

Mainstreaming gender equality into general and higher education

Project at a glance

The project 'Mainstreaming Gender Equality into General and Higher Education' lasted for 26 months – from December 2013 to January 2016. Implementation of project activities was funded by the Mainstreaming Gender Equality and Promoting Work-Life Balance Programme of the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2009-2014.

The aim of the project was to support the integration of gender equality in the education system of Estonia, thereby contributing to a reduction in gender inequality in Estonian society. For two years, the project team worked to break the cycle in which gender stereotypes spread, through training of people, improving their knowledge and skills, and changing their attitudes. To this end, two subject courses on gender equality for universities and one in-service training course for teachers of Estonian general education schools were developed and tested. To ensure that the courses meet the needs of Estonian society, teachers and students, a survey was carried out among students in order to identify their experiences, knowledge and attitudes regarding gender equality, and interviews were conducted with students and teachers of education and social sciences, as well as experts in the field of gender equality and education. In addition, the necessary basic knowledge was obtained from an analysis of the experience of the Nordic countries (Finland, Norway and Sweden) and academic literature.

To better meet the objectives set, find new ideas and spread the knowledge created, importance was attached to close cooperation with the target groups and stakeholders throughout the project. Educators, youth workers, young people, gender equality experts and education policy makers met twice during the project period to discuss the topics of gender-aware schools and young people's career choices.

Informing the public was also deemed important. Work on ensuring media coverage of the topic in general and the project activities specifically was a recurring activity during the project.

Starting points of the project

Gender inequality as a cross-cutting issue in Estonian society

Estonian society remains far from achieving the standard of gender equality in almost all spheres of life, which is confirmed by statistical indicators as well as analyses and studies. Gender inequality prevailing in the labour market is one of the most striking examples. Although the employment rate of women in Estonia is relatively high, the situation in the labour market is still unequal. Estonia has the highest gender pay gap and one of the most highly gender-segregated labour markets in the EU. This situation is all the more noteworthy when considering that Estonian women are significantly more highly educated than men. Thus, the potential of women is not sufficiently utilised in the labour market, women's self-realisation is limited and, therefore, society benefits from just a part of the income and development provided by the education offered by the state.

The [gender equality index](#), which compares European countries in six spheres of life, shows that Estonia falls short of the average level of Europe in terms of gender equality. In addition to labour

market and income-related inequality, the index indicates a gender gap in time use and the fact that women contribute significantly more to care activities (care for both children and adults) than men. Estonian women also have considerably less political and economic power than women in Europe on average. On the other hand, men have a significantly poorer health and shorter life expectancy than women in Estonia.

While boys and girls have equal access to education in Estonia, the education system is one of the places where inequality is clearly manifested. The sphere of education in Estonia is among the most highly gender-segregated in the EU. Boys account for more than 70% of the pupils who drop out of basic schools, educational attainment levels differ by gender (for example, there are considerably more girls among those who pass basic school final exams with good grades), and basic school classes for children in extended study and for children with special needs are also dominated by boys. Furthermore, educational choices made after both basic and secondary schools are very different by gender: the proportion of boys decreases sharply in secondary schools compared to primary schools; boys prevail among those who choose vocational education after basic school, while more girls take up vocational education after having obtained secondary education.

Vocational education specialty choices differ strongly by gender, more women than men obtain higher education, and the proportion of men in the population with general secondary education or higher education is lower than the proportion of women. Boys' poorer academic performance and high dropout rates in basic schools, the deep gender segregation in specialty choices, and the significantly higher proportion of women with higher education in the working-age population are just some of the vivid examples of the gender bias and unequal opportunities in the sphere of education in Estonia.

Although Estonia has introduced requirements in the legislation to support gender equality and prohibit unequal treatment and joined a number of international conventions and treaties, the *de jure* equality has not led to a more equal distribution of opportunities, rights and obligations between men and women. In addition to the legislative framework and the national policy, the achievement of more equal opportunities is also significantly affected by culture, i.e. values, attitudes and beliefs that relate to being a man or a woman. While most people in Estonia perceive the position of men in society to be better than that of women, the population of Estonia in general does not regard gender inequality as an important problem.

