

# Caring masculinities in early childhood education and care services and primary schools in Europe

## ECaRoM – Early Care and the Role of Men

### TRANSNATIONAL REPORT



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Proofreading: Jason Kirkpatrick, <http://blackhelmetproductions.net>.

Project partners: Dissens – Institute for Education and Research (Germany, Coordinator), Institute for Masculinity Research and Gender Studies (Austria), Istituto degli Innocenti (Italy), The Peace Institute (Slovenia), Center for Equality Advancement (Lithuania) and Center of Women’s Studies and Policies (Bulgaria).

[www.ecarom.eu](http://www.ecarom.eu)

ISBN: 978-3-941338-30-2

**Berlin, Florence and Ljubljana, March 2022**

The project ECaRoM was co-funded by the European Commission, DG Justice and Consumers Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (REC-AG) and in Germany by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, in Austria by the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection and the Ministry of Education, Science and Research.



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**



Federal Ministry for  
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens,  
Women and Youth



Federal Ministry  
Republic of Austria  
Education, Science  
and Research



Federal Ministry  
Republic of Austria  
Social Affairs, Health, Care  
and Consumer Protection

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the ECaRoM project team, and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission or of the other co-financing institutions.

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# 1. Introduction: masculinities, care work and gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes have been defined as "preconceived ideas whereby females and males are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their gender".<sup>1</sup> Gender stereotyping can limit the development of the natural talents and abilities of girls\* and boys\*, women\* and men<sup>2</sup>, as well as their educational and professional experiences and life opportunities in general. Gender stereotypes justify and maintain the historical power relations between genders as well as sexist attitudes that hold back the advancement of gender equality. Gender stereotypes do not harm only women\*, but men\* as well. Narrow definitions of masculinity can lead to physical and emotional harm and hold men\* back from, for instance, fully engaging in parenthood, or forming close emotional bonds, depriving them of nurturing and caring relationships (2021 Report on Gender Equality in the EU, 15).

Care still seems to be one of the central social domains of gender stereotyping. For women\* in terms of the cultural ascription of caregiving as their biologically determinate function, and their numerical over-representation in caregiving. For men\*, as Bourdieu (2010) emphasises, through their delimitation from femininity by oppositional and complementarity of identities and social practices, i.e., through distancing themselves from caring. Gender stereotypes about care can be seen as one of the root causes of unequal distribution of care work between genders, which has remained the central source of 'patriarchal dividends' (Connell 1995), meaning that caring patterns are embedded in wider social inequalities. Social marginalisation of care work as something that mainly concerns women\* and intimacy conceals its economic dimension as the precondition of every system of production, and its political dimension, which is that the unequal distribution of care work between different social groups according to gender, class, ethnicity/race creates and strengthens social inequalities. That is why the vision of care, advocated by the feminist ethic of care as the universal human norm (Tronto 2013, Fraser, 1996), reveals itself as critical for gender equality (Scambor et al. 2013), inclusive citizenship (Lister 1997), and caring society (Fine 2007).

The EIGE Gender Equality Index points out that EU countries face high gender segregation in caring occupations related to the education, health and welfare (EHW sector), where 30% of all women\* in employment work and only 8% men\*<sup>3</sup>. Occupations in EHW sector are deeply burdened by gender stereotypes that these are 'women\*'s jobs' and associated with low social and economic status, which has been identified as the key reasons why boys\* avoid these occupations (Simpson 2009; Dill et al. 2016). Studies show that sectoral gender segregation is an important determinant of the gender pay gap and highlight that the socio-economic status of an occupation improves when a greater number of men\* enter it (Acker 1991; Boll et al. 2016). In ageing European societies, some occupations (e.g., nurse, elderly carers) are becoming scarce (OECD 2020), with studies showing that gender-segregated occupations are more affected by labour shortages than gender-neutral occupations (Williams 1995; Bettio and Verashchagina 2009).

Promoting an equal share of care, such as caring for children, the elderly, the sick and daily household chores, between women\* and men\* in private life, is a priority for achieving gender equality as well. The slow pace of change towards more gender equal division of unpaid family care

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1222>

<sup>2</sup> To implement gender-equitable language, this report uses the asterisk\* for boys\*, girls\*, men\*, women\*, inter\*, non-binary persons\* or trans\*. This spelling is used to refer to the social construction of gender and gender identities. This means that not all persons who are perceived as boys\*, girls\*, men\*, women\*, inter\*, non-binary persons\* or trans\* also identify as such. The asterisk shows the openness of gender identities and that they are never finished processes. This notation does not apply to fixed terms, compound words, quotations or when the context requires it.

<sup>3</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/domain/work>

is an obstacle to women\*'s equal participation in the labour market, their access to economic resources and their equality in career advancement. According to the EIGE Gender Equality Index in 2019, among the people doing cooking and household work every day were as many as 78% of women\* and only 32% of men\*; 37% of women\* compared to 25% of men\* were daily taking care of their children, grandchildren, elderly and people with disabilities.<sup>4</sup> This unequal share of care work reflects in unequal participation in full-time employment in which 41% of women\* were involved compared to 57% of men\*.<sup>5</sup> The gender pay gap for EU27 in 2018 was 14.1%, a meagre improvement from the 15.8% in 2010. The pension gap in the EU27 was 29.5%, having slowly decreased from 33.9% in 2010 (2021 Report on Gender Equality in the EU, 32). Inequalities in women\*'s unpaid care work in private life, which lead to inequalities in other areas of life, are also identified as a consequence of gender stereotypes that it is 'women\*'s work' and the social marginalisation of care work.

Influencing young people's perceptions and valuation of gendered division of care work, is therefore one of the important goals of achieving gender equality. However, research and policy initiatives rarely tackle gender stereotypes about care and boys\*/men\*/masculinities in early childhood education. The European funded project *Early Childhood Education and the Role of Men* (ECaRoM) (<https://ecarom.eu>) and this transnational report represent a step toward addressing this gap. The ECaRoM project aims at strengthening the connection between boys\*, masculinities and care. Its main objective is to support an egalitarian socialisation environment in early childhood education and care services and primary schools, which could inspire boys\* to caring practices and attitudes in private life and in society in general, potentially also in their further educational choices. The ECaRoM project started in February 2021 and will last for two years (until January 2023). It includes the following partners: Dissens Institut für Bildung und Forschung e.V. – Germany as project coordinator, Verein für Männer- und Geschlechterthemen Steiermark – Austria, the Peace Institute – Slovenia, Istituto degli Innocenti – Italy, Center of Women's Studies and Policies – Bulgaria, Center for Equality Advancement – Lithuania.

The ECaRoM project continues the work from the Boys in Care Work project (2017-2019) (<https://www.boys-in-care.eu/>), aimed at supporting boys\* in gender atypical educational and vocational choices. During this past project we often encountered a need for gender sensitive pedagogy and a lack of awareness for caring masculinities in early education. This motivated the partnership to start the ECaRoM project.

The project uses the term “care” in a broad sense, including the following aspects:

- Individual aspect: taking care of oneself, one's personal health and well-being.
- The relational aspect: rejection of hierarchical, dominating and privileged relationships between people, and a rejection of violence.
- Family and social networks aspect: care work necessary to ensure the daily physical, social and emotional well-being of family members and other close relatives; care for people in need (children, elderly, sick, people with disabilities), including household maintenance (cleaning, shopping, cooking).
- Occupational aspect: occupations in education, health and social care (kindergarten and primary school teachers, nurses, carers, social workers).
- Social solidarity: concern for the community and society in general (e.g., voluntary work; social movements; empathy and solidarity towards excluded and marginalised social groups).
- Ecological perspective: care for nature and the planet we live on.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/domain/time>

<sup>5</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/domain/work>

Figure 1: Dimensions of care



The ECaRoM project starts from the premise that the educational system, especially the part of it that relates to the earliest period of gender stereotyping, i.e., pre-school education and first grades of primary school education, is crucial on the one hand for its reproduction, and for its reducing and overcoming on the other. The aim of the project is to explore the pedagogical practices of the official and hidden curriculum in pre-school and primary school education that influence the formation of gender stereotypes about care work, and to develop and disseminate gender-sensitive innovative pedagogical strategies and tools that promote children's perception of care work as gender-neutral and socially relevant activities.

Gender-sensitive education is conceived as the education according to which teachers are aware of gender inequalities in society and of the role of educational process in gender socialization. It refers to a type of education within which teachers reflect on their own patterns of behaviour, ways of teaching and communication with children. It involves teachers discussing with children the gendered structure of society and creating an environment in which everyone, regardless of their gender identity, sexual orientation, or gender expression (but also class, race/ethnicity or ability), feels they are a part of. Last but not least, in gender-sensitive education gender equality is not only part of the educational content but an overarching principle by which teachers are guided in their approach to children (Krišová and Polanková, 2020). The specific contribution of the ECaRoM project and this transnational report is the assessment of the situation and existing strategies and tools of gender-sensitive pedagogy related to gender stereotypes about boys\*/men\*/masculinities and care in early childhood education.

Gender equality in the division of private and/or professional care work presupposes a loosening and changing of existing gender roles and social norms not only for women\* but also for men\*. The involvement of men\* in care work is complex because of the social regulation of masculinity in hierarchical and competitive relations between men\*, which are expressed in the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and multiple masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). The concept of hegemonic masculinity<sup>6</sup> describes a culturally dominant position of men\*, subordinating women\* and marginalised men\* and maintaining patriarchal relations.

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<sup>6</sup> The concept has its roots in Antonio Gramsci's theory of "cultural hegemony" and a reinterpretation of the Marxist dialectic concerning the relationship between structure (economic reality) and over-structure (ideas, culture). If for Marx the end of capitalist hegemonic power could be achieved by changing the structure (economic power) that generates the over-structure, for Gramsci it is necessary to start from the change of the latter, namely the cultural production generated by the school, the mass media.

Hegemonic masculinity subordinates men\* who embody devalued forms of masculinity associated with femininity, such as gay men\*, and marginalises men\* based on axes such as race, ethnicity, class, ability, and so on. Men\* who are complicit in the hierarchical gender order can benefit from the subordination of women\* without having to embody hegemonic masculinity themselves. The status and power associated with position in paid work and the ongoing maintenance of difference from femininity are central sources of hegemonic masculinity (Collinson & Hearn 2005). When men\* engage personally or professionally in a feminised care work, which is also associated with low social and income status, they find themselves in conflict with norms of hegemonic masculinity and risk marginalisation in their social networks and in wider society. Despite increasing women\*'s participation in paid work, the breadwinning continues to be perceived as the dominant model of male care work, which limits the scope and types of care that men\* provide. Furthermore, the symbolic association of care work with femininity, weakness, and subordination as antitheses of hegemonic masculinity, averts men\* away from care (Hanlon 2012). Numerous studies (Simpson 2009) call attention to the complex interplay and negotiations engaged in by men\* when they manoeuvre between the norms of hegemonic masculinity and the expectations of caring masculinity. Men\* receive little attention in existing gender equality policies, programmes and projects.

# However, the ECaRoM project starts from the recognition that the success of gender equality efforts also depends on the involvement of men\*, and therefore changing gender stereotypes related to masculinity and care work is a project's central focus. The project is founded on the notion of caring masculinities (Hanlon 2012, Scambor et al. 2016, Elliott 2016) as a model that contrasts with that of hegemonic masculinity, since it lends itself to questioning the logic of domination. In turn this notion is based upon Fraser's (1996) model of gender equality, in which care is defined as the basis for social and economic cooperation; a human norm which applies to both men\* and women\* (not a female task). While the concept has started to be used in relation to public policies (e.g., the International Conference on Men and Equal Opportunities 2016 in Luxemburg; see Scambor et al. 2016), its use in the context of early education is still rare and the aproject aims to begin filling this gap. This report presents the comparative findings of a survey on the current state of gender-sensitive pedagogy related to gender stereotypes about boys\*/men\*/masculinities and care in early childhood education in six EU countries.

The selection of countries encompasses diverse European perspectives as it includes partners from Central Europe (Austria and Slovenia), West Europe (Germany), South Europe (Italy), and from the East of Europe (Bulgaria, Lithuania). Involved countries have different educational, gender and labour market regimes that provides context for European exchange, learning and transfer of good practices.

In the first part, we look at how relevant national policies in the field of education and gender equality address this topic, what findings are emerging from current national research, and what programmes and projects are developed to improve the situation. In the second part, we present findings from individual and group interviews with kindergarten and primary school teachers and professionals in the field of education and gender equality, which provided insights into everyday pedagogical practices and existing strategies that address gender stereotypes related to masculinity and care work.

The analysis of the current situation provides a basis for identifying needs for the development of innovative didactic tools, guidelines and educational content that will enable teachers and experts to address gender stereotypes related to boys\*, men\* and masculinities in a gender-sensitive way and that will promote children's perception of care work as a gender-neutral and socially important activity. In the absence of clear guidelines and gender-sensitive didactic tools, teachers may inadvertently develop approaches that can reinforce stereotypes. The report therefore answers the questions: to what extent official and hidden curricula are proactive in the direction of gender

equality and in going beyond stereotypical images about gender and care, in particular those associated with masculinity and caring work; this would be the way forward.

## 2. State of the art in policy, research and good practices

The national state of the art analysis assessed policy documents, existing national research and national good practice initiatives, projects and tools related to reducing gender stereotypes, specifically in relation to boys\*, men\*, masculinities and care.

### 2.1. Policy contexts

Researchers assessed relevant national policy documents and the official curriculum for kindergarten and primary school's first grades including children up to 10 years old with the following analytical questions:

- Is gender equality explicitly addressed in early childhood education policies, and how?
- Is gender equality framed only as a 'girls\*' issue' or are boys\* and non-binary gender identities are also spotlighted, and how?
- Are gender stereotypes explicitly and proactively addressed?
- Which stereotypes specifically?
- Is care explicitly named as a biased, gendered issue?
- Are stereotypes related to educational and occupational choices of not only girls\*, but also boys\*, mentioned?
- Do policies about desegregation of the labour market address only the STEM sector or also the EHW sector?
- Is hidden curriculum addressed in the policy documents in relation to the gender stereotypes, particularly related to boys\* and care?
- How do policies tackle diversity of children?
- Is the intersectional approach related to mutual co-effect of gender with "race"/ethnicity, religion, citizenship status, health and/or class (and any other relevant social category) taken into consideration?
- Is there a national institution aimed at doing research/providing guidelines on gender and early childhood?
- Which strategies/recommendations/mechanisms/tools/measures for teachers (if any) are proposed for reducing gender stereotypes?

