence is extremely important and requires much more in-depth and conscious work with all stakeholders - teachers, students, parents.

Consultations with young people

Three consultations with young people were carried out for the purposes of the study, all three of which took place online. The first was conducted on 07.12.2022 in a mixed gender group of 4 boys and 6 girls aged 16-19 from a large secondary school in the town of Karlovo, which has students from all over the municipality with different social, ethnic, and economic status.

The other two groups were all boys. The first one took place on 12.12.2022 with 6 boys aged between 14 and 17 years (from VII to XII grade) from the same school in the town of Teteven with professional profiles in the field of IT communications, business, and hospitality. The second one took place on 19.12.2022 with 5 boys from the same school in the town of Iskar aged 17-18 years (from XI and XII grade), two boys are from Roma origin. The school gathers students from the town and surrounding villages and is in an economically deprived region with a predominantly Roma population. Both schools have participated in the two-year programme for the prevention of violence and bullying in schools implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science and UNICEF ("Steps Together") in the period 2020-2022. According to the analysis of the implementation of the programme, boys participate less, sometimes

deliberately excluding themselves from activities that involve discussions about emotions and violence at school (e.g., class or school level events). However, they are more involved in peer activities dedicated to supporting classmates in difficult situations.

Before the discussions began, each group was briefed on the aims of the project and the rules for participation in the focus group. Participants were asked to introduce themselves, and it was explained that the study was anonymous, and they could use a pseudonym instead of a real name, and for the purposes of the study their gender and age should also be stated. Participants in all three groups confirmed that they were aware of the terms of the interview - that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, with no right or wrong answers, and that they only answered the questions they want to and agreed to be recorded. All respondents declared written consent to participate in person or obtained from their parent if under 18 years of age.

All participants in the consultations participated voluntarily, during non-school hours, with the conversation with the mixed group taking place in the evening and each participant taking part in the conversation individually. Boys from the city of Teteven participated as a single classroom group, positioned in front of one computer, while the boys from the city of Iskar were gathered in the school library and asked that the cameras not be turned on while the conversation was taking place. The boys from the town of Teteven were organized by the pedagogical adviser, and the boys from the town of Iskar - by the deputy director. The conversations in all three groups took place without the presence of an adult, except for the moderator of the consultation.

The observation of the interviewers was that in the mixed group the girls and boys were not embarrassed to speak frankly in front each other, but there were questions relating to their views on intimate relationships which almost all refrained from answering, both because of their very little life experience and because of embarrassment at commenting on such matters in public. However, the behaviour of the groups of boys was different. The boys in the group from the town of Teteven were quite restrained in their answers, which were brief, with no desire to elaborate, and sought the approval of the older boys in the group, including correcting answers. Although gathered in front of one device, they managed to separate themselves into sub-groups, with some even joking amongst themselves and laughing to relax a little as some of the questions were obviously difficult and uncomfortable for them. Overall, the conversation was difficult and required a lot of patience on the part of the interviewer as the boys were physically communicating with each other, being noisy and not very focused. The real answers came after a long silence when the effect of the jokes wore off. The boys from Iskar also answered briefly, without much explanation, but behaved more seriously, perhaps also because of their older age. As a result, the conversation was more relaxed and the boys were more willing to talk and share their opinions, even without going into details.

The conversation in all three groups was focused on boys and masculinity and gender-based violence prevention, based on a questionnaire developed within the project.

IDEAS ABOUT MASCULINITY:

In the mixed group, there is a consensus among girls and boys about how a "real man in society" is defined. According to them, a man should be a gentleman with women, be kind to them and make them feel special. He should also be fit, go to the gym, exercise, and take care of himself. Girls believe that a man should be emotional, not be afraid to show his feelings openly, show respect and support them. According to all participants popular men (guys) are those who are known by many people, singers, actors, influencers. These popular men (guys) post stories on social media usually with pictures where they look good physically, show muscles and fashion. Youngsters like this and follow them on social networks. Boys consider those guys who behave unnaturally, especially in front of girls, try to pretend to be interesting, insult others, make fun

of themselves to pretend to be "cool", as slobs. Girls perceive "mommy's boys" as wimps, and boys think that these are the ones who are constantly making excuses, always have some problems of their own or who affect everyone. Girls are concerned about the appearance of the boys who are in their friend circle. How they look is important to them, whether they are well-groomed and physically healthy, while it is not the muscles that are important to boys, but the "folds of the brain" and the intelligence to allow other boys into their company. In their spare time, young men watch movies, listen to music, hang out with friends, sleep, play sports. One of the 17-year-old boys said he plays the clarinet, and one of the girls has her own business - she makes macramé and sells it through the Internet. When they are sad, most of the youth listen to sad music, hang out with friends, do something that distracts them. One of the boys said that he lets his feelings out and cries. Sometimes boys try to emulate famous bodybuilders and influencers because they like their looks. One boy said that he regularly goes to the gym, but not so much to put on muscle as to improve his health.