While nearly two-thirds of the EU population believe that gender inequality is very widespread or common their country, only 42% of the population hold the same position in Estonia, and more than a third of people believe that men and women are equal in Estonia. When comparing these figures with the results of Estonia in the different domains of the aforementioned gender equality index, there appears to be a large gap between the actual situation and the perception of the problem. The ability to notice and analyse gender stratification and consider it a problem is suppressed by gender stereotypes and prejudices prevalent in society. People's low awareness of the importance of equal treatment, prejudices and a lack of the ability to spot and react to unequal treatment also play a role.

The role of education in reducing gender inequality

Education in general and specifically school as an institution play an important role in promoting gender equality. On the one hand, it is important to ensure that the opportunity to acquire education is guaranteed to both boys and girls. This can mean access to education (such as the right and opportunity to go to school), as well as curricula, teaching methods and teaching practices supporting children and young people of both sexes in staying in education. Studies have confirmed that boys and girls are treated differently in schools and that their opportunities to learn and acquire education are therefore also different. The difference in treatment leads to differences in academic performance, perception of the school environment, and specialty choices.

On the other hand, school as a central socialisation environment plays an important role in the creation and spread of societal values and norms. Everything happening in schools therefore also has an impact on equality in other spheres of life, e.g. in families, in the labour market and in society at large. Gender mainstreaming in school curricula is considered to be one of the best ways to improve gender equality in the long run. However, the attitudes and values prevalent in society also affect the education system – education workers' attitudes and practices, such as teaching methods and the development of curricula and training materials, are based on the norms, values and attitudes that are widespread in society. Reforming the education sector alone is not sufficient to eliminate gender inequality, but the education sector has a huge potential to influence men's and women's equal opportunities and acceptance of gender equality as a fundamental value.

If the goal is to change the stereotypes, norms, attitudes and values that affect men, women and gender equality, educating (future) teachers and school principals on this topic so that they in turn will 'spread the virus' among children and young people is probably one of the best strategies.

In order to successfully mainstream the gender topic in curricula and change teaching practices and behaviours, it is important to ensure that teachers are aware and able to notice the internalised behaviours and attitudes that they pass on to students in their work. To this end, (future) teachers should be equipped with theoretical knowledge of gender equality and the role of gender in school, practical skills enabling them to notice gender stereotypes and gender-insensitive or discriminatory behaviour as well as pedagogical skills to solve such situations. Gender mainstreaming in teacher training is very important, as teachers play a crucial role in teaching values and attitudes due to their direct and close contact with students, and the way of integrating gender equality in various subjects depends, in particular, on the teachers of these subjects.

The main activities and outcomes of the project

Courses

Subject course 'Gender and Education'

The course 'Gender and Education' is intended for all students interested in the topic, including (but not limited to) those studying educational and social sciences. The subject course aims to introduce the role and impact of gender at the different levels of education and explain how the gender perspective in education is passed on to other areas (work, career prospects, public opinion, etc.). Another aim is to introduce the opportunities and need for application of various intervention mechanisms, such as gender mainstreaming, in education.

The subject course was conducted for the first time at the Institute of Social Studies of the University of Tartu during the 2014/15 spring semester. The course was completed by 19 students, most of whom studied social and education sciences but who also included students from other disciplines (philology, medicine, etc.). The course was conducted by Helen Biin and Eve Mägi.

The course corresponded well with the expectations of the students who attended it. According to the attendees, the course discussed a relevant topic, offered new knowledge and enabled them to create novel links. The students found the discussion of the topic to be informative, lively and exciting. As the positive aspects that contributed significantly to the value of the course, the attendees highlighted the inclusive and open attitude of the lecturers and their personal and in-depth knowledge of the topic, which encouraged students to think and react.

Subject course 'Gender (Im)Balance in Society: Analysis and Solutions'

The subject course aims to address the meaning of gender equality and equal opportunities – concepts that are often referred to. The course discusses the questions of why the topic of equal opportunities is important; how it is reflected in policies, strategies, decisions and legislation in Estonia and elsewhere in the world; and how all these things affect men's and women's lives.

The course was conducted for the first time at the Institute of Social Studies of the University of Tartu during the 2014/2015 spring semester. The course was completed by 12 people – mainly social science students, but also law and economics students. The course was conducted by Helen Biin and Kadri Soo (UT Institute of Social Studies), and Marre Karu, Kadi Viik and Marianne Meiorg (Estonian Human Rights Centre) as guest lecturers.