Research from partner's organizations in Bulgaria, Italy and Slovenia analyzed relevant national policy documents and the official curriculum for early childhood education and care (ECEC), while researchers from partner's organizations in Austria, Germany and Lithuania analyzed also the policy documents referring to primary school education.

#### *ECEC services*

The legal and organisational structure in the field of ECEC vary in the six participating countries. In Austria and Germany, the ECEC is regulated by federal states, while in Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania and Slovenia the ECEC is part of the educational system under the responsibility of the state and ministries and regulations at the local level (for example, municipality).

In **Austria**, the early childhood system is regulated by the nine federal states, meaning that there is no uniform legislation of ECEC. Kindergarten (3- 6 years of age) and crèches (up to 3 years of age) are established under municipalities, churches and private providers (Suppan and Scambor, 2021). Kindergarten is compulsory for children at the age of 5 (Eurdyice, 2021). The last year of



kindergarten, the year before primary school starts, is compulsory as well. Children who have reached the age of five must attend a kindergarten half a day (at least 20 hours per week).

In **Germany**, similarly as in Austria, relevant policy documents and laws regarding ECEC are under the responsibility of 16 federal states. Early childhood education and care is provided by private and public child and youth welfare facilities for children before they enter the primary school (between 5 and 7 years of age), which is compulsory (Holtermann et al., 2021).

**Italy**, on the other hand, in 2017 introduced an integrated system of early childhood education for children between 0 and 6 years of age. Services for children in the age 0 - 3 are managed by local authorities, public bodies or private providers based on the state and regional regulations. Attendance of children in kindergarten is not obligatory, while primary education is compulsory. The Ministry of Education is responsible for allocation of financial resources to local authorities, provision of educational guidelines and promotion on an integrated system of ECEC in the local level (Di Grigoli, Bernacchi and Bicocchi, 2022). The Ministry of Education, University and Research is responsible for preschools (for the age 3-6), which are run by public and private entities.

In **Slovenia**, the ECEC is an integral part of the educational system under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. It is organised uniformly for all children from the age of 11 months to 6 years, or until they enter primary school. By law, education is a public good and is part of the public service provided by public and private kindergartens, which are obliged to follow the principles, objectives and guidelines of the national curriculum (Hrženjak and Humer, 2021). The inclusion of children in kindergartens is obligatory one year before the primary school.

In **Lithuania**, the ECEC is also included in the education system and its provision is divided into two parts: non-obligatory preschool education, and similarly to Slovenia, compulsory one year before entering the school (at the age 5 or 6). Pre-primary education in the last year before entering the school aims to prepare children for primary school education. The state, municipal and private ECEC institutions receive state funding (different degree of funding) (Orechova and Frišmantaitė, 2021).

In **Bulgaria**, the ECEC is provided in nurseries, kindergartens, and primary schools. Nurseries (from 3 months to 3 years of age) are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health, while kindergartens (from 3 to 7 years of age) are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Science. Kindergartens are public (municipal) and private. In comparison to Slovenia and Lithuania, where the last year of kindergarten is compulsory, in Bulgaria the last two years of preschool education (between the ages 5 and 7), are compulsory and aimed to prepare children for school. Amendment of the law adopted in 2022 in force from school year 2023 envisages preschool education to be in the last three years (between the ages 4 and 7). The institutions within the preschool and school education system are, similarly as in Slovenia, legal entities and managed by local authorities (Kmetova et al., 2021).

The main ECEC policy documents in the six countries are:

- Austria: Educational Framework Plan (2010).
- Germany: laws at federal level, which are the Constitution of Germany, the Eight Social Code and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Child and Youth Strengthening Act (2021) and legislation of the level of federal states.
- Italy: Guidelines for the Integrated System for Ages 0-6 (Legislative Decree no. 65; 2017), National Recommendations and New Scenarios (2018).
- Slovenia: Kindergartens Act (1996), the White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (2011) and the Curriculum for Kindergartens (1999).
- Bulgaria: for nurseries - Health Act (2004) and Ordinance № 26 (2008) of the Ministry of Health. For preschool and school education - The Preschool and School Education Act (2016), Ordinance on Inclusive Education (2017), the State Educational Standard on Inclusive Education, Ordinance No. 5 (2016), the State Educational Standard for Preschool Education, Ordinance No. 13 (2016) and Ordinance № 10 (2017) on the reference books, textbooks, and teaching material.
- Lithuania: Methodological Guidelines for Pre-School Education (2015) and the National Education Strategy 2013 - 2022.

In **Austria**, the Educational Framework Plan (2010) is a federal education framework plan with guidelines for pedagogues, vocational school and those involved in the implementation on the level of federal states. Kindergarten and crèches are described as complementary and supportive institutions to education and care in the family, while kindergartens (children from 3 to 6 years) are recognized also as a place of social interactions with peers and aimed to prepare children for school (Suppan and Scambor, 2021, p. 6). However, as emphasized by Suppan and Scambor (2021, p. 5), the legal implementation of the educational plan is missing in most of the Austrian federal states. Among the principles stated in the document is also gender sensitive education with the aim "*to support girls\* and boys\*, regardless of their gender, in developing different potentials of their personality*" (Educational Framework Plan, 2009, p. 7). It addresses the context of sexuality and gender identity, promotes positive attitudes towards sexuality and prevention of sexualized violence. The cooperation with parents is addressed, but lacking the reference to parent's work in regard to gender and care (for example, engaging fathers). However, the commitment of gender sensitive pedagogy implementation in preschool education depends on pedagogues' knowledge, resources and engagement (ibid.). In the existing curriculum of vocational schools for ECEC employees, gender is mainly considered as a binary concept.

In **Germany**, the Constitution prohibits discrimination based on gender, while the Eight Social Code also addresses the promotion of gender equality. Further, the Child and Youth Strengthening Act (2021) widens the formulation concerning different life situations also to "*transgender, non-binary and intersex young people ... reduce disadvantages and promote gender equality*" (Holtermann et al., 2021, p. 11). According to Holtermann et al. (2021), in seven out of sixteen federal states in Germany gender is not explicitly mentioned, while care is represented in all ECEC laws in federal states. Care and caring apply to educational institutions' aims in relation to child development and strengthening children's social skills, in relation to diversity and democracy, in relation to self-care and health care, nature and non-violent education. In the ECEC laws of federal states gender is considered mainly in the context that education facilities enable participation regardless of gender and in relation to gender equality as a social value (ibid.). Furthermore, in educational plans of the federal states there are big differences in the scope, content and negotiations of gender. Rejection of gender stereotypes is stated, while some of educational plans

also reproduce gender stereotypes. The relation between care and masculinities is lacking in educational plans. According to Holtermann et al. (2021, p. 63), gender-reflective pedagogy is marginal in the training of pedagogical staff, while care and masculinities are not topics in any of the framework curricula for future pedagogues.

In **Italy** the Guidelines for the Integrated System for Ages 0-6 (Legislative Decree no. 65) addresses concepts, such as identity, autonomy, citizenship, gender diversity and recognizes families “*as partners in educational alliance*” (Di Grigoli, Bernacchi and Biccocchi, 2022). As stated in the document one of the aims of ECEC is “*formulation of a gender identity free of stereotypes ... self-care*” (ibid.). Guidelines are promoting gender sensitive pedagogy in the areas of family, curriculum, organization of activities, space and services. However, the guidelines refer to gender as a binary concept and gender stereotypes are not clarified through examples, but mainly in the context of the guidelines' overall goals. No manuals or guidelines on how to structure activities with children and families are provided, nor is the hidden curriculum mentioned as an educational issue that requires intervention. In the document National Recommendations and New Scenarios, as a supplement to the Guidelines for the Integrated System for Ages 0-6, there is no specific focus on gender sensitive pedagogy for ECEC. The Italian legislation in the field of ECEC lacks regulations regarding explicit attention to gender-sensitive education for boys\* from early childhood. In the whole education system Law no. 107, 2015 - Reform of the national education and training system emphasizes equal opportunities in all levels of education, prevention of gender violence and discrimination. The Extraordinary Action Plan against sexual and gender-based violence (2015) emphasizes the initiatives for prevention of sexual and gender based violence. The Guidelines Educating to Respect: for gender equality, prevention of gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination (2015) introduced by the Ministry of Education also refer to gender equality and diversity, to the gender sensitive use of language and the prevention of violence against women\* and discrimination (Di Grigoli, Bernacchi and Biccocchi, 2022) .

In **Lithuania** the National Education Strategy 2013 - 2022 does not address any specific goals for the ECEC and the notion of gender is missing, while the lack of male educators in educational institutions is seen as a numerical problem only. There is no national curriculum for ECEC. Providers of ECEC develop their curriculum based on the Methodological Guidelines for Pre-School Education (2015) by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, while the pre-primary education is based on General Curriculum Framework for Pre-primary Education (2015). The Methodological Guidelines for Pre-School Education (2015) address the role of kindergarten teachers, who are responsible for providing the largest possible range of options for all children, such as the ability for girls\* and boys\* to play with toys of their interest. The guidelines also recognize different “*needs of girls\* and boys\* from different cultural backgrounds, gifted, bilingual, migrant, socially excluded and other special educational needs*” (Orechova and Frišmantaitė, 2021, p. 9). Stereotypes are addressed in the context of division of labour in the family and by teaching children that both girls\* and boys\* can do the household work.

The document also addresses implicit gender stereotypes of teachers by stating that female kindergarten teachers do not sufficiently understand boys\* and, therefore, boys\* tend to be more criticised in early education settings due to the way education is organised. This does not meet their needs (ibid.). On one hand teachers are encouraged to reflect on their work, attitudes and behaviours in regard to work with children, while on the other hand there are no tools provided. Besides, the guidelines state that due to the lack of male kindergarten teachers, female kindergarten teachers shall enable children to talk to and do activities with male employees in the kindergarten (for example, a carpenter or a janitor).

Orechova and Frišmantaitė (2021, p. 9) emphasize that some parts of the guidelines involve gender stereotypical generalizations by denoting physical differences between boys\* and girls\* and their implications for development at an early age. Apart from the policy documents in the field of ECEC, researchers also highlight strategical documents in the field of gender equality, such as The Law on Equal Treatment of the Republic of Lithuania (2003/2019), The Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (1998/2016) and the National Programme for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 2015 - 2021. The main emphasis in these documents in relation to education are equal opportunities, anti-discrimination in education programmes, teaching material and content, and protection against sexual harassment (ibid.).

In **Slovenia**, the Curriculum for Kindergartens (1999) describes kindergartens as a place where feelings of social belonging based on equality and non-discrimination (according to personal circumstances, including gender) are developed, and a place where a "*gender identity is developed safely*" (Hrženjak and Humer, 2021). However, there is more than a passing reference to the development of gender identity in the documents. The role of kindergarten teachers is to facilitate and foster the equal inclusion of children in a variety of activities regardless of personal circumstances of gender, physical and mental constitution, ethnicity, cultural background and religion. It is the role of teachers to avoid stereotyping (both when working with and interacting with children) and to avoid sexist use of language.

Inclusion in pre-school education is recognised as crucial for children from marginalised social groups (Roma children are mentioned), as it enables greater social inclusion and increases the chances of escaping poverty. Gender stereotypes are mentioned in the documents as existing in society, however, kindergartens are have to strive to overcome them. The hidden curriculum is explicitly named in key policy documents stating that it is implemented in everyday kindergarten practices such as communication, interaction, rules for controlling time and space, etc., which can have a greater educational impact on children than defined educational activities.

The document includes examples for each of the activity areas (movement, language, art, society, nature and mathematics), which are divided for the first (1-3) and second (3-6) age groups of children. The example refers to the acquisition of experience through changing roles "*linked to gender difference*", e.g. through play and activities such as housework, childcare, different occupations, etc. In the area of movement activities, for example, the importance of involving girls\* and boys\* in different activities of this kind is highlighted. In social activities, e.g. children aged 1 to 3 years get experience of changing roles, get to know the kindergarten environment, learn about and talk about things, etc., while children aged 3 to 6 years get to know the local community (excursions, visits to different institutions like the fire brigade, the theatre), learn about different occupations and acquire social skills.

Gender equality in early childhood education is considered in the context of equal opportunities for girls\* and boys\*. Gender equality concerns both women\* and men\*, as is evident in particular in the gender equality document The Resolution on the National Programme for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 2015-2020, which argues for increase of the number of girls\* and boys\* in those educational programmes where they are under-represented. The perception of gender equality in the reviewed policy documents is limited to the gender binarism (girls\* - boys\*). Trainings for preschool and school teachers are offered in the Catalog of further education and training programs for professionals in preschool and school education by The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, however, topics of gender equality and gender stereotypes are rarely included (Hrženjak and Humer, 2021).

In the field of ECEC in **Bulgaria**,<sup>7</sup> the main policy documents for nurseries are the Health Act (2004) and Ordinance No. 26 (2008) of the Ministry of Health, aiming to support families in raising children. The Preschool and School Education Act (2016) regulates the provision of preschool and school education and the structure, functions, organization, management, and financing. Additionally, the Ordinance on Inclusive Education (2017) determines the State Educational Standard on Inclusive Education, while the Ordinance No. 5 (2016) by the Minister of Education and Science, determines the content and the scope of the State Educational Standard for Preschool Education. Furthermore, the Ordinance No. 13 (2016) on the Civic, Health, Environmental and Intercultural Education is issued by the Minister of Education and Science. In the latter document it is stated that preschool children develop ideas about their gender, and basic ideas about differences between women\* and men\*. The Ordinance No. 10 (2017) determines the educational requirements and the procedure of their approval. The list of resources for teachers in ECEC needs to be approved by the Minister of Education and Science.

The State Educational Standard for Preschool Education defines the educational fields of ECEC, their objectives, content and learning outcomes for different age groups. The main educational fields are Bulgarian language and literature, mathematics, the surrounding world, arts, music, design, technology, and physical culture. Every ECEC institution has to develop its own pedagogical plan and curriculum based on the state educational requirements for the preschool education.

Policy context on gender equality in Bulgaria refers to the Law on Equality between Women and Men (2016) and National Strategy for promoting equality between women and men for the period 2021-2030, which are very general documents and partly cover also gender stereotypes in education and career promotion of in STEM. In the field of gender equality and education policy, documents cover the Protection against Discrimination Act (2005), which refers also to kindergarten curriculum to cover gender equality. Furthermore, The National Strategy for the Development of Pedagogical Staff (2014 - 2020) emphasizes the problem of feminization of professions, while the Strategic Framework for Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 - 2030) does not contain any provisions on gender equality for any level of education. In pedagogical universities in Bulgaria, there are no required courses on gender sensitive pedagogy. According to Kmetova et al. (2021), gender sensitive education is not a subject of public debate nor of the debate in the professional community.

