"Who cares? Children and young people's voices on gender equality in five European countries"

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Abstract. Despite the long list of international policy recommendations aimed at eradicating all forms of discrimination based on sex and gender, each European country continues to face different internal challenges. Involving younger generations in the analysis of real problems, through community initiatives, and respecting a whole-school approach have been fruitful strategies to introduce gender issues into formal education. This was the aim of the Erasmus+ project "Equality in Action" (2019-2022), which involved five European countries. This article presents the perceptions of 114 students aged 14-18 from Portugal, Greece, Romania, Turkey and Slovenia on the five most important gender equality issues that remain unresolved in their countries, as well as their proposals for tackling them. After the activities in each school and the exchange between classes from different countries, the children and young people completed an open online questionnaire. They revealed that they had become aware of various areas of personal and collective life in which inequalities between women and men exist, resulting from a particular social order that can be corrected. The younger generations are in fact capable of participating in building a better society, being critical and attentive to themselves and others.
Keywords: Gender equality, children and young people's voices, gender mainstreaming in education.

[PT] "Quem se importa? Vozes de crianças e jovens sobre igualdade de género em cinco países europeus"

Resumo. Apesar da longa lista de recomendações políticas internacionais destinadas a erradicar todas as formas de discriminação com base no sexo e no género, cada país europeu continua a enfrentar diferentes desafios internos. Envolver as gerações mais jovens na análise de problemas reais, através de iniciativas na comunidade, e respeitar uma abordagem escolar holística têm sido estratégias eficazes para introduzir as questões de género na educação formal. Este foi o objetivo do projeto Erasmus+ «Igualdade em Ação» (2019-2022), que envolveu cinco países europeus. O artigo apresenta as perceções de 114 estudantes com idades entre os 14 e os 18 anos de Portugal, Grécia, Roménia, Turquia e Eslovénia sobre as cinco questões mais importantes em matéria de igualdade de género que continuam por resolver nos seus países, bem como as propostas que sugerem para as solucionar. No final das atividades em cada escola e do intercâmbio entre as turmas dos diferentes países, crianças e jovens preencheram um questionário aberto online, onde revelaram ter tomado consciência sobre diversas áreas da vida pessoal e coletiva, em que existem desigualdades entre mulheres e homens resultantes de uma certa ordem social, que pode ser corrigida. As gerações mais jovens são capazes, de facto, de participar na construção de uma sociedade melhor, sendo críticas e atentas a si próprias e aos outros.
Palavras-chave: Igualdade de género; vozes de crianças e jovens; *mainstreaming* de género em educação.

[ESP] "¿A quién le importa? Voces de niños, niñas y jóvenes sobre igualdad de género en cinco países europeos"

Resumen. A pesar de la larga lista de recomendaciones políticas internacionales para erradicar todas las formas de discriminación por razón de sexo y género, cada país europeo se sigue enfrentando a diferentes retos. Implicar a las generaciones más jóvenes en el análisis de problemas reales, a través de iniciativas comunitarias, y adoptar un enfoque escolar integral han sido estrategias fructíferas para introducir las cuestiones de género en la educación formal. Este fue el objetivo del proyecto Erasmus+ «Igualdad en acción» (2019-2022), en el que participaron cinco países europeos. En este artículo se presentan las percepciones de 114 estudiantes de entre 14 y 18 años de Portugal, Grecia, Rumanía, Turquía y Eslovenia sobre las cinco cuestiones de igualdad de género más importantes que aún siguen existiendo como problemas en sus países, así como sus propuestas para resolverlos. Tras las actividades en cada centro escolar y el intercambio entre clases de distintos países, los niños y jóvenes adolescentes rellenaron un cuestionario abierto en línea. Revelaron que habían tomado conciencia de diversos ámbitos de la vida personal y colectiva en los que existen desigualdades entre mujeres y hombres, fruto de un determinado orden social que puede corregirse. De hecho, las generaciones más jóvenes son capaces de participar en la construcción de una sociedad mejor, siendo críticas y atentas consigo mismas y con los demás.
Palabras clave: Igualdad de género, voces de niños/as y jóvenes, integración de la perspectiva de género en la educación.

