

Boys and Gender (In)Equality

A Toolkit for Educational
Work with Youth



Gdańsk 2026

 NATIONAL SCIENCE CENTRE
POLAND



Boys and Gender (In)Equality.

A Toolkit for Educational Work with Youth

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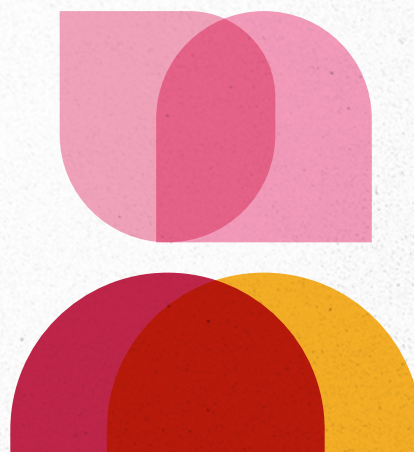
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INTRODUCTION



Gender equality matters.

Equality is essential for maintaining high well-being, good overall health, and a sense of national security. When schools, workplaces, and other organizations promote equality, individuals tend to feel more comfortable learning and performing tasks. This leads to higher engagement and a greater willingness to cooperate with others. If we want to be respected and valued as unique individuals who develop our skills, aspirations, and interests, gender equality matters.

Educational programs, social campaigns, and activities organized by national and international organizations have long aimed to promote equal opportunities and improve the status of girls and women worldwide. This effort is both justified and necessary. International literature across the fields of education, health, psychology, economics, and political participation highlights numerous gender-based inequalities.¹⁻³ So, why should we draw attention to boys and men? Including their perspectives and engaging them in equality efforts is essential to recognizing equality as a mutual benefit for all. To make real progress, it is essential to recognize that the call for equality benefits all individuals, regardless of gender. **Sons, friends, brothers, fathers, partners, husbands, students, workers, retirees, athletes, experts, citizens, entrepreneurs, activists, and politicians all play a role in co-creating a society that is not based on domination and violence but on justice and dialogue that they themselves would like to experience.**

The picture of social change related to gender equality should not be overly simplified or seen as strictly black-and-white. We need to examine and honestly discuss the opportunities and challenges faced by people with different gender identities.



I respect the fight for gender equality, but it doesn't really concern me much. Everyone should be able to do what they like, and gender shouldn't stand in the way.

boy, 16 years old*

* Selected comments from the quantitative study conducted as part of the EQUAMAN – MASCULINITY NAVIGATOR research project.

We hope this publication broadens perspectives on gender equality, presents arguments, and provides a basis for discussion of social change that benefits everyone.

We created this toolkit as a team of researchers and educators working in the field of equality and social justice – and, more broadly, as people committed to building a society in which we can feel safe, make our own choices, and care for one another – regardless of our gender, age, or political views.

This publication is intended for individuals already engaged in promoting equality and social justice, as well as for newcomers seeking ideas for incorporating these topics into their educational practices. We also hope to inspire those who wish to use this knowledge to include diverse gender perspectives and encourage equality-focused dialogue in classrooms, teams, sports groups, community centers, libraries, and other organizations.

How to use this toolkit

The first two parts of this publication serve as a navigator through important themes and concepts related to gender equality. We present arguments for involving boys in gender equality initiatives, clarify definitions, and provide different perspectives on understanding masculinity. Additionally, we highlight potential pitfalls and challenges that may arise along the educational journey. In the third part, we offer several tips to help you embark on your personal journey in equality education or encourage you to reflect on and reevaluate your existing approaches.

In the fourth section, we present a range of starting points and tools to support dialogue on gender equality. Rather than providing ready-made paths, such as lesson plans, we offer ideas for educational activities.

One important clarification can help in reading this educational guide. We discuss the stereotypes, roles, and norms associated with masculinity, with a specific focus on **gender stereotypes**. These stereotypes are deeply rooted, simplified beliefs about which traits, behaviors, or roles are deemed “appropriate” for women and men. They do not arise from genuine differences between individuals but rather from culture, tradition, and social transmission.

Stereotypes reflect **norms** that set **expectations** for women and men, including specific traits and roles. For example, women are often expected to be caring and gentle (traits) and to take care of the home and children (roles).

In contrast, men are typically expected to be assertive and decisive (traits) and to be good leaders (roles). Additionally, societal norms discourage women and men from possessing certain traits or fulfilling specific roles. For instance, women may be discouraged from being dominant or from prioritizing their careers over having children. In contrast, men may be discouraged from showing vulnerability or from choosing child-rearing responsibilities over their careers.



We present arguments for involving boys in gender equality initiatives, clarify definitions, and provide different perspectives on understanding masculinity.



PART 1.

The Argument Base

Six Reasons Why It Is Worth Working with Boys for Gender Equality

- 1** Gender stereotypes affect not only girls and women but also boys and men, often causing harm to both. This topic is explored further on page 15. Efforts to achieve gender equality show that individuals do not need to be constrained by stereotypes when pursuing important life goals, such as passions, starting a family, or building a professional career.⁴
- 2** Introducing discussions about stereotypes of masculinity to boys at an early age can have positive effects on both the quality and length of their lives. Over time, these efforts can enhance their **comfort and success in assuming various social roles**, including being friends, students, fathers, partners, community leaders, and employees.
- 3** The challenge of social polarization and disinformation should be addressed at different ages and with diverse means.⁵ Simplifying the concept of gender equality by framing it as a “gender war,” portraying it as “excessive demands of feminists,” or suggesting that it threatens the current social order can deepen divisions and create social discord. Such generalizations and misconstruals provide fertile ground for populist slogans, offensive comments, and hostile oversimplifications regarding social issues or specific groups.^{6,7}

To live in a safe society and community with other countries, we need to maintain trust and curiosity about one another. This can be supported, among other things, by modeling and teaching how to communicate with someone with different views, to accept other perspectives, to draw value from disagreements, to resolve conflicts, and to engage in discussions without aggression.

4

It is essential for boys to play a role in **eliminating and preventing gender-based violence**.⁸ It is crucial to teach and demonstrate that:

- a. Gender-based violence stems from cultural and social norms that create and maintain imbalances between genders, with the majority of perpetrators being men.
- b. Boys and men also face various types of violence, including physical, sexual, or relational abuse. Social norms related to masculinity, along with the fear of stigma, make it harder to report harmful behaviors and to give proper support to boys and men.
- c. Violence does not have to be an inherent characteristic of masculinity or of being a man. Most men cultivate relationships without resorting to violence and opt for non-harmful ways to resolve conflicts. Current research and critical studies show that attributing men's aggression and violent behavior only to evolutionary or biological factors – such as testosterone levels or high sex drive – is inaccurate.⁹
- d. We need more allies who recognize and demonstrate appropriate responses to violence.

5

Reducing gender inequality can benefit everyone. **Gender equality, along with a less stereotypical view of women and men, is linked to numerous positive outcomes** for both individuals and societies, such as longer and healthier lives, better well-being, increased economic productivity, improved safety, fewer armed conflicts, and higher scores on country-level peace indicators.¹⁰

6

Without the involvement of boys and men in pro-equality efforts, we will not achieve gender equality. We need to promote and strengthen their roles as partners, allies, decision-makers, researchers, and activists who expose and oppose gender-based bias and discrimination.¹¹ They can also intervene in spaces where girls and women are not present but where there is a tacit acceptance of conversations and jokes that sexualize and objectify women and reinforce male dominance (so-called “locker-room talk”).



Reducing
gender
inequality
can benefit
everyone.

