

# Combating harmful gender norms through innovative education

## Results from the Youth SpectActors project



**Rigid gender norms or stereotypes limit people's ability to pursue their professional careers and make choices about their lives. Gender norms not only limit people's freedom and choices, but they end up condoning gender-based violence and perpetuating inequalities rooted in unbalanced power dynamics. As a result, people are coerced by collective expectations into taking up gender roles that stop them from pursuing the careers and relationships they want, or even being themselves.**

**F**or example, young men are often expected to suppress their emotions so that they can conform to damaging understandings of strength and masculinity. This leaves men illequipped to express or navigate through their emotions, which can later on cause issues for their mental health. Equally, young women are often expected to be polite and accommodating to others – even in situations where they are made to feel uncomfortable. Conforming to this expectation can make it more difficult for women to assert themselves and can lead to their enduring discrimination or abuse without possessing the skills or confidence to address it.

But relationship and sexuality education can play a crucial role in dismantling and challenging harmful gender norms, thus preventing gender-based violence and giving young people the skills needed to lead more equal and safe lives. Furthermore, training of adults and educators is key to raising their awareness around existing gender stereotypes that they may inadvertently perpetuate. Civil society organisations in Serbia, Estonia, Romania and Latvia came together under the Youth SpectActors project to do just that.

The main purpose of the project was to educate and empower young people between 12–25 years of age to question gender norms, attitudes and stereotypes that contribute or could lead to gender-based-violence (GBV) through organising theatrical plays that deal with typical situations where gender identity and expression occur.

The project used an innovative methodology: Gender Transformative Social Theatre. This methodology involves the presence of a trained moderator, whose role is to propose a daily life situation to be acted out by participants and to provoke discussion and reflection after the play, and "SpectActors", young people with the dual role of observing and creating a performance, in which they are invited to step into the shoes of a different gender and share their feelings, emotions and reflections.

An overview of the main results from the final evaluation process is hereby presented including an analysis of data gathered during the project implementation as well as the feedback by a representative sample of young people, moderators and sub-moderators at the end of the project.

# Youth SpectActors engaged and trained 6842 young people

**93%** of participants say that the education activities on gender norms, stereotypes and links to gender-based-violence using the social transformation theatre methodology were useful because Youth SpectActors led to:

- **the creation of a space of exchange** on issues not discussed in the family;
- **increased knowledge** both for young people and adults;
- **widened awareness of the relationship** between gender norms leading to GBV and prevention of abuse;
- **self-awareness of enacted gender stereotypes** at the individual or community level;
- **a fun and engaging learning space** for young people.

**An Estonian 25-year-old moderator said: "I knew these things, I knew about some inequalities, I paid attention to some things. But I didn't realize how much gender stereotyping is around us, in our everyday lives. The more I hosted these sessions the more I started to hear gendered stuff in my everyday life, stuff I had never noticed before. I started to see how much I do it myself, with my own kids."**



The trainings offered a learning journey about gender terminology; meaning and factors, leading to gender-based-violence, how to act to prevent or deal with it. Thus:

**67% of youth report good levels of knowledge and understanding of gender stereotyping and GBV;**

**61% of youth assert confidence to know how to take action;**

**59% of youth commit to act against GBV and challenge gender constructs.**

This shows that it's entirely possible to make a real change in the life of youth by equipping them with the knowledge to recognise abuse and violence and address it.

## Highlight on areas of increased knowledge

**D**uring the theatre-based sessions, topics linked to gender norms, stereotypes and gender based-violence were discussed, including more sensitive and controversial issues as identified by the young people involved. Among the topics of discussion: Homophobia - vocational training based on gender differentiation - differentiation on the way women and men can express their emotions - objectivization of women in the media/cosmetics industry - domestic violence - dress codes and the objectivization of women - LGBTQ rights - single-parent families. Creating a safe space for young people to discuss such issues is key to understanding and dismantling social gender constructs that are damaging.

**71%**  
OF YOUTH – UNDERSTANDS  
POTENTIAL NEGATIVE  
CONSEQUENCES OF GENDER  
NORMS AND PRACTICES ON  
BEHAVIOUR

**60%**  
OF YOUTH – RELATES  
UNDERSTANDING ABOUT  
GENDER-BASED-VIOLENCE  
AND LINK WITH GENDER  
NORMS

"I am a young person and I believe that through theatre-based interventions we can destroy learned gender stereotypes and prejudices in our community and show that there is no particular role for girls and boys, all people regardless of gender have the same human rights. This is what I learned through participation in the theatre play." **Serbia**

## An effective approach

**B**oth young people and moderators considered the methodology applied useful to deal with the topics at stake – 85% considered it very useful or useful and 11% somewhat useful.

