# CarMiA – Caring Masculinities in Action

# National Report – Slovenia

Hrženjak Majda and Markelj Leja

*Peace Institute*
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# *Content*

## 1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a violation of fundamental human rights and one of the most widespread forms of gender-based discrimination, causing serious psychological, physical and economic harm to the persons involved and to society as a whole (ReNPEMŽM 2030, 57).

In Slovenia, the majority of policy and systemic activities are focused on intimate partner and domestic violence, as well as on curative programmes for victim protection and treatment of perpetrators. According to the EU-wide survey on violence against women conducted by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (2015)[1], 5 % of women in Slovenia have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a current partner and 21 % by a former partner since the age of 15. 14 % of women have experienced stalking and 44 % have experienced sexual harassment. Before the age of 15, 16% of girls had experienced some form of violence (physical, sexual or psychological).

Slovenia has ratified the Istanbul Convention[2] in 2015 and made significant progress in addressing domestic violence over the last decade. With the adoption of the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence[3], it has also adopted important strategic documents that provide detailed definition of measures to protect victims and, at the operational level, establish the protocols for different authorities and services in dealing with domestic violence. Instructions and guidelines have been provided for the activities of institutions in the field of combating domestic violence. The policies pay particular attention to the vulnerability of women facing intersectional and multiple forms of discrimination, such as migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women, women with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ and Roma women. The activities of the state and civil society are focused on the provision of victim support services through the network of social protection programmes, crisis centres, maternity homes and safe houses established within the social protection system across Slovenia. The state co-finances 12 counselling centres for victims of violence, including 1 programme for the prevention of violence against the elderly, 1 programme for telephone counselling and 1 programme for social skills training for perpetrators of violence (ReNPEMŽM 2030, 59-60).

There is also a growing awareness of the need to take action on GBV online such as sexual extortion, sexual recruitment, voyeurism and revenge pornography. A survey conducted in 2019 by the *Unclick project* showed that among the primary school children (aged 12-14 years), 56 % of female students and 50 % of male students had experienced at least one form of online harassment in the previous school year. Among the secondary school pupils, 65 % of girls and 55% of boys experienced at least one form of online harassment in the past school year. The survey revealed that girls are more likely to experience serious consequences (helplessness, depression, stress, fear) as a result of online harassment and that boys are the most common online harassers of both girls and boys (ReNPEMŽM 2030, 60).

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[1] Violence against women: an EU-wide survey. Main results report | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (europa.eu)
[2] CETS 210 - Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (coe.int)
[3] Domestic Violence Prevention Act (ZPND) (pisrs.si)

Recently, as well as a result of the global 'Me Too' campaign, more attention has been paid to GBV, harassment in the workplace and sexual violence. The Criminal Code has recently adopted a new definition of rape in line with the 'yes means yes' model.[4]

The predominant approach to GBV in Slovenia focuses on intimate partner violence, is curative and victim-centred. Although NGOs are working to systematically integrate prevention programmes into the work with young people within the framework of the education system, this is still a matter of voluntary decision of individual schools and pedagogues. GBV is also a sporadic topic in youth work, depending on individual projects and local initiatives. In this respect, the CarMiA project, which focuses on prevention work with young people, the peer-to-peer approach, a broad definition of GBV, and on changing gender norms of masculinity linked to domination and violence, brings important innovations.

The CarMiA project starts from the point of view that an important part of promoting a culture of non-violence in the private and public spheres is to educate boys and men about non-violence and to involve men in various initiatives aimed at preventing all forms of GBV. Conceptually, the project is based on critical studies of men and masculinities that shed light on the link between gender norms about masculinity and GBV. Connell (2005) introduced the concept of *hegemonic masculinity* as a pattern of masculine social behaviour that is considered the ideal norm of what it means to be a man in a particular society at a particular time. These ideals are often portrayed in popular culture and the media, for example, men as young, strong, assertive, leading, fearless, managers and politicians, breadwinners and protectors of families, fighters, athletes, winners, heroes, forging their own path and overcoming adversaries. Kimmel (2009) points out that for a hegemonic masculine identity, it is essential to differentiate oneself from femininity (constructed as the 'weaker' gender) and from people marginalised and defined by society as supposedly weak, such as the poor, people with disabilities, physically weak, migrants, gay, transgender, non-binary and queer identities. In today's social gender order, violent behaviour has two main functions: violence against women is a mechanism to consolidate and maintain male superiority and to subordinate women; violence against other men is a mechanism to enforce hierarchy among men (Connell, 2005). The many acts of violence by men against men reproduce male hegemony, unequal power relations between structurally privileged and non-privileged men, and inequality within the category of male. From this perspective, sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, racism, xenophobia, class arrogance, which constitute key mechanisms of social oppression, are inherent in the norms of homogeneous masculinity. The norms of hegemonic masculinity deny the vulnerability of men associated with feelings of powerlessness, shame and fear, and push boys and men to constantly prove their self-confidence, strength and invulnerability to themselves and others. This makes boys and men less sensitive to the vulnerability of others and more insensitive to violence. In the processes of male socialisation, Kimmel (2009) points to the importance of the 'boys' code', which is a set of attitudes, values and characteristics that together constitute what it means to be a 'real man'. He elaborates on the boys' code:

> *Never show emotion or admit weakness. You have to show a face to the world that says everything is fine, everything is under control, there is nothing to worry about... The key is to win. Kindness is not an option, neither is compassion. Such feelings are taboo.* (ibid.: 45).