Six Reasons Why Working with Boys for Gender Equality Can Be Challenging

- 1** The belief that gender equality is a **zero-sum game** suggests that when women gain more rights and opportunities, men inevitably lose out.¹² Zero-sum reasoning is a significant barrier to advancing equality for boys and men. If boys and men believe these efforts threaten their own status, their engagement will be limited. Hence, gender equality educators should focus on highlighting the benefits of equality for all and illustrating how everyone suffers from inequality.
- 2** **The power of gender stereotypes.** The prevalence and persistence of gender stereotypes are so strong that challenging and attempting to dismantle them may significantly disrupt the social system in which we live. Boys may feel fear, hostility, reluctance, or anger toward this topic, while you might feel overwhelmed by how complex, vast, and ever-present the issue is.
- 3** **Limited scope of influence and uncertainty about long-term outcomes.** The students, mentees, or clients you work with are part of families, groups, and communities. If your educational efforts help them move beyond stereotypical thinking about themselves and their masculine roles, their environment may not fully understand the changes they experience and might judge equality-oriented behaviors as “unmanly.” As a result, boys may face what is known as a **backlash effect** – a form of social punishment for behavior that defies stereotypes of masculinity.^{13,14} This backlash may manifest in the form of derogatory labels, mocking remarks, social exclusion, or even acts of violence aimed at disciplining individuals perceived as violating gender norms.
- 4** **The power of patriarchy** – the belief that men's privileged status and dominant roles in politics, the economy, and social relationships constitute the proper and natural social order. Internalized patriarchy, along with a reluctance to share or relinquish privileges, may be evident in the attitudes and behaviors of the boys you work with. Acting in line with the stereotype of a “strong and dominant man” may, for example, reinforce their status within a local group or earn approval from their family. “Guardians of the patriarchy” may also include other people (including women, which may not be obvious to many) whom you encounter in your work and who may discipline boys for behaviors considered stereotypically unmanly or ungentelemanly.
- 5** **“I’m a good guy, so this doesn’t concern me”** is linked to the idea that gender equality is only an issue for girls and women, and that violence is committed only by certain boys and men. This perspective simplifies and



Boys may feel fear, hostility, reluctance, or anger toward the topic of gender stereotypes.

obscures the understanding of inequality as a systemic issue, making it more difficult to engage in meaningful discussions about complex social problems. Responses like “this doesn’t concern me” and “not all men” (the #NotAllMen hashtag, in which individuals emphasize that they are personally not responsible) shift the focus to a personal level and prevent taking responsibility for shaping one’s family, peer group, or school environment. A broader view of social discrimination and the acceptance of violence goes beyond highlighting statistical differences, such as the fact that men are more often the perpetrators of violence than women. It also reveals environmental and contextual factors, such as the tolerance of harmful behaviors and the propagation of seemingly “inoffensive” stereotypes through sayings, jokes, and everyday actions.

6

“Inequality is no longer present.”

“Now, boys and men are being discriminated against.”

Ongoing social changes, particularly the growing empowerment of women, are shaping new perspectives on gender equality. On the one hand, some men and women believe that gender equality has already been achieved, arguing that both sexes have equal opportunities for a good and comfortable life, so they feel there is nothing left to improve or change. On the other hand, some men and women argue that the “push for gender equality” has progressed to the point that men now face discrimination and new expectations, often without clear guidance.¹⁵ This narrative can reinforce resistance to collective efforts to reduce inequality, encourage the search for those to blame (e.g., feminists and pro-women organizations), increase divisions between groups, and portray men primarily as victims of social change.^{16,17} For example, one may claim that men face discrimination in family courts because they are granted custody of children much less frequently than women. However, this argument also fails to consider that men apply for custody far less often than women do.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that conversations about inequality and discrimination, particularly regarding gender-based violence, might lead boys to realize they have sometimes behaved inappropriately or hurtfully, or have tolerated such behavior in others. This realization can trigger resistance, often leading to a defensive shift in which they may claim, “I am not the perpetrator of harm; I am its victim.” They may also use out-of-context arguments or selective reasoning to support this stance.

Gender Equality and Gender Equity¹⁸



Why is the topic of equality discussed so frequently?
In my opinion, this is a case of forcing a problem.

boy, 17 years old*

Gender equality means that every person – regardless of gender – should have the same right to access education, choose a profession, develop a career, receive healthcare, choose romantic relationships, pursue their passions, etc.

Equality ≠ being the same

Equality = equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities

Given that gender inequality is a complex issue rooted in history and cultural norms, it is crucial to recognize that equal access does not imply an equal starting point.

Gender equity ensures fair treatment based on gender and equal opportunities, while taking into account the diverse needs, opportunities, and challenges arising from stereotypes, cultural transmission, and a history of inequality.

Examples

Equality may manifest as allowing all students to choose any subject and educational activities they like, while equity would involve recognizing how gender stereotypes may discourage boys from HEED subjects (health care, early education, and domestic work) and girls from STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and taking additional effort to eliminate these gender-related enrollment differences.

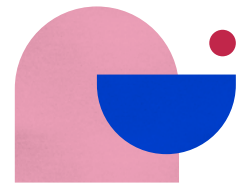
Everyone, regardless of gender, should have equal opportunities to maintain their hygiene and health, including access to restrooms in public and commercial spaces. To ensure fairness, the number of restrooms for men and women must be carefully considered. Men and women have biological differences in their urinary and reproductive systems, which influence how often they need to use the restroom. Women may menstruate or be pregnant, and due to the internal structure of their reproductive organs, they generally have less bladder capacity than men. In this context, gender equity could mean planning restroom spaces to meet the needs of all users. Or it could mean rethinking why restrooms are gendered in the first place and discussing with the public the advantages and possible risks of introducing gender-neutral restrooms.

* Selected comments from the quantitative study conducted as part of the EQUAMAN – MASCULINITY NAVIGATOR research project.

Six Ways to Deal With Challenges

- 1 Approach your work with kindness and a rational distance.** Accept that in education and social work, there will be moments that vary widely – some better, some worse. Moreover, immediate results are not always apparent, and the process of shaping attitudes and changing behaviors often reaches its turning points beyond what you can see and beyond your direct activities.
- 2 Use reliable data and a variety of materials.** Social campaigns, films, TV series, podcasts, school readings, and so-called “stereotypically female” and “male” press can be useful resources for critically analyzing stereotypes and inequalities. You can also use the list of references and inspirations provided at the end of this publication.
- 3 Combat feelings of isolation.** Connect with others who share your mindset, especially men. Explore men's groups, communities that advocate for nonviolent communication, and organizations that promote equality education. This will help you build your skills and connect with others involved in similar initiatives. Seek support from staff members at your organization or institution and take advantage of supervision opportunities.
- 4 Start by establishing a group agreement** at the beginning of a class, course, or extended collaboration. The rules should address organizational procedures, safety protocols, and communication standards. Typical elements of this agreement include speaking from personal experience, listening respectfully to others, referring to ideas rather than individuals, and allowing participation based on each person's abilities. Foster a sense of shared responsibility – ensure everyone agrees to uphold the agreed-upon rules.
- 5 Define the zone of proximal development*** of the people you work with – that is, what is neither easy nor obvious to them, yet not too complex or difficult at their current stage of learning.¹⁹ When challenging stereotypes, it is important to recognize the starting point of your educational work and to set realistic goals.

* The zone of proximal development is a concept introduced by Lev Vygotsky. It refers to the range of tasks that a child cannot perform independently but can accomplish with the help of a more experienced person, such as an adult or a peer.



Provide boys with space to express their opinions, doubts, and disagreements.

6

Provide boys with **space to express their opinions, doubts, and disagreements**. Try to listen rather than respond immediately, even if you don't agree. Let them finish speaking, and approach their statements with curiosity rather than a desire to argue. Aim to understand where their views come from – what beliefs, experiences, and life context shape them.