### ***Primary school education***

In **Austria** the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung) has legislative and implementation responsibility for primary and secondary education. The main policy document is the decree "Reflexive gender pedagogy and gender equality circular" (No. 21/2018) by the Ministry of Education, Science and Research. State schools are obliged to promote gender equality, while pedagogues are encouraged, but not obliged to implement the policy. The document represents a guiding framework for the implementation of gender equality in schools. Among the goals stated in the document are also; dismantling gender stereotypical allocations and fixations, dismantling of prejudices against boys\* and men, interest in the education and health sector, and reflection about one's own career and life plans. In the curriculum of vocational schools for educators at the university level, gender and

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<sup>7</sup> In Bulgaria the term "gender" should be understood in its biological and binary dimensions, as in the Bulgarian language for both "gender" and "sex" only one word is used; "пол" (Kmetova et al., 2021, p. 13).

diversity issues are present with varying emphasizes from institution to institution (Suppan and Scambor, 2021 p. 5). In Vienna, for example,

*“gender mainstreaming is embedded in the curriculum as a cross-sectional issue, module-specific and interdisciplinary. Gender know-how, gender competence and gender sensitivity are promoted in teaching and research with the aim of promoting equal opportunities for women\* and men\* in professional, cultural, material and psychosocial terms.”* (ibid. p. 6).

The education framework is very general and leaves a lot of space for interpretation of gender sensitive pedagogy with no practical guidance on how to implement gender sensitive pedagogy in practice (ibid.).

In comparison to ECEC laws in **Germany**, gender is explicitly mentioned in all education laws in federal states, in the following areas: sex education, gender mainstreaming/gender justice, access to educational institutions regardless of gender, vocational consulting and non-discriminatory materials (Holtermann et al., 2021, p. 14). In relation to gender and care, the School Act of Bavaria specifically addresses boys\* and young men\* as future fathers in order to encourage them to equally share family and household work. The Bremen School Act emphasizes special pedagogical guidance in cases of violation of dignity of girls\*, women\*, homosexuals and religious, cultural and ethnic groups (ibid., p. 16). Also, different aspects of care are in all school laws, mainly referring to educational goals, in the context of sex education and in specific areas of the responsibility of elementary school.

The ECEC and school laws in federal states that do address gender establish a value framework for educational institutions by focusing on broad goals like "gender equity" or "protection against discrimination." The specific educational strategies, how to achieve these objectives are scarcely articulated. According to Holtermann et al. (2021), a relation of masculinities and caring is missing in the educational plans.

In **Lithuania**, primary education is included in the broad understanding of early education and is provided until age 11. Curriculum for primary education is implemented in line with the Description of the Primary Education Curriculum, General Curriculum Framework for Primary Education and General Teaching Plans approved by the Minister for Education and Science. Teachers have the autonomy of creating and implementing their own teaching plans, but there are more regulations and constraints on the primary education level compared to pre-primary or pre-school (Orechova and Frišmantaitė, 2021).

In the context of sexual education on the level of primary education the programme Health, Sexuality, Education and Preparation for Family (2016) by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport shall be included in all subjects of primary curriculum. The programme emphasizes equality of women\* and men\*. According to the programme, children in grades 1 to 2 (ages 7-8) should learn and understand that there are no "male" and "female" duties in the family and that everyone is accountable for the family's well-being (ibid.).

To assist teachers with the implementation of the programme, an Advice for Teachers on Sexuality Education and Family Preparation in Primary Education (2017) was introduced. It recognizes sexuality as a vital component of a person's well-being. The guidelines cover a variety of topics (heteronormative family concepts, sexual maturation, self-control), each of which is accompanied by suggestions for how and what to talk to children about, what activities to organize, what tools to use, and what the goal of talking about each topic should be. Teachers are expected to integrate these themes into their own lesson plans based on their students' needs. The guidelines also provide

examples, which according to Orechova and Frišmantaitė (2021), illustrate a binary and generally restrictive understanding of gender.

To summarize, the analysis of ECEC policy documents and other relevant documents for pedagogues in partners' countries show that gender, gender equality, diversity and care are addressed to a certain degree and lacking in some cases. For example, in some of the educational plans in federal states in Germany gender is not even mentioned, in Lithuania gender is mainly considered as non-entity in ECEC, where teachers decide about the curriculum based on the methodological guidelines, which do not address gender in early childhood.

On the other hand, in **Slovenia** gender equality is stated as a fundamental right in ECEC, mainly perceived in terms of equal opportunities. In the policy context of Italy, gender equality is strongly linked to prevention of gender-based violence and discrimination. Furthermore, in ECEC policy analyses, gender is mainly considered as a binary concept, lacking the inclusion of trans\* and non-binary\* identities. Gender equality and gender stereotypes are formulated in a more general way without specific, concrete guidelines for preschool teachers, how to integrate these topics in their everyday activities with children.

In some policy documents of some federal states in **Germany** and in policy guidelines for preschool education in Lithuania, researchers pointed to reproduction of gender stereotypes in analyzed documents. In relation to educational and occupational choices, for example, in **Bulgaria** only STEM professions are addressed, while in **Austria** and **Slovenia** policy documents also pointed to the need to eliminate gender stereotypes and prejudices against boys\*, who are interested in education and health sectors. Hidden curriculum is explicitly addressed in policy documents and national curriculum in Slovenia. Topics of care are included in kindergartens' activities in the context of self-care, in relation to the introduction of different occupations (doctor, teacher, nurse, etc.) and activities related to the topic of division of labour in the families (Lithuania, Slovenia).

The common denominator in all six national reports is first, small percentages of male kindergarten teachers in ECEC, which is the largest in **Germany** (7.5%), while for **Bulgaria** there is no available data. Secondly, there is a complete lack of addressing boys\*/men\* and care in ECEC policy contexts, and a lack of regulation considering gender sensitive pedagogy.

Policy contexts of primary school education pays slightly more attention to the issues of masculinities in gender equality. For instance, in **Austria** the main policy document explicitly addresses the need to eliminate gender stereotypes against boys\*, who are interested in education and careers in the field of education and health care. While in **Germany**, for example, the School Act of Bavaria perceives boys\* and young men\* as future fathers, and thus encourages them to equally share family and household work.

## 2.2. Research state of the art

Concerning research state of the art, each partner selected 3-5 relevant timely national studies about gender-sensitive education tackling gender stereotypes related to boys\*/men/masculinities and/or care in early childhood education and provided its findings.

Generally, a lack of systematic national research on gender sensitive education and gender stereotyping can be observed. Existing research is of small scale, fragmented and produced within the different action projects or within diploma, master and doctoral thesis. In all partner countries, very limited numbers of studies exist on early childhood education that in some ways approach the subjects of gender and gender stereotypes. There is even less research that focus specifically on the masculinities and on the gender stereotypes around masculinity and care. The existing research on gender-sensitive education focuses on girls\* and STEM skills, while masculinities and EHW skills are backsliding. In some countries, for instance in Italy, masculinity is taken into consideration only in adolescence with focus on formation of toxic masculinities and gender-based violence. Nevertheless, some small-scale research, for instance in Slovenia, points out that boys\* can be even more affected by gender stereotypes in kindergartens than girls\*.

When boys\* undertake activities or behaviour that are stereotypically female, (i.e., being emotional, playing with dolls, wearing skirts or coloured nails, etc.), they experience social pressure. On the other hand, when girls\* engage in stereotypical 'masculine' areas (like playing with cars, playing football, socializing with boys\*, etc.) they often receive approval from their social environment. Older children in primary schools and adolescents are spotlighted more frequently in research than early childhood education. The Lithuanian national report has provided a meaningful explanation for that. While an absence of gender perspective in early childhood curricula is explained as a 'too early' period to implement gender lenses, a conflation of gender with sexuality frames gender issues in higher grades of primary school as a primarily sexual education (which is often reduced to biology or is even absent).

In **Germany**, most research related to gender-sensitive education and masculinities has been conducted primarily within sociology, not within education. Lithuanian report states an observed lack of gender competencies in educational research - while gender is included as a statistical variable, it is not thoroughly explored. In general, the lack of an interdisciplinary approach that would connect the fields of education with gender studies, critical studies of men\* and masculinity, and different social disciplines, can be observed.

In **Austria** a recent survey in the frame of the EU project DEE<sup>8</sup>, targeted experts in early childhood education. Among many themes, special attention was paid to gender equality policies in the education system and the challenges the education system faces in applying a gender-sensitive approach. The most frequent response to the question about obstacles and risks to the implementation of gender equality measures in the education system was "lack of well-trained professionals", followed by "political decisions" and "lack of information". Measures to improve the situation were suggested, such as: binding guidelines for the implementation of gender equality, mandatory training for teachers, monitoring, campaigns and awareness raising, and voluntary in-service training for pedagogical staff. The following best practices regarding work with children and young people were mentioned. Employees of municipal institutions have completed a 16-day multiplier training on the topic of "Prejudice-conscious education and training", and they pass on their newfound knowledge to their institutions.

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<sup>8</sup> Diversity, Equality and Inclusion in pre-primary Education and Care <https://deeplus.wixsite.com/deep/dee-output>



Social workers (in mobile youth work in Vienna), reach out to young people outside institutions and help them to exercise their rights and opportunities in all areas of life. Projects such as Boys in Care, Girls' Day and Boys' Day were promoted as good practices as well. Frey and Hirtl (2020), in their diploma thesis, developed a longitudinal analysis of how children's books depict diversity of families. They found out that alternative family forms have been increasingly portrayed in the children's books since 2000, however, the portrayal of genders continues to follow traditional roles and norms.

In **Bulgaria**, a survey, conducted among over 270 female and male schoolteachers in the scope of the Career Rocket project<sup>9</sup> implemented in 2017-2019, has shown that over 50% of interviewees did not receive training on the issue of gender equality during their university education. Over 70% of the participants have not taken a specialized training on the topic in the last 3 years. 50% of men\* and 44.5% of women\* would like to increase their knowledge on teaching topics related to gender equality.

The last comprehensive research about potential gender discrimination in the content of textbooks and teaching materials in preschool, primary and low secondary education was done in 2011 by an independent team of experts assigned by the Bulgarian Commission for Protection against Discrimination. The conclusion was that, concerning gender, direct discrimination is not revealed, but there is indirect discrimination based on the construction and affirmation of the principle of repetition of certain stereotypes that assign different roles and representation of men\* and women\* in the social world. In this way, the stereotype is transformed into a discriminatory category, insofar as it imposes certain and unequal spheres of activity of female and male subjects, respectively boys\* and girls\* (Commission for Protection against Discrimination of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2011, p. 8).<sup>10</sup>

In **Italy**, the scholarship on the processes of gender segregation in early childhood education started in 1970s when the feminist movement had placed emphasis on gender-based inequalities, particularly relating to girls\* (Giannini, Belotti, 1973). From that date onward, there was a growing interest in schools and educational systems, with analyses highlighting the aspects of educational systems that contribute to constructing gender from a binary perspective (Ulivieri, 1999; 2007) in accordance with what has been defined as "gender cages" (Biemmi, Leonelli, 2016).

However, the idea of involving men\* in efforts to fight against the patriarchy would not catch research attention until the late 1990s. The first sets of theories were developed from a historical perspective (Vaudagna, 1991; Bellassai, 2004, 2011; Benadusi, 2005) and later, from sociological (Ciccone, 2009, 2019; Fidolini, 2019; Mauceri, 2015; Pacilli, 2020; Rinaldi, 2018; Ruspini, 2009) and philosophical viewpoints (Gasparini, 2016, 2020). These studies still represent a minority perspective within the field of gender studies, which in itself is a minority in academia. However, in terms of the field of pedagogy, gender analysis is still primarily aimed at analysing situations of social and educational disadvantage among young girls\*, adolescent girls\*, and women\*, with few exceptions (Burgio, 2012, 2021) which analyse the models through which toxic masculinity is constructed in adolescence in relation to both intra-gender and inter-gender violence.

Regarding the research aimed at investigating models of caring masculinity in early childhood, the only specific focus of investigation concerns the presence of male educators (Ottaviano and Persico, 2020). There is still no specific pedagogical attention on boys\*, in this regard as the focus remains on girls\* and, at most, a reflection on boys\* emerges in relation to the prevention of abusive male

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<sup>9</sup> <http://career-rocket.eu/>

<sup>10</sup> National independent study of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination of the Republic of Bulgaria on the topic: "Stereotypes and prejudices in textbooks, teaching aids and educational programs and plans for pre-school and elementary education".

attitudes towards women\* starting from early childhood. As extensively reported in the report, this is due to the recent affirmation of critical studies on men\* and masculinities in the educational scientific landscape and to the difficulty of combining them with childhood studies.

In **Slovenia**, the evidence and analysis of gender stereotypes in early childhood education is fragmented and produced primarily on the level of diploma and master theses, while a comprehensive national research is lacking. This small-scale research evidence shows that gender stereotypes are formed already in the preschool period in both boys\* and girls\*, and that both younger and older pre-school children show stereotyping.

Children of both genders are more stereotyped towards boys\* than girls\*, as they are less likely to approve of boys\* doing things that are socially defined for girls\* than vice versa (Grčman, 2019). Gender stereotypes and gender-based differentiation are expressed also in verbal and non-verbal communication between teachers and children, with the interviewed female teachers expressing a low level of awareness and reflection of their own stereotypes (Kovšca, 2020). The role of hidden curriculum has been highlighted in gender differentiation of children in kindergartens. Different representations of gender roles stem from gender stereotypes and beliefs of both teachers and parents. Empirical evidence has shown subtle discrimination against boys\* who are raised in a more stereotypical way compared to girls\*, and within the confines of traditional gender roles of masculinity.

Gender non-stereotypical behaviour of girls\* is received more positively by teachers compared to gender non-stereotypical behaviour of boys\*. For example, boys\* are taught not to show too much emotion, to stand up for themselves, to be more physically active than girls\*, and not to break out of traditional masculinity frames with their appearance (e.g., long hair). The author also points out that teachers in kindergartens lack knowledge and competence in the field of gender equality (Bandelj, 2009).

With regards to the position of male kindergarten teachers in Slovenia, the results, based on interviews with parents, teachers and kindergarten managers, of a master thesis (Revinšek, 2015) suggest that male teachers are accepted and wanted in kindergartens. The main reasons for the low proportion of male teachers are stereotypical perceptions that it is a female profession and a lack of incentives for males to take up the profession.

