

Discussion Paper No. 2

EU Network on the Prevention of Gender-Based and Domestic Violence

Introduction: the role of education in preventing gender-based violence and domestic violence

Educational settings have a critical role in violence prevention and response.¹ Education is a powerful tool to prevent gender-based violence and domestic violence.

1.1 The Council of Europe

The preamble of the **Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention)** stresses the “structural nature of violence against women as gender-based violence”, and that “violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.”² Education is pivotal in addressing the root causes of violence and challenging the social and cultural patterns of behaviours of women and men. Under Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention, which opens Chapter III, States must “take the necessary measures to promote changes in the social and cultural patterns of behaviour of women and men with a view to eradicating prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women and men” (para. 1). Parties, including the European Union as of 1. October 2023, “shall take the necessary measures to encourage all members of society, especially men and boys, to contribute actively to preventing all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention.” A specific article is devoted to education. Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention reads as follows:

1. Parties shall take, where appropriate, the necessary steps to include teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity, adapted to the evolving capacity of learners, in formal curricula and at all levels of education.

2 Parties shall take the necessary steps to promote the principles referred to in paragraph 1 in informal educational facilities, as well as in sports, cultural and leisure facilities and the media.

The Explanatory Report of the Istanbul Convention clarifies that “the majority of men and boys are not perpetrators,” and that “their contribution can take on many forms in particular as role models, agents of change and advocates for equality between women and men and mutual respect.”³ Bearing in mind that the primary responsibility for education is a child’s parents, the Explanatory Report focuses on educational establishments, for which Parties can design “teaching material for all levels of education (primary, secondary and tertiary education) that promotes such values and enlightens learners with respect to the various forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention.”⁴ The drafters of the Convention did not impose a specific model on the Parties and this is the meaning that must be attributed to the phrase “where appropriate” in Article 14. States

¹ European Education Area Strategic Framework, Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training, *Issue paper: Gender Equality in and through Education*, 2023, p. 16.

² Istanbul Convention, preamble. On the Istanbul Convention, see S. De Vido, M. Frulli (eds), *Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence: A Commentary on the Istanbul Convention*, Elgar, 2023.

³ Explanatory Report to the Istanbul Convention (Explanatory Report), para. 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 95.

are not free to decide whether they want to include these issues or not, but they maintain flexibility to decide how.⁵

Education regarding gender equality issues can be incorporated in the “formal curriculum,” meaning “the planned programme of objectives, content, learning experiences, resources and assessment offered by a school where appropriate. It does not refer to incidental lessons which can be learnt at school because of particular school policies.”⁶ As stressed in the Explanatory Report, “some states for instance determine the teaching aims in their formal curriculum while leaving it to the schools to decide on the proper working methods and teaching materials to be used to reach these aims.”⁷ Education is also crucial for all informal educational facilities – the definition varying quite significantly from State to State – as well as any sports, cultural and leisure facilities as well as the media.⁸

1.2 The European Union

The **European Union** is party to the Istanbul Convention after the conclusion of the two Council Decisions: No. 2023/1075 on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence with regard to institutions and public administration of the Union, and No. 2023/1076 on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence with regard to matters related to judicial cooperation in criminal matters, asylum and non-refoulement.⁹

The legal bases used for the accession (Articles 82(2), 84 and 78(2) TFEU), do not expressly refer to education. However, under Article 6 TFEU, the Union shall have competence to carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States in the field of **education**. Article 84 TFEU, by providing for the establishment of measures to promote and support the action of the Member States in the field of crime prevention, paves the way for a reflection on education as a measure to address the root causes of crimes, including those falling under the umbrella term “gender-based violence and domestic violence.”

The European Commission emphasised the centrality of education in the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025,¹⁰ and in the Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025.¹¹ In particular, the latter stressed the need to develop “a better gender sensitivity in education processes and institutions,” and “to equip all boys and girls with equal respect and proper conditions to become fulfilling adults in schools and universities.” The document also acknowledges that “sexist behaviours and sexual harassment affect primarily girls and young women and hamper their educational experience.”¹²

With the purpose of creating a European Education Area, the European Commission and the EU Member States are working “to achieve their collective vision for a European Education Area by focusing their efforts” on, *inter alia*, improving quality and equity in education and training. In that respect, the Working Group of

⁵ Explanatory report, para. 95.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., para. 95

⁸ Ibid., para. 96.