Summary. 1 Introduction: Why talk about gender inequalities at school?; 2. Teaching and learning with a gender perspective: opportunities and challenges; 3. The importance of listening to children and young people on social issues; 4. Children and young people's voices on gender equality: an empirical study report; 4.1. Methodology; 4.1.1. Participants; 4.1.2. Instrument; 4.1.3. Procedure; 4.2. Presentation and interpretation of the responses; 4.2.1. Most pressing issues identified; 4.2.2. Recommendations suggested for schools and public policy; 5. Brief discussion and suggestions for future gender equality projects; 6. Conclusion: Learning and teaching to build a fairer society; 7. References

1. Introduction: Why talk about gender inequalities at school?

It seems that the belief in the advance of civilization over time, guided by scientific knowledge as a guarantee of sound political decision-making for the common good, including the protection of human rights and the planet, is now weakening abruptly. It is therefore likely that the legacy we will leave future generations will be poorer, on all fronts, than what we ourselves received. Several structural factors of inequality appear to be growing, exacerbated by extreme natural phenomena and unthinkable human decisions in handling various conflicts, such as armed warfare, which push considerable segments of the population into suffering and poverty, ultimately erasing hope.

Roughly three decades ago, in an effort to find ways to measure the success of actions implemented in each country to promote people's quality of life, the Human Development Index began to include the gender dimension. This makes it possible to understand that the greater the disparities between women and men in a given nation, the higher its gender inequality index would be (UN, 1995).

Focusing on Europe, we know that achieving equal opportunities in all areas of life remains a difficult goal (even in the wealthiest countries), as shown by data from the European Institute for Gender Equality, which publishes the Gender Equality Index annually[2] (EIGE, 2024). Despite national and supranational policy recommendations that encourage a gender mainstreaming approach in education and other public policy areas, anti-gender movements – clearly identified in Europe and elsewhere, especially in the past two decades (Habed *et al.*, 2024) – are undeniable and have contributed to a growing confusion in public perception. Drawing on patriarchal and sexist arguments and using terms such as "gender ideology" – a concept rooted in Catholic Church documents from 2004, which allude to the supposed degradation of the "traditional family" and the destruction of spousal roles (Ubieta *et al.*, 2018) – recent narratives and actions from more conservative groups have challenged inclusive language, as well as gender-sensitive teaching and research (e.g., Beck, 2024; Ferreira *et al.*, 2024). All of this is unfolding insidiously, generating setbacks in civilizational progress with respect to human rights guarantees.

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[2] https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024

Among the various national efforts to counter generational trends of gender inequality and its intersections, the greatest hopes continue to be placed on schools and formal education (e.g., CEDAW, 1979; CoE, 2007; Vieira, 2017). By promoting a common curriculum base – with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be developed progressively throughout schooling – it is believed that all children and young people can benefit from equivalent learning conditions. These conditions would equip them to grow and succeed, often reaching levels of achievement that were inaccessible to their parents due to factors such as poverty or religious, political and socio-historical constraints. In today's world, barriers to knowledge, free thought and informed opinion, which we believed had been overcome, are resurfacing, albeit often in disguise. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure the quality of education provided in schools, which should include not only disciplinary content but also the core values of democratic citizenship.

Starting from the conviction that it is still possible to promote positive societal change, and that schools should be a primary space for nurturing critical awareness of inequality from an early age, this article contends that we need to integrate a gender perspective in education. This integration should occur not only in curriculum design, but also in the organisation of learning spaces, in teacher training and school management (Vieira and Alvarez, 2020). To that end, and because students are not merely school clients but active participants, it is essential to understand the views of children and young people, regardless of age, on social issues inherent to their lives as developing citizens[3].

This article focuses on gender inequality, giving voice to children and young people from five European countries (Portugal, Greece, Romania, Turkey and Slovenia) that participated in the Erasmus+ project "Equality in Action" (2019-2022), coordinated by the Miranda do Corvo School Cluster in Portugal. The work carried out (although delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, between March 2020 and May 2021) included shared pedagogical activities, specific curriculum adaptations, school exchanges and teacher training sessions. At the end of the project, participating students were invited to identify what they considered the most persistent gender equality problems in their countries and to propose solutions. The responses and reflections derived from them are the subject of this article. No comparative analysis between countries was attempted, both due to the small number of participants per group and to avoid the ethical issues that could arise from illegitimate cross-national data interpretation.

2. Teaching and learning with a gender perspective: Opportunities and challenges

Organising both formal and informal learning spaces with the awareness that learners and educators are permeable to stereotypes, prejudices and oversimplified views of reality that influence practices and the significance assigned to learned content, means to be aware of human diversity and the impact of intersecting individual characteristics and experiences on both implicit and explicit behaviours. Among the biased ideas often mobilized in the teaching and learning process are those attributed to categories such as age, sex/gender, class, race, ethnicity, ethno-religious belonging and conditions of disability or mental health, among others. Such influences often affect classroom interactions and the opportunities available for children and young people to learn and demonstrate their abilities. Their performance is frequently shaped by unequal chances to participate or even to express their views on a range of topics (Vieira, 2017). Therefore, it is important to adopt an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989) to identify and understand the power of stereotypes, including in childhood studies (Santiago *et al.,* 2024). This approach allows us to examine the possible intersections between individual characteristics and opportunities, which show a wide range of axes of oppression and/or privilege also experienced and internalised by children and young people. Although these are not always acknowledged, they interfere in self- and peer-assessment, and therefore on freedom of choice.