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[4] Nujno potrebne spremembe KZ z vidika spolne nedotakljivosti- Amnesty International Slovenija; "Samo ja pomeni ja" - Inštitut 8. marec (8marec.si)

Research shows that peer group pressure constitutes a constant social control by establishing boys who conform to the boy code as popular and those who do not follow these norms as submissive (Frosh 2002). Such identity dynamics are fertile ground for various forms of GBV ranging from sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, a sense of entitlement to sexuality, domination, objectification of women and bullying of those peers who show signs of vulnerability or difference.

According to the definition proposed by the European Commission[5], the project understands GBV as violence directed against a person because of their gender, or violence that disproportionately affects persons of a particular gender. It can be expressed as physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence. Examples of GBV cited by the European Commission include violence against women and girls, domestic violence, sexual harassment, cyber violence, forced marriages, etc. However, drawing on studies on men and masculinity, we are broadening this definition to include homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia and peer violence, with a focus on violence between men and boys.

In Slovenia, the project complements the prevailing curative approach, which focuses on working with victims of violence, with a preventive approach, which focuses on changing norms of masculinity that are linked to domination and violence, and that lead to the majority of violence in society being perpetrated by men. The project develops an approach for peer-to-peer promotion of non-violent masculinities by (self-)reflecting on dominant masculinity norms and imagining alternative, non-violent, positive (Salazar 2020), and caring (Hanlon 2012; Elliott 2015; Scambor et al. 2014) models of masculinity.

This report presents the findings of a study on the perception and treatment of masculinity and GBV in Slovenia in the existing violence prevention practices and from the perspective of the professionals and young people. Particular attention is paid to the identification of training and awareness-raising needs on the social regulation of masculinity and violence among educational staff and young people in prevention approaches. Methodologically, the study is based on a review of existing practices and focus groups with professionals and young people. In the first part, we analyse selected examples of national good practices in terms of addressing topics related to masculinities, the promotion of non-violent masculinities and a peer-to-peer approach in addressing GBV. In the second part, we present findings from group interviews with professionals in the field of GBV prevention and youth workers. The purpose of the group interviews was to identify the needs for new forms and contents of work with young people, especially boys, in order to support them in non-violent identity formation and to promote norms of non-violent masculinities. What follows is the analysis of consultations with young people, focusing on their perceptions of dominant and alternative models of masculinity, their attitudes towards GBV and their needs for support in the formation of non-violent behaviour. All three analyses result in the identification of existing gaps in the awareness-raising, reflection and support programmes available to boys in their socialisation into egalitarian, inclusive and non-violent adults. The national study provides a basis for the development of training for professionals and young people to act as agents of change in peer-to-peer activities in schools and youth centres.

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[5]  https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-based-violence/what-gender-based-violence_en

## 2. Review of national good practices

The purpose of the review of existing good practices is to analyse different approaches and topics in working with young people, with a focus on boys, in order to provide insight into the state of the art in addressing masculinities and violence, i.e. what is already in place and what is missing. The following criteria were used to identify good practices of programmes and projects working at national level to reduce GBV:

- The programme explicitly addresses boys, men, social constructions of masculinity and gender stereotypes associated with men;
- the programme articulates and promotes alternative, non-violent masculinities;
- the programme includes peer-to-peer approach.

We have selected three good practices.

In 2004, the nongovernmental organisation *Association for Non-Violent Communication* launched a *Social Skills Training for men who perpetrate violence against women*. In 2015, the programme was expanded and renamed in *Training in Social Skills for People who Inflict Violence*[6]. The programme has a systemic, long-term, public funding. It specifically addresses domestic violence, intimate partner violence and violence against women and children. The target group are adult men who perpetrate domestic violence. Exceptionally, the programme is open to violent adolescents aged 15+. Participants are referred to the programme by different institutions such as social work centres, and courts, or they decide to join the programme voluntarily in order to change their violent behaviour. The programme takes the form of lectures, discussions and self-reflective work about entrenched patriarchal stereotypes in participants' social environment and in their lives. The programme includes work with emotions (understanding emotions, how we recognise them in ourselves and in others, how we express them appropriately, how we experience them, etc.). It highlights the different socialisation of men and women and the resulting differences in the expression of emotions. The objectives of the programme are:

- To stop causing violence;
- to acquire the knowledge and skills to change behaviours and beliefs that allow the use of violence;
- learning to take responsibility for violence, its consequences, and for their own behaviour;
- developing social skills: learning non-violent communication, constructive problem solving, non-violent parenting and education;
- increasing emotional literacy;
- understanding violence against women as a direct consequence of the underlying structural inequalities in gender relations.

Intersectionality is not specifically highlighted in the programme, with the exception of learning about the link between alcohol and drug abuse and violence. This programme adopts peer-to-peer approach because the trainer is usually a man who has successfully overcame his own violent behaviour.

Another good practice is a handbook and curriculum for professionals working with young people *Cancel! Stop Online Violence against Women and Girls,* developed within the the EC co-funded project *Odklikni* and published by Faculty of Social Sciences - Centre for Social Informatics, University of Ljubljana[7]. The purpose of the manual is to educate teachers and

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[6] Trening socialnih veščin (drustvo-dnk.si)
[7] https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MDDSZ/Enake-moznosti/OdklikniPrirocnikMladina.pdf

youth workers for conducting workshops with young people about online GBV. The key message of the handbook and workshops is that online violence and harassment of women and girls are forms of GBV, which is defined as a consequence of the persistent and entrenched patriarchal power gender relations and the idea of women's subordinate position. Promoting gender equality and challenging gender stereotypes is promoted as the best way to combat online violence against women and girls. Special attention in the manual is devoted to gender expectations about masculinities. Violence between boys is explicitly named as GBV. Active participation of boys and men and their commitment not to cause, share, comment on or remain silent about online violence against women and girls is underlined as very important. The pedagogical approach of the workshops with youngsters, which last approx. 90 minutes, builds on guided participative discussions. Participants discuss what violence is, which forms of online violence they are familiar with, what are the consequences of experiencing online violence for victims, why there is more violence (online) against women than against men. Participants analyse concrete examples of online violence, watch and comment on the videos. Discussions are accompanied by short theoretical inputs on gender stereotypes, sexualisation, power relations, etc. Each activity ends with a concrete message on what is right and what is wrong. Strategies are given on how to avoid online violence, either as a victim or as a perpetrator, and how to seek help. The workshop results in developing a joint ethical code of conduct, which can be posted in a classroom, online or elsewhere.