An overview of existing education research in terms of gender (stereotypes) and early care in **Lithuanian** research showed that the notion of sex/gender is often conflated with sexuality. Gender only becomes relevant when it is perceived as a quality that 'is about to be used', i.e., when the pupil is considered to be capable of having sex. Therefore, gender/sex is discussed in the frame of sex(quality) education and this area then pertains only to research concerned with adolescents (at least 14 years of age). There is a widespread understanding of gender as something belonging to and experienced by teenagers and adults rather than young children.

Vaišnoraitė's (2008) Master's thesis analyses gender stereotypes expressed by 5–6 year old preschool children. It is the only scientific work that deals with gender stereotypes in early care and education. It includes interviews with children and surveys of teachers and parents. In the children's interviews, the participants are asked to describe 'a real man' and 'a real woman'. The thesis discusses three main settings which influence children's understanding of what such figures are like: the family, the preschool institution, and the media. It is noted that preschool institutions lack the means to work against or educate children about gender stereotypes, despite preschool education being highly important and formational for the children.

The results of the parents' survey also show contradictory bias: while most parents do not think that women\* are better educational workers, a huge percentage would still prefer female, not male preschool teachers to care for their children. While not scientifically robust, this thesis provides

much raw material on how widespread gender stereotypes among children, parents and teachers were in the first decade of 2000. It also shows that preschool teachers then clearly lacked skills and motivation to identify and deal with negative stereotyping.

Brandišauskienė and Maslienė (2014) analyses how children play at preschool institutions with a focus on play situations and game types in 64 kindergartens in the three biggest Lithuanian cities. It concludes that children prefer playing in mixed gender groups, but games in single-gender groups tend to be gender-specific. What such gender-specific games look like is only implied in the list of different types of games, where roleplay games are noted in respective grammatical genders (for example, “firemen” or “[female] fairies”). It discusses that such gender differences in game types most probably build on stereotypical gender roles. The article thus claims that stereotypical gender roles in the games of preschool children exist, but the methods of eliminating stereotypes or the teachers’ role are not discussed in the article. In general, gender is not thoroughly applied in the study, but only used as a statistical variable. The study of Grigaliūnienė and Rutkienė (2020) analyses gender bias in mathematics textbooks for fifth-grade students (usually aged 10–11) by analysing the textbooks’ contextual content, illustrations as well as the wording of the exercises and explanations that include human characters. Most characters in the exercises or problem descriptions are male. Some categories, for example, exercises about transport, describe almost only men\* driving various vehicles, while female characters are referred to as passengers. A clear gender segregation is noticed in exercises about work or free-time activities, where men\* are described as professionals, while women\* are placed in the private setting as homemakers or carers. In the exercises where both genders are present, male characters are always described as smarter, stronger than and generally superior to female characters. The study concludes that, even though some textbooks include more norm-breaking contextual material than others, all of them express strong gender stereotypes. It is also suggested that teachers should be critical not only of the factual academic content of the textbooks, but also of the underlying contextual information. That is, the authors of this article see the teacher’s personal involvement and critical sense as one of the solutions. The authors of textbooks, on the other hand, are encouraged to portray different genders in equal proportion and in varying, non-stereotypical settings. The recommendations are thus directed to the individual teacher or author, while the lack of official regulations concerning negative stereotyping in teaching material is not commented on. Such fixation on the individual is problematic, as it is unlikely that most teachers and authors are able and/or willing to identify and correct gender bias.

In **Germany** framework conditions for gender sensitive pedagogy and different negotiation of gender in early childhood education, in relation to caring masculinity, has been relatively comprehensively spotlighted in research. It has been indicated that the presented studies show only a small section of the current debates. However, most discussions take place in the sociological field, while pedagogical implementations of the caring masculinity notion, especially in the area of day-care centres and primary schools, are not to be found.

The **coordination office Men in Kitas** (ECEC)<sup>11</sup> has produced numerous publications on the topic of "Men and Gender in Kitas" from 2010 - 2019. These include practical handouts on the topics of career orientation, gender in pedagogical work, public relations, general suspicion, work with parents and fathers, organisational and personnel development and men's work groups as well as information on gender-sensitive training of educators.

Cremers, Klingel and Stützel (2020) investigated how early childhood education professionals deal with the demands and changes to achieve more gender equality in day-care centres. Through the evaluation of team-internal group discussions, four types were formed which illustrate the different

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<sup>11</sup> [Startseite MiK \(koordination-maennerinkitas.de\)](http://Startseite_MiK_(koordination-maennerinkitas.de))

approaches to the topic of gender, heterogeneity within the team as well as confrontation with gender norms and performance.

Teams of Type I Accentuation of Personal Identity exhibit a complementary mode of collaboration in which the focus is primarily on individual abilities and preferences. Gender attributions and identifications receive only secondary attention and are perceived as individual character traits. The gender-related practice is cooperative in that gender-related input from children is responded to, but there is no proactive thematization or fundamental questioning. The teams are heterogeneous in both gender and age composition. Type II teams are homogeneously older and female, with a strong sense of "we" and a search for personal agreement and harmony. Gender-related identity characteristics have great relevance insofar as men\* in the ECEC are constructed as categorically different and inferior. In practice, gender stereotypes are recognized as powerful and accepted indifferently. Type III Side by side, but together team shows a different manifestation in that the shared work is traditionally divided along gender lines. However, the gendered areas of work are perceived as positive in their division, thus reinforcing gender-stereotypical identity norms. This is also evident in the gendered practices of action, which reinforce gender-stereotypical differences. Type III teams are homogeneously older but gender heterogeneous.

Homogeneously younger, but gender heterogeneous as well as male and female homogeneous are teams of type IV Reflexive Reference to Difference. These teams work together flexibly and heterarchically; tasks are distributed situationally according to the children's well-being and interest. Identity norms are actively reflexively dealt with and gender-stereotypical attributions are consciously changed. This leads to an offensive gender-related practice, which includes awareness raising and non-stereotypical interventions, e.g., also in the exchange with parents. In her review article, Kubandt (2016) clarifies the importance of gender equity, as ECEC are obliged to promote gender equality within the framework of child and youth welfare according to Social Code VIII (Child and Youth Welfare Act).

Kubandt names challenges for supporting institutions and pedagogical professionals in childhood education who want to work in a gender-sensitive way: These include the diverse and hardly specified terminology in the education and orientation plans, such as gender-conscious, gender-sensitive and/or gender-oriented. This theoretical ambiguity results in a corresponding practical uncertainty as to how the terms can be implemented pedagogically. Kubandt (2016: 11) says:

*"With regard to educational policy debates and formulations in the education plans, however, it is not sufficiently defined what is to be understood by the avoidance of stereotypes in the context of 'gender' and how these are to be countered in everyday educational practice. Especially when on the one hand the recognition of differences becomes the starting point of the demands, but at the same time stereotypes are to be avoided, the question arises in particular (from) when gender differences or differentiations are problematic or are regarded as stereotypes".*

This situation leads to professionals in practice not knowing how to implement gender-responsive pedagogy. This is reflected in statements such as "We treat everyone the same". Against this background, Kubandt gives recommendations for training on the topic of gender justice, self-reflection on one's own role and working with case studies. Pangritz (2020) in her dissertation makes clear that caring masculinities do not guarantee the absence of hegemonic masculinities but can also be reproduced by them. She draws on the model of hybrid masculinities within which specific female characteristics are integrated while simultaneously hegemonic masculinity is reproduced. The results of the quantitative survey among prospective pedagogical professionals suggest a hinge function between devaluation through feminisation and punitive educational orientation. Punitiveness in this case means that behaviour that deviates from the norm is punished. Pangritz concludes with pedagogical implications that are specifically aimed at political education. The central point is to develop a critical ability to act in relation to masculinity(ies).

## 2.3. Examples of existing guidelines and didactical tools for reducing gender stereotypes

In each partner country, recent projects aimed at overcoming gender stereotypes in early childhood education developed by national authorities or NGOs were checked. In particular, we were interested in projects aimed at promoting alternative masculinities, caring masculinities and the promotion of atypical professional choices for boys\*. Examples of existing or recently implemented good practices, pedagogical materials and tools with a focus on masculinities, care and early childhood education were collected. A review of national educational and gender equality policies with regards to gender-sensitive education shows that they do not provide concrete and practical didactic guidance, materials and tools. This has been left to individual projects and mainly to NGOs, who have produced a wide range of materials, guidelines and tools in a number of national and European projects, which are presented on various websites. The vast majority of the examples that we shall provide are the creations of activists, enthusiasts and non-governmental organisations rather than systemic actions.

Moreover, our interview evidence proves that there is an obvious lack of cooperation and networking between NGOs and teachers in kindergartens/schools to transfer good practice and practical tools for gender-sensitive approaches in early education. As the search for materials and self-learning requires a lot of extra work and time from teachers, it would be recommendable that national authorities establish learning platforms of resources at national level with a collection of materials and didactic support created in different national and international projects.

In this regard, an **Austrian platform offered by The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research** represent an example of good practice. The platform provides a collection of offers, actions, materials, websites and manuals on the gender topics such as: gender-sensitive vocational orientation; gender-sensitive pedagogy: violence prevention and health promotion; gender issues/gender relations/political education; self-evaluation and reflection tools for schools.<sup>12</sup>

Another good practice example, platform **Eduthek**<sup>13</sup> also comes from Austria and provides differentiated material for different school levels, from elementary to upper school and for children from three to 19 years old. It offers materials such as audio, video, documents, graphics, interactive material, collections and folders (subject area folders) related to gender, diversity, and gender-sensitive education.

Although the existing material on gender-sensitive education is vast and varied, gender stereotypes related to masculinity and care work are rarely given centre stage. Most materials focus on gender-sensitive pedagogy related to girls\*. In particular, career guidance offers and materials advertised as gender-inclusive or gender-sensitive are often aimed at girls\* and presentation of STEM professions. Materials addressing gender stereotypes of masculinity and care work and introducing boys\* to EHW professions are very rare. Most of the materials are aimed at primary schools, and there is a distinct lack of materials addressing children and teachers in ECEC. Most of the materials provide methods, guidelines and information aimed at teachers, while gender-sensitive didactic tools such as toys, picture books, games etc. aimed directly at children are lacking.

Selected didactic materials, tools and guidelines from national contexts are presented below. The materials have been selected to include primarily those addressing gender-sensitive pedagogy related to gender stereotypes about boys\*/men/masculinities and care in early childhood education. First, we present materials aimed directly at children in kindergarten and lower primary school, addressing the themes of alternative masculinities and care work. The projects and materials that

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/gd/gss/pm\\_fu.html](https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/gd/gss/pm_fu.html)

<sup>13</sup> <https://eduthek.at>

most specifically address gender stereotypes of masculinity and care work are those that aim to dispel gender stereotypes about different professions.

The majority of these didactical tools take the form of card sets and memory games, which represent different professions and activities in gender inclusive ways. Another promising site of deconstructing gender stereotypes related to masculinities and care according to the logic of counter-stereotyping are picture books and fairy tales. In the continuation, gender-sensitive educational tools for teachers are listed. It should be noted, that with very few exceptions which target pedagogical practices related specifically to masculinities and care, most of them address the issues of gender stereotypes in a general way and tackle masculinities and care only implicitly and indirectly. In addition, gender-sensitive resources for teachers in kindergarten are very rare compared to resources for teachers in primary schools.

In the last section, we present sources for gender diversity inclusive pedagogy. Increasingly, teachers are called upon to improve their knowledge about gender diversity and how to deal with it in a classroom situation. Gender diversity and gender inclusivity represent important topics within the gender-sensitive educational approach, because it loosens the gender binaries and consequently also contributes to dismantling gender stereotypes about ‘femininity’ of care rooted in binary and complementary notions of gender. Most of the materials are available only in the national languages. The obvious advantage of the materials produced in the framework of projects funded by the European Union is that they are also available in English.

### ***Sources for children***

In 2017, the Department of Women and Gender Equality of the Federal Province of Tyrol (Austria) created a memo game for children to discover professions and to raise awareness of the broad spectrum of career choices. The game vividly conveys to children the message that both men\* and women\* can pursue all professions.

[https://www.tirol.gv.at/fileadmin/themen/gesellschaft-soziales/frauen/downloads/Anleitung\\_beide\\_Spiel\\_neu\\_2018\\_gesamt.pdf](https://www.tirol.gv.at/fileadmin/themen/gesellschaft-soziales/frauen/downloads/Anleitung_beide_Spiel_neu_2018_gesamt.pdf)

The biv-website (**Academy for Inclusive Education**) provides a collection of tools for children in primary school such as two card sets; “Activities” and “Competencies”, aimed at educational counselling and career orientation. Card sets are accompanied by a guide “So that I know what I can do” (Damit ich weiß, was ich kann).

<https://www.biv-integrativ.at/material/>

Project “**The Weaving of Professions for boys = girls**” (Prizma Foundation, 2016) (Slovenia) raise up the message that young people should make decisions about further education and career choices based on their own desires and interests, and not on the expectations of parents and society. Among many activities, the project included a public competition for pupils' artistic entries on the theme “Women in technology, why not?/Men in early childhood education, why not?”

<TKALNICA-POKLICEV.pdf> (fundacija-prizma.si)

Within the Slovenian project “**Active.All**”, a memory game about professions and activities has been created, which is suitable for both pre-school and schoolchildren.

Figure 2: Memory game "Active.All"



<http://aktivni-vsi.enakostspolov.si/spomin>

The **Slovenian online newspaper for children Časoris**<sup>14</sup> targets primary school children up to grade 6, parents and teachers. Gender stereotypes are addressed through practical examples, discussion questions, informational resources, and awareness-raising videos. Some headlines on gender stereotypes are: “What are gender stereotypes and how to talk about them”; “Girls don't like dusting either”; “Girls can have short hair too!”, “Girls can drive a tractor too. And boys can do ballet”; “Girls can run too, and boys can have long hair”.

The newspaper published a picture book *Lučka and Tine* (by Nina Jelen and Miha Klenovšek, 2018) about a friendship between a girl Lučka who is interested in science and a boy\* Tine who is good in dance. Growing up they face gender stereotypes related to their interests. Nevertheless, as adults Tine becomes a dancer and Lučka a chemistry scientist. The message for to the children is to follow their desires and goals.