For the boys from Teteven, being a real man means firstly standing by your words and your principles (they joked that, for example, brushing your teeth every morning is a kind of example of what it means to follow your principles - be consistent in what you do). It's important to be sure and confident in yourself, but also to rely on each other especially in boys' groups, to respect each other and most importantly to have fun. They felt that there were no more or less popular boys in their school, all were equal, but when the question was rephrased as to who their role models were at school, they replied that it was certainly the most confident boys, the ones who had expensive clothes and phones, had looks and seemed confident in what they were doing. Nasty and weak boys are those who behave like girls, who are more introverted, but also those classmates who take too much initiative in school life, as if they want to attract too much attention from teachers and the principal. For all the body, its size, strength, maintenance matter. Everybody practices sport, but they think it is no problem if some boys decide not to pay attention to their body. However, they would encourage them to start practicing some sport. In their free time they are rarely sad, they listen to happy music, go to parties, there is no room for sadness. They demonstrate that they are very confident of themselves as boys and their principle is "no stress".

Of special note is the answer to the question of who they consider a role model, and this turns out to be American-British former professional kickboxer, internet personality and online influencer Andrew Tate. Tate describes himself as an "absolute sexist" and an "absolute misogynist". His comments lead to him being banned from several social media platforms. He is the leading voice of the so-called manosphere (a network of online male communities against female empowerment that promote anti-feminist and sexist attitudes and blame women and feminists for all sorts of problems in society). The other examples the guys gave were famous kickboxers. They've been following these examples for a relatively short time - a year and a half since these men became more well-known. Otherwise, since childhood they have liked Batman and Spiderman, heroes who fight against injustice and help the disadvantaged.

The boys from Iskar had a hard time answering the question what it means to be a real man. They were also not specific in answering who were the more or less popular boys in the school, as they could not relate popularity to their situation in the small town. The most liked boys are the ones who certainly don't misbehave, rather the boys who behave decently. The nasty and weak boys, a definition that elicited laughter, are the ones who have no idea how to behave properly as men, the word "decent" was repeated - they are like little children, frivolous, not following any rules. In terms of their physical body shape, all agreed that body shape was important to them and to appeal to girls, but the interviewer's impression was that the boys were not so focused on this. Some play football, others go to the gym. Interestingly, one of the boys linked the issue of being fit to spirituality and added the example of going to church regularly,

meeting friends there and having fun. According to him, this keeps him in good mental health. (The majority of the Roma population attends a Christian evangelical church, there is a community that meets regularly, and church is a place where people talk about values). In their spare time most play sports, go out with friends - boys and girls and - have fun, "it's more fun when boys and girls are together". It's an opportunity to see some girl and flirt. But there are situations when boys prefer all-boy company. They don't feel stressed about their masculinity. According to them masculinity is something you are born with; you behave like a man naturally. Their role models are football stars, real life influencers, though not so much. They enthusiastically respond that they know who Andrew Tate is, some consider him a very "cool" guy and like him a lot; they also follow his brother and admire the way they both give advice to young people to believe in themselves, to be confident. Even though he makes sexist comments, the boys believe that most of what he says is, in their opinion, the truth. He also has a good standard of living - brand new super expensive cars, a big house on the beach - in their eyes he is a man who has turned his dreams into reality, so he deserves respect. From the cartoons of their childhood, they like those in which there is action, race, fight, funny situations, like Tom and Jerry, Scooby Doo, Mickey Mouse, Nu Pogodi (a Russian cartoon on wolf and rabbit).

GENDER RELATIONS:

All participants in the mixed group believed that both girls and boys are important in society and cannot do without each other, even though they are different in terms of physical, biological and gender characteristics. They want both sexes to be equal but notice inequalities in different spheres of life - lower pay for women than men for the same positions, admission of boys with lower grades to universities. They declare their willingness to fight for greater equality of the genders in society. Do not feel uncomfortable with people of the other gender. One of the 19-year-old girls said that she grew up in the company of boys and never felt uncomfortable around them; on the contrary, she felt important and valued. Another 17-year-old girl said that she did not feel uncomfortable, she felt comfortable in a group, whether it was girls, boys or mixed, she was sociable and always spoke her mind. However, a 17-year-old boy said he felt uncomfortable with girls because he did not know what impression he would make on them, and another 18-year-old boy felt uncomfortable with boys but was comfortable with girls. The question 'what is a strong intimate partnership' made everyone uncomfortable and only one of the girls said that it was important to her that an intimate relationship with her partner was about feelings. The others refused to answer. Only one of the boys said that he did not want to have children because he thought he would not be a good parent. The others want to be parents in the future and will educate their children by setting a good example, not being hypocrites, having the right to make their own choices and not being aggressive. However, they think that mob law is a better option to deal with violence, if any, than talking to teachers, psychologists, parents. When they felt unsafe and had a problem, half of the participants shared with their parents, the other half with friends. They have few real friends of either gender - either they grew up together since childhood or became friends at school. All said they accept differences and are not afraid to make friends with people of different ethnicities and LGBT. Most of the participants have friends from the LGBT community and accept them as they are. It is not important to them what their sexual orientation is, but whether they are honest and good people. Regarding the violence against LGBT people, the youth believe that this is a legacy of the communist regime, during which only the traditional family between a man and a woman was recognized and no differences were accepted or talked about. Our Balkan mentality also imposes many stereotypes and hence the lack of understanding and aggression towards people with different sexualities. Young people say they do not accept hate speech and violence against people with different sexual orientations and are ready to fight to break stereotypes.

For the boys group from the town of Teteven boys and girls are equal but different. For example, girls' behaviour and interests are different, girls' way of thinking is also different because they think emotionally and boys logically. They believe this applies to all girls, so it should be. At this point, however, opinions split - half of the boys say that all girls are the same, the other half that many girls are different from this image. They never felt embarrassed in front of girls, but some of them refrained from answering. They do not have much experience in intimate relationships and do not find such questions comfortable. Communicating with girls is more difficult for them. Some of the boys can imagine themselves as parents in the future and for relationships they think the ideal situation is to have a family with children and a dog. A good relationship definitely means a relationship without violence. Boys belonging to groups rely a lot on each other; if there are different opinions, decisions are made quickly because the leaders determine them. Discussions are brief. But usually the opinions are similar, so there is not much room for disagreement. It's far easier than discussing something with girls - it's too emotional there, with too much discussion. Boys said they usually don't share feelings like insecurity, fear or depression with anyone, or only sometimes share with friends, brothers, fathers or grandfathers. They are not used to sharing and do not want to do so. Only one boy said that his mother had helped him once in such a situation, but this answer rather elicited giggles and bad reactions from the other boys. They thought that women and men do not have equal rights in society and gave examples of the gender pay gap but could not give any other examples of inequalities. In their general opinion, men are stronger than women in all areas and in general. They completely reject the idea that there are LGBT people in their school or even in the city. They explained that the town is very small and if someone has a different sexual orientation, it is hidden. If such people are more often the victims of violence, it is perhaps because they are not well accepted by society. They confirmed that friendship with LGBT people will only bring them a bad reputation. And this is the normal situation. That's how it should be according to them. They could do nothing about it and even some did not want to continue the discussion.

For the guys from Iskar relations with the girls look different. They understand that we are all human beings, but their general opinion is that girls are spiteful; they often intrigue. Almost everyone is like this, exceptions are rare, and these girls are quite invisible. They affirmed that sometimes it can happen to feel insecure in front of girls, but in general it is a rare situation. They have girl who are their friends, but LGBT people - firmly no. One of the guys said he hated them, although he couldn't explain why. They find their behaviour unacceptable. They don't know what can be done if these people are more often victims of violence, maybe they need counselling with a psychologist, to learn self-defence as they are weaker. In any case, the boys saw no other solution and wanted to make sure they were not liked and not cared for at all. As in the other group of boys (in Teteven), the boys from Iskar said that they didn't know such people personally, so maybe they didn't have enough personal experience. In the boys' groups, in situations where there are different opinions on some topics, the boys just argue for a while and then they are angry with each other, they don't talk, but then it passes. There are no informal leaders among them to impose an opinion. They refrain from sharing feelings such as insecurity, fear, or depression, in very rare cases they do so with friends, parents – only one boy said he talks to his mother.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE:

In the mixed group, girls expressed the opinion that a man who hits a woman is not a man but a complexed weakling. Abusers are most likely to come from families in which they themselves have experienced violence. And now they kill their victim complexes by beating and abusing their wives and children. And battered women are accepted as victims, become accustomed to violence and are afraid to fight back. Every woman should have self-respect and in no case tolerate violence. Boys are of the opinion that women enable violence. If they know that the

man is aggressive, they stand in fear because if they let him, the harassment will be greater. According to the participants, any form of violence is caused by suppression of true feelings. Men are more likely to be violent when they do not show their feelings. Usually these are men with distorted thinking and wrong perception of the world and others.