If you feel like making a quick and sharp comeback, ask a question or encourage them to elaborate (e.g., “What do you mean by...?” or “Can you tell me more about why you think that?”). Only after listening should you share your perspective. Remember, you can achieve more through dialogue than by trying to win an argument.

You don't have to work only with boys. Research shows that gender-diverse groups also offer benefits – they can create a more engaging and empathetic space where people of different gender identities can hear one another.^{20,21}

How do boys and girls view gender roles?

How does the perception of gender norms relate to the mental well-being of teenagers?

What encourages boys to support gender equality?

The answers to these questions can be found in the report.



Growing Up in a World of Gender Norms and (In)Equality.

Report from the EQUAMAN Masculinity Navigator Project





PART 2.

Who Is a Real Man?

W

ho am I? This fundamental question takes on different meanings at various stages of life, particularly during adolescence. This period is characterized by increased curiosity and self-doubt. As young people experience changes in their bodies, minds, and social relationships, they actively explore their identity and seek to understand their place in the world.

Adolescence serves as a crucial phase for uncovering personal traits, strengths, passions, and dislikes. Many individuals consider gender an important aspect of their identity exploration. For some, the transition from saying “I am a boy” or “I am a girl” to expressing themselves with phrases like “I am becoming a man,” “I am becoming a woman,” or “I am an adult seeking my own identity” reflects their journey in developing their gender identity. For others, the boundaries between femininity and masculinity are less clearly defined, prompting them to forge their own paths and identities beyond traditional gender categories.

The process of forming gender identity can involve doubts about what it truly means to be a “man” or a “woman.” Culture often provides insights through accessible, extensive, and sometimes stereotypical knowledge of appearance, personality traits, and expected roles for women and men – commonly referred to as norms of femininity and masculinity, along with gender stereotypes. However, closer cultural and historical analysis reveals that neither femininity nor masculinity is a single, fixed concept. Norms around masculinity – often seen as “self-evident” or “natural” – can be misleading. For instance, wearing heeled shoes was common among men because it helped them keep their feet in the stirrups while riding, and was a mark of the upper-class fashion in the 17th and 18th centuries. Moreover, the promotion of pink as a masculine color remained relevant in the mid-20th century.

Researchers today emphasize that traditional norms of masculinity are more rigid and less adaptable than those of femininity.²² This shows that societal expectations for men and boys are often more restrictive than those for



Traditional norms of masculinity are more rigid and less adaptable than those of femininity.

women. What do we know about these expectations? For example, these expectations are largely universal. Men are often seen as capable, resourceful, and decisive, and are typically perceived as dominant across different countries. They are also expected to avoid traits commonly associated with women – in other words, a man or boy is acceptable as long as he does not behave “like a woman.”²³ As a result, masculinity is frequently perceived in opposition to femininity. In addition, masculinity is associated with a continuous need to validate one’s masculinity, strength, and toughness. Being a man is not considered an innate characteristic that, once attained, remains constant.²⁴ Unfortunately, the pressure to conform to traditional ideals of masculinity can have serious consequences for men themselves. In societies where masculine norms are particularly rigid and strongly enforced, men tend to have shorter life expectancies, fewer opportunities to lead safe and healthy lives, and a greater risk of becoming victims of violence, including homicide. These expectations often encourage men to demonstrate their masculinity through risk-taking and self-endangering behaviors, while discouraging them from seeking support for physical or mental health problems. As a result, adherence to restrictive masculine norms can undermine men’s well-being, health, and overall quality of life.

But what happens when men and boys choose not to conform to traditional gender stereotypes? What if they aspire to be modest, relationship-oriented rather than achievement-driven, gentle, caring, and actively involved in caregiving – perhaps by taking parental leave or prioritizing family life? What if they construct their identities in ways that are not anchored in conventional notions of “true masculinity”? Some may face negative social judgments, being seen as less competent, less likable, or less deserving of respect.²⁵ Without support in exploring questions like “Who am I beyond these stereotype-driven expectations?” boys and men might feel they have no other options. The feeling of having no choice is connected to the pressure always to understand what “real masculinity” entails and to handle crises and uncertainties effectively and decisively. This is why it’s important to create environments where boys and men are not constrained by stereotypical roles in the formation of their identities. They need time and space to develop their sense of self, understand their needs and preferences, and challenge social expectations. They have the right to define themselves beyond gender and stereotypes, to question their beliefs, and to choose their own path.



Without support in exploring questions like “Who am I beyond these stereotype-driven expectations?” boys and men might feel they have no other options.

Dominant social norms, i.e., standards and expectations related to masculinity	Possible adverse consequences of adhering to dominant norms of masculinity or conflict resulting from failing to meet these expectations
A man should be: composed, self-sufficient, emotionally reserved, independent, success-oriented, agentic, responsible, competitive, strong, daring, aggressive when threatened, avoiding feminine traits, dominant, active, and ready for sexual conquest.	• Difficulty in asking for help and accepting support. • A barrier to accessing psychological support and reaching out to other mental health professionals. • Ignoring one's health, neglecting preventive care, and seeking help from mental and physical health professionals only in times of crisis. • Engaging in aggressive behavior, using various forms of violence, and displaying sexist behavior. Justifying such actions as a convention or masculine style, rather than recognizing them as a broader social issue. • Difficulty in recognizing and naming one's emotions and feelings, especially those considered "unmanly," such as sadness, anxiety, fear, felicity, uncertainty, disappointment, or loneliness. • Struggling to sense and interpret one's own body, viewing it like a machine or a tool for action, rather than an integral part of oneself. • Shorter life expectancy compared to women. • Attempting and committing suicide using methods that minimize the chances of rescue. • Experiencing isolation and a sense of loneliness. References: 26-28.

Gender Essence, Differences, and Similarities



Gender equality is unrealistic to achieve because we are fundamentally different, and that's not a bad thing. Each of us should focus on what we do best, not on what we'd like to do.

boy, 17 years old*

There are biological differences between men and women. However, the abilities and psychological traits commonly associated with each gender – such as the tendency for women to be communal and nurturing, and for men to be agentic and leadership-oriented – are not predominantly biological. Instead, these traits are heavily influenced by social expectations.

“Expressions like ‘men are from Mars, women are from Venus’ reflect essentialist thinking: the belief that all members of a category share fundamental or ‘essential’ qualities that make them what they are.”²⁹

Research in social psychology indicates that essentialism can lead to unfair generalizations about social groups and reinforce stereotypical beliefs and behaviors toward others (e.g., sexism, justification of gender inequalities, and support for traditional gender roles).²⁹

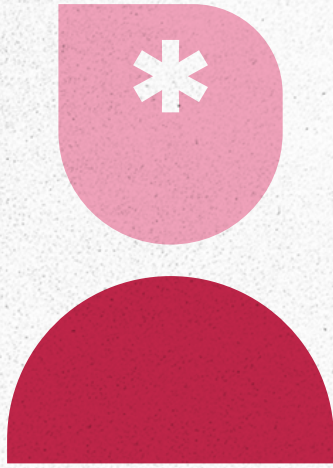
Numerous studies have examined gender differences in skills and social behaviors, including communication, decision-making, and emotional expression. Most research indicates that the statistical differences between women and men are small.^{4,30}

What does this mean? Women and men are more alike than commonly believed. Greater differences in psychosocial functioning can be observed between two women from different families than between the average man and woman.

Can beliefs about gender essentialism be changed?