<https://casoris.si/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/lucka-in-tine.pdf>

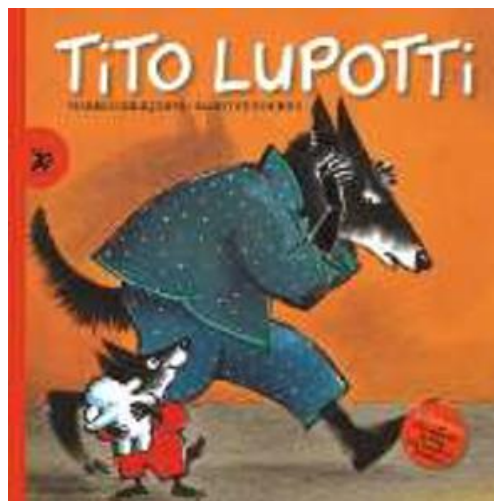
The ongoing project **Boys Day** carried out in Austria and Germany aims at broadening the spectrum of career choices for boys\* who are introduced to care professions in nursing, education and social work. In Austria, the programme has been commissioned by the federal Ministry of social affairs, health, care and consumer protection in the last 15 years and is planned and implemented by organisations in the provinces. However, the main target group are boys\* from the 7th grade onwards (12 to 18 years old, with the majority being between 13 and 15 years old).

Group excursions or open houses at workplaces in care professions where men\* already work are organised for boys\*. In the project activities boys\* are made aware of the professions and that they are considered welcome and competent in caring professions. Boys\* can choose the areas according to their interests. Once a year there is an action day with a big event taking place in Vienna, while the remaining offers are organised throughout the year on demand. Workshops are offered in schools, external institutions or online. In addition, there is teaching material and information for children and pedagogues on the project's website.

<https://www.boysday.at>

Picture-books and fairy tales represent a site where active deconstruction of gender stereotypes are taking place, including those related to boys\*, men\* and masculinities and care work. Since 2011 in Italy new publishing companies (e.g., **Settenove**; **EDT Giralangolo Sottosopra**; **Lo Stampatello**) address gender stereotypes, the cultural roots of gender-based violence, and portray a diversity of family models in response to primary school textbooks that present a highly stereotyped set of images. The anti-princess model is often offered to girls\*, along with promoting STEM subjects, while boys\* are portrayed in situations where they can show their feelings, play with dolls, and not necessarily be heroes.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the fairy tale *Tito Lupotti* (by Judes, Marie-Odile, Bourre, Martine, 2014) targets children at the age of four. The main character is Tito, a wolf who wants to become a florist when he grows up, but has to confront his father's wish to introduce him to the world of hunting. The story flows along two opposite lines with regard to the role of the main character, i.e., on one hand there are the father's (and society) ideas spurring Tito to comply with the traditional masculine line, on the other hand there are Tito's wishes to follow the aspiration of a 'profession' defying masculine traditions.

Figure 3: Cover of the fairy tale book "Tito Lipotti"



In the illustrated book *Una bambola per Alberto* [A Doll for Alberto] (by Zolotow, Charlotte, Delacroix, 2014), the main character is Alberto, a boy\* who is longing to own a doll but has to come to terms with his brother and his friends who make fun of him. In addition, his father wants him to play with a train, as it is more appropriate for boys\*. However, Alberto's grandmother makes the father consider the chance that the boy\* could become a good father one day. The story highlights not only stereotypes linked to masculinity and the choices of toys, but also the topic of caring and masculinity. The book is appropriate for children above the age of 3.

The **Scosse Association** engages in a systematic collection of illustrated books for children between 0 and 6 years of age ("Reading without Stereotypes. Educational for children between 0 and 6 years old to imagine the future" by Fierli Elena, Franchi Giulia, Lancia Giovanna, Marini Sara, 2015). The aim is to employ new literary products as a means to show new generations that it is possible to live in a society without having to feel locked into a stereotype.

In Lithuania there have been contentious cases about two fairy tales that tell a love story between people of the same sex. The story "The Amber Hearth" by Neringa Dangvydė soon after being published, it was effectively banned. While Lithuanian courts maintained that the book is harmful to

<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the new children's literature, see Bernacchi, 2020.



children due to the depiction of homosexual relationships, the case is to be discussed by the Grand College of the European Court of Human Rights in 2022. This example shows that the issues of gender represent a highly controversial and sensitive political topic in some contexts.

Slovenian picture book **“Rozagroza and Plavalava”** (by Saša Eržen, Maruše Ivančič and Kobrowsky, 2016) presents social stereotypes through the different life situations of the main characters in a humorous way and draws attention to the importance of gender equality. The picture book was the basis for the theatre performance *Vijolašola*, which shows in a thoughtful, witty, informative and critical way that children are brought up in stereotypical gender roles. Twins Neža and Anže realise that they are very similar, but also very different. Neža likes to climb trees, build Lego blocks, and kick a ball, while Anže likes to bake cookies, dress up a doll, etc. Their parents constantly remind them what is appropriate for a girl and what is appropriate for a boy\*. In their dreams, however, the monsters *Plavalava* and *Rozagroza* are chasing them, so Anže and Neža decide to set a trap for the monsters and bring them together. From blue and pink, a new colour, purple, is created. That is when they decide to take their parents to *Vijolašola*.

<http://aktivni-vsi.enakostspolov.si/slikanica>

<http://aktivni-vsi.enakostspolov.si/lutkovna-predstava>

**“Gender Matters! Strong girls, strong boys!”** are two theme boxes (one for children between four and eight years, and one for children between eight and twelve years). The box for younger children includes picture, read-aloud and non-fiction books that address questions such as what is the importance of different genders and information on topics such as body image, professions or sexuality.

<https://wien.edupool.de/home?pid=30cuec60hoo57kamiqb8s3j8g7>

### ***Sources for teachers***

The EU funded project **“Boys in Care – Strengthening Boys to Pursue Care Occupations”** aimed at vocational education and presented care work in explicit connection with masculinity. Among others, it provided a toolkit, videos with men\* employed in care professions and Handbook for Teachers and Vocational Counsellors Working with Boys that contains background knowledge, self-reflection and methods for strengthening caring masculinities. However, the material is intended for educational professionals working with boys\* over the age of 10.

[boys-in-care.eu](http://boys-in-care.eu)

A European funded project **“Diversity, Equality and Inclusion in pre-primary education and care: a gender perspective”** (DEE) focus on gender and education in ECEC and has produced a useful checklist for self-monitoring of hidden curriculum.

<https://deepplus.wixsite.com/deep/dee-output>

Also project **“E4E Education for Equality - Going Beyond Gender Stereotypes”** developed useful resources for teachers about how to implement gender-sensitive education for both boys\* and girls\*.

<http://www.education4equality.eu/>

**“Method set Cliché-free”** starts early (2020) is aimed at children and pedagogical staff in early childhood education with a focus on gender-sensitive career orientation. It contains methods for stereotype-free pedagogical work with children, sensitisation and self-reflection in the team, the involvement of parents and guardians as well as tips and suggestions for preparation and

implementation in the day-to-day life of the day care centre. Included are a hidden object book and an occupation memo.

<https://www.klischee-frei.de/>

The initiative “**Klischeefrei**” has developed also a method set “Cliché-free through primary school” (2021). The focus is on gender-sensitive career orientation for primary school pupils. It includes methods for pedagogical work with children on gender stereotypes and professions, instructions for sensitisation and self-reflection of teachers and for involving parents. The method set also contains two reading books for children who have just started reading and for advanced readers.

[https://www.klischee-frei.de/de/klischeefrei\\_101987.php](https://www.klischee-frei.de/de/klischeefrei_101987.php)

A comprehensive methodological tool “**Fostering Respect for Others in Primary Education**” (by Akvilė Giniotaitė and Vilma Gabrieliūtė, 2018) is provided by Lithuanian NGO House of Diversity and Education. It is aimed at professionals in primary education and provides theoretical background on stereotype formation, advice on how to discuss stereotypes with children, preventive measures for harassment and violence as well as practical tasks that can be used in different subject classes. An example of one such task is titled How do we share household chores in the family? This task allows the educator to prepare for work with children by reflecting on their own internalised stereotypes and provides guiding questions for group discussions.

Slovenian Sector for Equal Opportunities at the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities developed The Guidelines for the Elimination of Stereotypes and the Promotion of Equality between Men and Women with the aim of promoting an equal distribution of care work within the family and of active fatherhood. The Guidelines highlight the role of institutions and professionals in education, health, social services and local communities in overcoming gender stereotypes. The Guidelines highlight the impact of gender stereotypes on children’s educational and occupational choices and offers suggestions on how to eliminate stereotypes in language, child rearing and education, parenting, employment and access to services. The Guidelines suggest to the teachers that they should choose literature and contents in which men\* and women\* are represented in a balanced way, and discuss stereotyped characters with children and young people.

[AktivniVsiSmerniceEN.pdf \(gov.si\)](#)

The **Project “STEP STereotipi Educazione Pari opportunità”** (Stereotypes, Education, Equal Opportunities) carried out by the Municipality of Genoa (Italy) addressed gender stereotypes in preschools with a focus also on educational and cultural models of masculinity, thus shifting attention from the feminine to the masculine as an agent for change. The project investigated the ways in which gender stereotypes are reproduced and rooted in formal and informal educational settings.

It highlighted stereotypes regarding masculinity such as: models of premature construction of hegemonic masculinity; stereotypes about masculinity internalised by parents and passed on to children relating to the choice of toys, activities, clothing, etc.; fear of emasculating sons and inducing homosexuality; cultural pressures as fertile ground for the construction of forms of toxic masculinity that are misogynist, sexist, and transphobic. The toolkit designed for both educators and parents provides useful recommendations on gender-sensitive educational work with girls\* and boys\*.

<http://www.arcosricerca.it/Lavori/step/index.html>

The project “**PARI lo imPARI a scuola**”. A project on gender equality carried out in the schools of the territory of Seregno, aimed at addressing gender stereotypes through the proposal of playful

activities in ECEC services and primary schools intended at reflecting on children's identity, gender roles in the family, at work and in society. The project also actively involved families. The list of exercises used is available at:

<https://www.impariascuola.it/sites/default/files/media/allegati/pariloimpariascuola.pdf>

Involving fathers into kindergarten activities and in active fatherhood is the aim of the **“Being a Father project”** (Bulgaria), which is based on the idea that a good and strong bond between children and their fathers is beneficial for all. Nurseries and kindergartens organize different actions and activities, guided by the understanding that the fathers are equal partners in the educational process. There are special guides and resources developed for teachers to organize, for example “Father’s week”.

<http://mencare.bg/>

<http://mencare.bg/ресурси-за-учители/>

<https://roditeli.org/resources>

A manual of good practices **“Cross-disciplinary Pathways to Educate about Differences from nursery to secondary school”**, developed by Associazione Scosse (Italy), provides methods, activities, and tools for working with girls\* and boys\* on differences, care, and the body.

<https://www.scosse.org/scosse-in-classe-2/>

The **“Fairy Tales Project”**, implemented in 2018-2020 in Bulgaria, Greece and Italy, addressed the issue of how to introduce the topic of gender equality among children aged 5-7, as well as among their parents and teachers. The project developed an online training platform for teachers and professionals working with children aged 5 to 7; a Guide for teachers and childcare professionals and training modules on gender equality for 5-7 year old children.

<https://www.fairy-tales.eu/en/>

The EU funded project **“Gender Loops. Methods, Instruments and Strategies for Gender Mainstreaming in Early Childhood Education”** addressed the topics “culture of binary genders”, “doing gender”, “gender mainstreaming” and “hegemonic masculinity”. The handbook which was developed has a strong practical orientation and contains a collection of methods, instructions and examples for the implementation of gender-sensitive pedagogy in day-care centres. A checklist for picture books has been created which can be used by pedagogues to check whether books are in line with gender-sensitive pedagogy.

<https://genderloops.dissens.de/outcomes-and-results>

Gender-sensitive pedagogy: **“Manual for Teachers and Adult Educators in Elementary Pedagogy”**, was developed in 2009 by Claudia Schneider and the EFEU association focusing on gender, diversity and education in Vienna. The target group of the manual are kindergarten pedagogues. The manual provides a theoretical discussion of the topic of gender-sensitive education, methods, games and exercises to be used with children, and checklists for pedagogues and teams of pedagogues. It tackles topics, such as: gendered bodies, gender-sensitive language, socialization, gender sensitivity, perception of gendered interactions among children and how to deal with them using guided methods for gender-sensitive education in the different activities.

[https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjErpGhw830AhXIDuWkHWJ4ArsQFnoECAMQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fpubshop.bmbwf.gv.at%2Findex.php%3Freflex\\_media\\_type%3Dpubshop\\_download%26reflex\\_media\\_file%3D184\\_leitfaden\\_bakip\\_09\\_15545.pdf&usq=AOvVaw3BZo4utUEvyxSnDiY86ahb](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjErpGhw830AhXIDuWkHWJ4ArsQFnoECAMQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fpubshop.bmbwf.gv.at%2Findex.php%3Freflex_media_type%3Dpubshop_download%26reflex_media_file%3D184_leitfaden_bakip_09_15545.pdf&usq=AOvVaw3BZo4utUEvyxSnDiY86ahb)

Another manual for practical work in kindergartens from Austria is titled **“Dani und Alex – Gender-sensitive Pedagogy in Elementary Educational Facilities”**. It consists of an introduction

to gender-sensitive education and national legal and education frameworks; instructions for self-reflection and group reflection for pedagogues; examples of situations in the kindergarten in which gender-sensitive education can and should be applied; further material and literature. The checklist in the form of guiding questions are intended to make it easier for pedagogues to reflect on (non-) gender-sensitive actions and, if necessary, to intervene at different levels. The guiding questions refers to personal aspects of the pedagogues, their teamwork, work with the children, design of the rooms and services, work with parents, as well as public relations and work in the system of childcare.

[https://www.tirol.gv.at/fileadmin/themen/bildung/elementarbildung/allgemeines/Broeschuere\\_Geschlechtersensible\\_Paedagogik.pdf](https://www.tirol.gv.at/fileadmin/themen/bildung/elementarbildung/allgemeines/Broeschuere_Geschlechtersensible_Paedagogik.pdf)

### *Sources for gender diversity*

The “**LGBT-Friendly Certificate**” has been awarded by the Municipality of Ljubljana since 2014. It aims to raise awareness by educating the management in organisations which then pass on the knowledge to employees and ensure that the idea of equal treatment for all and the guarantee of fundamental human rights is taken into account among employees and externally towards clients or users. The training covers topics related to fundamental human rights and the specific needs of LGBT people. Nine kindergartens and two primary schools in Ljubljana, have been awarded the LGBT-Friendly Certificate.

