



Да растем равни

Growing up Equal

101005862 — Growing Up Equal — REC-AG-2020 / REC-RGEN-WWLB-AG-2020

Deliverable D.2.2.		
Analytical Report		
Dissemination Level		
PU	Public	x
PP	Restricted to other programme participants (including the Commission Services)	
RE	Restricted to a group specified by the consortium (including the Commission Services)	
CO	Confidential, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)	
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This document is co-funded with European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program (2014 – 2020). The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation and can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union.



**Growing Up
Equal**

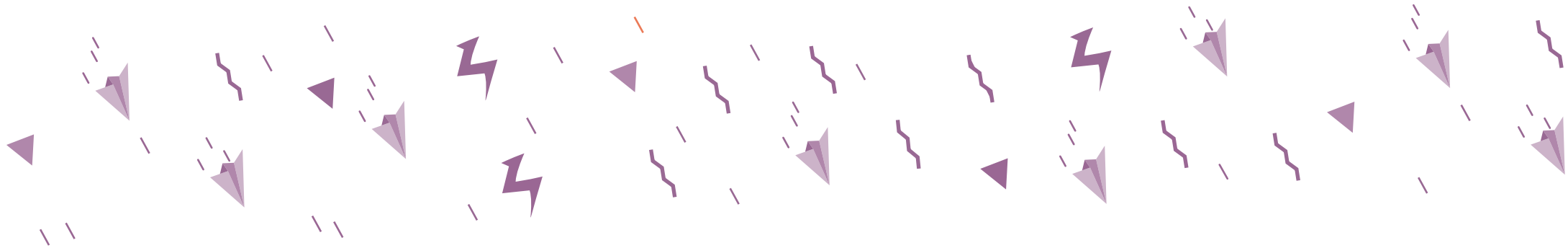
PROMOTING EQUALITY BETWEEN GIRLS AND BOYS IN SCHOOLS

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT
CONDUCTED WITHIN
THE PROJECT "GROWING EQUAL"
(GROWING UP EQUAL) AND
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS
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WORKSHOP
FOR CIVIC
INITIATIVES
FOUNDATION





Overview of the overall picture on gender equality in Bulgaria

One of the most widespread public beliefs in Bulgaria is that women and men have equal rights and if there are obstacles to women's full realization in society they are entirely of a private nature. At the same time, facts collected by the Bulgarian Fund for Women and presented in figures show the following picture¹:

¹Bulgarian Fund for Women, Infographic „Is there gender equality?“, <https://bgfundforwomen.org/bg/resursi/>

IS THERE GENDER EQUALITY?



POLITICS

Only 1/4 of the representatives in Bulgarian parliament are women



POVERTY

There are 360 000 single mothers in Bulgaria. 72% of them are at risk of poverty



VIOLENCE

In every two weeks one woman in Bulgaria is killed by her husband, partner, relative.



LEADERSHIP

Less than 16% of managers of large companies are women



LABOUR

40% of Bulgarian women everyday work without being paid and take care for children, grandchildren, elderly. Only 13% of household work is done by men



ART

Women are less represented in cultural sphere. In the permanent exhibition of the National Gallery only 9% of the works are by women



PAY

Men in Bulgaria receive 13.5% higher pay than women

(Infographic „Is there gender equality?“, <https://bgfundforwomen.org/bg/resursi/>)

In addition to these statistics, the low percentage of women in the Council of Ministers and the low percentage of women owners of medium and large businesses is also striking.





Where is Bulgaria in terms of equality between women and men globally and in Europe?

According to the World Bank's 2021 Gender Equality Index², which examines the legal aspects of women's inclusion in the labour market, Bulgaria is ranked 36th in the world, with only 10 countries out of 190 surveyed achieving 100% equality. From the Balkan countries, Greece, Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo and Albania are in front of us in the ranking, and Romania is right behind.