Our research team at the Institute of Psychology, University of Gdańsk, is investigating effective methods to address gender essentialism. We have achieved promising results from conducting popular-science lectures for young people. In these lectures, we provided clear, evidence-based information about real sex and gender differences, compared with gender stereotypes, and how different gender expectations affect the quality of life for both women and men.

* Selected comments from the quantitative study conducted as part of the EQUAMAN – MASCULINITY NAVIGATOR research project.



PART 3.

Where to Begin When Working with Boys? Knowledge, Skills, and Awareness

1

Before you begin working with boys, **reflect on the values that guide you. What meaning do you find in this work?** Before setting specific educational goals, it is worth taking time to reflect on this question. In difficult moments – whether working with a group or addressing interpersonal tensions – it can serve as a compass, helping you remain focused on what you consider most important. For example, if openness is one of your core values, you may prioritize creating opportunities for dialogue and understanding across differences. If responsibility guides your work – understood as part of civic competence – you may place greater emphasis on engaging boys in activism and fostering prosocial attitudes.

2

Begin by educating yourself about equality. Take part in anti-discrimination training, read feminist literature, and observe your own or others' experience of inequality in daily life. Verify the materials you already use and the gender stereotypes and (unintentional) gender messages they imply. Reflect on the privileges you hold, which may be linked to your cultural background, education level, profession, socioeconomic status, gender, or skin color. Think about how you can use these privileges as opportunities to help build equality – this could involve giving someone space to speak or amplifying someone else's voice.

3

Reflect on your childhood and teenage years. Consider your school experiences, how your relationships with others developed, and the challenges you faced. Think about how your understanding of sex and your gender identity evolved, as well as your interactions with people of different genders. We often carry our personal experiences into our work, along with the beliefs and concerns they evoke, especially those that haven't been fully processed or reflected on from an adult perspective.



Demonstrate that you can build relationships without relying on stereotypes or prejudices.

4

Maintain consistency in your educational practice. Both the content and the way you communicate matter. Young people are more focused on how you act and how you treat them than on what you declare. Embrace diversity in your daily work. When interacting with boys and girls, avoid reinforcing stereotypes, even those that may seem empowering, such as claiming that men are the “stronger sex” or that they “take something like a man.”

5

Demonstrate that you can build relationships without relying on stereotypes or prejudices. Your interactions with other adults serve as a model for positive behavior for young people. Show cooperation with people of all genders, including your own. This can involve decision-making, dividing or sharing tasks, and resolving conflicts without aggression.

6

Appreciate and reinforce behaviors in children and young people that don't fit into stereotypical scenarios. Challenging stereotypes in a group can be a courageous act that may carry the risk of exclusion or social pressure. When providing feedback, clearly specify what you want to acknowledge: interest, passion, behavior, or creativity. Focus on specific outcomes, engagement level, skills demonstrated, or progress made. Avoid relying solely on labels, such as “you’re doing well in such a masculine sport” or “you’re doing great for a boy.”

Intersectionality: the multi-layered nature of identity³¹

Biological sex and socio-cultural gender intersect with other dimensions of identity and social roles that define a person and may be important to them.

Examples of identity dimensions include: national background, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, religion, age, and gender.

Examples of social roles include: being a parent, sibling, child, partner, friend, student, employee, leader, or citizen.

An intersectional approach to understanding human identity helps recognize the privileges some individuals have and the potential areas where others may face discrimination and exclusion – precisely because of the overlapping aspects of their identities.

Different possibilities, experiences, needs, and senses of masculinity may be present in: (a) a boy who uses a wheelchair and is raised in foster care, (b) a teenager who was not born in Poland but attends a Polish school, (c) a neuroatypical boy from a wealthy family living in a large city.

Intersectionality also helps us notice people's diversity, complexity, and potential – shaped by who they are and who they want to become. In educational work, it encourages us to see individuals not only from the perspective of gender (e.g., “he is a boy”), but also through other aspects of identity that influence their attitudes and decisions (e.g., “he is an older brother, a Catholic, a scout, a student”)



Reflect
on the privileges
you hold, which
may be linked
to your cultural
background,
education level,
profession,
socioeconomic
status, gender,
or skin color.



PART 4.

How to Talk about Stereotypes and Gender Equality?

Exercises

We propose three exercises that we frequently use in our workshops and training sessions. We also scientifically evaluate their effectiveness. These methods are rooted in the principles of equality and diversity. They demonstrate how to respect one's own and others' opinions, and how discussions can encourage openness to different perspectives and the rethinking of one's own beliefs.

A SCALE

This exercise aims to:

- introduce a new topic for a class,
- assess the knowledge, attitudes, or mood of different people in the group,
- present and share different opinions and experiences within the group,
- develop the ability to justify one's opinion,
- strengthen diversity within the group.

Instructions

- Lay out a long piece of tape or a rope on the floor. It should be long enough for all participants to stand on it. This rope represents a scale for mood, opinion, or the intensity of a given trait in the group. Designate which end is the beginning and which is the end of the scale.
- Choose and explain the scale, for example: from 0 to 100%, from 0 to 10, not at all – very much, strongly agree – strongly disagree, or definitely yes – definitely no.

- State a question or statement for the participants to respond to. Participants will then position themselves along the line according to their opinion or feelings.
- Approach different people and ask why they chose that position.
- Continue the exercise by presenting further statements.

Suggested statements and questions

Exchange of opinions

- Girls should be more concerned about their appearance than boys.
- Men should be strong and independent.
- If a man refuses sex with a woman, it suggests there is something wrong with him.
- Gender equality in ... (*select a country*) has already been achieved, so we should no longer focus on it.
- Gender equality programs primarily benefit women.

Exploring differences and similarities

- On a scale from 0 to 10, please rate how much you like the following activities: cooking, learning foreign languages, going to school, traveling, running, sleeping, cleaning, public speaking, and teaching others.
- On a scale from 0 to 10, please rate how stressful you find the following situations: going to school, public speaking, asking for help, being in a new place, studying (e.g., math), making decisions about your future, final exams, meeting new people, the political situation in your country.

Assessing knowledge and interest

- On a scale, indicate how well you know your rights and responsibilities at school.
- Indicate how important the topic of gender equality is to you.
- Indicate how you rate your knowledge about gender-based discrimination.
- Indicate how interested you are in politics, sports, media, a healthy lifestyle, etc.
- Do you believe that the topic of gender equality concerns you personally?

In this exercise, it is important to reflect not only on our thoughts and opinions, but also on the reasons behind them. You can conclude the exercise by considering the following questions:

- What was it like for you to place yourself on the scale?
Was it easy or difficult?
- Did you learn something new about yourself?
Did you learn something new about others?
- Did anything surprise you?

FOUR WALLS

This exercise aims to:

- develop discussion skills,
- practice active listening and asking questions,
- stimulate discussion and group engagement.

Instructions

- Designate four walls of the room, each representing a distinct statement. You can use two variants:
 - a. *agree, disagree, maybe, I don't know;*
 - b. *yes, no, maybe, I don't know.*
- Participants should stand freely in the middle of the room. Read and display a statement (on paper or a screen).
- Each person moves to the wall that reflects their opinion on the statement. After choosing a position, participants have a moment to discuss it within their group, sharing arguments and explaining why they chose it.
- Then invite participants to an open, public discussion, where they share their opinions while standing by their chosen walls (positions). If another person's argument persuades someone, they may change their mind and move to a different position. This is a valuable opportunity to ask about the motivation behind the change. It may help to understand different thought processes and reinforces the idea that changing one's opinion can be a strength, not a sign of weak conviction.
- Continue the exercise with additional statements.

Note: this exercise is often called "Four Corners" if you want to search for additional sources. It uses the room's corners rather than the walls. Here, we propose an alternative version that avoids using corners, which can be associated with spaces of escape, defense ("cornering someone"), resistance, punishment, or exclusion.