The course corresponded well with the expectations of the students who attended it, giving them new and necessary basic knowledge and helping them to pay attention to the previously unacknowledged problems. The attendees found the knowledge of the area to be helpful. The wide range of topics meant that everyone could learn something new, and the knowledge acquired will help the attendees to better analyse societal phenomena from the gender perspective.

In-service teacher training course 'Gender-Awareness in School – What and Why?'

The project involved the development of the two-day in-service teacher training course 'Gender-Awareness in School – What and Why?' The aim of the course is to introduce the role of gender in education and the impact of gender awareness in school. Among other things, the course discusses how to recognise gender-stereotyped attitudes in the behaviour of oneself and in the behaviour of one's colleagues and students, and introduces opportunities for integrating stereotype-free teaching methods in the teaching process. The training is intended for all general education school teachers interested in the topic, including career counsellors, psychologists, educational counsellors and others.

The training course was conducted for the first time in April and May in Tartu (in cooperation with the In-Service Teacher Training Centre of the University of Tartu) and in Tallinn. A total of 36 teachers attended the training. The in-service training course was conducted by Helen Biin, Eve Mägi and Marre Karu.

The feedback was positive, and teachers who attended would recommend this course to others. The attendees felt that the entire team of a school should attend the training, and there was also interest in a follow-up training course.

Surveys

An extensive survey and interviews were carried out to ensure that the courses to be developed would better meet the needs of Estonian students and teachers. The results of the surveys provided important input on the current knowledge, attitudes and experience of the target groups as well as on the desirable structure, contents and methodology of the courses.

Student survey

The student survey aimed to find out the gender equality-related attitudes, experiences and knowledge of today's students. To be able to compare students' gender equality-related attitudes, awareness and experience with those of the general population of Estonia, the questionnaire of the

survey was compiled partly on the basis of the questions included in the periodic gender equality monitoring carried out by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

A total of 4525 people responded to the questionnaire. However, after data cleansing the answers of 2748 respondents, accounting for about 5% of the total student population, were used in the final analysis.

Interviews

The analysis of the qualitative study is based on six semi-structured focus group interviews with teacher training and social science students, one semi-structured focus group interview with practicing teachers and nine individual expert interviews with university professors, teachers in general education schools, education officials, and gender equality and equal treatment experts.

The focus group interviews with students aimed to discuss the university's teaching practice and the values and norms affecting it from the gender equality perspective. Two focus group interviews were conducted with social science students, and four such interviews were conducted with teacher training students. The focus groups involved 10 social science students (six women and four men) and 20 teacher training students (12 women and eight men). All interviews were conducted with the students of the University of Tartu.

The main interest of the focus group interview with teachers was on collecting input for the in-service teacher training courses developed during the project. However, participants also shared their experiences, observations and attitudes with regard to equal treatment and gender equality in school practice. The interview was attended by eight teachers who teach different subjects in different schools and at different educational levels (five women and three men).

The aim of the expert interviews was to collect the opinions of general and higher education experts on the awareness and needs of teachers, pupils and students with regard to gender equality and equal opportunities, and to identify the level of openness of general education schools and universities to studies on equal opportunities. The nine expert interviews were conducted as individual interviews. The interviewees included persons in charge of organising both initial and in-service training of teachers, representatives of teachers' (professional) associations, practicing teachers, university lecturers, a gender expert and a representative of the Ministry of Education and Research.

Mapping of the experience of the Nordic countries

Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish experiences of gender mainstreaming in general and higher education

In the area of gender equality and equal opportunities, we often look at what is done in the Nordic countries, and we want to learn from their experiences. The project involved a closer analysis of the experiences of Finland, Norway and Sweden in connection with the integration of the principle and topics of gender equality in general and higher education in particular. The mapping exercise was undertaken with a view to finding out how gender issues have been mainstreamed in the education systems of the Nordic countries, what the problems and challenges of this process have been, and to what extent gender equality issues are represented in national curricula horizontally (i.e., gender equality is taken into account in the preparation of study materials as well as in teaching methods) and vertically (i.e., classes/lectures specifically focusing on gender equality and equal treatment). The

project also involved an examination of links between the horizontal mainstreaming of gender equality in curricula, on one hand, and teacher training, on the other hand.