It is underlined that gender stereotypes affect how people feel and express their feelings. Men often do not show that they are sad or afraid, but rather behave in a seemingly brave way, which undoubtedly causes stress. Women, on the other hand, tend to have a problem with expressing anger, which also causes stress and a discrepancy between experiencing and expressing emotions. Self-awareness, mindfulness and empathy are underlined as key to preventing online violence, as well as recognising and taking action when such violence is already happening. Intersectionality is not specifically addressed.

The third good practice identified in Slovenia consists of preventive workshop with boys, which has been developed and conducted in 2019 by *Ključ association – centre for fight against trafficking in human beings. 'Ključ (en. key) school for boys'*[8] specifically targets boys in order to inform them about consensual and safe sex, the harms of pornography and prostitution and respectful interpersonal relationships. It is project run activity funded by the Municipality of Ljubljana, Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, and Foundation for the funding of disability and humanitarian organizations (FIHO).

The assumption of the programme is that through their attitudes towards prostitution and pornography, men reinforce gender stereotypes and roles, which has negative impact on their sexuality and relationships in real life. Moreover, it objectifies women and justifies violence towards them. The workshops promote behavioural change with the long-term objective to reduce the demand for sexual services by internalisation of the concept of sexual consent and perception of prostitution and pornography as a form of GBV. The target group are boys from vocational secondary schools (15 – 18 year olds). The main pedagogical approach is guided discussion between participants. Different didactic learning materials are used (e.g. short film[9] that was produced for the workshops, video clips and quizz) to guide and frame the discussion. The main purpose of the methods is to encourage an open, non-judgemental discussion among young people. Workshops address hegemonic masculinity by paying attention to prevailing gender roles in relation to sexuality (e.g. '*Real men are always ready*

[8] https://drustvo-kljuc.si/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/KLJUCna_sola_za_fante_e_brosura.pdf
https://drustvo-kljuc.si/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/E-publikacija_KLJUCna_sola_za_mlade.pdf
[9] https://drustvo-kljuc.si/napotki/knjige-filmi-dokumentarci-glasba/filmi/

*for sex and never turn down an opportunity the have sex', 'Women have to meet men's needs, regardless of what they themselves want'*). Boys are encouraged to develop non-violent behaviour in relation to girls and sexuality (e.g. '*You don't take advantage if a girl is drunk and flirts with you, instead you try to help her get home, call her parents etc.'*). Dealing with emotions is not specifically addressed. Heteronormativity is addressed through emphasizing that the content of the workshop also applies to the relationship between two men. Intersections between gender, class and race are mentioned as factors that increase women's vulnerability to violence.

To summarize, all three programmes explicitly address GBV and masculinities. The first one works with perpetrators of violence against women and children (domestic violence) based on deconstruction of patriarchal power relations and gender stereotypes, including those related to masculinities. Violence is understood as the power abuse that is used to achieve a specific goal, like to control, punish, retaliate, re-educate, isolate, humiliate, exploit, injure or destroy a person with less power. The programme addresses physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence and empowers beneficiaries for nonviolent behaviour and for taking responsibility for the consequences of their violent actions. The manual *Cancel!* deals with different forms of online violence against women and girls through deconstruction of gender stereotypes and instructions about nonviolent behaviour online. Violence is defined as the impermissible use or abuse of power by one person (group) over another, violation of rights, interference with integrity and disrespect for personal boundaries (spatial, psychological, physical, spiritual, legal, intellectual, personal integrity). Such behaviour is the result of an unequal distribution of power (physical, psychological, social, economic, cultural, and political) between persons (or groups). *Ključ school for boys* tackles sexual violence against women with the emphasis on boys' attitude towards prostitution and pornography by educating them about consensual sex.

In all three programmes boys, men and masculinities are explicitly addressed, but primarily in gender binary concept and as homogeneous group. Gender plurality and intersectional diversity of boys and men are not highlighted. The topics of violence against trans, queer and non-binary people and homophobia are not explicitly taken into account. Implicitly, the intersection of age and masculinity is taken into account as the manual Cancel! and Ključ's programme that address adolescents in secondary schools. In Ključ's and Association's programmes boys and men are mostly addressed as perpetrators. Manual Cancel! explicitly recognizes men and boys also as victims of online GBV.

All three projects promote non-hegemonic, egalitarian and non-violent masculinities. Association strenghtens self-reflection, listening and speaking skills and teaches the principles of non-violent communication. Manual Cancel! promotes active participation of boys and men in preventing violence and their commitment not to cause, share, comment on or remain silent about online violence against women and girls. Self-awareness, mindfulness, and empathy are underlined. Ključ promotes behavioural change by developing non-violent and consensual behaviour in relation to girls and sexuality.

The three good practice examples follow the participatory approach – all participants are actively involved in activities and discussions; however, with the exception of the Association's programme, they do not explicitly build on peer-to-peer approach.