The main indicators in this index are: mobility to find a job, starting a job, getting paid, getting married, raising children, running a business, managing assets, and getting a pension. These indicators show whether legislation guarantees women equal rights in their working lives. For example, how is maternity care secured?

Is there protection for women who are fired or demoted after they become pregnant and give birth? Do states guarantee women equal rights in retirement, or does the shorter length of service required to receive a pension mean lower pension levels?

² World Bank. 2021. *Women, Business and the Law 2021*. Washington, DC: World Bank. ©World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/35094> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.



The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)³, an EU agency, researches and publishes monitoring reports on the state of equality between women and men in different areas of life in EU countries. According to the Gender Equality Index 2020, Bulgaria scores 59.6 out of 100 and ranks 19th in the EU. The results are based on gender gaps and success rates in six key areas: work, money, knowledge, time, power and health, as well as in their respective sub-areas. Two additional domains are included in the index but have no impact on the final score.

The area of intersectional inequalities highlights the way in which inequalities between men and women manifest themselves in combination with age, ability/disability, country of birth, education and family type. In the area of violence against women, women's experiences of violence are measured and analysed. The index consists of 31 indicators. The Gender Equality Index 2020 also includes a thematic focus on digitalisation and the future of work.

The overall score for Bulgaria is 8.3 points lower than the EU average. Since 2010, Bulgaria's score has increased by 4.6 points, but at the same time the country is two places behind in the overall ranking. Gender gaps are most pronounced in the area of time (42.7 percentage points). Having fallen three places since 2010, Bulgaria ranks last in this area⁴. The unequal distribution of household chores and care activities, especially in a Covid-pandemic situation, contributes to this result.



³ European Institute for Gender Equality, https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/agencies/eige_bg

⁴ <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-bulgaria#downloads-wrapper>

What are the main obstacles to achieving equality between men and women in Bulgaria and what are the problems of women and girls that remain invisible to society?

The Bulgarian Fund for Women (BFW) is trying to answer these questions with a “Women’s Rights Workshop”, consisting of representatives of 20 NGOs from all over the country working for women’s rights.⁵

Workshop participants identified the following main issues:

- **Increasing prevalence among young people of gender role stereotypes whose** genesis is in patriarchal society. These stereotypes make girls passive observers of life with a low degree of interest in their rights and in asserting an active personal position. This also creates the conditions for overt public action against women’s rights by interest groups.

⁵ Bulgarian Fund for Women, *Women’s Rights Workshop: possible solutions for achieving gender equality in Bulgaria 2018*, <https://bgfundforwomen.org/bg/resursi/>



This conclusion was confirmed by the unhindered invasion of the country by the global anti-gender movement, which manifested itself in the mass campaign against the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women (the so-called Istanbul Convention), which led to the rejection of the Convention by the Bulgarian government in 2018.

- **Women’s poverty and especially women’s poverty in small towns is not addressed in openly the public space.** Many women, even those who work, are highly economically dependent on the male breadwinners in the family – husbands, partners, fathers. Women are most often the ones who do unpaid work in caring for other family members who need it. The accumulation of poverty, low education and unpaid work in the family leads to economic and social isolation, low self-esteem and lack of search for self-fulfilment outside the home. Women living in such a situation often also become targets of domestic violence.

In addition to the description of this problem, the Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation also highlights another low-visibility group of women who are the only source of income for the family. In the small towns where the Foundation has worked for the past 20 years, women are often the only wage earners (usually from garment factories or in agriculture), but this does not cancel out their domestic duties or reduce the time they spend caring for children and vulnerable adults.