Suggested statements

- A “war of the sexes” is inevitable.
- Gender equality benefits only girls and women.
- Men gain nothing from gender equality.
- Everyone is the master of their own fate.
- Masculinity is currently in crisis.
- Women are the “weaker gender,” so they require protection and care from strong men.
- Gender parity should apply to all positions, not just leadership roles.

How to run the discussion? Tips for the facilitator

- Remain neutral about the statements presented.
- Support participants in expressing their own arguments, but avoid one-on-one debates.
- Participants should not attack or ridicule others’ opinions; instead, they should express their own views.
- Ensure everyone has an opportunity to speak and participate in the discussion.
- The proposed statements are intentionally somewhat controversial and may sound categorical, often using words like “everyone,” “always,” or “all.” Participants may interpret and define concepts such as fairness, equality, or discrimination differently. Stay calm, patient, and curious. You can ask for clarification, for example:
What do you mean when you say...? How do you understand this?
What are your experiences related to this?

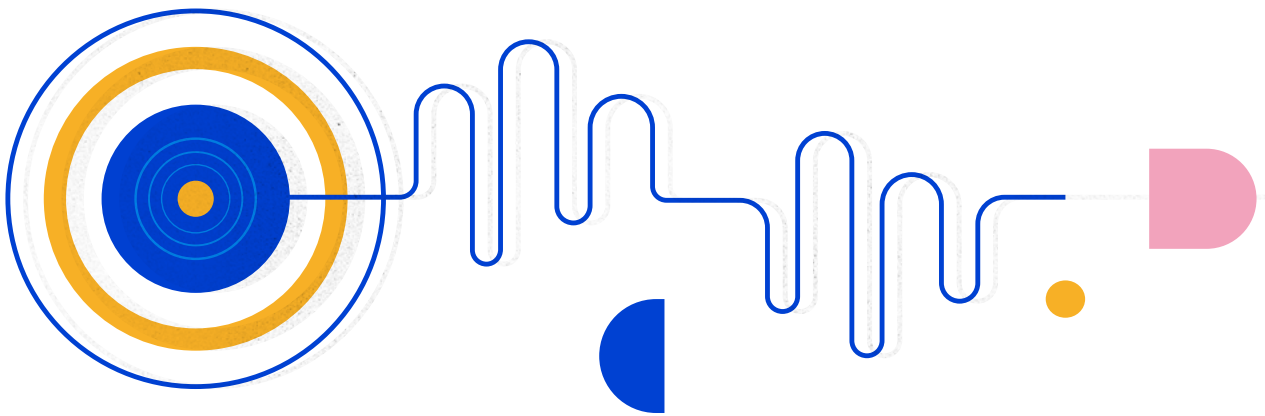
COOKIE-PERSON**This exercise aims to:**

- evaluate the extent of stereotypical thinking among participants, their level of self-confidence, their optimistic or pessimistic self-view, the sources of self-perception, and their susceptibility to others’ opinions;
- highlight how external opinions, social norms, and stereotypes are internalized by young people and their reactions (e.g., submission, rebellion, shame, anxiety, depression, acceptance);
- demonstrate the complexity of gender-related social expectations, including their contradictions and whether they are constructive or destructive.

Instructions

- Ask each person to draw a cookie-person figure (you can refer to a gingerbread man from the movie Shrek). Leave space inside the figure for writing, as well as space around it. You can provide an example by drawing on paper or on the board. This task can also serve as an icebreaker.
- After everyone has drawn their “cookie person,” ask them to write words or phrases inside the figure that capture how they think about themselves. Encourage them to include a range of self-descriptions, such as positive attributes, self-critical thoughts, and neutral observations. When the first part is complete, move on to the second round. Ask participants to write around the figure the kinds of phrases and attributions they hear about themselves as boys (or, in a mixed gender group, about their gender) from others – for example, from parents, teachers, influencers, or the media. These may include opinions they hear about themselves, about boys in their class, or about their generation as a whole.
- Invite participants to discuss what appeared in their drawings. Emphasize that they should share only what they feel comfortable with – this may include quotes, selected elements, or a general summary. Pay attention to recurring themes (both internal and external opinions) and ask what might be behind them.
- Ask for a reflection on the relationship between what is inside the cookie-person and what is outside it. Which external opinions are internalized (taken as their own)? Which do young people disagree with, and how do they resist them? What might be the consequences of taking everything personally versus ignoring feedback from others? Which opinions can be supportive, and which can be damaging to one’s self-image?

Working with drawings of a cookie-person can serve both as an introduction to a broader discussion on stereotypes, intergenerational tensions, criticism, and boundary setting. It can also help you to understand better what is happening within the group and with individual participants. Pay special attention to statements written inside the figure, as they may indicate psychological or social difficulties. Try not to address these publicly, so as not to expose someone in a vulnerable situation. A participant may signal a need for support without being ready to discuss it openly. If harsh or harmful statements are written outside the figure, check whether they come from specific individuals, such as other adults in the young people’s environment.



Educational Impulses

During classroom interactions or extracurricular activities, certain messages or behaviors may disrupt the flow of the lesson. These moments are what we call **educational impulses**. Rather than viewing them as “malfunctions,” we can see them as valuable learning opportunities. They can have the potential to expose unconscious beliefs or reveal gender-related stereotypes.

We have prepared eight short descriptions that illustrate situations in which leaving issues unaddressed or unexamined may pose educational risks. We also propose possible responses and follow-up actions that can help teachers and educators transform these situations into learning opportunities – impulses – for both young people and themselves.

When using this set of ideas, it is important to:

- recognize the behaviors, attitudes, or messages related to femininity and masculinity that arise within the group or class;
- approach young people with openness and curiosity, avoid shaming or judging, while remaining mindful of your own boundaries and your role as an adult (especially in situations involving violence);
- transform the discomfort or tension that may accompany educational impulses into an opportunity for reflection and dialogue;
- encourage participants to think critically about social norms and gender-related stereotypes.

1. “Boys will be boys”

Situation

During a group activity, two boys begin pushing each other and roughhousing until one of them falls to the ground. When the teacher intervenes, a girl laughs and remarks, “They’re just messing around. Boys will be boys.”

Educational risk

Statements like “boys need to blow off steam” or “boys are just like that” normalize aggression and difficulties with self-control, framing them as natural traits of boys rather than behaviors that can be addressed and changed. Such statements may also suggest that calm, sensitive, or non-aggressive boys deviate from the norm and that something is wrong with them, reinforcing a narrow and harmful understanding of masculinity.

When boys feel pressured to “prove their masculinity,” they may act dominantly or aggressively, crossing others’ boundaries or even resorting to violence. This not only limits their emotional development but also contributes to an atmosphere of insecurity or unequal relationships in the classroom.

Educational goal

Questioning gender stereotypes and demonstrating that there are many ways to be and express oneself as a boy.

Proposed reaction

You can ask:

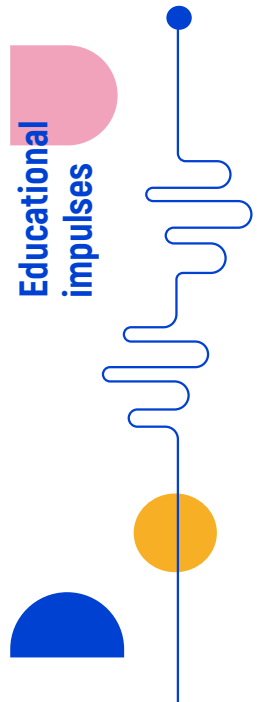
- What do you mean by “boys will be boys”?
- If a male teacher behaved this way toward a student, would we say “men are just like that”?
- If a girl behaved this way, what would we say about her?