⁹ Council Decision (EU) 2023/1075 of 1 June 2023 on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence with regard to institutions and public administration of the Union, ST/5514/2023/INIT, OJ L 143I, 2.6.2023, p. 1–3. Council Decision (EU) 2023/1076 of 1 June 2023 on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence with regard to matters related to judicial cooperation in criminal matters, asylum and non-refoulement, ST/5523/2023/REV/1, OJ L 143I, 2.6.2023, p. 4–6

¹⁰ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, COM/2020/152 final.

¹¹ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on achieving the European Education Area by 2025, COM/2020/625 final.

¹² Ibid., para. 2.2.

the European Commission on Equality and Values in Education and Training published in 2023 an issue paper on Gender Equality in and through Education, focusing, in a part of the analysis, on how addressing gender-based violence in education.¹³

In the proposal for a **Directive** to combat violence against women and domestic violence, presented by the European Commission in March 2022, preventive measures were envisaged. On 6 February 2024, the co-legislators reached provisional political agreement, with formal adoption expected in the Spring. The text of the provisional political agreement contains several provisions on education. For instance, Article 36 requires Member States to develop education programmes to increase understanding of the different manifestations and root causes of this type of violence, as well as the development of digital literacy skills, including critical engagement with the digital world. In addition, the text includes specific provisions on the prevention of rape and the promotion of the central role of consent in sexual relationships. In that regard, Article 36a requires Member States to take appropriate measures to promote changes in the behavioural patterns rooted in the historically unequal power relations between women and men. This can be achieved through “the making available and distribution of consent education material and the wide dissemination of information on measures of rape prevention.” Furthermore, in the preamble (para 57a): “primary prevention measures should aim to prevent violence from occurring and could include actions such as awareness-raising campaigns, targeted education programmes to increase understanding among the general public of the different manifestations of all forms of violence and their consequences and to increase knowledge about consent in inter-personal relationships at an early age,” and (para 58) “prevention may also take place in formal education, in particular, through strengthening sexuality education and socio-emotional competencies.”

Against this background, the discussion within the EU network becomes strategic. The participants to the EU network stressed multiple times the key role played by education in addressing the root causes of gender-based violence and domestic violence in the first meeting in November 2023, and encouraged an exchange of ideas and practices in the field.

Education clearly aims at preventing gender-based violence and domestic violence (primary prevention), but it can also be considered as a powerful tool for secondary and tertiary prevention. For example, the presence of an anti-violence centre within a university or an institution to which an individual can report gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, can be mentioned as a form of secondary prevention. Actions and programmes addressed to perpetrators, including teaching the perpetrators of domestic violence to “adopt non-violent behaviour in interpersonal relationships with a view to preventing further violence and changing violent behavioural patterns,” which is an obligation under the Istanbul Convention (Article 16), refers to tertiary prevention.

The discussion within the network will mainly refer to primary prevention, without however excluding the importance of secondary and tertiary prevention. The purpose of the discussion will be guided by three main points (M.A.K.E.):

- a) **M**apping measures and approaches in education, both formal and informal, looking into gaps and emerging needs;
- b) share **K**nowledge about the impact of violence on children and young people;
- c) **E**xchange existing good practices and effective outcomes.

Guiding questions for an introductory discussion:

- Is there an action plan on education and gender equality in your country?
- Is gender equality in education (formal curriculum) provided by law? Are there specific educational actions on preventing gender-based violence and domestic violence?

¹³ Issue paper: Gender Equality, *op. cit.*

Formal Education

Formal education is education in formal settings. In that context, it is crucial that teaching materials “acknowledge structural inequalities, power imbalances and discrimination based on sex, gender and other intersecting grounds (e.g. age, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, race, belonging to national or ethnic minorities, migrant or refugee status, etc.) that contribute to or exacerbate violence against women and girls.”¹⁴ Teaching materials can refer to prevention of discrimination and eradication of stereotypes, and/or can work specifically on countering gender-based violence. It was observed that few materials address forms of gender-based violence against women such as female genital mutilation and forced marriages.¹⁵ According to the analysis conducted within the framework of the Council of Europe, few States parties (e.g. Austria) to the Istanbul Convention explicitly mention the involvement of boys or men in their educational work, but almost all States highlight the importance of disrupting harmful gender stereotypes, which implies the need to also work on concepts of masculinity and femininity.¹⁶