<https://www.ljubljana.si/sl/moja-ljubljana/odprto-in-dostopno-mesto/lgbt/certifikat-lgbt-prijazno/>

“**Media Suitcase Family and Diverse Ways of Living**” is intended for daycare facilities and contains picture books, games, textbooks for kindergarten pedagogues on topics such as gender-inclusive education, trans\* identity and rainbow families. Teaching modules on the topic of intersex for primary school provides free downloadable material and inclusive methods and worksheets for teaching in the primary school level. In addition, digital queer initial counselling cases for help with upbringing of children were developed. Teaching material Let's Talk about Gender can be used in the first and second secondary level in English classes

[https://www.queerformat.de/wp-content/uploads/Queerformat\\_GS\\_LieblingsEis\\_druckdatei.pdf](https://www.queerformat.de/wp-content/uploads/Queerformat_GS_LieblingsEis_druckdatei.pdf)

Queerformat Fachstelle Queere Bildung and the Sozialpädagogisches Fortbildungsinstitut Berlin-Brandenburg have published the handout “**Murat Plays Princess, Alex Has Two Mothers and Sophie Is Now Called Ben**” - Sexual and Gender Diversity as Topics in Early Childhood Inclusion Education (2018). It supports professionals, teams and institutions in early childhood education in dealing with the diversity dimensions of gender, gender identity and sexual orientation within the framework of inclusive education. The content includes basic texts, practical aids and pedagogical material.

<https://www.queerformat.de/murat-spielt-prinzessin-alex-hat-zwei-muetter-und-sophie-heisst-jetzt-ben/>

Queerformat has also published pedagogical material “**Julian is a Mermaid**” (2021), to accompany the picture book. This handout supports educational professionals and teams in nursery schools and preschools in reflecting and developing their pedagogy in a gender-conscious and racism-critical way. In addition to background knowledge and reflection possibilities for educational professionals, the handout contains methods for children aged 4-6 years.

<https://www.queerformat.de/begleitmaterial-zu-julian-ist-eine-meerjungfrau/>

### 3. Field research: interviews and focus groups on gender sensitive education in ECEC services and primary schools

In this second part of the transnational report, we present and discuss the main results that have arisen from the qualitative research carried out by the partner countries, mainly through interviews and focus groups on gender sensitive education in ECEC services and primary schools.

#### 3.1 Methodology

The methodology used to carry out the qualitative research included the following:

- **In depth-interviews** with educators of ECEC services, teachers of primary schools and experts in field of gender sensitive education
- **Focus Groups** with policymakers, scholars and experts who deal with gender-sensitive research, and specifically, with caring masculinities aimed at early childhood as well as educators and teachers.

Both in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted on the basis of a semi-structured interview guide that was agreed among the partners during the preparatory phase of the qualitative research.<sup>16</sup> The methodological guidelines foreseen in the ECaRoM project set a minimum number of 5 individual interviews and 2 Focus Groups. However, when possible, each project partner country conducted a larger number of interviews and focus groups based on the availability of educators, policymakers, and experts willing to participate in the research. Also, on the choice of interview types, some countries (Lithuania and Bulgaria) opted for both single and group in-depth interviews. In addition, check-lists (in different formats)<sup>17</sup> addressed to educators and teachers were used to collect further data. Some partner countries have already analysed the results emerging from the checklists that have been distributed to educators and teachers while others will do this in the second phase of the project, as explained in national reports.

Obviously, the methodology followed is not designed to reach a statistical representativeness, but it can provide valuable information on the needs of ECEC educators and primary schools teachers on gender sensitive education in the countries involved in the project. Below are the methodologies of each country indicating those who conducted the interviews and focus groups only with experts from ECECs and those who worked with experts from both ECECs and primary schools.

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<sup>16</sup> Interviews and focus groups guides are listed as annexes in each partner country national report.

<sup>17</sup> Checklists used by the project partners are also available in the national reports.

Table 1: Interview overview

Country	In-depth interviews	Focus Group
Germany	<p><b>12 interviews</b> with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>educators of ECEC services</li> <li>teachers of primary schools</li> <li>University students, researchers in gender studies and pedagogy</li> </ul>	<p><b>2 Focus groups</b> with:</p> <p>5-6 educators in training</p>
Austria	<p><b>4 interviews</b> with:</p> <p>experts of the public education sector (in the field of gender and diversity management and Boys' Day initiative); teachers, experts in gender studies.</p>	<p><b>5 focus groups</b> with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15 prospective primary school teachers</li> <li>13 primary school teachers and</li> <li>4 ECEC services educators</li> </ul>
Lithuania	<p><b>5 in-depth interviews</b> with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 educators of ECEC services</li> <li>1 teacher of primary school</li> </ul>	<p><b>3 Focus groups</b> with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2 directors of ECEC institutions</li> <li>1 director of primary school</li> <li>4 experts of gender in education</li> <li>4 experts in early education</li> </ul>
Slovenia	<p><b>6 in-depth individual interviews</b> with educators of ECECs</p>	<p><b>4 Focus groups</b> with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>University professors focusing on gender issues</li> <li>Policymakers at the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Equal Opportunities Sector</li> <li>Experts of associations focusing on gender issues</li> <li>Public and private institutions</li> </ul>
Bulgaria	<p><b>2 in-depth individual interviews</b> with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 educator in ECEC</li> <li>1 teacher in primary school</li> </ul> <p><b>1 group interview</b> with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>24 educators of ECECS</li> <li>2 head of ECECS.</li> </ul>	<p><b>2 focus groups</b> with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educational experts</li> <li>Psychologists</li> <li>NGOs experts</li> <li>Roma educational mediators</li> <li>Roma community primary schools</li> <li>Roma community ECECS educators</li> </ul>
Italy	<p><b>6 in-depth interviews</b> with educators of ECECS</p>	<p><b>2 Focus groups</b> with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 higher education researcher</li> <li>2 experts in gender and sexuality association</li> <li>1 coordinator and 1 educator from ECEC services</li> <li>4 researchers from higher education and independent researchers in gender, masculinities and early childhood education</li> </ul>

## 3.2 Results from qualitative research: the state of gender sensitive education in the experience of educators and teachers

In the next sections we summarise the results of the qualitative research divided by topic bearing in mind that there are a number of areas that overlap. We also include some direct quotations from interviews and focus groups.

### 3.2.1 Activities carried out with children in ECEC services and primary schools

#### Tools: use of material and of spaces

In relation to the use of materials such as toys and books **most interviewees in partner countries emphasise that educators use the same material with boys\* and girls\***, although a number of contradictory remarks emerge. In Italy all the interviewed educators state that they use tools and materials that are free from gender stereotypes. Their use is connected to the activities they offer, in which there is no gender segregation in relation to a given toy or activity. All the children play with the same toys both in structured activities and in free play. All the educators have stated that the children (especially those aged 0-3) are not influenced in their choice of tools or materials, given that, according to interviewees, stereotypes are ordinarily constructed from age 4-5. One interviewee revealed that:

*There's a group of boys\* that especially loves to set the table and carry out an activity that society would assign to girls\*. And there are girls\* who prefer to play with Lego blocks. In each section there will always be some little group or individual boy\*/girl doing an activity that could be defined as stereotyped.*

In Slovenia “Teachers offer the same toys to boys\* and girls\* because they take the view that all children, regardless of gender, need to acquire all the skills prescribed in the curriculum”. Educators note that “Role playing is very common and children (both girls\* and boys\*) like to dress up, wear masks, decorate, etc. They also like to dress up as the opposite sex. For example, in kindergarten they put on a play about witches and the boys\* were happy to dress up as witches. In the hairdressing corner, they do their hair and make different hairstyles. **Through body and body work, they dispel gender stereotypes of what 'is/isn't appropriate' for boys\* and girls\*.**”

In Lithuania, while educators in ECECs services emphasize that there is no gender division of spaces, experts state that there is some ambiguity about the division of corners in spaces. For instance, there is the mention of a "beauty corner" and a "builders' corner", respectively marked by the colours pink and blue. If no one forbids a boy\* to play in the "beauty corner" and a girl to play in the "builders' corner", the typology of social skills proposed by the two spaces, associated with the use of colours, implicitly (and perhaps also explicitly) proposes a gender division in the choice of activities. Care, for example, will be associated with the "beauty corner" as a female pink space, while activities such as building will be associated with the "builders' corner" as a male blue space.

Also, in Bulgaria some contradictions arise. Some interviewees state that the environment in general is not stimulating gender stereotypes. Colours of furniture, textile and equipment are various. ECECs have thematic corners by learning subjects, where all children participate. However, other participants in the study shared that they know or have observed in their professional experience some not so rare practices in which children are divided in gender specific corners – with toys “for girls\*” and “for boys\*”, or children are encouraged to participate in sports activities that “are suitable” for boys\* or for girls\*. For instance in one focus group, it emerged that

in one ECEC service, boys\* and girls\* are divided during the free play time into different rooms – girls\* in the room with dolls, kitchen sets, strollers, and boys\* in the other room, where there is parking, cars, trucks, airplanes, Lego blocks, etc. The reason for this practice was explained by sources as a method for teachers to prevent conflicts between children for the toys. This prevented, for instance, those boys\* who showed an interest to play in the kitchen corner to be allowed to do that. In Bulgaria a similar situation was identified in relation to some primary schools where boys\* and girls\* are also often divided to play “masculine” and “feminine” sports – to escape conflicts about unusual mixing of girls\* and boys\*, for example, in playing football.

In relation to the presence of **specific material which aims to contrast gender stereotypes**, the majority of countries state that **there are not enough gender sensitive materials**, and sometimes educators try to create materials themselves.

In Germany\_educators state that both toys and books are influenced by gender stereotypes, although there has been some progress. In ECEC services there is an attempt to make play corners gender-neutral so that everyone feels invited. Playing with "girls\*" toys" is not punished by boys\*, there just seems to be no interest on their part. In primary school most materials have gender stereotypical content. Teachers state that there are some books that are gender sensitive, but more are needed. Showing other pictures that are not stereotypical is within the pedagogical freedom of the teachers.

In Lithuania a lack of gender-sensitive material is highlighted and it is for this reason that often some educators or teachers of the primary school try to create them on their own, following some models from other countries such as Sweden. Also, in Austria\_educators were unaware of the possibility that such materials exist with a specific focus on masculinity and care. This lack of focus on masculinities highlights how gender education is considered to be a dimension linked exclusively to women. Another cause is due to the lack of resources, therefore educators who want to create materials have to do it outside their working context.

In Italy there have been some positive developments in relation to **the creation of gender-sensitive illustrated books**, while for the rest, educators do not have other materials nor toolkits especially on the relationship between boys\*, masculinity and care. In Bulgaria educators state that they have no practical experience or materials to work with. On the other hand, they have interest in learning from other countries. This could be explained by the fact that there are no specific guidelines for pre-primary and primary education for a gender-sensitive approach and the process depends mainly on the understanding and willingness of ECEC teams.

### **Occupations and professions**

One area in the activities carried out in ECEC services and in primary schools where **gender stereotypes emerge rather clearly is the presentation of professions**. In Slovenia\_the presentation of professions is part of the regular activities of the kindergartens, however this is done in a rather stereotypical way. Visual materials are stereotypical and educators do not problematise them. They also do not use gender-sensitive language. The professions preferred by boys\* and girls\* are very stereotypical. Also in Germany\_the occupational profiles chosen by the children are already strongly gendered in ECEC services: Boys\*: fireman, policeman, construction worker... Girls\*: princess, unicorn breeder, etc.. Moreover, girls\* tend to talk less about career aspirations than boys\*. In primary schools, vocational orientation is strongly neglected. Another important aspect is that while male educators are seen more and more by the children, they do not appear in the pictures in the textbooks. One teacher states:



*We have to talk about what is not visible: the ways that boys\* don't go in terms of care because they learn very early that it is unmanly, we don't see them because the boys\* don't go ... We can only get there if we make them a variety of offers and the mental permission is there to be a ballet dancer.*

Also, in Lithuania in primary schools stereotypical gender models emerge about the choice of professions. For example, when an educator asked a girl what she wanted to be when she grew up, to the answer "I'd like to be a policeman," a boy\* intervened by saying, "It's a boy\*'s profession."

The account given by educators in Italy appear somehow different for children aged 0-3 years. The preferences of boy\*s\* and girls\* regarding a profession are not excessively stereotyped at least until the age of 4. After that age children start to express more stereotyped preferences. Educators tend not to intervene, unless children's statements about their preferences of specific professions become very pressing and stereotypes. In those cases, they invite the children who always perform the same kind of character to change it.

### **3.2.2 Gender stereotypes shown by children and by educators and teachers**

In general, **educators and teachers believe that they do not use and reproduce gender stereotypes on purpose in their activities with children**, however they reflect on the fact that sometimes they are influenced by them and stress the importance of self-reflection.

In Slovenia teachers believe that they do not differentiate between boys\* and girls\*, but sometimes they react automatically. In Austria, the influence of educators in the reproduction of traditional and stereotyped gender roles is identified. For example, in some focus groups it emerged that there are still teachers in primary schools who refer to cling to traditional social categories and concepts, while on the other hand the educators play an important role in promoting a gender-free approach.

On the one hand, the educators are aware of their influence and on the other hand, they distance themselves from it on the grounds that this is an area for the family, the parents, or the private environment to deal with. In some cases, however, as in the focus group discussions, it was also found that the participants were aware of gender reflection methods for themselves as educators, and that most of them actively use them. In Germany primary school professionals mention **clothing as an issue in the reproduction of stereotypes**. *"How often do you greet children with phrases like "You are pretty today"? "In terms of looking neat that's what I would do. Also sometimes with the boys\*, but there it is rather less often. It is noticeable when some of the girls\* are wearing something nice and I name that too."*

Also, in Austria almost all educators claimed that self-reflection was the main tool that helped them improve their practice. One of them admitted that after participating in a gender equality training, she started to notice her own stereotypical behaviour. In Lithuania a participant in a focus group also stressed the importance of reflection in every minute of daily practices:

*I don't know how much we reflect on the fact that our tone of voice is different with boys\* and girls\*, the way we greet them in the morning when they come in, the details we pay attention to when we talk to them, what we praise them for, things like that.*

Also in Italy, most of the educators replied that they constantly question themselves, with the aim of understanding if there are any expectations regarding gender in the way they behave towards children.

