

MARTA Centre

Dare to Care — Prevention of violence towards and among youth in Latvia

Research report on the impact of the Youth
Group methodology

Egita Pļaviņa
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Introduction

With the financial support of the Oak Foundation, the organization MARTA Centre implemented the project *Dare to Care — Prevention of violence towards and among youth in Latvia*. The project piloted and culturally adapted non-formal education groups for young people — boys and girls. One of the aims of this project is to promote healthy relationships between young people, emphasizing mutual respect and equality and eliminating violence.

The organization MARTA Centre organized the first such group within the framework of the 2007-2013 European Union Regional Development Fund Central Baltic INTERREG IV A program in cooperation with the Åland Islands Peace Institute. The aim of these youth groups was to promote gender equality, to identify stereotypical perceptions of gender roles and to increase the group members' self-reliance and help them make better-informed decisions about their actions and attitudes. The method was developed in Sweden, but in essence includes many of the same principles found in support and discussion groups led by a group leader in a safe environment.

Being included in a group within a safe environment is generally recognized as a supportive and effective method. It increases personal awareness, balances one's personal experiences, and helps find words to express and identify one's emotions and reactions. Groups have a mirroring effect, which enables participants to get different perspectives on one's usual behaviour and attitudes and find the mental space to start reflecting on these issues. The group creates an atmosphere where safe, shared experience is possible; it provides a sense of acceptance and belonging. It is a way of acquiring new mental experience that may not otherwise be available to a young person in any other environment.

The World Health Organization urges society to view young people's health as a shared responsibility. The violence that young people may experience in a variety of contexts, including among themselves in schools, is a young people's health issue.

Interpersonal relationships at school are determined by many factors: family experience during childhood, the relationships between their parents during childhood, power relations in schools between pupils and teachers, school management, general societal perceptions of what is and what is not violence, as well as gender aspects and gender stereotypes in the community.

The common disadvantage of adolescent health programs throughout the WHO European Region is that they often view adolescents as a homogeneous group. These programs often do not take into account the fact that boys and girls differ in terms of the health risks they face and how they are uniquely vulnerable towards their environment.

The WHO European Handbook of Tools for the Strategy for the Development and Health of Children and Young People lists the prevention of bullying and violent behaviour among young people through an interdisciplinary approach as one recommended action. As an interdisciplinary solution, the handbook seeks to promote prevention programs in schools and communities to reduce bullying and violent behaviour. Support groups for boys and girls is one such interdisciplinary solution.

Gender-based violence is understood as violence based on gender norms that encourages behaviour that is perceived as masculine, such as aggression and the use or display of force, and it has created an unequal environment where women are perceived as subordinate because of their gender. Most gender-based violence is perpetrated by men against women and girls, but it should be noted that adolescents (especially young adolescents) are more at risk of gender-based violence than their adult peers. Gender-based violence can include, but is not limited to, domestic violence, physical violence, sexual violence, violence during pregnancy, psychological violence, harmful traditional practices, forced prostitution, and human trafficking (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002).

Unlike the first youth groups organized in Latvia by MARTA Centre, which focused on the issues of gender equality and gender awareness, these groups are focused on a general reduction or prevention of violence among young people. So, this time, the issue of gender equality is only one among others. The WHO recommends that effective prevention of violence is possible if it is viewed from a gender perspective, in the sense that young women and young people in general may experience harassment and violence in a variety of ways that are based on societal perceptions of gender norms (WHO, 2011). The quantitative study conducted within the framework of this project on the prevalence of sexually abusive behaviour in Latvian schools among 13- to 16-year-olds also confirms this (Pļaviņa, 2020).

Latvia participated as one of the five European countries in a 2015 study, which was conducted by researchers from Beckett University. In this study, sexual intimidation was understood as unwanted sexual behaviour, intimidation or harassment because of a person's actual / perceived sexual experience, interests, or orientation, or

because of their gender-related appearance, identity, or practice. Sexual harassment often occurs online and with the use of smartphones, instant messaging, and social networks. It is a growing problem among young people and can seriously affect a bullied adolescent. It can reduce self-esteem, cause anxiety, depression, and sometimes suicidal behaviour (Milnes K et al., 2015).

The WHO met in Montenegro in 2019 for a consultation in south-Eastern Europe on guidelines for the health sector response to child maltreatment and emphasized that the lack of safe and loving relationships in childhood has a negative effect on neurological developmental changes. This, in turn, negatively affects the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural development of children. In the European region, the prevalence of child abuse ranges from 9.6% for sexual abuse to 22.9% for physical abuse and 29.1% for emotional abuse. (WHO, 2019). Negative childhood experiences are associated with an increased propensity for violence later in life and with patterns of unhealthy behaviours such as alcohol and drug abuse, lack of physical activity, depression, and self-harm. The section on the situation in Latvia states that, unfortunately, there are no training programs in place for Latvian specialists in child protection, although the EU Development and Employment Program is available, which also includes education for recognizing and preventing violence (WHO, 2019).

Given that the Public Health department of the Latvian Ministry of Health acknowledges such existing shortcomings, it is understandable that only non-governmental organizations actually work in interdisciplinary violence prevention among adolescents and young people, and that the question of gender norms in the prevention of violence at the level of the nation as a whole, is an issue that will only be tackled in the future.