- **School dropout is a phenomenon that** creates secondary illiteracy and affects mostly girls from low-status families. The causes of dropout are numerous, but family influence and traditions rank high, including early marriage and early births. Lack of safety for girls on their



way to and from school is also a reason why they drop out of the education system, especially those from the Roma community. Another group vulnerable to dropping out are girls in institutions, who are most often victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

- **Girls, especially those from low social status families, do not know how to set goals and have a plan or alternatives for personal development.** They are also a vulnerable group because no one is concerned with building skills to protect their own dignity, to motivate them to succeed in life in a competitive environment. The most vulnerable in this regard are girls who have not had adequate role models in their immediate life environment.
- **Lack of sexual education in schools,** which leads to low sexual awareness among young people, lack of knowledge and skills on contraceptive use, is highlighted as one of the reasons for early births, increasing number of therapeutic instances and miscarriages.
- **Families/parents who share traditional stereotypical attitudes about women's roles in society often limit girls' personal choices for fulfillment.** This is especially true for girls from small towns, isolated groups, minorities, or those with disabilities.
- **Women's issues are not adequately covered in the media or are glossed over** – they are “invisible” to the general public and to decision-makers at different levels. This creates a sense of isolation for the women themselves, who experience these situations as something that happens only to them on an individual level or, conversely, reinforce their feeling that this is the correct “natural” order of things.



Three of the twenty recommendations formulated to the State by the participants of the Women’s Rights Workshop are focused on education, namely:

- Incorporate the study of the history and contemporary status of women’s rights into the State Educational Requirements (SREs) for civic education in secondary schools;
- Supporting projects and programs in schools to build positive role models for girls and boys through social mentoring, volunteering, peer-to-peer work, etc.;
- Introduce compulsory sexual education programmes.

In discussions with experts from the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), WCIF was informed that these recommendations had not reached them. At the same time, the Ministry of Education has shown its willingness to support projects implemented by NGOs that have a direct link to gender equality policies in all areas of public life. In its letter of support to the “Growing up equal” project, the MES stresses that many initiatives were planned with the participation of specialists from higher education institutions, government institutions and interested organisations in order to reach a public consensus and address many issues related to sexual education in schools, gender role stereotypes and activities in this regard with adolescents, but the situation created by COVID-19 pandemics has led to their postponement in time⁶.

⁶ [Bhttps://growingupequal.frgi.bg/bg/articles/obuchitelni-materiali/pismo-za-podkrepa-na-mon-po-proekta-growingupequal](https://growingupequal.frgi.bg/bg/articles/obuchitelni-materiali/pismo-za-podkrepa-na-mon-po-proekta-growingupequal)

The problem of violence against women and public attitudes

One of the most striking manifestations of gender inequality in our country (as well as worldwide) is violence against women and the “normalisation” of some forms of it (e.g. sexual violence in marriage, the unsanctioned public use of sexual innuendos towards women, sexual violence against girls in school, etc.). Studies over the last twenty years show an unchanged trend of one in four women in Bulgaria being subjected to gender-based violence. A nationally representative study by the Open Society Institute – Sofia in 2018 sheds light on

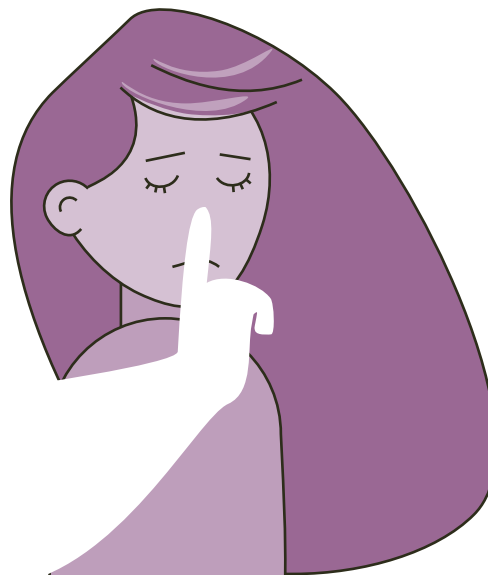
some societal attitudes that are a prerequisite for the difficult eradication of the problem⁷.

On the one hand, the majority of Bulgarian citizens support equality between men and women and consider unacceptable the various forms of violence against women – verbal, physical and emotional. Over 90% of respondents consider equality between men and women a basic human right, consider it a necessary condition for achieving a fairer society and agree that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work. Around and

over 85% of respondents stated that it is unacceptable to make unwanted sexual advances towards women, for a man to determine whom it is appropriate for a woman to date, and for a woman to be hit if she has challenged a man in some way or another.