With this in mind, teaching with a gender perspective begins with "recognising that the socially and culturally constructed differences between women and men represent fundamental organising principles of society and have historically sustained asymmetrical power relations that tend to be naturalized, even in institutional contexts" (Ferreira *et al.*, 2024, p. 23). To this end, it is crucial to invest in the professional development of educators at all levels of schooling, introducing content on citizenship education both in initial teacher training and continuing professional development. These topics should be explored across all subjects throughout the various levels, so that there is a connection between theoretical knowledge in areas such as languages, mathematics, history and philosophy, among others, and the real world. Citizenship education can also gain relevance if it is included in the curriculum as an autonomous subject, as happened in Portugal from 2018, following the publication of the National Strategy for Citizenship Education[4].

In order to promote and monitor the efforts made by each country to use educational settings as privileged contexts for structural change, various recommendations have been issued, particularly since 1979, when the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly. The founding text declares it a pressing concern for democratic states to ensure "the elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education (...), in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods" (CEDAW, 1979, Art. 10., par. c)[5]. In the case of Portugal, the monitoring committee reiterated

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[3] Although our study focuses on binary people (who were born with a defined biological sex and identify as women or men), it is crucial for schools to address specific issues that involve non-binary persons, such as gender identity and expression (for a better understanding and use of these concepts, see the EIGE Glossary: https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus).

[4] https://cidadania.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/pdfs/national-strategy-citizenship-education.pdf

[5] https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/cedaw.pdf

these recommendations in 2015 and 2022[6], due to the fact that patterns of sex segregation persisted in vocational areas and in the labour market, as well as lower salaries for women and biased and 'naturalistic' perceptions of women and men's skills and roles.

Among the many policy documents produced – and without space here for an exhaustive analysis – we highlight a recommendation from the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (CoE, 2007), which calls for a gender-sensitive approach and attention to equality issues between women and men to be "incorporated at all levels of the education system (...), so as to foster (...) the values of justice and participation necessary for the effective and active exercise of democratic citizenship and the building of a genuine partnership between women and men in the private and public spheres"[7]. Thirteen years later, in 2020, this crucial issue was restated in the Communication on the European Education Area by 2025, which is based on six strategic axes, among which are the promotion of a "more inclusive and gender sensitive" school education[8].

3. The importance of listening to children and young people on social issues

Managing learning spaces and socialization contexts from the viewpoint of a certain structural or institutional 'adultism' – which sees children and young people as mere receivers of knowledge and as naturally less empowered in decision-making – can be considered a form of oppression (Holquist *et al.*, 2023). However, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989)[9], each country must ensure every child's right "to express [their] views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (Art. 12).

The proactive nature of children, regardless of age, has been acknowledged for over a century in developmental psychology and related fields (Sprinthall and Collins, 1995). In school settings, safe spaces for expressing opinions and for genuine participation must be created – spaces that are not to be confused with moments of 'decorative talk', where students' voices are superficially heard without real engagement (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2021, p. 76). Participation means more than just being present; it involves having a voice and opportunities to develop active listening, and the school should provide a protective environment for expressing opinions and learning about the world.

Conducting research with children and young people also means overcoming the epistemological and ontological limitations of traditional science, which tended to treat them as mere objects of study, due to their assumed lack of maturity to speak on most topics (Soares *et al.*, 2005). Nevertheless, contributions from childhood studies (e.g., Sarmento, 2013) using more interpretive methodologies have emphasised "the subjectivities, experiences and meanings of 'what' and 'how' children think, speak, act and feel in their sociocultural contexts, including power games" (Ferreira and Tomás, 2022, p. 273). Thus, it is assumed that they are perfectly capable of expressing their worldview using vocabulary with which they are familiar and mobilising their experiences to give meaning to the issues they are invited to discuss. These opportunities to participate in scientific research – as full citizens rather than simply people transitioning into adulthood – have had bilateral benefits. They have impacted both the children involved and the field of science, in terms of enhanced knowledge and methodological development. In fact, several studies have highlighted how motivation and learning improve when children and young people know their voices are heard and their participation valued (e.g., Mercer, 2000; Mitra, 2004). Furthermore, we know that when formal and non-formal pedagogical activities are guided by the principles of promoting children and young people's participation in learning processes, they tend to develop a stronger civic consciousness and a greater adherence to democratic values (Menezes and Ferreira, 2014).