Concerning the **relevance of gender stereotypes for children, there is a general understanding that these are less pronounced in the age group 0-3 years, while they start to become more visible from the age of 4 years** and even more so in the primary school.

In Lithuania in children aged 1-3 years, behaviours attributable to their gender role are not markedly evident, and they do not attempt to exert control over others' gender (non)conforming behaviour. The trend toward creating a clear gender demarcation becomes apparent in the later years. In contrast with the ECEC system, in primary school girls\* and boys\* almost always play in gender groups and do not mix.

In Slovenia one of the teachers said that "... boys\* at this age seem to be less determined by gender norms of masculinity and do not yet show the distance from femininity that is so characteristic of puberty". She perceives girls\* to be more dominant and sometimes does not allow boys\* to play in the home corner. She also mentioned that girls\* appear to be more manipulative but also more keen to help others, while boys\* tend to be more inclined towards physical violence.

In Italy during the interviews, educators were asked if they had ever had a direct experience of sensing, through children's choice of games or costumes, that they embraced and felt a sense of belonging to gender and sexuality models other than the heteronormative standard. One educator replied:

*Constantly, because at this age they're very fluid... I often see a boy\* carrying a handbag (and arguing with a girl in the class about which of the two of them can carry it first) or putting on make-up. But I've never thought of projecting their identity over the long term - it would be a negative form of influence on them... I've reflected on it privately, but obviously I act from a suspension of any judgement.*

In Germany in one focus group, it was said that *"In the children, the doing gender can be seen, among other things, in the way they dress, in negotiating conflicts, in being in gender-homogeneous groups, in sanctioning deviant behaviour from gender norms, in occupational orientations and in caring practices. Caring practices occur more often in girls\*. Boys\* are more likely to need explicit encouragement to be caring. The normative pressure on boys\* not to behave in a feminine way is already perceptible in early education and upbringing."*

### **3.2.3 Care activities**

The care activities proposed in ECECs services are those related **to tidying up domestic spaces, caring for the environment (e.g., through gardening), and caring for their mates**. Generally routine care activities are designed to teach children to be independent and **to support the development of social skills of all children, girls\* and boys\* alike**.

Regarding gender stereotypes, it was found that mostly there are no major differentiations related to the participation of boys\* and girls\*, although this also depends on the interpretation given by educators. Some educators stated that the behaviours of boys\* and girls\* who are reluctant to perform this kind of activity should not be linked to gender stereotypes, but rather to personal attitudes.

Austrian educators emphasise that demonstrating and showing that every child has the same tasks is central for educators in both pre-primary and primary education in their everyday pedagogical work and it is important that children are shown appreciation for care activities.

One aspect which encourages greater participation of boys\* and girls\* without a marked binary distinction of roles is the fact that generally the **structuring of the spaces** in which the activities are proposed (including those of care) **is not based on gender stereotypes**. For example, in an interview conducted in Slovenia, it was found that:

*“thematic corners offer the opportunity to introduce children to family care work in a more in-depth and gender-neutral way, through games and didactics designed for this purpose.”*

In the Slovenian report it is also emphasised that feelings and emotions are allowed and teachers do not differentiate between boys\* and girls\*. Children with special needs are included in the kindergartens and both teachers and children show inclusive attitudes towards them. Another interesting aspect that emerged from the focus groups in Slovenia is that **caring as a masculine activity is normally conceptualised inside the concept of the heteronormative ‘traditional’ family**, as for instance educators appreciate when boys\* play with dolls, as this would cultivate the involved fatherhood model as a state’s family policy approach.

However, in other cases a different attitude on the part of boys\* was noticed by some educators. For instance, teachers in Bulgaria stated that girls\* are those who are much more active in serving the meals and putting away the toys. Boys\* are not so enthusiastic to participate in such tasks, but it depends on the family model that children see at home. Boys\* are perceived to be more hyperactive, full of energy and obsessed by electronic games, which they play at home, and it is sometimes difficult for teachers to encourage them to help the others.

**Educators are convinced that children copy the model of distribution of care duties between women\* and men\* in families.** For instance, girls\* very often even correct boys\*’ attempts to arrange the tables by rearranging napkins, forks, and spoons as they think they know how to do it better, because they are girls\*. Teachers suppose girls\* copy the model, seen at home by their mothers. Also, in Lithuania some informants believed that inclination to tidy one’s things was a personal preference. However, others noticed a pattern that girls\* would offer to help others or just jump and clean up for the boys\* unprompted. They would also tidy the entire room, not only their own toys which was what boys\* would usually do.

In Germany ECEC services educators suggest that it should be normal for children to take care of each other but there are different views about gender. For some gender is irrelevant, for other **boys\* need to be more encouraged** as the **normative pressure on boys\* not to behave in a feminine way is already perceptible in early education and upbringing**. In primary school, class duties are particularly important and must be taken on by everyone. Also, in this case **for some teachers, girls\* are more caring and are more likely to act as mediators, while for others gender is irrelevant**.

Other relevant experiences in relation to care emerged from two educators in Italy. In an interview one educator related the following episode:

*The thing that I noticed on a behavioural level among the boys\* with respect to the girls\* is that when there are activities taking place in the garden, the boys\* tend to have more “physical confrontations”. The kind of reaction we have to these acts is not to intervene directly; they are allowed to act, obviously in circumstances in which no dangerous situations could arise. When a confrontation occurs between boys\* and one of them gets hurt, I ask the other boy\* to take care of him; I don't suggest explicitly, “say you're sorry, etc...”, but for example, I ask him to get the other boy\* some water.*

In another case one Italian educator told the story about two boys\* who showed a girl excessive attention, insisting on kissing her. The educator confronted the boys\* and the girl involved in the event by posing a number of questions about what they liked or disliked. In the end she proposed an activity called “The Circle” which addressed topics such as caring for others and consent that was fully appreciated by the children. The event was also discussed in a meeting with the parents.

Finally, regarding the aim of bringing boys\* closer to caring activities, the importance of doing so with an awareness of not grafting a sense of "extraordinariness" onto the education of boys\* and girls\* in carrying out this activity emerged in some circumstances. For example, in an Italian focus group, a scholar emphasized the **dangers of creating "counter-stereotypes"** that place male caregiving in a position of superiority over female caregiving that might even mark it as inadequate.

### **3.2.4 Male educators in ECEC services**

Promoting a model of masculinity that takes care into account requires not only a commitment on the part of educators and teachers to structuring activities that engage boys\* but also the very presence of men\* in childcare settings. Although researchers in partner countries have highlighted that there are positive pushes towards male inclusion in early childhood education settings, **in all involved countries male educators are a minority**. The main reasons for this situation can be attributed to the following elements.

#### **Economic and social status of this job**

Most partner countries emphasised that the stereotype of the male breadwinner who must earn more than his wife is still deeply rooted, and the job for a male as a teacher or educator does not usually guarantee these expectations. In addition, Austria stated that there was consensus from the interviews and focus groups that there is still a stereotype about the consideration of this job as feminine, soft and leisure-like activities at least with children up to 10 years of age and the lack of knowledge of the profession by males, which determines their reduced access to this profession.

On the other hand, in some situations, it was found that often the demand for male educators or teachers can produce a counter-stereotype in terms of both social and salary recognition as it emerges in this interview from a male German educator:

*[...] they offered me so much right away that I immediately earned much more than everyone else, because they absolutely wanted to keep me, as the only man. [...] Which I then found unfair to the others.*

This poses an ethical question as a salary increase only for men\* as a political strategy to include more men\* in ECEC services is seen as discriminatory towards women. It is more appropriate to consider that care professions in general need better working conditions to be more attractive for all.

Also, in a focus group discussion in Italy a proposal was advanced to make the training for educators more professional in order to attract more men\* in this kind of job, but this was criticized by other participants. They emphasised that care professions should be recognised more by social and economic values in and of themselves, and not just in order to raise the number of men\* in this area.

#### **The “spectre of child sexual abuse”**

In men's work with young children hovers the issue that they might be accused of child sexual abuse especially in work with ECEC children where direct body contact is required between the educator and the child. On the contrary this dimension of "intimate" care is lived serenely by female educators who are still considered to be naturally inclined to care for young children. For example,

in an interview with an Italian educator, it emerged that during the open day of an ECEC service, a mother, when she learned that there would be a male educator in the team, had a crying fit, to the point of choosing another educational service.

In the German report, it was indicated that in half of the interviews, the allegation of sexualized violence against male educational professionals was discussed in more detail. It is confirmed that the **fear of general suspicion is great among male trainees**, that intimate activities tend to be avoided for this reason, that such general suspicion deters men\* from working in ECEC and as educators, and that this is an important social problem in general.

On those bases respondents are in favour of clear frameworks and concepts - for example, a concept of protection for all employees in a facility, trust frameworks for intimate situations (e.g., diapers can be changed only after 1 month of collaboration), or concepts on how to support male educators emphasizes that the responsibility for child protection lies with the institution, not just the individual educator. Also, in the Slovenian context in both involved kindergartens, a traumatic experience of a male teacher being accused of sexual abuse was revealed in a conversation with the headmistresses.

It is important to notice that male employment in the care professions presents a certain underlying ambivalence. On the one hand they are sometimes feared (bias about the sexualization of men), on the other hand they can be over-valued with the risk of creating a counter stereotype. Moreover, **the presence of male educators does not automatically equate to a measure to counter gender stereotypes in education**, as on the contrary, sometimes it can foster them.

This happens, for instance, when male educators are expected from parents or other colleague to perform activities with children that are regarded as masculine (e.g., play sports with the kids or engage in more active roles). Male educators themselves may have different considerations of these assigned roles as it emerges in the following divergent accounts of German male educators:

*For example, I deal with the children in a rather relaxed way, yes, they can climb trees and cranes, I don't know, I'm much more relaxed than female educators.*

*Yes, then the children have 'someone' to fight with, who then plays football, then you are immediately reduced to these male things, 'he will then do the workshop' and so, some don't want that at all. ... Of course, I'm also a football coach, I like to play football with them, I can do that, but being reduced to that again is also a big problem that we often have.*

From what has emerged from this section, despite the problem of the male gender gap in the care professions, stereotypes linked to the binomial care-masculinity still exist. This binomial is considered inconceivable both for the association of men\* working with children with child sexual abuse histories, and because of the hegemonic model of the successful man that imposes a male career path linked to a vision of success which is not found in "feminised" jobs.

### **3.2.5 Relationship with parents and fathers**

This section analyses the relationship between educators and parents and, specifically, with fathers in order to understand in each country the level of paternal involvement in the lives of their children. In general, in recent years **fathers appear to be more active in their children's lives**, for instance they increasingly bring and pick up the children from kindergarten and they are more involved in events and activities. It is also possible to notice that there is **a greater attention from the educational staff in the involvement of both parents**, but there seems to be a varied picture about the relationship between educators/teachers and parents regarding gender issues.

Sometimes gender stereotypes seem to lurk in educational staff, other times in parents, and especially in fathers. This does not make the job easy. It is rather common that even if educators try to involve both parents in every aspect of their children's daily life in the service, in cases of an emergency it is always the mother who comes forward.

In Italy an educator recounted an anecdote of a father who, upon being asked to bring a change of clothes for his child, responded that "those are things his wife takes care of." The educator defiantly replied why the wife should be the one to know and he was unable to answer. Another female educator noted a sexist attitude of a father towards her, questioning her educational skills in relation to her male colleague.

Another important element that emerges from interviews from educators in Italy is that contrary to the common stereotypes, it appears that fathers from different cultures are more present in their children's lives than Italian fathers.

In Slovenia some good practices can be observed in the area of involving fathers in kindergarten life - e.g., encouraging fathers to participate in the introduction of the child to kindergarten; encouraging parents to both attend PTA meetings with teachers; organising parties and events just for fathers. At the same time, there is also a need to pay attention to the gender assumptions on which these practices are based. Indeed, teachers assume a **gender dichotomy** according to which they see men/fathers as 'different' from mothers, they are more assertive, less emotional, less anxious, spontaneous, unencumbered, relaxed, open, humorous'.

In addition, in some cases **fathers' participation in their children's lives is more evident in the urban context**. In rural areas it is still a growing phenomenon compared to urban areas and, in the first case, there are more stereotypes about masculinity and some activities considered typically feminine. One interviewee in Slovenia stated:

*Sometimes grandmothers and parents, especially from rural backgrounds, comment that dolls are not toys for boys\*, that it is not appropriate for boys\* to dress up as the opposite sex, to have their hair made or to paint their nails. They express fears that a boy\* might get disguised or become gay. .... stereotypes associated with masculinity may be even stronger and more numerous than stereotypes associated with femininity.*

In Germany it has been shown that in some cases parents find it difficult to accept forms of tenderness from their male children, as well as when they wear "girly" colours or play "girly" games.

A similar discourse applies to the surveys carried out by Lithuania, where it was found that many parents have an active role in controlling the activities carried out in ECECs. Fathers are little inclined to accept that ECECs promote a gender-sensitive education, claiming for their sons the duty "not to cry". While mothers are more inclined to accept a gender-sensitive education.

This aspect, on the other hand, seems to be less present in countries like Italy, where educators have stated that parents do not have a problem if their child cries, or wears girls\* clothes or performs "feminine" acts in the service. However, the situation changes in elementary school, where parents begin to focus on gender binary construction of the personality of their children.

In Bulgaria the FG and the group interview showed that there is a communication gap between parents and teachers. The topic of gender stereotypes is never discussed between parents and teachers, although both sides see the need to discuss it, but a catalyst for starting the dialogue is still missing. There is, however, an active commitment to the involvement of fathers in caregiving activities towards their children. Strategies to promote the role of fathers in caregiving include both information and awareness campaigns to change attitudes toward the accepted social roles of men\* and women\* and to promote the benefits of active fatherhood for child development.

Bulgarian NGOs engaged in promoting such a model with some projects such as “**Being a Father**” (<http://mencare.bg/>), which is based on the idea that a good and strong bond between children and their fathers leads to more confident, calm and successful children, and more stable and secure men, e.g., it has a positive effect on the whole family. In 2013, a consortium of 8 NGOs (part of the **International MenCare Campaign**), worked to create school events aimed at fathers, fostering their active collaboration with teachers and their positive relationships with their children.