Recommendation CM/Rec (2019)1 of the Committee of Ministers on preventing and **combating sexism** defines sexism and designs measures to counteract it in various sectors, including education. It invites Member States of the Council of Europe, among others, to ensure the design and implementation of tailored, ongoing education and training for educators in all spheres and at all levels of education, including in education establishments.¹⁷ As for teaching materials, it recommends that States “ensure the assessment of textbooks, training materials and teaching methods used by/for pupils of all age groups and in all forms of education and training (starting with preschool education) for sexist language, preventing and combating sexism and gender stereotypes, and revise them so that they actively promote gender equality.”¹⁸

In its practice, **GREVIO** emphasised that “the issue of violence has to be addressed in the school education through a gender lens as a type of violence that primarily affects girls.”¹⁹ Also mutual respect and non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships must be included in the required teaching issues (actions aimed at combating bullying at school for example).²⁰ Sexual education is not expressly requested by the Istanbul Convention; GREVIO, however, posited that it is one of the key issues related to its implementation, because it can provide knowledge about rights such as personal integrity and the importance of consent.²¹ In its Mid-Term Horizontal Review, GREVIO mentioned several practices. For example, in Portugal, the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) made available to teachers far-ranging and in-depth material to promote an education free from gender stereotypes, developing, since 2008, a comprehensive set of guides on gender and citizenship for all levels of education, from pre-school to secondary education.²² One of the key issues to be considered is whether this material is useful and practically make a change in the way children and adolescents conceive interpersonal relationships. In its baseline evaluation reports on Denmark and Turkey, GREVIO stressed the importance of monitoring how teachers make use of existing teaching materials and how they approach issues related to domestic violence and violence against women.²³ In the baseline evaluation

¹⁴ V. Sundaram, A. Stenson, *Preventing Violence against Women through Formal and Informal Education: Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention*, Council of Europe, 2022, p. 12.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁷ Committee of Ministers, Recommendation CM/Rec (2019)1 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States to prevent and combat sexism, 27 March 2019.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ GREVIO, Baseline Evaluation Report on Albania, GREVIO/Inf(2017)13, para. 60. K. Sękowska-Kozłowska, *Article 14: Education*, in S. De Vido, M. Frulli, op. cit.

²⁰ GREVIO, Baseline Evaluation Report on Monaco, GREVIO/Inf(2017)3, para. 45.

²¹ GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Italy GREVIO/Inf(2019)18, para. 97.

²² GREVIO, *Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation reports*, 2022, para. 157.

²³ Ibid., para. 166.

report on Italy, GREVIO noticed the “mounting resistance faced by schools” when undertaking educational projects in line with the standards of the Istanbul Convention.²⁴

A response to these challenges could be found in the promotion of an integrated approach to education, which involves all relevant stakeholders, including in the formal education systems level, civil society organisations, community level and family level. It was found, for example, that:

work to promote non-stereotyped gender roles in schools needs to focus on interventions within a classroom (e.g. lesson and curriculum), institutional policy (e.g. on sexual harassment, corporal punishment), interactions (e.g. respect shown by teachers for learners, the way bullying or harassment is responded to), and the wider environment.²⁵

Intersectionality should also be considered as a pivotal element to promote gender equality, because it goes at the root causes of violence and at the elements that multiply and intensify discrimination.²⁶ An intersectional education aims at: redressing disadvantage; addressing stigma, prejudice, stereotyping and violence; enabling participation and giving voice to those disadvantaged; and accommodating difference through structural change.²⁷

Guiding Questions:

- Can you mention a best practice and some data in your country of origin in formal education?
- Is there an appropriate training of teachers at all levels on matters concerning gender equality? Are teachers trained to identify gender-based violence and domestic violence of which their pupils are victims?
- Is there an obligation or a formal reporting procedure at school level? How common are specific policies and procedures to deal with possible cases of abuse suspected or reported before escalating to involving authorities?

Informal education

The expression “informal educational facilities” covers, according to the Explanatory Report to the Istanbul Convention, “organized education activity outside formal systems, such as community or religious education facilities, activities, projects and institutions based on social pedagogy, and any other type of educational activity offered by community groups and other organizations (such as boy scouts or girl scouts, summer camps, after school activities, etc.).”²⁸ Sports, cultural and leisure facilities constitute a key aspect of this form of education. Concerning the role of the media, the Explanatory Report indicates that Parties to the Convention are requested “to include the media in their measures to promote the above principles. It is important to note that the drafters clearly indicated that any measures taken in this regard shall have due regard to the fundamental principle of the independence of the media and the freedom of the press.”²⁹

According to the analysis conducted within the framework of the Council of Europe, interventions have included national campaigns, initiatives in youth centres, through the Scouts/Guides networks and in healthcare settings.³⁰ Information can be disseminated through seminars and workshops, television spots, art exhibitions, and social media, websites and mobile applications. In Belgium, educational materials developed for formal

²⁴ Ibid., para. 171.