Listening to children and young people on social issues and bringing everyday topics into the classroom is also a political act by educators (Silva, 2000) and requires preparation, knowledge and commitment. While it is crucial to create curricular space for discussing social issues – such as gender equality, rejecting all forms of discrimination and embracing human diversity – this educational intentionality should be embedded within the core pedagogical practice. That is to say, through core subjects like languages, mathematics, biology and history, among others, children and young people should also be able to practice and strengthen their sense of citizenship, since the school is open to society and knowledge does not develop in a vacuum. Therefore, educational spaces and pedagogical relationships should be organised in such a way that the school becomes a place where democracy is both learned and practiced (Lima, 2001). It must be recognised that the development of the values underlying children and young people's citizenship depends on the opportunities and conditions that are made available to them.

4. Children and young people's voices on gender equality: An empirical study report

4.1. Methodology

The study underlying this article is the final output of the Erasmus+ project "Equality in Action" (2019-2022)[10], which involved public schools in five European countries: Slovenia, Greece, Portugal, Romania and Turkey.

The first author of this article participated as the lead researcher for the final report, carrying out data analysis and coordinating its publication, while also serving as a trainer for teachers on gender-sensitive education in the early phase.

During the years of project implementation (2019-2022), only Portugal had a coordinated policy to promote gender equality through formal education. In the other participating countries, strategies in this area were left to the discretion of individual schools, which could choose whether or not to include them in their educational plans. It is important to note, however, that even in Portugal such policy was still in an early stage of implementation, making the institutional contexts of each school relatively comparable.

4.1.1. Participants

The participant group consisted of 114 students aged between 14 and 18. We refer to them as children and young people, in accordance with Portuguese legal definitions for the age group involved. In each country, one class at the ISCED[11] 2 or ISCED 3 level took part in the project (see Table 1). The gender distribution was as follows: 64 girls (56.14%) and 50 boys (43.86%).

Table 1. Distribution of participants by country and education level

Country	ISCED	n	%
Portugal	ISCED 2	23	20.1%
Greece	ISCED 3	20	17.54%
Romania	ISCED 3	24	21.05%
Turkey	ISCED 3	20	17.54%
Slovenia	ISCED 3	27	23.68%
Total		114	100%

Although having additional sociodemographic data on the participants would have enriched the intersectional analysis, this was not possible due to the project's ethical requirements. Therefore, the responses are presented only disaggregated by gender.

4.1.2. Instrument

To collect data in each school, a short open-ended questionnaire was created ("Young people's perceptions of gender equality"). This was administered to each participating class in the five countries. Following a brief introduction explaining the purpose of the questions, the first part of the questionnaire included four sociodemographic questions: nationality, gender, age and year of schooling. This was followed by two distinct sections, which allowed us to collect the responses that will be presented and discussed here. In the first, students were asked to identify, in descending order of importance, the five most pressing problems that, in their opinion, constitute obstacles to gender equality in their country. In the second section, they were asked to write three recommendations for political decision-makers, aimed at addressing the identified issues and promoting more just legislation.

4.1.3. Procedure

The anonymous questionnaire was translated into the five national languages and completed simultaneously by all students in each participating class. During a designated lesson, they accessed a link to an online form. All ethical guidelines for research involving minors were followed, including parental consent. Data collection took place between April and June 2022. To facilitate combined data analysis, each teacher translated the responses into English. The data were then compiled into an Excel database, disaggregated by gender and without identification of nationality or other variables.

4.2. Presentation and interpretation of the children and young people's responses

Given the variety of qualitative data collected and considering that this study does not aim to compare countries (for reasons previously outlined), a thematic content analysis approach was adopted (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Responses were grouped into broad categories or themes through an interpretive exercise based on the substance of the students' opinions. Guided by exploratory objectives and key ideas from the responses, we employed a deductive procedure, following a pre-established categorical system informed by theory and literature review (Amado *et al.,* 2014, p. 313). Thus, we established a correspondence between the responses obtained and each of the seven indicators used by EIGE (2024), as explained below.

We begin by presenting the systematization of responses regarding the problems identified, disaggregated by gender. This is followed by a synthesis of the recommendations made by students, illustrating our interpretations with selected excerpts that clarify the reasoning behind their proposals. Note that the number

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[11] International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) https://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/international-standard-classification-education-isced

of responses considered valid for analysis does not always match the total number of participants, as some responses were excluded[12].