Although the Nordic countries are considered pioneers in the area of gender equality, the analysis showed that gender mainstreaming in education has not been systematic or all-encompassing in Sweden, Norway and Finland. While the integration of gender equality in various strategies is common and a number of positive initiatives have been carried out, the gender perspective, equal treatment and gender equality remain issues that need to be defined and discussed in these countries. Furthermore, focus on gender equality has decreased in education-related legislation, as more attention is now being paid to multiculturalism, racism and ethnicity. Therefore, the educational systems of the Nordic countries face a challenge to acquire knowledge and engage in activities addressing discrimination based on a variety of characteristics, including gender.

Project team's visit to the University of Agder in Norway

In August 2015, members of the project team visited the University of Agder in Kristiansand, Norway. As the host, the Centre for Gender and Equality of the Agder region (senterforlikestilling.org) organised, over the course of three days, meetings with the management, leaders and lecturers of the departments of humanities, social sciences and teacher training at the University of Agder, as well as with persons in charge of gender equality and coordinators of foreign projects at the university. The situation in Norway and Estonia was described, experiences were shared and opportunities for cooperation were searched for during lively discussions. The project team also visited the Eplehagen kindergarten in order to learn about its organisation of work, which focuses on the promotion of diversity and gender equality.

Inclusion and information of target groups and stakeholders

Roundtable discussion 'Gender-Awareness in School – What and Why?'

Praxis and the British Embassy organised the roundtable discussion 'Gender-Awareness in School – What and Why?' on 17 December 2014. The roundtable was attended by teachers, school principals, university professors, officials, stakeholders' representatives, experts and education innovators. The discussion was aimed at jointly finding ways to support the realisation of girls' and boys' abilities and to reflect on teachers' qualifications and readiness for applying a gender-aware approach to teaching and school culture. Dr. Barbara Read, a recognised educational sociologist working at the University of Glasgow and focusing on the relationships between school culture and gender in general education schools and universities, offered inspiration for the discussion.

The roundtable discussion was attended by 50 people whose positive feedback highlighted the speakers during the first part of the day and the friendly and cooperative atmosphere of the discussion.

Seminar 'From School to Work: Choices and Missed Opportunities of the New Generation'

On 14 October 2015, Praxis organised the seminar 'From School to Work: Choices and Missed Opportunities of the New Generation'. The aim of the seminar was to engage education innovators, teachers, career counsellors, school principals, social and educational policy makers and young people themselves in finding ways to broaden the new generation's opportunities for self-realisation in the education system and the labour market. The focus was on the questions of how to change gender-segregated specialty choices and raise young people's awareness of their rights in the labour market as well as on the situations that affect choices and shape attitudes. The event was chaired by Mari-Liis Sepper, the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner.

The seminar was attended by 32 people who evaluated the event positively, stating that their awareness of the area has improved and that the seminar has provided them with evidence-based arguments and new information about gender-segregated career choices. The attendees found that interesting discussions had led to important ideas and proposals and that they had obtained new useful contacts.

Media and communication activities

To ensure that the knowledge generated during the project would reach beyond the circle of people whose everyday activities relate to gender equality, the project team purposefully worked to communicate the topics, initiatives and results of the project as widely as possible. Information about project activities was published on the website and Facebook page and in the blog of Praxis. To reach the target groups and stakeholders of the project, the newsletter 'Gender Mainstreaming in Education' was created, and information was also distributed via various mailing lists. To present the issues addressed and the results achieved by the project, the project team used the opportunities to publish articles and give interviews to the print and talking media.

Scientific publications

To increase the visibility and disseminate the results of the project, the results of the qualitative and quantitative studies were published as scientific papers. In spring 2015 Kersti Kruus defended MA thesis „Gender equality related understandings through the example of teacher training students” in the University of Tartu. An article „Gender awareness and attitudes toward gender equality among teacher training and educational science students“ by Eve Mägi, Helen Biin, Karmen Trasberg, Kersti Kruus and Valentina Batueva will be published in Estonian Journal of Education in May 2016.