²⁵ V. Sundaram, A. Stenson, *Preventing Violence*, cit., p. 13.

²⁶ European Education Area Strategic Framework, *Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training, Issue Paper: Tackling different forms of discrimination in and through education and training*, 2023, p. 43.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Explanatory Report, para. 96.

²⁹ Ibid., para. 97.

³⁰ V. Sundaram, A. Stenson, *Preventing Violence*, cit., p. 32.

education settings are being made available to those working in informal contexts, such as in facilities for those with disabilities, in youth organisations, in prisons and at concerts and festivals.³¹

Several examples of State practice can be mentioned, including the “White Ribbon” campaign in the Netherlands which called upon men and boys to pledge to prevent gender-based violence against women, and to state that they would not commit acts of violence.³²

The role of prevention in informal educational settings is not adequately stressed, though. In the Mid-Term Horizontal Review, GREVIO stated that out of 17 published baseline evaluation reports at the time of the publication, “only some addressed the obligation provided under Article 14, paragraph 2, in relation to sports, cultural and leisure facilities.”³³

However, the role of informal educational settings in the reproduction of stereotypes should be of concern. Coaches should be involved in the promotion of preventive practices, including the prevention of sexism and a language that reinforces stereotypes and toxic masculinity in sport. An integrated approach seems keys in that respect, requiring the involvement of multiple actors (family, sport facilities, community, etc).

Guiding Questions:

- Can you mention a best practice in your country of origin involving men and boys?
- Are there data to demonstrate the effectiveness of the programmes in place?
- What is the main obstacle to the effectiveness of these programmes? (stereotypes, absence of legislation imposing these programmes, lack of training for trainers in the sport sector, etc).

Digital dimension of education

The digital realm is both empowering women and girls³⁴ and a source of gender-based violence and domestic violence.³⁵ It is empowering,³⁶ because the “virtual” world “opens doors to information, education, markets, jobs and communities that, in the past, would have been completely inaccessible to most people, particularly girls and women.”³⁷ At the same time, however, it is also a source of gender-based violence. Insults, defamation, threats and hate speech are facilitated by the internet, with the intersectional dimension constituting a “multiplier” of hate that quickly runs online. In the Victim’s Rights Strategy 2020-2025, the European Commission defined cybercrime or online crime as “any type of a criminal offence that is committed online or with a use of computer or online tools,”³⁸ which “may include serious crimes against persons such as online sexual offences (including against children), identity theft, online hate crime and crimes against property (such as fraud and counterfeiting of non-cash means of payment).”³⁹ In a report for the European Parliament,

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 36.

³³ Mid-Term Horizontal Review, cit., para. 170.

³⁴ United Nations, *Gender equality and empowerment of women through ICT*, in *Women2000 and Beyond*, 2005.

³⁵ European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) (2017), *Cyber violence against women and girls*, available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

³⁶ Human Rights Council, *New and emerging digital technologies and human rights*, A/HRC/RES/41/11, available at: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/41/11>.

³⁷ D. Ging, E. Siapera (eds) *Gender Hate Online*, Springer International Publishing, 2019.

³⁸ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, EU Strategy on victims’ rights (2020-2025), Footnote 32, COM/2020/258 final.

³⁹ Ibid., para. 1.

published in March 2021,⁴⁰ the expression “gender-based cyber violence” was used to stress the gendered nature of cyber violence.⁴¹

Among the types of behaviour amounting to cyber violence, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, in her 2018 report, included the following forms of violence committed online: emerging forms, such as doxing,⁴² sextortion,⁴³ and trolling;⁴⁴ some forms of violence against women which carry the prefix “online”, such as online mobbing, online stalking and online harassment; or newly emerging forms, such as the non-consensual distribution of intimate contents.⁴⁵ In another study for the European Parliament, additional behaviours were included, such as cyber bullying, non-consensual pornography, image-based sexual abuse, creepshots,⁴⁶ upskirting,⁴⁷ digital voyeurism, non-consensual/unwanted sexting,⁴⁸ etc.⁴⁹ In a more recent study for the European Parliament, the following behaviours were mentioned: cyber stalking, trolling, cyber harassment and bullying, hate speech online, flaming,⁵⁰ image-based sexual abuse/non-consensual pornography, and doxing.⁵¹ CM/Rec (2019) noted that the internet has provided “a new dimension for the transmission of sexism, especially sexist hate speech.”⁵²