4.2.1. Most pressing issues identified

As previously mentioned, we used the seven indicators from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) to guide our reading of the responses. These indicators, which we describe below, are used to calculate the Gender Equality Index[13]:

- – *Knowledge*: Measures inequalities between men and women in educational outcomes, participation in lifelong learning, and gender segregation in education.
- – *Money*: Measures gender inequalities in access to financial resources and economic status.
- – *Power*: Measures equality between women and men in decision-making roles in political, economic and social spheres.
- – *Health*: Measures gender equality in terms of health status, health behaviours and access to healthcare services.
- – *Time*: Measures inequalities in the distribution of time women and men spend on care, domestic work and social activities.
- – *Work*: Assesses whether women and men have equal access to employment and good working conditions.
- – *Violence*: Includes indicators that help monitor the prevalence of most common and documented forms of violence against women.

Tables 2 and 3 show the number of times each issue was identified by girls (n=64) and boys (n=50), respectively, categorized according to the EIGE indicators.

Table 2. Issues identified by girls (n = 64) from the five countries (no. of occurrences)

EIGE indicators	Issue 1	Issue 2	Issue 3	Issue 4	Issue 5
Knowledge	9	13	13	12	11
Money	11	5	5	6	7
Power	23	25	18	18	22
Health	0	0	0	0	1
Time	4	6	8	5	3
Work	7	8	8	9	10
Violence	10	7	12	14	10
Total:	64	64	64	64	64

Table 3. Issues identified by boys (n = 50) from the five countries (no. of occurrences)

EIGE indicators	Issue 1	Issue 2	Issue 3	Issue 4	Issue 5
Knowledge	5	10	11	8	9
Money	14	6	2	4	3
Power	23	19	16	15	13
Health	0	0	0	0	0
Time	0	5	2	2	2
Work	7	8	9	10	4
Violence	1	2	10	11	19
Total:	50	50	50	50	50

As shown, the most frequently cited primary concerns among both subgroups were issues of power inequality and economic inequality, particularly among boys. For girls, issues like violence also emerged prominently as top priorities. Boys also recognised the importance of addressing violence, although this concern was mostly ranked last. Regarding time use, this topic seemed to be more relevant to girls than to boys, based on frequency and priority of responses. Topics such as education and work appeared with similar frequency in both groups, while health was only mentioned once by the girls.

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[12] Given that the questionnaire was anonymous, some male students (either due to lack of maturity or patriarchal legacy) used the opportunity to make homophobic comments. This was not a complete surprise, considering the age bracket involved and the constraining force of hegemonic masculinity (Silva and Araújo, 2007), which may influence them to make biased judgments for fear of being seen as inferior to other boys or even 'effeminate'. It is an often unconscious internal fear, driven by the need to conform to socially desirable patterns of behaviour.
[13] https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024; GEI indicators

These differences might reflect the specific focus areas emphasised during activities in each school or the topics prioritized during cultural exchanges and discussions. More than the raw numbers per indicator, what is most noteworthy is that both girls and boys expressed a broad range of concerns and demonstrated an emerging familiarity with these themes. This may be the first step toward seeking further information and developing greater critical awareness of the issues discussed.

Given the age group involved, topics such as power, employment and economic access likely resonated more with older participants who are beginning to consider vocational decisions and reflect on their future role in the labour market. Topics like time use and health may have seemed less pressing, possibly due to a limited understanding of how gender inequalities manifest in these areas. Additionally, not all schools may have devoted equal time to exploring each domain of persistent gender inequality, which would naturally affect the students' level of awareness.

4.2.2. Recommendations suggested for schools and public policy

Each study participant made three policy recommendations, based on what they had learned through the project and their reflections on the state of gender equality in their country. Due to specific content and strategic variations across schools, comparative analysis is not viable. Instead, we provide a primarily descriptive overview, with responses disaggregated by gender.

Tables 4 and 5 show the suggestions made by girls (n=64) and by boys (n=50), respectively, arranged in descending order of occurrence. To systematise the data collected without changing the substance of the suggestions, we organised the responses of both genders into proposals with equivalent formulations. Note that some entries only appear in one of the groups of students.