However, certain stereotypes remain widespread: a third of people believe that domestic violence is a personal problem that should be dealt with within the family; one in four believes that women exaggerate when complaining about sexual harassment; approximately

⁷ Open Society Institute Sofia (2021), „Public Attitudes towards Gender Equality and Violence against Women“, <https://osis.bg/?p=3739>.



one in ten think it is acceptable for a man to hit a woman if she provokes him. The factors that influence the formation of these attitudes, according to the survey report, are: gender, education and age. Men, people with less education and older people are more likely to ac-

cept different forms of violence against women and less likely to support gender equality. Among respondents with primary education or less, approximately one in three (29%) think it is acceptable for a man to hit a woman if she provokes him:

“Among those surveyed, men were twice as likely overall to agree that such behaviour was acceptable. Hitting a woman is considered acceptable by 12% of men and 6% of women (vs. 9% national average)”⁸.

⁸ Ibid, <https://osis.bg/?p=3739>.

Sexual harassment at school

Sexual harassment at school is a form of gender-based violence that is underreported and lacks primary prevention programmes embedded in education. Widespread myths such as that if a girl does not resist, then she wants it, exacerbate the problem and lead to a lack of reporting of this type of harassment. A study by Demetra Association Burgas on sexual harassment at school within an EU-funded international project in Bulgaria, Italy, Latvia, Slovenia, and the UK (2015) shows roughly the same levels of sexual harassment at school in different countries and three-quarters of all young respondents say they have experi-

enced it⁹. Girls are more likely than boys to experience physical or verbal sexual harassment, harassment related to their appearance and pressure to perform a sexual act. One form of bullying shared by both girls and boys was group pressure to be sexually active (as heterosexuals). The study also underscores the finding that despite the widespread prevalence of the major forms of sexual harassment listed above at school, this phenomenon remains largely unrecognized. Schools do not take active measures to combat it. In terms of the extent of use of sexual innuendo, verbal sexual harassment, and involvement in physi-

cal sexual harassment, the general conclusion is that both boys and girls are involved, with differences coming mainly from the type of sexual harassment. However, as the object of sexual harassment, the percentage of girls is predominant. (Representativeness, age group)

A more recent study conducted by Demetra Association within the Safe Community – Safe Children project (2018-2020) among 767 students from 5 Bulgarian universities shows that sexual violence experienced at school up to the age of 18 is normalised, with girls being the most frequent victims.¹⁰

⁹ Association Demetra, *Research report for the Addressing Sexual Bullying Across Europe (ASBAE) project*, <http://demetra-bg.org/research-report-for-the-addressing-sexualbullying-across-europe-asbae-project/>

¹⁰ Assoc. Dr. Alexey Pamporov, *Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge at BAS*, ©Demetra Association – Sofia *Sexual experience and sexual abuse of children in Bulgaria*. Source: <https://researchgate.net>

The report shows startling data, such as: that 47.4% of girls have been spanked or groped on the bottom by a boy with whom they are not in an intimate relationship, 37.9% have been “called” on the breasts, and 33.4% have heard “I’ll break you by fucking” or another form of aggressively expressed sexual desire not from their intimate partner. At the same time, boys developed an uncritical bully mentality: 42.2% spanked or groped the ass of a girl with whom they were not in an intimate relationship, 32.2% groped the breasts of such a girl, 30% surprisingly kissed on the lips, and 4.4% possessed a girl in a helpless state.