Education plays a key role in preventing violence committed in the digital dimension. As acknowledged by the aforementioned recommendation, it is important to prevent “online sexism and abuse, through the establishment and promotion of programmes that teach critical digital and media literacy, and skills for safe and critical engagement with digital media.”⁵³

In the **GREVIO General Recommendation No. 1** on the digital dimension of violence against women,⁵⁴ States parties to the Istanbul Convention were required to “promote the inclusion of digital literacy and online safety in formal curricula and at all levels of education.”⁵⁵ It also adds that teaching materials made available in line with Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention “should enable learners to learn about equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships and violence against women, including in its digital dimension and should be accessible to persons with physical and/or intellectual disabilities.”⁵⁶

Some practices can be mentioned. *Can You Fix It?*, for example, is an evidence-based online educational programme addressed to young people aged 14–20.⁵⁷ The website contains video scenarios which have the potential to become sexually violent or where sensitive issues relating to sexuality are discussed. Learners can

⁴⁰ European Parliamentary Research Service (2021) *Combating gender-based violence: Cyber-violence*, European Added Value Assessment, March 2021, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU\(2021\)662621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU(2021)662621_EN.pdf).

⁴¹ See, in more detail, Sara De Vido, Lorena Sosa, *Criminalisation of gender-based violence against women in European States, including ICT-facilitated violence*, EELN, 2021.

⁴² Doxing is the act of revealing identifying information about someone online, such as their real name, home address, workplace, phone, financial, and other personal information, with the purpose of harassing, threatening or damaging the person.

⁴³ Sextortion can take different forms, but it generally entails a threat to expose sexual images in order to make a person do something. These threats may come from strangers or (former) intimate romantic partners attempting to harass, embarrass and control victims.

⁴⁴ Trolling is the act of leaving an insulting message on the internet with the intention to upset, refute, discredit or silence someone.

⁴⁵ UNHRC, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women*, A/HRC/38/47 (2018), para. 33.

⁴⁶ Creepshots are photos of women taken discreetly in public by men.

⁴⁷ Upskirting is the act of taking a photograph or video from a position that allows someone to look up inside a woman's dress or skirt, without the woman's permission.

⁴⁸ Sexting is the act of sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs or videos.

⁴⁹ See the complete analysis, based on the characteristics of victims, and perpetrators here: A. van der Wilk, *Cyber Violence and Hate Speech Online Against Women*, 2018.

⁵⁰ Flaming consists of ‘vitriolic content, denoted by explicit language and ‘misogyny’: Jane, E. (2015) ‘Flaming? What flaming? The pitfalls and potentials of researching online hostility’, in *Ethics and Information Technology*, 65-87

⁵¹ European Parliamentary Research Service *Cyberviolence*, cit., p. 6.

⁵² Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on preventing and combating sexism, p. 5.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵⁴ GREVIO General Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women adopted on 20 October 2021.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 24, letter g).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ V. Sundaram, A. Stenson, *Preventing Violence*, cit., p. 34.

have a look at things from the perspective of one character or the other, actively participate, answer to questions and “fix” the scenario. Two interesting projects funded by the EU can be recalled here. One is the *MenABLE* project, which aims to prevent online gender-based violence by tackling its roots causes and by promoting means of prevention strategies primarily, but not exclusively, targeting boys and young men.⁵⁸ The second one is the *Cybersafe project*, run by NGOs operating in 8 countries (2018-2021). The project aimed to create a toolkit with scenario-based online workshops for students in schools to work through in the classroom. Information of the impact of online sexual violence were shared with the participants.⁵⁹

Guiding Questions:

- How important is cross-border cooperation in raising awareness of digital violence, and what role can the EU play in facilitating this cooperation?
- Do you know any initiatives or campaigns that have been impactful or prompted behavioural changes?
- Can you share data or knowledge related to the impact of digital violence, including pornography, on children and youth?

Conclusions

In a final session, the main points of the discussion will be summed up, and further suggestions collected from the participants on the role of the EU in the implementation of the (if adopted) Directive and of the Istanbul Convention within the limits of EU competences.

⁵⁸ <https://www.menable.eu/>

⁵⁹ <https://www.stoponlineviolence.eu/deliverables/>