Table 4. Policy recommendations suggested by girls (n = 64) from the five countries

Recommendations made by female students	n	%
Investment in formal education through schools	36	19.50%
Promotion of family education (targeting children/youth and parents)	28	15.14%
Awareness campaigns through media and other means	27	14.60%
Implementation of laws promoting equal opportunities	19	10.27%
Equal pay for equal work	15	8.11%
Promoting equality in career advancement	14	7.57%
Increasing the visibility of women in civic and political roles (including quotas)	11	5.95%
Harsher penalties for those committing gender-based discrimination	10	5.41%
Elimination of stereotyped representations in public spaces (e.g., toy and clothing stores)	9	4.86%
Gender-neutral toys, books, and games; abolishing stereotypes in stories, films, etc.	5	2.70%
Expanding support services for gender-based violence victims	4	2.16%
Eliminate requests for gender information in job applications	3	1.62%
Promoting equality through sports	2	1.08%
Supporting civil society organisations working for equality	1	0.54%
Increase scholarship support to help girls pursue higher education	1	0.54%

Note: A total of 185 out of 192 responses were considered valid.

Girls emphasised the importance of both school and family education, as well as awareness campaigns and legal frameworks to ensure equality. Labour-related issues, such as equal pay and career advancement, appeared in fifth and sixth place, followed by increasing the visibility of women in political and civic roles (possibly through the implementation of quotas). Harsher punitive measures for discriminatory behaviour were also recommended, though ranked eighth.

Regarding stereotypical representations of gender, students made suggestions that included changes in the way clothing stores are organised, the kind of toys that are given to male and female children, the way films and books portray people's daily life, etc., and pointed to the importance of sports in combating stereotypes. Showing awareness of the tendency to naturalise differences based on biology, three participants suggested removing gender identification in job applications to challenge essentialist notions of capability tied to sex. A few also addressed the need for better support systems for victims of gender violence and state backing for organisations working in this area. One student emphasised that empowering girls through access to higher education via scholarships was crucial.

Below are selected student quotes to illustrate these perspectives, indicating in parentheses the areas to which they refer.

> "Schools could maybe add subjects that address these important topics so our generation can be aware of these problems"; "I think this is very necessary, not just for Erasmus projects, but for all schools to have such activities so that young people and children understand gender equality and learn to act accordingly". (School)

"The family needs to raise our awareness about these issues so we can change the world and make it better for everyone"; "First, we must end it before it begins, so instead of telling girls what to wear, we should teach boys how to behave from birth". (Family)

"In workplaces, women and men should earn the same and hold the same positions. Besides, skills should not be divided by gender, because we are all able to do anything." "Create a law that ensures that women who get pregnant have their jobs back after giving birth"; "Women and men should get equal pay for equal work". (Labour market)

"Both citizens and the state must be fair in everything they do"; "The state must take action, or future decision-makers should be young people who apply what they've learned about gender equality"; "There should be adjustments in the justice system to ensure fair trials for crimes like rape, sexual harassment, etc."; "Adopt stricter and harsher laws to deter offenders"; "Create laws that require a minimum number of women in parliament". (Legislation)

"Ban advertising that promotes gender-stereotyped toys (pink for girls, blue for boys), or that contain stereotyped activities (cooking and taking care of babies for girls, building for boys). These things limit true capabilities from birth"; "Avoid assigning professions by gender in children's books; for example, don't always illustrate pilots as men or mothers cooking in the kitchen"; "Challenge gender stereotypes in mainstream and news media". (Media and representation)

"Let people talk about these issues. Even if it's hard and may cause problems, people should realise that this is necessary and that we should do something about it. If we show how important this is to society, the actions we take will have an effect"; "People should make demonstrations and display posters, talk about this on TV"; "We should encourage women to speak out and raise their voices against this kind of actions instead of normalizing them". (Freedom, visibility and public space)

"Stop asking people to indicate their sex when it's not relevant (job applications, or account sign-ups) and maybe we will begin to see more opportunities and an equitable representation"; "Stop explaining everything to children and people in general in binary terms"; "This way of thinking keeps us from thinking in an inclusive manner and sets people against each other". (Sex/gender dichotomies)

Table 5. Policy recommendations suggested by boys (n = 50) from the five countries

Recommendations made by male students	n	%
Investment in formal education through schools	25	17.86%
Implementation of laws promoting equal opportunities	24	17.14%
Equal pay for equal work	16	11.43%
Awareness campaigns through media and other means	15	10.71%
Promotion of family education (targeting children/youth and parents)	12	8.57%
Increasing the visibility of women in civic and political roles (including quotas)	10	7.14%
Promoting equality in career advancement	9	6.43%
Measures to combat gender-based violence and sexual harassment	6	4.29%
Affordable hygiene products for women and access to free contraception	5	3.57%
Harsher penalties for those committing gender-based discrimination	4	2.86%
Fair distribution of household tasks	4	2.86%
Elimination of stereotyped representations in public spaces (e.g., toy and clothing stores)	2	1.43%
Expanding support services for gender-based violence victims	2	1.43%
Gender-neutral toys and games	2	1.43%
Production of statistical indicators that make problems visible	1	0.71%
Promoting equality through sports	1	0.71%
Increase scholarship support to help girls pursue higher education	1	0.71%
Supporting civil society organisations working for equality	1	0.71%

Note: A total of 140 out of 150 responses were considered valid.