Group or class activity

Identify common sayings or beliefs that people often repeat. For example: “boys don’t cry,” “a real man is strong as an oak,” “that’s just women’s talk,” “a man’s decision,” or “drama queen.” Also search for phrases that gain popularity on social media platforms, such as “simp,” “girl math,” and “pick me girl”. Discuss what impact these messages can have on both boys and girls.

Also, introduce positive male role models who break stereotypes, such as athletes, famous actors, or influencers who speak about kindness and empathy.

Educational
impulses



2. Mansplaining³²

Situation

During a group project, the girls try to present different ideas, but a confident boy keeps interrupting them and, in a condescending tone, explains to everyone “how things are and how they should be.”

Educational risk

This kind of situation reinforces the belief that there is only one correct interpretation of topics that are open to discussion – and that boys hold a monopoly on it. It may also strengthen the idea within the group that the most dominant person is the right one – that is, the one who speaks the loudest and most assertively, in a stereotypically masculine way.

This dynamic limits girls’ opportunities to speak up and to take on leadership roles within the group.

Educational goal

Expanding the understanding of leadership to include inclusive, collaborative, and non-hierarchical models, while giving different people the opportunity to speak up and express their ideas.

Proposed reaction

You may ask:

- What ideas do other people in the group have?
- How can we ensure that everyone in the group has an equal opportunity to speak?
- What have you done to ensure that different perspectives are included in the project

Group or class activity

- Start a class discussion on the topic: “What makes it easier, and what makes it harder, for people to speak up in a group?” Write students’ ideas on the board. Divide the class into several smaller teams (3–4 people). Some teams should list the most common silencing messages heard by girls, while others should list the most common silencing messages heard by boys.
- During class discussions, use a “talking object” – for example, a ball – that is passed from hand to hand. Explain that whoever holds the object has the floor to speak at that moment.
- When working on a selected problem, use Edward de Bono’s Six Thinking Hats method.³³ Each hat represents a different style of thinking: white (objective; facts and figures), red (emotional



and intuitive), black (critical; why something cannot be done or work), yellow (optimistic; why something can be done or work), green (creative; new, unconventional, and alternative ideas), and blue (organizational; facilitating and managing the group's work). Assign hats to individuals in subgroups (physically or symbolically), ensuring that each perspective (thinking style) is expressed throughout the problem-solving process.

3. Gender equality has already been achieved, so why talk about it?

Situation

During a class discussion, one student confidently remarks, "I don't understand what feminists are complaining about. Girls can do all the same things as boys." Several classmates nod in agreement, while others remain silent. The comment goes unchallenged, and the discussion moves on to another topic.

Educational risk

This reinforces the idea that formal rights automatically lead to genuine equality and social justice, while ignoring differences in experiences, social expectations, and access to opportunities that still affect students by gender. When such comments do not encourage further discussion, they hinder critical reflection on how gender stereotypes continue to influence behaviors, relationships, and social participation both in school and beyond.

Educational goal

Showing that equality under the law does not always translate directly into social reality, and that inequalities persist and require our attention.

Proposed reaction

You may ask:

- Do equal rights always mean equal opportunities in life?
- What are women and men criticized for, even though they are legally allowed to do so?
- What examples do you know – from school, home, sports, or work – where girls and boys, women and men are treated differently? What do you think causes this?
- Are students treated equally at school? If not, what are the differences? If so, what steps does the school take to ensure equal opportunities, and what more could it do?



By asking the last question, you may demonstrate that equality is not automatically guaranteed but depends on the implementation of particular values or educational policies.

Group or class activity

Begin by facilitating a brief discussion or providing a few illustrative examples to clarify the distinction between equality, where everyone has the same rights and status, and equity, which involves ensuring that people have the resources and support they need to access genuinely equal opportunities. Next, divide the class into four small groups (mixed-gender groups may be used if appropriate). Ask each group to complete a sentence using examples drawn from everyday life at school, at home, in sports, or during leisure activities.

- *I am a girl – I can...*
- *I am a boy – I can...*
- *I am a girl – I should not...*
- *I am a boy – I should not...*

Afterward, invite each group to share their responses with the class. Guide students in reflecting on how gender norms and stereotypes can constrain people of all genders. For example, girls may face expectations to be caring, accommodating, or highly concerned with their appearance. At the same time, boys may feel pressure to be tough, emotionally restrained, physically strong, and focused on demonstrating competence or status. Encourage students to consider how these expectations can limit individual choices, self-expression, and well-being. This discussion can help illustrate how rigid gender norms and unequal power structures may affect different groups in different ways, often creating costs for everyone.

Lastly, encourage participants to creatively reimagine their examples in a more equitable world, where anyone can confidently say: “I can...”



4. The “alpha male” model of leadership

Situation

During a group project, a confident and popular boy quickly takes charge. He organizes the work and assigns roles to others without asking for their opinions or preferences. The group largely accepts this as a natural form of leadership. As a result, some students actively participate in the tasks they are given, while quieter classmates have few opportunities to contribute and gradually fade into the background.

Educational risk

This situation reinforces the idea that leadership is primarily associated with self-confidence, dominance, and the ability to command obedience – traits often perceived as masculine. Consequently, the voices of quieter individuals or those with different approaches to completing tasks may be silenced. If this pattern continues, it can strengthen hierarchical structures within the group, especially among boys, and pressure everyone to emulate the “alpha male” stereotype – portraying a dominant, strong, competitive, and aggressive male leader akin to animal hierarchies.^{34,35} Over time, emphasizing this type of leadership may suppress emotional expression and diminish the value of skills such as empathy, reflection, and teamwork. It could also cause divisions, feelings of exclusion, and heightened competition within the group.

Educational goal

Encouraging students to recognize that there are many ways to take on leadership roles and, more broadly, to participate in a group, and that openness, empathy, listening skills, and cooperation are just as valuable as task assignment. It is important to support diverse models of masculinity and challenge the myth of the “alpha male.”

Proposed reaction

You may say:

- I see that in your group, the task-assignment role has emerged – what other roles might you need?
- Before you take action, I'd like each of you to write down at least three ideas from three different people on how to solve the problem we are working on.
- Before you continue your work, tell me – how does your group want to make decisions?
- Let's think about this – if you have ideas and want to be involved in the group's work, what kind of leadership do you need?

Group or class activity

- Assign different leadership roles when you conduct a project (e.g., organizer, motivator, listener, and summarizer). Afterward, encourage the group to reflect on how these different roles influenced participation, communication, and the overall group dynamic.
- Introduce a rotating leadership model for group tasks and projects, in which leadership responsibilities shift based on assigned time or tasks. This approach allows every student to experience leadership, develop diverse skills, and recognize that effective leadership can take many forms.



Educational
impulses



- Use a movie clip or a quote from pop culture or social media that features the concept of the alpha male or sigma male. Discuss how these ideas are portrayed. You can show a **TED Talk by Frans de Waal titled “The surprising science of alpha males”** (or refer to his work on primate behavior), where the researcher challenges the stereotype of the aggressive alpha male and presents research showing that leaders often guide through engagement, empathy, and the ability to maintain calm within the group.
- In small groups, ask participants to list different labels for boys and men they encounter in everyday life or in the media, such as alpha, sigma, emo, nerd, incel, etc. Then discuss:
 - What behaviors or traits are associated with each label?
 - Which are considered “strong” and which “weak”?
 - How do these labels limit people or create pressure to behave in a certain way?

At the end, create a shared poster or digital collage that shows different ways of being a boy or man.