In Austria in the focus group discussions, it emerged that in ECEC services **both children and parents have become more open to the topic of gender equality in the course of the last few years**. One kindergarten educator explained this by her observation that the gender spectrum is becoming wider and wider and there are fewer and fewer differences between binary gender role expectations. It becomes more difficult, however, when additional differentiation is made to the "other/diverse gender" and as an educator you meet with a lack of understanding in the work with parents. Also in Austria, in contrast to the kindergarten educators, the topic of working with parents found little resonance in the focus group discussions with the primary school teachers. For the majority, the combination of working with parents and gender issues is limited to the fact that they write gender-conscious announcements to parents. Active engagement with parents on the topic of gender is out of the question for many and is clearly outside their field of duty as educators.

### 3.2.6 Training

A final area that was investigated in the qualitative research refers to the training received by educators and teachers. In general, the **training on gender pedagogy received by educators and teachers is scarce, insufficient, or not systematic**, in all the countries involved in the project, although in some cases there have been improvements in the last years. **A general need to integrate gender pedagogy more systematically in the training of educators arises**. This is even more true in relation to the topic of caring masculinities. A general need and interest is expressed on the part of educators/teachers to have more training in gender reflective pedagogy.

In Slovenia the interviewed educators declare that they have not received any training on gender stereotypes nor on masculinities issues. Most knowledge is acquired in practice, and they also have a certain scepticism about the value of formal education in this field. However, experts from the focus groups have stated that:

*Over the last 20 years, gender sensitisation among teaching staff has increased.... Gender is included in compulsory subjects at the Faculty of Education but ... As an independent subject, it is optional, i.e., not compulsory, and there is not enough practice on these topics.*

It also appears that in education there is a prevalence of the concept of gender as binary, but there are also some positive developments concerning the existence and certification of LGBT-friendly kindergardens.

In Germany in general, gender-reflective pedagogy is included in the training or studies by educators/teachers only in exceptional cases. For educators of ECEC services in the educational curricula, the concrete implementation in gender-reflective practice is often missing. Gender is included in the training plans, but not as a main topic. There is also an issue of how this subject is addressed and it appears that the reflection on these themes has stopped in the '90s, and it continues to be based on a gender binary conception. In the interviews it is stated that early education is very much biased from the Brother Grimm fairy tale ideas of gender, despite conscious engagement with diversity or feminist values by some educators. Therefore, the educational need is expressed to get to this deep cultural heritage through self-experiential spaces. Also, in primary schools it emerges that:

*The discussion about gender in the primary school context is stuck in the 1990s ... it is always about the question of boys\* and girls\* ... the whole deconstruction debate has not arrived in the subject didactics related to primary school.*

At the same time, educators and teachers generally agree about the importance of **self-reflection on gender socialisation and stereotypes and about the importance of being themselves role models for children**. One interviewee in Germany states:

*I think it is good to always keep the educators' focus on the perspective that gender stereotypes restrict children's experiences and education, and the task of day care is to enable education and not to restrict it, and they have to understand this in whatever methodological way.*

In Austria the training of kindergarden educators and teachers on the topic of gender and caring masculinity is lacking, and gender appears to be a topic that is avoided. It is generally considered as a sub-topic of other areas, for instance gender appropriate language. In training, the topic is often only touched upon, or is only the sub-topic of gender-appropriate language/gendering. The actual topic and the question of why the topic of gender is important is left out. This is one of the reasons why **many educators get the feeling that the topic is unmanageably big and thus develop a fear and aversion towards the topic**.

As a result, teachers do not even want to deal with the topic because they have the feeling that they would have to spend a lot of resources, such as time and energy on the one hand, and on the other hand they do not feel up to independent implementation in the classroom. This leads to the lack of attention to the gender dimension in the educational curricula of educators and teachers and in the lack of methods and materials that can be used in their educational activities. In the focus group discussions, it was often pointed out that there is no time in everyday pedagogical life for the topic of gender, and even less time for the specific topic of caring masculinity. The gender issue seems to have a low priority. This is confirmed by the observation that workshops offered, and further training for educators, are not well received.

Moreover, **the topic of gender and caring masculinity is avoided because educators lack material and methods**. In the focus group discussions, educators expressed the problem that there are no resources for researching suitable material. This work would have to be done outside of working hours. However, since they are not aware of any platforms and access to gender-sensitive material, this research task is very difficult and time-consuming for the educators.

In Lithuania the majority of interviewed educators had not received any training on gender issues throughout their careers. However, from the focus groups with experts it emerges that gender issues and stereotypes are often included in the study curriculum, because the university lecturer believes it to be an important issue. However, almost always this is done on a personal basis, and there is a lack of a more systematic approach.

A **polarization on the part of education students regarding the issue of gender stereotypes** arises, given that some defend the **stereotypes**, while others are happy to challenge them. In any case, experts affirm that it is important that higher education offers spaces for discussion and reflection on gender so that they can form science-based and well-informed attitudes that would help them in practice.

In Italy the interviewed educators have had curricular training on gender pedagogy from their higher education, or have participated in ongoing training courses proposed by the local municipality or within national and European projects. However, from the focus groups it emerges that the **training on gender pedagogy in Education Faculties is not carried out on a systematic**



**basis.** Yet, it is very diversified throughout Italy, with some Centres of Excellence dedicated to the study of gender in education, or with the presence of specific courses initiated by some professors, and other faculties with no offer on this subject. This means that **gender studies very much depend on the good will of specific professors** and are not a consolidated part of Education Sciences curriculum.

The interviews in Italy also show that the gender training of an educator allows them to activate a critical and deconstructive process with respect to the stereotyped approach towards boys\* and girls\*, which, even if unconsciously, emerges and influences the construction of the gender identity of children. Some have shown themselves to be aware of the importance of specific work on boys\*, masculinity, and care, as an approach to the creation of an egalitarian gender system.

On the type of training they received, the need is also expressed for **reviewing the methodologies adopted which, almost always, remain on a theoretical-abstract level** or suitable for the analysis of the realities of the adult world. Moreover, training is needed that is aimed at creating tools (theoretical and methodological) adapted to the 0-6 age group. This reflection also includes toolkits, handbooks, and specific strategies on the relationship between gender and early childhood.

In Bulgaria the interviewed teachers confirmed that they have not received any training on gender equality, neither the role of men\* in gender equality, nor gender stereotypes, related to masculinities.

## **4. Conclusions: identified needs, suggestions and recommendations**

This transnational report was carried out on the basis of the national reports produced by the project partners in order to identify the needs relating to gender sensitive education in ECEC services and primary schools. The research was carried through a desk review and qualitative research. The desk review analysed the following: ECEC services and primary schools' policy documents, national studies about gender sensitive education tackling gender stereotypes related to boys\*/masculinities and/or care in early childhood education, and examples of good practices of pedagogical materials and tools relating to the overcoming of gender stereotypes in early childhood education. The qualitative research was carried out through interviews and focus groups with ECEC services educators and primary school teachers, experts of gender sensitive education, public authorities.

The results emerging from the research about the state of the art in relation to gender equality and gender sensitive education in ECEC services and primary schools in the involved countries show a patchy overview with lights and shadows. Below we summarise the main points, and recommendations emerging from the analysis.

### **Policy documents and curriculum**

Legislation and policy documents address issues relating to gender and gender equality, diversity, and care to a certain degree, but they often address those subjects in a general way without providing specific guidelines.

#### *Recommendations*

- A gender-sensitive approach needs to be included in strategic and policy documents on education, and its importance for social equality needs to be recognised by stakeholders and policy-makers;
- The policy documents need to be complemented by guidelines and curriculum that are informed by comprehensive research on gender stereotypes in early childhood and that include self-reflection tools for educators.

### **Gender sensitive education**

Some countries emphasise that in recent years increased gender sensitivity can be observed in kindergartens. For instance, in relation to toys and activities (all children are offered the possibility to carry out the same activities regardless of gender), play areas are more inclusive. Gender-neutral colours are also being used, and teachers are more equipped with mechanisms for self-reflection, including about hidden curriculum. There is also some production of gender sensitive material. Nevertheless, many limitations are still visible. First of all, the attention to a gender sensitive education depends largely on individual ECEC educators' interest and engagement in dealing with gender equality and gender stereotypes in their work with children. Secondly there is a general absence of a focus on care and masculinities.

#### *Recommendations*

- Further efforts should be directed into developing an inclusive gender sensitive education system that involves critical work on men\* and masculinities, educational and professional desegregation, and that takes into account the spectrum of gender realities.

- Promoting the use of an intersectional educational approach that considers the complexity beyond the whiteness and gender binary and complex social systems (single-parent families, lgbtqia + etc.)
- Supporting the dissemination of existing good practices and supporting networks working on gender sensitivity in early education.

## **Training**

The availability of training on gender pedagogy is not uniform throughout the countries involved. In general, the academic offering on gender pedagogy is very diversified: while some Universities systematically offer courses on gender related issues in education, in other cases gender is only touched upon or it is considered as too complex of a subject, and is therefore avoided. The overall offer is not consistent and relies on the individual interest and engagement of professors.

### *Recommendations*

- Gender-sensitive pedagogy must be a compulsory part of the training of ECEC services, educators, and primary school teachers. Concepts such as caring masculinity and gender-sensitive pedagogy should become part of the training for all educators
- Educators should also be trained in the following areas: communication skills that support the importance of gender-sensitive education in child development, and the ability to involve parents; how to bring gender equality issues to children indirectly, through play, daily activities, everyday life, art and culture; how to proactively approach the highly gender-stereotyped images in the media, fairy tales, and information material on professions.
- Training related to gender issues should be provided to all staff involved in ECECs and primary schools and the training for educators should be offered continuously.
- Training courses and hand-out materials should also be offered to parents, potentially before starting activities with children in order to clear doubts and debunk myths of gender sensitive education on one hand and ensuring a more cohesive environment for children.

## **Research**

There is a lack of systematic national research on gender sensitive education, instead there is small scale, fragmented research produced within different, often EU funded action projects by associations or Universities and in diploma, master and doctoral thesis.

There are fewer studies on early childhood education compared to primary/secondary school because of the »too early« bias; however, in primary and secondary schools gender is conflated with sexuality. There is a lack of interdisciplinarity (prevalence in sociology) and a lack of gender expertise if produced within educational discipline in existing scholarship.

Most available studies focus on girls\* and STEM skills, while masculinities and EHW skills are backslidden. Practically no existing research focuses specifically on masculinities and on the gender stereotypes about masculinity and care in ECEC.

### *Recommendations*

- There is a need for the realization of more systematic research on gender stereotypes in education at national level.
- More research is needed from critical studies on men\* and masculinity from early childhood that investigate the relationship between boys\*, masculinity, and care.

## **Pedagogical material and didactical tools**

Most of the existing gender sensitive materials target primary schools, while there is lack of this kind of materials in ECEC services. Materials are also difficult to find as they are produced within specific projects and by non-governmental organisations, and is fragmented across different resources.

Most gender sensitive materials are based on a gender binary conception and mostly address girls\*.

There is very little focus on masculinity and on the relationship between masculinity and care. Materials aimed at occupational orientation generally concentrate on the promotion of STEM subjects for girls\* while materials introducing boys\* to EHW professions are rare. Materials that address gender stereotypes related to masculinity are those that aim to dispel gender stereotypes about feminisation of care work. Boys\* in care work appear as a prevalent discourse on gender equal and progressive masculinity, which is important but rather narrow because it only indirectly addresses other stereotypes related to masculinities (i.e., body, health, heteronormativity, competitiveness, violence, sport, etc.)

The majority of didactical tools that focus on gender stereotypes take the form of card sets and memory games which represent different professions and activities in gender inclusive way. Another site of deconstructing gender stereotypes related to masculinities and care are picture books and fairy tales, also using the logic of counter-stereotyping.

### *Recommendations*

- Developing further pedagogical and didactical material that allows for gender sensitive education for children in ECECs and primary schools that deconstruct care as an inherently feminine activity and quality, and that discuss stereotypes about "masculine" and "feminine" professions with children
- Developing pedagogical material that highlight the importance of working with emotions, human co-dependency, empathy and solidarity to promote forms of masculinity different from the hegemonic one also in other life domains beyond family and professional care work
- Materials should be accessible, easy-to find, well prepared, and able to be used in different situations
- Promoting the creation of a database/repository of already existing materials and media (including play materials)

## **Male educators**

Male educators are a tiny minority in all countries involved, and a need is expressed to raise their presence in the classroom, however, contradictory reflections emerge on this subject. For some educators an increased presence of men\* as educators can convey the message to children that men\* too can do this job and can perform a caring role (and this is important because generally children throughout schooling have little contact with men). For others this does not necessarily lead towards more gender equality, on the contrary, it can lead to a reinforcement of traditional gender roles.

This happens for instance when colleagues and parents expect male educators to be risk-takers and sporty. Such normative images go hand in hand with a devaluation of female professionals and their performance in pedagogy. Also, male educators themselves are not necessarily endorsing the concept of caring masculinities in the sense of rejecting dominance and violence and being committed to promoting equality. They can also reproduce hegemonic notions of masculinity, which can be seen, among other things, in the devaluation of femininity.

Another sensitive issue concerns the persistence of social prejudice against male educators as potential abusers that is linked to the hyper-sexualisation of men\* in care work, and this is a deterrent for men\* to choose this profession.

#### *Recommendations*

- Promote the presence of male educators and teachers in ECEC services and primary schools (also based on the experience of the ‘Boys’ Day’ initiative in Austria and Germany)
- Promote a reflection on the relationship between the presence of male educators versus the contrasting perpetuation of gender stereotypes in education
- Promote the adoption of a clear concept in ECEC facilities about child protection that also addresses the issue of the general suspicion of sexualized violence by male educators

#### **Care and caring masculinities**

Topics of care are included in ECEC services activities in the context of self-care, getting to know different occupations and activities related to the topic of division of labour in the families. The research shows an almost complete lack of addressing the issue of men\* and care in ECEC policy contexts and in gender pedagogy. Exceptions are found in school education in Austria and Germany («School Act of Bavaria» in Germany, and “Reflexive gender pedagogy and gender equality” in Austria).

#### *Recommendations*

- The image of care work should be enhanced in gender sensitive educational material; its benefit for individuals, interpersonal relations and for the society as a whole should become evident.
- The economic and social value of care jobs should be promoted.
- Awareness needs to be created among pedagogues on the topic of gender-sensitive pedagogy and caring masculinity. Questions like: “What does it mean when boys\* and men\* take on caring and nurturing work?”, or “How does this concept of masculinity affect the career orientation of boys\* or the lives of girls\* and women?”, should be addressed with the pedagogues, so that the larger concept can be understood, and awareness of the importance of these issues is created.
- A transfer of good practice, with the example of material of (Boys’ Day) into schoolbooks and other educational material, should be pursued.

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