“The analysis of the victims through the prism of their age at the time of the occurrence of the sexual harassment or sexual violence shows that the teenage years are the period in which such precedents occur with the

greatest intensity, and as the most risky can be identified the interval between 12 and 18 years (see Fig. 4). In terms of the primary focus of the present study, it should be emphasized that the weighted cumulative validity rate indicates that 38.7% of victims (or 4.2% of all students) experienced sexual harassment or assault under the age of 14, while 70.4% of victims (or 7.7% of all students) experienced sexual harassment or assault before the age of majority.”¹¹

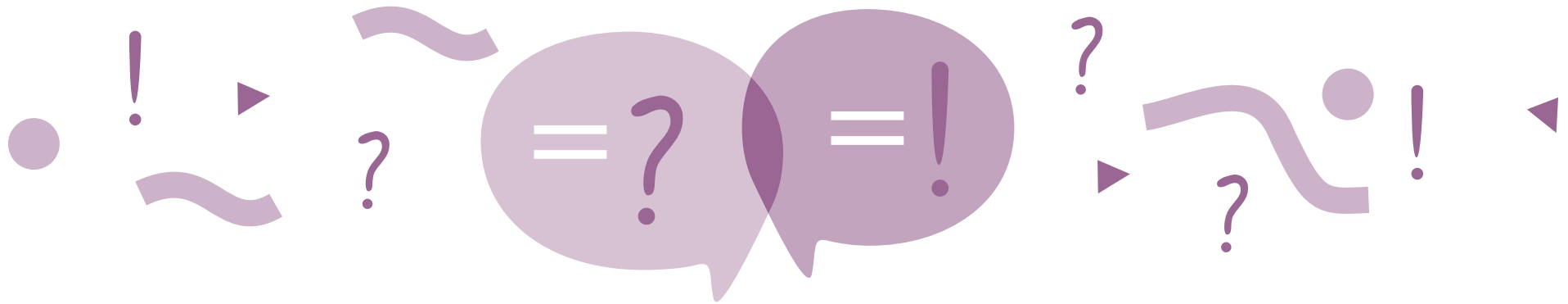
The author of the study emphasizes that “Socializing children in an environment that tolerates gender-based sexual violence leads to a desensitization to violence and its normalization”¹². Therefore, the issue should be talked about openly and in an age-appropriate manner, in line with the target group of the communication. The main conclusion from the

research conducted is the need for targeted school sexual violence prevention and victim support programmes.

The study shows the need for further in-depth research on the issue of sexual harassment in schools, taking into account the views of all stakeholders: students, teachers, school psychologists, school administrators and parents. We received additional information from the Ministry of Education on the lack of nationally representative research on school bullying that reports on the presence and manifestations of sexual bullying in schools. This information shows once again that the problem is invisible and largely unrecognized. This is one of the issues that could be addressed in future school sexuality education programs.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 23.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 31.



What do teachers think about equality between girls and boys at school and the prevention of gender-based violence?

Within the project “Growing Equal” 4 focus groups were held with primary teachers from different schools in 4 different towns of Bulgaria: Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Svishtov and Sofia. The focus groups were organized and moderated by the Education Trade Union of CL “Podkrepa”. Each focus group included between 10 and 15 teachers who took part in a structured discussion based on a pre-designed questionnaire lasting 2 hours. The questions aimed to gather feedback in the following directions:

- Degree of awareness of the role of the school (such as curriculum, rules of conduct, and textbooks/books in primary education) in shaping primary children’s understanding of gender;
- Degree of awareness that personal understandings, including unconscious teacher biases, directly influence the formation of gender role attitudes in adolescents;
- Level of awareness of sexual harassment in school;
- Willingness to gain additional knowledge on gender equality, equal treatment of girls and boys, and prevention of gender-based violence in schools.

We present the main conclusions from the analysis of the views shared in these focus groups.



First, teachers believe that boys and girls are treated equally at school. ‘Equality’ is often understood to mean ‘equal treatment’.

“In my opinion, teachers don’t have different expectations for boys and girls. For me they are students and I treat them equally, my expectations for them are the same”
(Teacher, Plovdiv)

Teachers, in general, believe that expectations of boys and girls at school do not differ and this is correct. This is true both for academic achievement and for boys’ and girls’ participation in sports activities. Some responses signal a lack of in-depth consideration of the specific needs of boys and girls in terms of achieving the best possible personal fulfilment at school.