Boys' proposals largely mirrored those of the girls, although the percentage of responses on specific topics varied. Like the girls, boys emphasised the school's role in promoting equality, including courses and projects to discuss problems, raise awareness and foster change in individual and collective terms. However, perhaps due to influences of socialization, issues such as equal pay ranked third in their recommendations, before the promotion of family education (ranked fifth, while girls ranked it second), awareness campaigns through the media and increasing the visibility of women in civic and political roles. Promoting equality in

career advancement had only nine responses, followed by measures to combat gender-based violence and sexual harassment (six responses). It is also interesting that only two boys mentioned the issue of male and female representations in the public sphere, although four were in favour of harsher penalties for gender-based discrimination. A more equitable distribution of household chores was proposed by four boys, while only one mentioned the importance of producing statistical indicators to give visibility to gender issues.

Comparing the recommendations of both groups, we should highlight the fact that five boys raised issues particularly relevant to girls' daily lives – such as the cost of menstrual hygiene products and reproductive health rights – which girls themselves did not mention. These recommendations may have emerged because the school chose to include the topic of sexuality in classroom activities, but it is nonetheless interesting that only boys included these concerns in their 'political agenda'. The girls' view of sexuality as an unimportant issue at an early age, maybe due to a strongly gender-stereotyped socialization in the family, may explain the fact that they left these issues out of the questionnaire.

As done before for the girls' proposals, we present below some of the boys' opinions in their own words, respecting the requirements of qualitative data analysis.

> "Schools must teach students to respect the opposite sex"; "There should be more projects addressing gender inequality, and more students should participate"; "Schools should host talks about respecting others, for being gay or a man doesn't mean you can't wear makeup". (School)

> "Educate parents to raise more aware future generations. Educate middle-aged people to make the present more equal"; "Education starts with the family, and so parents should pay attention to gender equality when raising boys and girls". (Family)

> "To achieve fair globalisation, policies must be based on statistics that include women's real contributions"; "Laws must be reformed to fight gender inequality"; "It is important to choose political representatives who stand against gender inequality". (Legislation)

> "Ensure equal pay for equal work for men and women"; "Men and women must have equal career opportunities"; "Like many men, women should be equally entitled to manage or own businesses". (Labour market)

> "All TV channels should be required to talk about gender inequality at peak viewing hours". (Media)

> "Pay attention to signs of domestic violence"; "Create more centres and organisations to help victims of domestic violence". (Combating violence)

Although the 64 girls and 50 boys expressed many other opinions in their responses to the questionnaire (342 in total), we believe the examples quoted above provide a fair illustration of the diversity of concerns that they have, as well as the relevance of their recommendations for effective action in different areas.

5. Brief discussion and suggestions for future gender equality projects

The exploratory analysis of responses from girls and boys across five countries indicates that, despite the project's limited duration and interruptions due to the global pandemic, participants demonstrated transformative learning and increased awareness of gender equality dimensions. However, it is not possible to evaluate the longitudinal impact of this experience with a cross-sectional study. In this kind of project, we always face the bittersweet challenge of sustaining practices and knowledge gained and transferring them effectively. Since we had no other available data that might be used to deepen our study, our analysis focused on the empirical material collected.

As stated before, differences in pedagogical approaches in each school may have influenced some of the concerns and opinions that students expressed in the open questionnaire. We also need to take into account the fact that the sociopolitical contexts during the project period (2019-2022) likely shaped students' awareness. There are, thus, different non-controlled factors to consider when interpreting their responses. According to the 2024 EIGE Gender Equality Index, where only four of the five participating countries are included, there is a 12.6-point gap between the highest and lowest scores (the EU's median score is 71)[14]. Although these numbers must be approached with caution, the fact is that they are based on statistics provided by each country, reflecting roughly the relative situation of women and men in the domains of knowledge, money, power, health, time, work and violence, as well as intersectional inequalities, in the two-year period preceding their publication. Thus, the 2024 indicators refer to the period when the schools administered the questionnaire, and at that time none of the 28 countries included in the Index had achieved full equality. These indicators help highlight key areas needing improvement, and therefore should impel governments to design more effective gender equality policies (EIGE, 2024).