5. Incels and the manosphere

Situation

During an extracurricular discussion about relationships, one boy expresses frustration with his dating experiences. “Girls only want popular guys or rich idiots,” he says. “Someone like me doesn’t stand a chance – I’m not going to pretend to be some knight in shining armor.” He continues by arguing that “girls today have too many options” and that “men are becoming the real victims of social change.” Several students listen quietly, while others nod in agreement.

Educational risk

These statements may reflect narratives found in the manosphere – online communities that bring together boys and men who feel frustrated and lonely in social (including romantic) relationships, as well as threatened by ongoing changes in gender roles. Such narratives can promote harmful beliefs about male victimhood, portray women’s motivations as shallow or self-serving, and encourage a combative desire to preserve patriarchy. They can also fuel anger, divisions, and conflicts between groups with different views. Complex emotions – such as rejection or insecurity – are oversimplified and redirected into blaming and mocking others (primarily women), which can lead to sexism and even radicalization, both online and offline. The manosphere environment may reinforce the objectification and dehumanization of women, as well as the denial of their rights, normalizing violations of human rights against one gender.³⁶

Educational goal

Helping students recognize how the online environment shapes beliefs about gender, attractiveness, power, and popularity. Encouraging critical thinking about media influence. Building resilience to online radicalization, developing emotional awareness, strengthening empathy, and promoting understanding of diverse experiences.

Proposed reaction

When hearing such comments, avoid confrontation. Instead, focus on expressing curiosity about the statements rather than judging the beliefs. Recognize the student's frustration by saying something like: "It sounds like you're feeling overlooked or disappointed."

You can steer the conversation by encouraging others to share their opinions and feelings. Pay attention to how others perceive and feel when these beliefs are expressed.

Introduce a discussion about what a healthy relationship entails – one rooted in respect, communication, and choice, rather than popularity or competition. Ask questions such as: "What could a fair way of building relationships look like for everyone, regardless of gender? How can we work toward that?"

Group or class activity

- Prepare an analysis of scenes from TV series, films, or social campaigns depicting dating, forming, and ending relationships among teenagers. The discussion can focus on realistic vs. unrealistic portrayals of boys, girls, and romantic relationships.
 - Example series: *Normal People* (dir. Lenny Abrahamson, Hettie Macdonald), *Adolescence* (dir. Philip Barantini), *Sex Education* (dir. Ben Taylor, Kate Herron, and others).
- Propose analyzing online content about dating, relationships, girls/women, and boys/men, presented in various ways. You can examine videos or graphics by asking: which messages are funny, interesting, untrue, hostile, or oversimplified? Which might evoke anger, shame, or rejection? Which would you share with friends?
- It is also worth addressing the issue of social polarization, often reinforced by the spread of oversimplified or misleading content online.

You can expand the discussion with these questions:

- Do you think social media or influencers shape how we view relationships?
- Why might some people online want us to feel angry or disappointed about dating?
- What are the dangers of framing reality as an "us versus them" divide?



Educational
impulses



6. "Get a grip. Act like a man"

Situation

After losing a match, a boy begins to cry. Another student laughs and says, "Come on, get a grip! Don't act like a girl." A few classmates also laugh, and the teacher notices the boy quickly wipes away his tears and remains silent for the rest of the meeting.

Educational risk

Comments such as "don't act like a girl," "act like a man," or "man up" associate masculinity with toughness, control, emotional suppression, and resilience, while portraying traits stereotypically linked to women as inferior or weak. These messages narrow the range of emotions boys consider "acceptable," teaching them that expressing sadness, fear, or frustration is embarrassing or "unmanly."

Over time, suppressing emotions can lead to stress, isolation, difficulty recognizing and managing a wide range of emotions, poorer well-being, limited relationships, or conflicts with others.

Educational goal

Demonstrating that experiencing and expressing emotions is natural for all genders. It aims to help students understand that emotions have important functions: they communicate needs, regulate behavior, and build connections between people. The focus is on fostering emotional awareness, empathy, and resilience, enabling both boys and girls to express their emotions without shame openly and to support each other.

Proposed reaction

Encourage participants to reflect on the role of emotions and crying.

You may ask:

- In what ways can people express sadness and disappointment?
- In general, why do we cry?
- Which emotions usually lead to tears (sadness, anger, relief, joy)?
- What do we communicate when we cry, and how can others respond?

Present emotions as natural biological and social signals, not as a sign of weakness. Emphasize that the ability to recognize, express, and respond to emotions is a key life skill that is beyond gender, strengthens relationships, and helps people cope with challenges.

Group or class activity

Ask participants to share situations where they felt comfortable expressing their emotions. They can do this anonymously on slips of paper if they prefer.

Ask questions like:

- What helped them during those moments?
- Who supported them?



Educational
impulses



Exchange responses and reflect together on whether there are any differences between boys and girls. Then, as a group, create a list of possible physical, psychological, and social consequences of suppressing emotions. For example:

- outbursts of anger or frustration, such as throwing objects or aggression;
- accumulated stress or anxiety that may lead to getting sick more often;
- difficulties getting along with others, escalating conflicts, and losing friendships;
- trouble recognizing emotions and supporting others.

Finally, consider asking:

- What strategies can help us manage emotions healthily and without shame?
- How can friends, family, or teachers foster a space where everyone feels comfortable sharing their feelings?



7. Essentialist beliefs about gender differences

Situation

During a class discussion, one girl states, “Boys are just naturally better at math, and girls are better at languages.” Other students build on this idea, adding comments such as, “Girls care more about looking pretty,” “Boys are naturally more competitive and strong,” and “Men and women have completely different brains. Women are from Venus, men are from Mars – that’s why they can never truly get along.”

Educational risk

Such beliefs may seem like “common sense” because they are based on everyday observations and are repeated in media messages, within families, and at schools. However, they overlook the fact that skills, motivation, and ambitions are shaped more by environment and genetics than by gender.

Statements like these reinforce essentialist beliefs about gender (see the explanation on page 18). They can undermine self-confidence, narrow interests, discourage development in certain areas, create communication barriers between girls and boys, and, in the long term, increase distance and divisions between groups.

Educational goal

Supporting understanding of how gender stereotypes influence skills and life goals. Strengthening the diversity of talents, interests, and abilities within the group.

Proposed reaction

When you hear such comments, avoid correcting them immediately. Instead, create space for reflection.

You may ask:

- What other characteristics do girls have?
What other characteristics are boys like?
- What happens when someone comes to believe that they are “not suited” for a particular subject? How might this belief influence their motivation, confidence, and willingness to put in effort?
- If a person receives more encouragement, support, or opportunities to practice a skill, does their success necessarily reflect an innate talent, or could it be the result of the opportunities they were given?

Group or class activity**Skills and motivation**

Ask participants to write down two skills they feel confident in and one they would like to develop. Then discuss how they developed these skills and whether gender played a role in that process.

Values and goals

Ask participants to write down their three most important values or life goals, such as friendship, family, success, world exploration, or learning. They may choose to share them aloud or only with a partner – no one is required to speak in front of the group.

Then discuss:

- Did anything surprise you during your conversations in pairs?
- What similarities did you notice in what others chose?
- Did any clearly “boyish” or “girlish” patterns emerge? What does this suggest about how stereotypes influence our choices, priorities, and sense of what is “appropriate” for us?

Optional:

You can finish with a group activity, such as a bingo game titled “We have more in common than what divides us” or a board exercise in which you collect goals and traits that everyone can relate to.

Working with a video

Watch a TED Talk: **The danger of a single story** by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Then facilitate a discussion about the video and the concept of stereotypes. You can use a facilitation guide prepared by **Principled Innovation (in English)** or by **the Polish Humanitarian Action (in Polish)**.