“Expectations for boys and girls are the same”
(Teacher, Stara Zagora)

“Sports in school have a curriculum so that boys and girls can participate equally”
(Teacher, Sofia)

“We expect them to be even better than girls (in terms of academic performance)”
(Teacher, Sofia)

“There is no difference between a student who studies and one who doesn’t, it doesn’t matter if s/he is a boy or a girl”
(Teacher, Stara Zagora)

In terms of discipline, teachers also share the same expectations for boys and girls.

“I expect them to show emotions, I don’t expect boys and girls to be different”
(Teacher, Svishtov).

However, teachers reported observing gender-related differences in realization in sports and academic activities, as well as in discipline. Stereotypical perceptions of gender-related qualities that determine success permeate some responses – this is true for both academic and sporting activities.

“Some subjects are more popular among boys, such as science, while humanities are more popular among girls”

(Teacher, Stara Zagora)

“Boys are better at sports because they are physically stronger” (Teacher, Svishtov)

“The boys are doing better in sports activities. They are more active and girls are lazier” (Teacher, Plovdiv)

“There are female-only sports like gymnastics and male-only sports like rugby, but in general both boys and girls participate in sports activities at school.” (Teacher, Plovdiv)

“I expected the boys to be more undisciplined, but it turned out the opposite. The girls in the primary school are noisier in class”

(Teacher, Sofia).

Most respondents active in the discussion stressed that motivation, not gender, plays a crucial role in participation rates, as well as in girls’ and boys’ academic and sporting performance. Some responses acknowledged the influence of the teacher in shaping this motivation. However, some teachers emphasised the crucial role of the family in shaping both motivation to learn and understandings of gender roles.

“Yes, the teacher’s perceptions (of gender roles) influence the students. However, communication at school also depends on what kind of family the child is from, who is raising the child (grandparent, father or single mother)”. (Teacher, Svishtov)

The influence of the teacher’s own understandings of gender and gender roles, including unconscious gender biases/prejudices, was sometimes acknowledged, but there was a general reluctance among the respondents to hold the teacher responsible for shaping understandings of gender equality.

This tendency is most evident when it comes to gender stereotypes in textbooks. Although they acknowledge that primary school textbooks stereotype some jobs and roles as suitable for men and others for women, they strongly deny that this leads to inequality. Such responses recur in the discussions in each of the cities.

"There are themes about both the role of the father and the role of the mother, no inequality is created." (Teacher, Svishtov).

"Professions in English have no gender. Sometimes stereotypes (about a certain profession) cause surprise among children, but inequality is not stimulated." (Teacher, Plovdiv)

"Textbooks in kindergarten reinforce both male and female roles." (Teacher, Plovdiv)

"If they are unconscious, then they (prejudices) influence unconsciously. Communication in the family is much more important in forming understandings of gender roles, whereas communication in the classroom is more opportunistic." (Teacher, Plovdiv).

"Communication with the boys and girls flows differently. This should not be treated as inequality." (Teacher, Sofia)

"Yes, stereotypes influence children's understanding of gender roles, but children themselves are not aware of this influence and do not see it as creating inequality." (Teacher, Svishtov)

"Yes, textbooks reinforce male and female roles, but this does not lead to inequality." (Teacher, Stara Zagora)

"I disagree that textbooks stereotype inequality. Certain pictures of women and men with different jobs do not lead to gender inequality." (Teacher, Sofia)



In terms of understanding the concept of gender equality, teachers from all cities showed a good understanding of the definition of this concept. They associate equality with ‘equal chances and opportunities’ as well as ‘equal participation’. At the same time, however, they believe that the Bulgarian education system creates equal chances for girls and boys to succeed in educational institutions and that gender is irrelevant to achievement. In general, the comments show an insufficient appreciation of the impact of intersectionality on

students’ performance in school: the relationship between gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, wealth, and other attributes that affect a student’s position in school, on motivation and performance.