### 3. Focus groups with experts and youth workers

In order to review the current situation and to identify the needs and gaps in supporting young people, especially boys, to develop non-violent identities, we conducted one individual and two group interviews with experts from different organisations. After reviewing national practices in the field of GBV prevention targeting young people, we identified organisations that we considered key to carry out needs analysis. In selecting our interviewees, we were attentive to cover two key areas of the CarMiA project: expert work in the field of GBV and work with young people based on the principles of non-formal education and youth work. For this reason, we invited three professionals from organisations working in violence prevention to participate in the first group interview, one of whom was interviewed individually due to time constraints. The organisations come into contact with different forms of GBV: homophobic and transphobic violence, intimate partner violence and sexual violence in the form of prostitution and pornography. The second group interview focused on youth work. Two representatives of youth centres and a representative of the national umbrella organisation for youth centres took part. All three youth organisations have come into contact with various forms of GBV in their work, which shows the high relevance of this topic among young people.

*Table 1: Sample of the interviews with experts and youth workers.*

| Interview | Date of the interview | Sample characteristics |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 23.6.2022 | Programme coordinator of counselling and self-help groups at Legebitra, an association working in the field of homophobic, transphobic and GBV.

President of the Association for Nonviolent Communication (DNK), working in the field of prevention of intimate partner violence.

President of the Ključ Association - Centre for Fight Against Trafficking in Human Beings, which works in the field of prevention of sexual violence against women in the form of prostitution and pornography (individual interview was carried out on 29.8.2022). |
| 2 | 23.6.2022 | Representative of the Youth Network MaMa, a national umbrella organisation of more than 50 youth centres across Slovenia.

Representative of the Youth Cultural Centre Maribor, which organises activities for young people on gender-related themes, with special focus on LGBTIQ+ topics.

Representative of the Celje Youth Centre with extensive experience in working with young people on peer violence. |

In the interviews, we were interested in how experts and representatives of youth centres see the situation in the field of GBV, especially in terms of prevention programmes targeting

boys. We were interested in whether the programmes take into account aspects of gender, gender identities, masculinities and intersectionality. What are the approaches of integrating these principles into work with boys and men? We were also interested in identifying needs, especially in terms of addressing and promoting alternative masculinities among young people. What training, skills, tools and methods would be needed to raise awareness about non-violent masculinities among young people, in particular boys?

Group interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 1 hour, the individual interview lasted 30 minutes. The interviewees signed an informed consent about their participation in the interviews, which also specifies the personal data protection. With their permission, the interviews were recorded and summarised for analytical purposes. In the interview analysis we identified key themes raised by the interviewees and summarised main topics of the interviews.

*Segmented coverage of the area*
In Slovenia, GBV is mainly dealt with by NGOs, which address violence in a segmented way within the framework of individual projects and programmes. Curative approach is prevalent and focuses on both victims and perpetrators of violence. The interviewees point out that systemic approach is missing. Non-governmental organisations are striving to integrate violence preventive programmes into the educational curriculum, which would contribute to a more systematic and qualitative coverage of the area, given that pedagogues are often not trained to educate young people about the topic. Legebitra identifies primary schools as particularly problematic, because of their biases on gender-related topics and prejudice against the LGBTIQ+ issues. On the other hand, Ključ Association has established good cooperation with vocational secondary schools, where they implement prevention workshops for boys on sexual violence.

*Boys and men as violence perpetrators*
All interviewees highlight that in majority boys and men are perpetrators of different forms of violence. They observe different forms of GBV related to traditional norms of masculinities in their local environment. In Celje, there is a problem of underage gangs perpetrating violence against other young people. A youth centre representative says that the most dominant gang members come from very patriarchal families and that they use violence to reinforce traditional masculinity and domination. In Maribor, violence against LGBTIQ+ people and communities is particularly visible. Violence is also related to football supporters group, in which young men and boys participate. Youth Network MaMa detects peer violence in the form of hate speech in social networks, and social exclusion of deprivileged young people. Youth centres focus mainly on curative activities, with the exception of the Celje Youth Centre, which carries out prevention workshops on violence, sexuality, health and self-esteem in cooperation with primary schools and young volunteers.

Some of the interviewees note a strong reluctance in boys and men, especially secondary school boys, to discuss gender issues and to question existing gender roles. Masculinity and gender norms are also closely linked to 'gender ideology', which is why interviewees often encounter resistance from parents who '*act as gate-keepers"*, as they do not want their children to discuss gender issues in schools.

*Violence as a gender-neutral phenomenon*
In the past the discourse on GBV has often been limited to violence against women. Today, the term is broadened and includes 'intimate partner violence' or 'domestic violence' in order

to also integrate male victims of violence. Organisations report about requests from funders of their programmes to establish capacities for male users too.

*Hegemonic masculinity*
As observed by our interviewees, violence often stems from internalized stereotypes about gender roles and norms, which are reflected in the interpretation of gender differences as a consequence of biological determinism. Homophobic and transphobic violence can also be a strategy for managing one's own homosexual orientation and reinforcing a masculine identity, which is directed towards violence against members of the LGBTIQ+ community in the form of projected homophobia:

> *I have worked with a few people in the last six years who have been perpetrators of violence in the past because they had such a strong internalized homophobia. One of their ways of coping was to just go after all the people who are part of the LGBT community. That is how you try to suppress your sexual orientation. You want to be the 'real' man.*

Norms of hegemonic masculinity are also problematic for transgender men who face challenges of 'doing masculinity' properly and finding a balance between conformity and resistance to gender norms. In the early stages of gender transition they often perform gender through a distinct masculinity in order to be recognised as 'real' men in society. This has led to criticism that they reproduce gender stereotypes despite their non-normativity. Ključ association observes that boys are often burdened with the expectation that they must always be ready for sex and that they must take the initiative in sexuality, suggesting that boys are reflecting on their experiences and expectations posed by hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is also observed in the DNK programme for perpetrators of violence:

> *We are dealing with people who have a lot of stereotypes and harmful beliefs. They think that the world is exclusively feminine and masculine. They have learned that what is masculine is not feminine, that feminine is the opposite of masculine, that features a woman has, a man should not have and vice versa.*

*Alternative, non-violent models of masculinity*
All the interviewees agree that they also encounter alternative forms of masculinities that anticipate gender equality and non-violence. The representative of Legebitra believes that these varies according to urban or rural settings. However, in recent years, interviewees have noticed an increasing number of cis men acting as supporters of the LGBTIQ+ community. Also in youth centres they see an increasing readiness of young people to talk about topics related to gender equality and non-binary gender identities. The representative of the Ključ association points out that various intersectional factors influence young people's openness and willingness to talk about this topic. She highlights different experiences in working with boys in technical vocational secondary schools and boys in grammar schools (gymnasium), where the groups are gender-mixed. In her opinion, the practice of alternative forms of masculinity also depends on the influence of the family and the educational background of the parents.

*Identified needs and practical recommendations for working with young people*
The interviewees believe that it is crucial to start addressing GBV at a systemic level and not only in the context of individual projects. It is also important to encourage cooperation between different organisations and institutions. Representatives of youth centres believe that

prevention programmes should start in primary schools. An approach in which activities are led by people who have personal experience, e.g. of violence, homosexuality, etc., was highlighted as effective.

In working with boys and men it is important to make the plurality of ways to be a man and different meanings of masculinity, visible. It is necessary to question existing gender roles and norms, including the level of everyday life and gender-specific division of labour, such as housework, financial decision-making, etc.

The way of presenting these topics to young people should be provocative, relaxed, conversational and interactive, using various multimedia materials (e.g. film, video, quiz), but above all it should address topics relevant to young people (partnerships, friendships, sexuality etc.). The representatives of the youth centres believe that it is necessary to address the issue of violence in an inclusive and integrative way, according to the principles and methods of youth work.

In the education system, it is important to reach out to head teachers to find ways to implement these topics in the school environment. There is also a need to train pedagogues to raise young people's awareness of issues related to gender and violence. This is particularly important in the light of the promotion of alternative models of masculinity by example, as highlighted by the youth workers. Such topics should be addressed with great sensitivity in the context of education. It is important to be gradual in introducing topics into the conversation, starting with topics such as gender stereotypes and norms, and gradually working up to more complex ones. Youth centre representatives believe that particular attention should be paid to young people with a migrant background, given the prevalence of patriarchal patterns that reinforce and encourage violent forms of masculinity.

## 4. Consultations with young people

Consultations or focus groups with young people were organised in two cities in Slovenia – Celje and Maribor – in cooperation with local youth centres and secondary schools. The first focus group was organised in Celje Youth Centre. Three boys and six girls responded to the invitation of a volunteer from the youth centre. All three boys deviated from the normative ideal of masculinity – two boys are transgender, the third is studying early childhood education, works as a volunteer at the youth centre, and through the conversation exhibited qualities of alternative masculinity such as non-violence, valuing emotions, and the importance of egalitarianism. The age structure of the group was heterogeneous, ranging from 17 to 22 years. The participants attend different secondary schools (media, pre-school education), a gymnasium, one participant attends the Faculty of Education and one participant attends a higher school of economics. The second focus group was organised in Maribor's First Gymnasium, where the psychologist invited boys to participate. 12 students responded, all boys aged 16. With both focus groups we included gender and age heterogeneity of young people. In total, 13 boys aged 16 to 21, two trans boys aged 17 and 18 and 6 girls aged 17 to 22 were included in the consultations. The first focus group was predominantly female and transgender and age diverse, while the second one was male and gender and age homogeneous. The difference in gender and age composition between the two groups allows for a comparison between the attitudes and needs in the area of masculinity and violence of different gender and age groups of young people.

*Table 2: Sample of focus groups with young people.*

| Name | Gender | Age | City |
|------|--------|-----|------|
| Kaja | F | 20 | Celje |
| Brina | F | 22 | Celje |
| Filip | TransM | 17 | Celje |
| Alex | TransM | 18 | Celje |
| Kristjan | M | 21 | Celje |
| Kaja | F | 17 | Celje |
| Brina | F | 17 | Celje |
| Pia | F | 17 | Celje |
| Ana | F | 20 | Celje |
| Žan | M | 16 | Maribor |
| Aljaž | M | 16 | Maribor |
| Leon | M | 16 | Maribor |
| Žiga | M | 16 | Maribor |
| Jakob | M | 16 | Maribor |
| Miha | M | 16 | Maribor |
| Daniel | M | 16 | Maribor |
| Žiga | M | 16 | Maribor |
| Tilen | M | 16 | Maribor |
| Slavko | M | 16 | Maribor |
| Nejc | M | 16 | Maribor |
| Ivan | M | 16 | Maribor |

Both focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes. With the the informed consent of the participants, including a declaration of cooperation and protection of personal data, they were recorded and summarised for analytical purposes. The summary was accompanied by a field diary in which we recorded our impressions of the conversation.