Invite participants to talk in pairs about their “single most heard story” about themselves and the story about them that is less visible or rarely heard. Then ask volunteers to share their reflections with the class.

Educational
impulses

8. Limiting gender roles

Situation

During a classroom workshop, one boy eagerly volunteers to join a dance activity. Several classmates respond with laughter and comments suggesting that dancing is “for girls.” As the teasing continues, he becomes increasingly hesitant and ultimately withdraws from the activity.

Educational risk

Responses such as these normalize the belief that interests and talents should be divided along gender lines. Over time, such messages can constrain young people’s aspirations, discourage them from exploring new activities, and restrict their freedom to develop and express their identities in ways that feel authentic to them.

Educational goal

Creating a space where individuals can make diverse choices without facing constraints imposed by labels or stereotypes

Proposed reaction

You can ask:

- Who decides which activities are for boys and which are for girls?
- Have you ever seen examples that break this pattern – in films, sports, or your own group?
- How have these norms changed over time?

Group or class activity

Present examples of people who challenge stereotypical gender expectations, for instance:

- Ballet dancer: Carlos Acosta
- Opera singer: Jakub Józef Orliński
- Footballers: Ewa Pajor, Alexia Putellas, Megan Rapinoe
- Tennis players: Cori Dionne “Coco” Gauff, Iga Świątek
- Artistic swimmer: Dennis González Boneu
- Psychotherapists: Jon Frederickson, Irvin Yalom
- Astronauts: Christina Koch, Sunita Williams

Then ask participants, working in pairs or small groups, to identify and present additional examples of people who challenge gender stereotypes across fields such as art, sports, media, IT, business, science, or politics.

You can include reflection questions such as:

- What influences me to make decisions freely and authentically?
- When do I lose the feeling that decisions about me are truly mine?

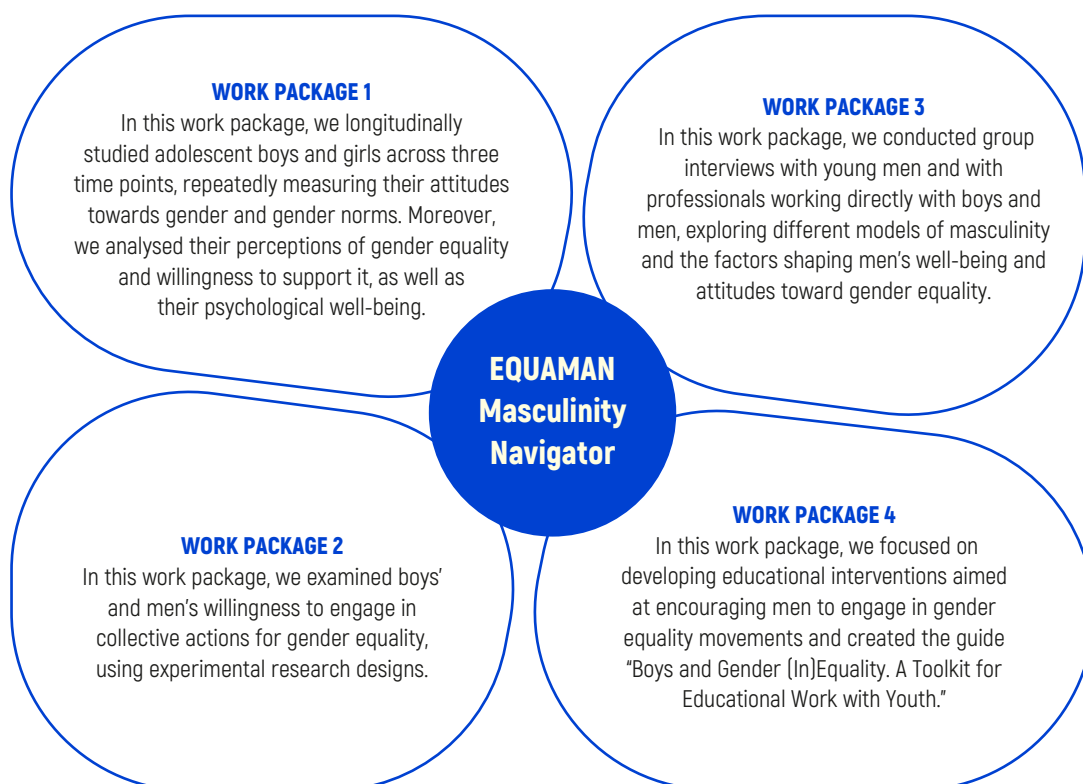


ABOUT THE EQUAMAN PROJECT

The project “Masculinity Navigator – unpacking the relationship between masculine roles, well-being, and gender equality (EQUAMAN)” was conducted from January 2022 to August 2026 by an interdisciplinary team of researchers from the University of Gdańsk in Poland and the Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø.

We used a range of research methods, including focus group interviews, quantitative surveys, and educational interventions, to examine the relation between gender-related attitudes, social expectations about masculine and feminine roles, perceptions of gender equality initiatives, and psychological well-being among adolescents and adults living in Poland and Norway.

The project consisted of four main research tasks, each addressing different issues.



Website: <https://towardsgenderharmony.ug.edu.pl/equaman-masculinity-navigator>

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Inspirations

Books

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- hooks, b. (2004). *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. Simon & Schuster.
- Jackson K. (2019). *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help*. Sourcebooks.
- Perez, C.C. (2019). *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. Abrams Press.
- Plank, L. (2019). *For the Love of Men: A New Vision for Mindful Masculinity*. St. Martin's Press.

Expanding working methods

- Emancipator: Transforming masculinities for a better world.
<https://emancipator.nl/en/materials/>
- The European Institute for Gender Equality's Sensitive Communication Checklist: https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-sensitive-communication/practical-tools-checklists-and-summary-tables?language_content_entity=en
- Lux, A., Cham, I., De Vries, A., Veldman, J., Van Veelen, R., & Van Laar, C. (2025). *Gardeners of Potential: A parents' toolkit for supporting your children's professional path [Toolkit]*. The RE-WIRING project.
<https://re-wiring.eu/>
- Our Watch: Men in focus practice guide; Men in focus evidence review.
<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/change-the-story/men-in-focus>
- Teen Dating Violence. CDC U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/intimate-partner-violence/about/about-teen-dating-violence.html>

Multimedia materials

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The danger of a single story*, TED TALK: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story
- Jackson Katz, *Violence against women – it's a men's issue*, TED TALK: https://www.ted.com/talks/jackson_katz_violence_against_women_it_s_a_men_s_issue
- Michael Kimmel, *Why gender equality is good for everyone – men included*, TED TALK: https://www.ted.com/talks/michael_kimmel_why_gender_equality_is_good_for_everyone_men_included
- Frans de Waal, *The surprising science of alpha males*, TED TALK: https://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_the_surprising_science_of_alpha_males
- Frans de Waal, *The “alpha male” myth, debunked*. Big Think: https://bigthink.com/series/legends/alpha-male-myth/?fbclid=IwAR3SZN7qatEHB69Oluud4SDxiz_xasiussv8Z8qiizKS01t6BjRTIt1W9YU
- Selection of short films (e.g., *Virile: The Origins of Masculinity; Have Men Always Worn Trousers?*) available on Arte.tv. <https://www.arte.tv/en>
- Valery Poshtarov, Father and Son photography project: <https://www.poshtarov.net/home/father-and-son>

International projects and campaigns

- Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice. <https://www.equimundo.org/>
- The MenCare Campaign. <https://www.mencare.org/>

Boys and Gender (In)Equality

A Toolkit for Educational
Work with Youth