The results of the focus groups reinforce the findings of other studies which have shown that despite a good knowledge of the concepts of ‘gender equality’ and ‘equal opportunities’ at a conscious level, people (in this case teachers) are unable to appreciate the impact of their unconscious gender biases.

The impact of a number of intersecting factors (such as ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) that contribute to the greater vulnerability of some students to gender inequalities relative to others is also poorly understood. The influence of the family, in terms of understandings and shared values, is foregrounded, with an awareness of the age of parents/carers as a factor in shaping values is standing out in some responses.

However, no one mentions the social situation, poverty, marginalisation of certain population groups as aggravating factors of gender inequality. It is as if parents' attitudes and perceptions are their personal choices, independent of their social situation.

On a positive note, teachers have shown interest in the topic of equality between girls and boys and how to promote equality between them at school. Responses in all towns show an openness to learning more about this topic. Although, some of the responses contain an implicit denial of the existence of a problem in

this area, the willingness to engage in workshops to acquire new knowledge is positive and can be used to achieve a higher degree of sensitivity to the role of teachers in shaping gender stereotypes among adolescents.

*“Yes, I want to learn more about this topic, especially if problems arise.”
(Teacher, Stara Zagora)*

“Yes, you can always learn something new on the subject.” (Teacher, Sofia)

*“The problem is often due to differences in perception caused by age (generations). I would like to know more about this.”
(Teacher, Plovdiv)*

“The topic of gender equality is interesting to me. I would participate in such trainings, especially if there is a clear case of gender inequality in my school.” (Teacher, Svishtov).

“Yes, I would like to know more, especially if there is a problem.” (Teacher, Stara Zagora).

Last but not least, the focus groups raised the issue of gender-based violence in schools. Most responses indicated denial of the existence of a problem related to sexual harassment of students or teachers at school. Teachers are either unaware of the existence of the problem or do not want to admit that it exists lest they be held responsible. They also deny the established fact that girls are more often victims. The fact that the respondents are primary school teachers goes some way to explaining the responses that at this educational stage girls are more sexually active than boys - confirmed by a number of studies on girls' earlier sexual maturation.

The participation of mostly primary teachers in the focus groups explains another aspect of the claim of lack of violence: at this educational stage, classes work mainly with one teacher and the vigilance over what happens between students in the classroom and outside it (in the corridors, in the school yard) is high. However, the situation changes abruptly as students enter middle school, when they also enter puberty and interact with many different teachers, and the class teacher does not have the opportunity to constantly monitor/control their behaviour.

*“I have never witnessed such violence (bullying), but it must exist somewhere”
(Teacher, Plovdiv)*

“Yes, I have detected this behaviour on both sides, but in general girls are more active in sexual relations.” (Teacher, Sofia)

“No, we have never witnessed this kind of harassment. In a small town, perhaps because people know each other, such phenomena do not exist.” (Teacher, Svishtov)

*“Yes, sometimes (sexual harassment) happens, but girls are more aggressive.”
(Teacher, Stara Zagora)*

*“It is often observed (verbal sexual harassment), but it is not a problem”
(Teacher, Stara Zagora)*