The research focus was on youngsters' views, opinions and standpoints about dominant and alternative models of masculinities and their relations to (non)violence as well as on young people's experiences and needs for support in non-violent identity formation. In focus groups conversations, we followed the *interviewee centred approach* (Frosh et al. 2002, 8) with the interviewer taking up a facilitative role, noticing issues the participants rise and encouraging them to develop and reflect upon these and to provide illustrative narrative account. Therefore, the questions in the two focus groups were not exactly the same. Nevertheless, in both focus groups we directed conversations in exploring ideas of masculinities, reflecting on relations to girls/boys and LGBTIQ+ people, relations to friendship and intimacy, diversity and power relations, GBV, and ways to break the vicious circle of masculinity and violence. The interviews were analysed thematically, according to the predefined themes in the questionnaire, so that the young people's narratives could be summarised, compared and reflected upon.

The dynamics of conversations in the boys' group and the gender heterogeneous group were different. In the boys' group, only half of the participants actively engaged in the discussion. The hierarchy among the boys was evident, with some being marginalised and hardly expressing their opinions. The group dynamic in the boys' group was also polarised. On one side were two boys who were very articulated and assertively expressed traditional views on masculinity, violence and gender roles. They presented gender as biological, often using

arguments of biology, genetics and tradition. On the other hand, three boys openly expressed opposing views, advocating egalitarian and non-macho relationships and profound reflections. In the gender heterogeneous group, all the female participants were actively involved in the discussion, with the exception of one girl who just followed the conversation. The views, with the exception of the LGBTIQ+ topic, were significantly more coherent and less extreme. In the introduction round in the gender heterogeneous group participants introduced themselves by the school they attend, while in the boys' group they highlighted the sport they train.

*Reflecting the ideas of masculinities*
Both groups agreed that the reasons for the popularity of certain boys in their environment are different. Popular boys are those who stand out from the majority in some way. These can be sportsmen (especially football and basketball players), socially engaged and thoughtful boys who have their own opinions, or extroverted boys who are loud and fun. Girls point out that boys sometimes act out their fun at the expense of girls: *'A boy humiliates his girlfriend and his friends laugh at him. Those that are more fun are also more popular.'* Girls also mention that popular guys are *'...those who change women often'*. In the boys' group they stress the importance of physical appearance because, they say, it is important to girls. This points to a relational dynamic between boys and girls, which is expressed by boys' doing masculinity in a way that responds to what they think is important to girls. A frank conversation between boys and girls about their stereotypes of masculinity therefore seems relevant for deconstructing gender stereotypes among young people.

Introverted boys are labelled as unpopular:

> *They keep to themselves more, they are quiet, they are not communicative. ... If someone is loud, even if they say things that are meaningless, they stand up for themselves. But if someone is introverted, if they don't respond to confrontation, if they don't stand up for themselves, it's harder for them to succeed.*

This means that general social norms about performance also affect the doing of masculinity. In the gender heterogeneous group, girls in particular point out the double social norms of performance and assertiveness: *'If a woman is assertive, knows what she wants, is vocal, speaks her mind, she's a bitch. But if a man is like that, he is a real man, he knows what he wants.'*

In the gender heterogeneous group, the main characteristics of a 'real man' are expressed within the framework of the heterosexual partnership and desirable qualities of a man, such as mutual trust, respect for women, fidelity and equality of both partners. Girls also point to the traditionally masculine qualities of *'...being assertive, giving a sense of security'* as important qualities. Non-violence is also highlighted: *'... he is never to hit a woman'*.

In the boys' group, one boy says that his role model is Andrew Tate, a Tik Tok star who represents a distinctive toxic masculinity[10]. He describes him as an ideal, possessing a combination of the best qualities in men:

> *He has to be in the best shape his genetics can make him, he has to take care of himself, I don't agree that physical appearance doesn't matter – it does; he's very intelligent, he's been a chess champion, a 4x world champion in kick boxing.*

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[10] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/aug/06/andrew-tate-violent-misogynistic-world-of-tiktok-new-star

Hegemonic masculinity is also highlighted by other guys by placing a high value on men who have leadership and management skills and self-made men.

There were different views on men's vulnerability in the two groups. A boy from the heterogeneous group, who expressed egalitarian masculinity, highlighted men's vulnerability and his own emotionality:

> *At the beginning it was very difficult for me because I kept the bad feelings inside and that's the worst. At a certain point you can't hold it in anymore... Other people say, stop whining and I get angry because I'm not whining, I'm expressing my feelings.*

One girl said: *'My ex-boyfriend apologised to me because he cried in front of me.'* Another girl thought *'...we girls make boys 'cold'. It's the girls who say, 'let's not make this one cry, let's not do this'.* This shows that young people are aware of the relational gender dynamics. Societal stereotypes of 'real men' also influence how girls evaluate boys. Although peer opinion is very important among boys, they also respond to girls' values in doing masculinity.

Transboy said that he requires himself to act like a 'real man', i.e. to be firm and not show emotions. At the same time, he says: *'Men are very emotional, but people don't recognise that because they believe that anger is not an emotion. Men express emotions every day.'* He was pointing out that expressing some emotions is socially unacceptable and that anger management skills need to be developed. In the boys' group, the view emerged that it is natural for men not to show their vulnerability because it is a sign of weakness:

> *Even an animal in the wild that has one less leg will be more likely to attract predators because it is weak. If you are weak, you are more vulnerable. You must not show vulnerability, if you do, you are even more vulnerable, an easy target.*

The same boy also expressed his dissagreement with encouraging boys to show emotions:

> *Nowadays it is encouraged to cry and be sad. It's the only way to get out of being sad, to just cry and confess. That doesn't attract many women at all, and then you can't even have offspring if you just confess.*

Boys also expressed the view that men often don't dare to show their sadness because of stereotypes that men can do everything: *'In reality, a man can also be very sad. Because he is only a human too.'*