For the boys from the town of Teteven, strong in society are those people who have achieved success - financially, but also those who have fulfilled their dreams, who are leaders in the family, in the community, who have good jobs. The weak are the opposite. They think that violence is not ok, in any case it is something very bad - a real man should support others and help the weaker ones. They know many men (themselves included) who never use violence because they control themselves and the situation as well.

For the guys from the town of Iskar strong in society are those who are successful in life, have good friends and can rely on them. Weak are the people who are not confident in themselves. According to them anyone can be strong, being weak or strong is a choice. Strong people have goals, they work for them to achieve them; if people do nothing, they become weak personalities, they are not interesting to others. Gender-based violence is totally unacceptable to them. Violence is never a solution. In a relationship where two people quarrel and are violent, it is better to separate, to stop seeing each other, than to quarrel every day. In relationships there are boundaries that need to be respected, but it is difficult - sometimes when they are angry, it is hard for them to control themselves.

ABOUT MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE:

All participants in the mixed group said they did not support violence and aggression. If someone in their environment is aggressive and shows forms of violence, they would support this person with talks and recommendations to do something useful and read books. They would not aggressively intervene in arguments, even if one of the parties is their close friend, because aggression achieves nothing except the loss of people you hold on to. One of the boys mentioned that he is religious and there are many boys in his friendship circle who avoid violence and are tolerant and caring towards others. But according to him there are women/girls who like more aggressive men who prove themselves to others with violence. This somewhat prompts some guys to behave rudely and aggressively. Another boy said he doesn't like to get into long arguments, he likes quick consensual solutions, which keeps him from getting into aggressive situations. They advised their peers to be themselves, be guided by their feelings and not to be slaves to stereotypes. Aggression doesn't solve problems and doesn't make someone hotter, on the contrary, you only create enemies and lose friends.

The boys from the town of Teteven believe that the examples of men who solve problems in a non-violent way should be promoted more and believe that people should be taught more how to develop self-control. Although they are not entirely sure, they give some examples that influencers need to talk more about caring masculinity.

The boys from the town of Iskar do not see a clear solution to what can be done if someone is a bully in a situation. They think parents need to step in and do something. There is no point talking to the bullies because they will never understand you. But on the other hand, according to one of the boys, if you are confident, you can intervene by talking to the bullies and calming the situation down. Social media campaigns can also help against violence in general. Paradoxically, it was only at the end of this discussion that they were able to articulate that a real man has a strong character, respect for others, fulfils his goals, protects women, has a good career - for example he is good at sports, earns money on his own. A real man keeps trying and never gives up.

Conclusion

Several main conclusions can be drawn from the desk study and the focus groups conducted with adults - experts, youth workers, representatives of NGOs and teachers, as well as from the consultations with teenagers - girls and boys.

Apparently, young people's understandings of gender equality, human rights and non-violence are very superficial. The school and the environment do not give them any knowledge and skills how to define their own social role as a man and a woman, as a future parent and citizen. Their visions rest rather on rather elementary ideas that they perceive from the surrounding world (for example, "equal pay for equal work", which they believe is not respected; or the idea of a future family with children and a dog), from their environment (the attitude towards LGBT people they haven't met and don't know, but may hate) or from social media influencers they like and follow (like the sexist and misogynist Andrew Tate).

It's obvious that relationships between the genders excite them, but they rarely can talk about it outside of their friends. The school and the parents do not provide the youth with any opportunities to discuss these topics, to express opinions, to even consider, because some of the questions made it difficult for the participants and they could not even express what they thought. In search of themselves - when they feel weak and vulnerable, they do not turn to parents, except in very rare cases, and never to school or professionals. It is significant that the country has a lot of developed training materials and good practices on the topics of gender equality and non-violent relations, but they are not part of what the school provides as knowledge and skills. Quite the opposite - the time at school for discussing "life" topics is extremely limited and does not give students the opportunity to build lasting attitudes about relationships with others.

Young people do not recognize violence as a form of settling problematic relationships, both between women and men, and between men. At the same time, the idea of the "other" can be hostile or rather consumerist. They consider the realization of a person in society and life important, but it is reduced to material dimensions of success. They believe that a man can fulfill himself and be whole without violence, but they also believe that non-violent masculinity is not promoted but should be.

When the main activities of the project were presented to them, most of the young people expressed their desire to join the activities. Some boys were particularly interested in two topics - anger management games and exercises and relationships with girls.

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