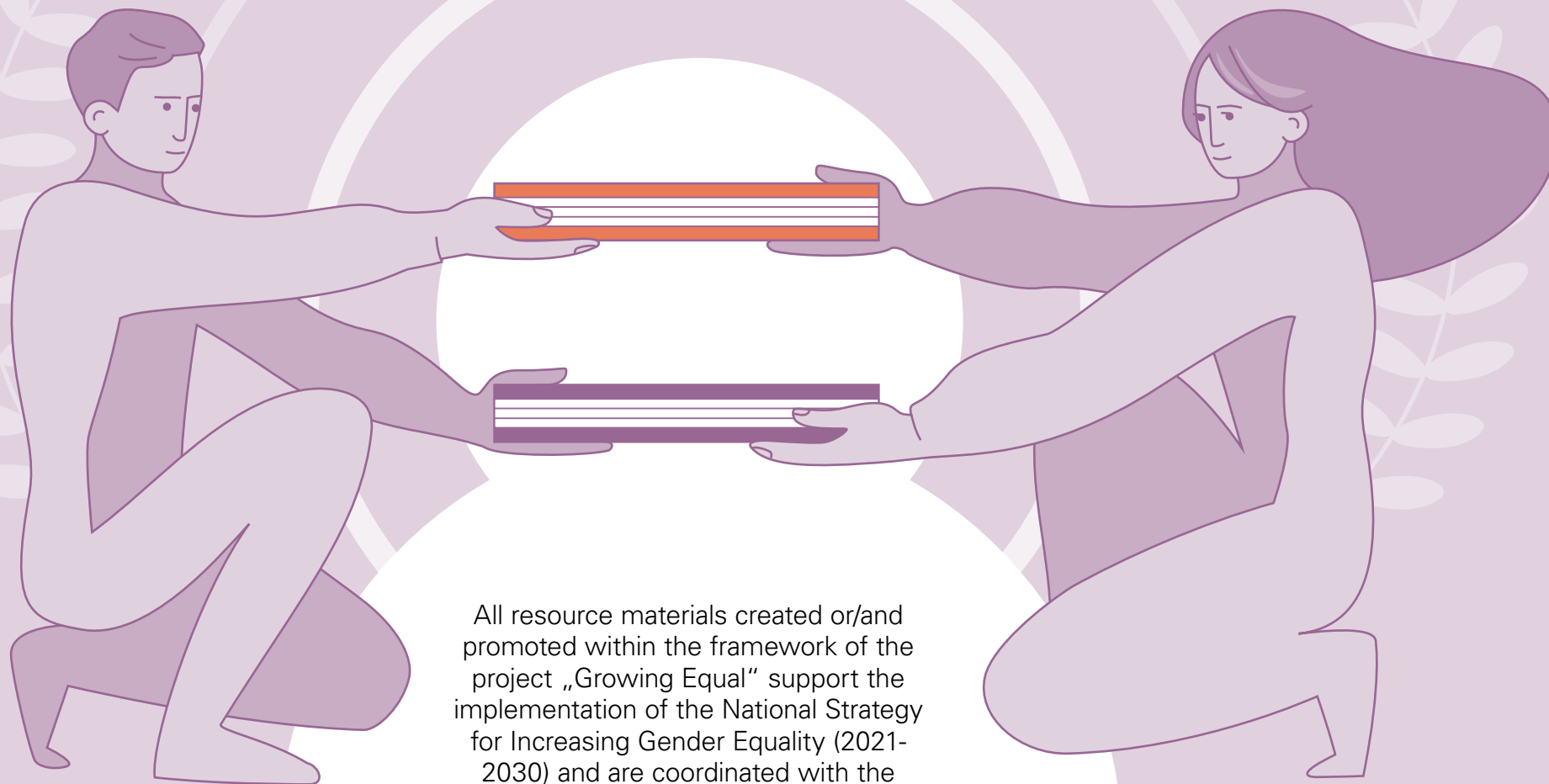
Key recommendations for schools to increase equality between girls and boys based on the research:

- Conduct a school audit on gender issues involving all stakeholders (teachers, school administration, students and parents).
- Update school regulations by introducing a School Policy to promote equality between girls and boys.
- Introduce the topic „Equality between women and men“ in licensed teacher training courses.
- Every teacher can take the time to study the available resource materials approved by the Ministry of Education and Science that address the topic of gender equality and support teachers in conducting discussions and interactive activities with students on this topic.



Educational materials and handouts on the above topics can be found as open resources on the project website.

<growingupequal.frgi.bg>



All resource materials created or/and promoted within the framework of the project „Growing Equal“ support the implementation of the National Strategy for Increasing Gender Equality (2021-2030) and are coordinated with the Ministry of Education and Science.

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