### Differences between women and men
There was a marked polarisation of opinion in the boys' group about the differences between men and women. Some of the boys were in favour of gender equality and were positive about women's efforts to achieve gender equality in all areas of life. Two boys in particular, however, expressed strongly traditional views:

> *The man's job is to take care of the family, to work, to protect, and the woman's job is to take care of the children. For me, the traditional view is the best, I live like that, my father is like that and he doesn't deviate from it.*

Another boy pointed to the supposed biological physical superiority of men, which determines their role in society:

> *It is in men's nature to go to war and to do heavy physical work, it has always been that way. It's biologically the way men are made, they are the bigger, their muscles are bigger.*

Recognising the diversity of men, including in terms of physical constitution, seems to be an important element in combating boys' gender stereotypes about male power. However, one boy uses the argument of male diversity in a way that reinforces gender stereotypes:

> *It depends on personality, some men are more masculine, others have more feminine qualities. Some are more mentally strong, others less so.*

Gender stereotypes of 'natural' femininity also come into play for girls, although only exceptionally: *'A woman has a "drive" for the family, she has a maternal instinct, so it is expected that all women want children.'*

### LGBTIQ+

Attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ community are critical in both groups. Young people feel that LGBTIQ+ has become a fashion trend. Transboy has challenged these views and has argued that gender fluidity is about exploring oneself outside the confines of ascribed gender identities, not a fashion trend. The gender heterogeneous group expressed the view that although they support their LGBTIQ+ colleagues, gender fluidity has *'crossed all boundaries'* as some people change their sexual orientation and identity too often. They also reflect on the homophobia that is constitutive of male identity:

> *Men have a different view of homosexuality. They are disgusted by the subject, they have more prejudices, it's distasteful to them. Most men react this way not out of direct hatred or misunderstanding, but more out of self-protection. In a male group, if anyone suspects anything about you, it's a problem. They don't say it because they hate the person in question, but because they want to separate themselves from that identity, which is stigmatised.*

In the boys' group, even boys who express a preference for gender equality say that while they respect LGBTIQ+ people, they disagree with the promotion of gender fluidity. *'I don't wave the flag that I'm straight, they don't need to wave the flag that they're not straight either'.* Boys who expressed traditional views on gender say:

> *They have more rights than we do. They're like an endangered species that you're not allowed to touch, they're higher than us, you're not allowed to say anything to them, you're immediately treated like an aggressor.*

One boy thinks that LGBTIQ+ is a privileged dimension of inequality compared to racism and violence against women.

Attitudes towards colleagues who have a ***migrant background*** are seen as unproblematic, inclusive and egalitarian in both groups.

### Gender-based violence

In both groups, violence by men against women has been condemned. One boy believes that men's violence against women is an expression of men's powerlessness, but at the same time he expresses approval of GBV among men:

> *Men are less powerful than they used to be, they don't have as much power over other men anymore, so violence gives them a certain power. They show power over a woman who is weaker. It makes them feel better in themselves. They don't feel superior to other men because men don't support women being beaten. It is an expression of weakness. If you are a real man, you will fight with men, not with women.*

One of the boys in the heterogeneous group, who expressed an alternative, non-violent masculinity, points to the gendered power relations between bullies and bystanders in his account of being a victim of peer harassment:

> *Usually there is always someone laughing at the bullies. There are three boys in the company, one is the bully, two encourage him, also because they are submissive. I was bullied when I was a kid. By a peer who had two companions with him. He was always talking, the other two were like appendages, laughing next to him. They were his audience.*

In both groups, young people think that men also experience violence caused by women, but they don't talk about it because they are ashamed.

> *Men try to glorify themselves in stories where they have been humiliated. If they break up with their partner in such cases, they tell others that she cheated on them because it is more socially acceptable.*

Verbal violence, the boys say, is more on the side of women. In the heterogeneous group, girls in particular highlight the role of women in intimate partner violence. They feel that women often think that violence is their fault or that violence is a sign of love. They reflect that women are unable to leave violent environments because of the pressure from the family and friends and because of their children. They point to the socialisation of boys into violence through the media, violent sports and the intergenerational transmission of violence from father to son. The blaming of victim for violence came to the fore in boys' group:

> *Many women themselves choose a more macho man. At first sight you know roughly which person is violent and which is not.*

Another boy thinks that it is the duty of fathers and brothers to protect their daughters or sisters from partner violence, but most men do not do this. This statement also shows that boys do not recognise or reject violence between men as GBV. A classmate disagrees and says that this is a shifting of responsibility for violence onto others. *'It is the one who commits the violent act who is to blame.'* In both groups, there is a lack of understanding of what violence even is. One of the boys asks the explicit question:

> *What exactly is physical violence? What kind of intensity? Is verbal violence also violence? Is it violence if you are attacked and defend yourself?*

*Promoting non-violent masculinity*

On the question of how to encourage and promote non-violent behaviour among boys, the gender dynamics between girls and boys came up once again. One girl pointed out the importance of reducing gender stereotypes of 'real man' among girls:

> *Men need to feel that if they show their inner side, women will not judge them. This should be done in such a way that women see that there is a gap between what they want and what they really support in men. That would also be the basis for men to see that too.*

Suggestions were also made for the inclusion of online influencers in the campaign, and for online activities, especially on social media popular with young people, such as Tik Tok.

Transboy stressed the importance of creating and showcasing positive and alternative examples of masculinity. He gave the example of the American cartoon series Mister Rogers[11]. The boys' group stressed the importance of boys' participation in sport, which allows them to vent their anger and energy in training and matches.