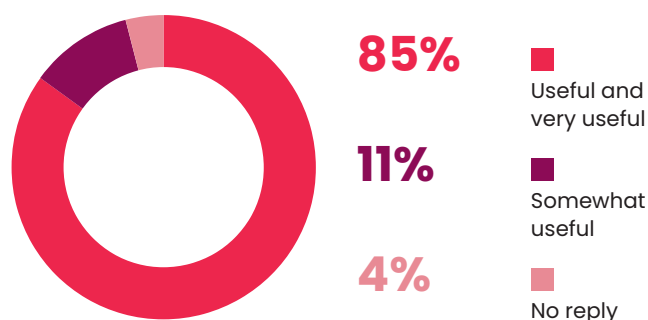
**Theatre-based education is considered useful because:**

- It is a tool for empowerment and experiential learning in a creative fun, spontaneous, imaginative way;
- It increased young people's empathy, widened their understanding and thinking;
- It helped young people to realize that their experiences are very similar to those of others, and they are going through social phenomena, but also allowed them to see what they have unconsciously accepted as normal, but is actually damaging;
- It provided young people with practical advice, tips on how to solve some problematic situations when they come up in life;
- It contributed to improve group dynamics and acting helped young people's capacity to memorize and to freely express themselves.

"Of course, conversations with the family are not so simple, but we discussed these topics with our friends and concluded that we should also be careful and not fall into the stereotype trap. It is certainly important to avoid generalizations, as not all situations are the same and there is a need to explain direct links between gender norms and gender-based violence." **Young person from Latvia.**



### Usefulness of the methodology



**Youth SpectActors activities had an impact on young people, on schools and civil society organisations as shown through the evaluation data:**

- **75% of participants** said they discussed about the topics raised during the training outside of the project or used the contents for youth-centred initiatives;
- **57% of NGO and school** representatives plan to use the theatre-based approach in sexuality education;
- **47% of organisations** interviewed adopted policies and guidelines on Child protection and have not related any specific obstacle to their adoption;

Social media campaigns and posts **reached 295.301 people and provoked around 18.599 engagements with text posts, videos, photos, posters and podcasts.** Youth SpectActors social media campaigns supported IPPF EN's advocacy toward the adoption of:

- **the EU Directive on GBV** recognising the need to strengthen sexuality education as an essential tool to prevent violence;
- **the landmark position on sexual and reproductive health and rights** voted by the European Parliament;
- **a study, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs on sexuality education** seen as an integral part of sexual and reproductive health and rights of children and young people in the EU.



# Take aways and lessons learnt

## → Methodology useful to deal with gender-based violence:

The choice of the methodology applied to the project strongly contributed to its relevance and usefulness for participants. Indeed, the gender transformative social theatre methodology enabled adequate access and openness of the participants for a better understanding of gender roles, social roles and gender-based violence. Playing the proposed scenarios allowed young people to experience how gender roles are enacted, but also showed that it is possible to overcome inequality and men/women traditional division of responsibilities. Young people could explore **topics relevant to the situations they live or may live in** thanks to the choice of the proposed scenarios. Furthermore, the systemic inclusion of people from minority groups was highly recommended based on the positive experiences had in some sessions.

## → Behavioural change requires time

and investment so any attempt to bring about long-lasting change would mean that more projects like Youth SpectActors should be supported to run.

## → School-civil society collaboration:

Across the countries it emerged that the **education systems do not always facilitate extracurricular activities**, but that there is an **openness for civil society organisations to propose and deliver learning activities within the school**. So, in the future there should be more investment to **enhance collaboration between schools and civil society** to work on gender-based violence as well as **advocate for the inclusion of this methodology and topic in the official curricula** through civic education. Furthermore, working with NGOs and youth centres proved to be a good solution during the project implementation as many schools were not responsive to moderators for the implementation of training activities during COVID times and after, due to several other issues they needed to prioritize.

## → Capacity-building for online sessions:

Taking into consideration that due to COVID-19 many activities had to take place online it was noted that **more capacity-building needs to be provided for teachers and non-formal education moderators** since they still lack some technical experience to deliver online meetings and trainings. Despite it being challenging for some of the moderators to organise and deliver online learning events, young people were interested and participated actively in online sessions, as the social transformation theatre offered an engaging learning modality. Furthermore, online sessions were an opportunity to engage a higher number of people overcoming geographical distance.

## In the future

**Y**oung people, teachers and NGO's staff involved in the project recommended to **continue work in their countries on gender norms and stereotypes which can lead to gender-based-violence. Among the most needed kind of activities, they identified debates and discussions – trainings – activities with parents and young people – advocacy**. Accordingly, a systemic approach to integrate the various aspects would be needed, combining short and medium-term actions.

**85% of young people and trainers would enjoy participating in similar activities in the future and 80% of them also confirmed that they already have plans for future activities to address gender-based-violence.**



This Fact Sheet was funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (REC 2014-2020).

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**International Planned Parenthood Federation  
European Network**  
55, Rue Royale 1000 Brussels  
Belgium

**[www.europe.ippf.org](http://www.europe.ippf.org)**  
Tel : +32 (0)2 250 0950  
Email : [eninfo@ippf.org](mailto:eninfo@ippf.org)

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