Participating students were able to identify real issues of gender inequality and made plausible recommendations consistent with democratic principles and human rights. As the excerpts quoted above show, the topics they addressed reflect core priorities in the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2018), particularly Goal 5: achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. While differences in

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[14]   https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024/compare-countries

prioritization suggest the influence of gendered socialization (as inferred from the comparative analysis of tables 2 and 3), students largely concurred in recognising the main issues that need attention and action in order to address inequality. Even if the project's impact fades over time, due to the influence of opposing societal forces (e.g., media, fake news), one of its most important aspects was that it exposed children and young people to real life issues and made them aware of experiences that are part of everyday life. To involve them in discussions and ask for their opinion on measures to address these problems was undoubtedly relevant for developing their knowledge and critical awareness (Freire, 1996), which can contribute to their freedom of choice now and in the future.

Future projects in the area of gender equality should include children and young people from the outset, involving them in proposal design to acquaint them with the concepts used and the dynamics to be developed. In this way, rather than viewing their participation merely as a means to achieve a goal, they will feel they had a say in the design of the project's activities, and therefore recognise their purpose. Because change requires a systemic approach, which reflects social relations within and beyond the school, it is advisable to include other education agents, such as families and non-teaching staff. Also, more research is needed into how families perceive the school's role in addressing gender and social inequalities. The lack of empirical studies on theses issues has contributed to what Norocel and Băluță (2023) called the "retrogressive mobilization" of opposition: the idea that everything that involves gender inequalities and sexuality embodies a perverse ideology whose goal is to cause undesirable ethical and social reforms – which are contrary to 'traditional values' – and that uses the school as an ally. Therefore, it is essential to understand whether families have trust in schools and the curriculum choices they make in specific periods to address pressing challenges.

The study presented here has several weaknesses: the relatively small number of participants from each country; the instrument used to collect data; and the lack of other sociodemographic data. In addition, for analytical purposes, the questionnaire responses in five languages were translated in English, which poses a further constraint. Nevertheless, we believe that it is important to carry out this kind of project to give children and young people the opportunity to develop intercultural knowledge and awareness. It should also be emphasised that the participants in this study seemed to have become aware that we all face common challenges, which therefore need to be confronted collectively.

6. Conclusion: Learning and teaching to build a fairer society

Promoting gender equality through education is a cornerstone of democratic states. Schools must take an active role in combating all forms of discrimination, integrating daily life issues into curricula (interconnected with content deemed essential in each subject area) to ensure meaningful learning rooted in students' lived experiences (Vieira, 2017). This does not rule out the existence of a specific course dedicated to citizenship education throughout the period of compulsory schooling. Whether through gender mainstreaming or standalone subject (Ferreira et al., 2024), pedagogical decisions regarding learning content and classroom management must take into account not only the local sociopolitical context in which schools operate, but also the global context.

Indeed, addressing gender inequality in schools is an ethical imperative. Education is not only about knowledge and truth, but also about notions of good and evil and actively opposing discrimination and injustice within and beyond the classroom (Giroux, 1991). This was what Henry Giroux argued three decades ago, calling our attention to the need to desacralize the curriculum, to challenge petrified notions of what is educational and worthy of being included in the classroom, and to confront the myths of 'neutrality' and 'individual responsibility'. We agree with Giroux's view that educators must go beyond critique and condemnation to envision a better world, a world that is worth fighting for.

The voices of children and young people are central to building that world. As one girl stated, "We have to solve these problems, so don't be afraid to share your opinion. It really matters, and it might even change the world". Mindful of leaving no one behind, a boy added: "We could expand to include people with disabilities and minority groups". Echoing Paulo Freire's (1967) belief that education does not change the world but rather transforms people who then change the world, another student concluded: "Honestly, most of the world's problems come from ignorance. If it is possible to educate people, then the first stage of the problem will be solved. That's why this project is so helpful for gender equality".

Achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, especially Goal 5 (gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment) requires recognising the strategic role of schools in eliminating prejudice and naturalized inequalities. This demands knowledge and commitment from both educators and learners.

Children and young people's engagement in learning and socialization throughout their schooling can be viewed as is a live rehearsal for broader societal integration (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2021). However, opportunities to participate must not rely solely on temporary or externally funded projects but should be an integral part of the strategic plan of the school, which is the place where goodness can be sown and where all our hopes continue to reside.

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