## 5. Conclusion

In Slovenia, the majority of policy and systemic activities are focused on intimate partner and domestic violence, as well as on curative programmes for the protection of victims. A growing awareness can be observed also of GBV online (where research shows that girls and boys experience almost balanced levels of violence, with perpetrators being predominantly boys), in the workplace and sexual violence. Although NGOs are working to systematically integrate prevention programmes into the work with young people in the education system, this is still a matter of voluntary decision by individual schools and various short-term project activities. In the long term, the State systematically funds only one programme that explicitly addresses men, the social construction of masculinity and gender inequalities in relation to GBV. The programme is aimed at social skills training for adult men (only exceptionally for boys aged 15+ and women) who are perpetrators of domestic violence against women and children.

In the interviews, youth workers draw attention to the diversity of violence stemming from traditional concepts of masculinity. In Celje, the problem of underage gangs perpetrating violence against young people has been identified. Dominant gang members come from traditional, patriarchal families and young boys perform norms of traditional masculinity through their participation in gang. In Maribor, violence against LGBTIQ+ people and violence perpetrated by football supporters group, in which younger boys also participate, is particularly visible. Youth workers believe that special attention should be paid to young people with a migrant background due to the prevalence of patriarchal patterns that promote violent forms of masculinity. In the area of sexuality, professionals note that boys are burdened by stereotypes, that they must always be ready for sex and that they must take the initiative in sexuality. In curative work with perpetrators of violence, their preoccupation with gender stereotypes and the performance of masculinity through a radical difference from femininity comes to the fore. The experts point out that the theme of masculinity and gender

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[11] Watch - Mister Rogers' Neighborhood

norms is linked to 'gender ideology', which is why prevention programmes often encounter resistance from parents.

A review of existing violence prevention programmes and projects shows that GBV is mainly seen as violence by men against women. Boys, men and masculinities are explicitly addressed in programmes and projects, but mainly in the context of gender binarism, as an internally homogeneous group and as perpetrators. Gender pluralism and related expressions of violence such as homophobia and transphobia are marginal topic in prevention programmes. The multiple masculinities and the gender dynamics between hegemonic, complicit, marginal and subordinate men within the category of masculinity is not addressed in existing programmes. Therefore, men's violence against other men (e.g. homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, harassment of peers who show signs of vulnerability or difference) is not recognised as inherent to hegemonic masculinity and as a mechanism for enforcing hierarchies among men. Therefore, it is also not seen as GBV. Violence against men in the context of domestic violence is recognised as a relevant topic, but it is estimated that its incidence is low. Pedagogical approach in the existing prevention programmes is a participatory guided discussion in gender-inclusive or boys-only and men-only groups. The peer-to-peer approach is the exception rather than the rule. Training for non-violent, egalitarian and positive masculinities is pursued through self-reflection, teaching the principles of non-violent communication, educating boys and men to actively participate in violence prevention and consensual sexuality, and promoting mindfulness and empathy.

In the consultations with young people, the polarised attitudes towards masculinity, violence and gender equality among boys emerged. Some boys have strongly traditional views on masculinity and violence. They argue that boys need to be tough, assertive, show invulnerability and even fight each other if necessary. They disapprove of violence against women as the supposedly weaker sex in need of their protection. On the other hand, there are egalitarian boys who advocate gender equality and respect for diversity between people, expressing their vulnerability and resolving conflicts through constructive disscusion. Many boys are somewhere in between and do not express their views. It is important that the training addresses these group dynamics and diversities.

Consultations with young people showed that they have a poor understanding of what GBV is. They identify mainly physical violence. For some boys, there is an apparent shifting of blame for violence onto the victim or onto those around them. They do not recognise peer violence between boys as GBV. Boys who express greater self-reflection point to gendered power relations between bullies and bystanders who encourage bullies by their approval and inaction against violence. They also highlight the inherent homophobia of masculinity. More insight into the social construction of gender identity could also contribute to reducing tensions towards LGBTIQ+ people, which young people experience mainly as an intrusive fashion trend.

For some boys, expressing their vulnerability, sadness and similar feelings is a sign of weakness. Young people point out that they also experience emotions, such as anger, the expression of which is socially unacceptable and that they need skills to manage and communicate such emotions. The examples of men who show their vulnerability but do not lose their power as a result, and the cultivation and socialisation of unpleasant emotions, therefore seem to be an important topic for violence preventive work with boys.

The body is also an important topic with boys, especially its size, strength and appearance. In the group dynamics within the boys' group, it was evident that the boys, who embodied the social norms of how a male body should look like, dominated. It is important to cultivate heterogeneity within the category of masculinity not only according to the categories of class, race, sexual orientation, but also according to differences in physical constitution and to make examples of 'cool' men with non-standard bodies visible.

Young people anticipate relational gender dynamics. Although peer opinion is very important among boys, in their doing masculinity they also respond to girls' opinions and stereotypes of what a 'real man' is. Although a gender homogeneous group has its advantages, the discussion in gender-mixed groups about stereotypes of masculinity also seems to be very important for deconstructing gender stereotypes among young people.

Some boys have role models in online toxic influencers. Online sources are also an inspiration for some egalitarian boys. In both cases, online representations of masculinity can be a rich source of material that represents the diversity of masculinity and engages young people in a discussion about the norms and values of masculinity. Interviews with professionals and youth workers also showed that online resources, films, videos, images, provoke lively discussion and (self)reflection. Concrete practical and real-life examples, e.g. through the quizz method, have also proved to be very successful. Young people remain disinterested in Power Point presentations and role games.

In the consultations with young people, sport, the internet, influencers, positive role models and the reduction of gender stereotypes of masculinity in girls proved to be important elements of a public campaign to disseminate non-violent role models and values of masculinity.

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