The Latvian Association of Systemic and Family Psychotherapy views groups for young people that are based on the same principles as support groups as an effective approach to reducing and preventing abusive attitudes and violence in Latvia. For the first time in the history of Latvia, the State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights of the Ministry of Welfare announced a procurement in 2020 for a pilot project — group work for young people whose parents have divorced.

MARTA Centre is one of the pioneers in Latvia in developing, implementing, and promoting various preventive activities, influencing both the community and state policymakers.

The aim of this study is to assess whether MARTA's youth groups are an effective and therefore — supportable interdisciplinary form of preventive work in reducing abusive attitudes and violence, including sexually abusive attitudes and violence among young people in Latvia, taking the perspective of gender into account.

Youth groups

The youth groups in Latvia are led by group leaders who have received training from MARTA Centre and who have previously been involved or interested in the field of non-formal education. The main topics covered in the group sessions are:

1. Who are we and what are we like? Who am I and what am I like?
2. Gender and sex — why should they matter to me?
3. My behaviours and emotions. Friendship and its core values.
4. Puberty, sexuality, and intimate relationships.
5. Decision-making, consent, and contraception.
6. The effects of addictive substances on my body.
7. How to say “NO” but REMAIN COOL.

Group sessions within the project are held once a week for a period up to six months; each lesson is planned to take about 2 hours. Note: the duration of the groups is not methodologically limited. If certain conditions allow, these group sessions can last up to two years and longer. The minimum number of group sessions is 10.

The main task of the groups is to build respectful relationships among the participants, creating a place for different opinions, emotions, and experiences, where each participant can receive the knowledge and support of the group leader. By creating rules in the group that everyone agrees on and helps each other abide, the participants learn to become aware of their rights and the rights of others, their own boundaries, and the boundaries of others, and ultimately their own needs and the needs of others.

If the group manages to achieve such an atmosphere of security and trust, then by discussing the highlighted topics or playing role-playing-games, scenarios and performing other activities, the group members become **open** to new experiences,

ideas, and towards the possibility of seeing themselves in the aforementioned contexts and thereby understanding the feelings of others as well. Otherwise, the discussion of the topics remains superficial in the sense that the participants do not gain new psychologically transforming experiences, but only informative or “successful experiences” engaging in pre-written scenarios, which is valuable and good, of course, but not the primary aim of these groups.

The method for assessing group impact.

Over the course of this research project, the researcher, acting as a systemic and family therapist, interviewed 4 leaders of youth groups using the 2nd cybernetics approach (an approach where the system itself monitors the system). As a researcher, I observe how group leaders observe what is happening within a group and simultaneously see themselves in the system acting as leaders. The researcher also conducted individual in-depth structured interviews with 3 group members (all 15-year-old girls) and held a group conversation with one group of boys (also 15-year-olds). The group leaders, however, conducted group interviews with two groups of girls, and 4 individual interviews. The interviews were conducted in the very beginning (when the groups began work) and when the groups ended (or during the last group session). Interviews with the group leaders were conducted six months after the end of the group sessions, giving the leaders time and space to look at what they experienced and observed in the sessions.

Such diversity in interviews allows one to look at the same issues from the perspective of different systems — how group members talk to their group leader, whom they may already trust, and how they talk to researcher who they are not familiar with, how young people talk about topics individually and how they discuss them in groups. This makes multidimensional or multi-perspective information possible. This can lead to answers that cannot be obtained via a quantitative self-assessment questionnaire. Answers to questions like: has a participant also gained some novel internal experience as a result of the group sessions or has he or she found new words or ways to talk about their experiences, or have they gained a novel perspective, even if it may get dismissed as uncomfortable at first. These series of sessions can metaphorically be compared to trying on a pair of new glasses, even though this may be uncomfortable at first and not lead to breakthroughs.

The meta-task of these groups is to let the participants “see” and feel that there are other choices available besides immediately reacting to whatever they see and experience. What are these other choices? They are choices that are not determined by a young person's past life experience, context, and environment, or as Virginia Satir would call them — their survival strategies. Instead, they are free and chosen. Adolescence and youth can be an intense time as one is searching for their identity. It is especially important to be part of an accepting environment during this age (and the groups are specifically designed for this) where one has the opportunity to pause for a moment and reflect upon the views of the other group members or ask oneself questions like who, how, and why I am, and why is that so.

To assess the impact of this youth group method, we analysed transcribed interviews with group participants and group leaders. The analysis is not always presented in two parts (separately for the first and second rounds of interviews). The main focus was to include those parts of the interviews in the report that display changes that, from a systemic and family psychotherapy perspective, contribute to reducing the potential for violent behaviour and violent, intimidating, abusive, degrading treatment of other peers in the future or suggest that the young person may be able to take better care of their actual needs and interests and recognize his or her rights, promote his or her own self-reliance and self-esteem, regardless of the restrictive stereotypes or prejudices that exist in that young person's environment or society. This is done by comparing the first and second rounds of interviews. The interviews with the group leaders are also an important part of impact assessment.

The personal information collected during the interviews - name, age, place, school - was available to the interviewers, the researcher, and the project manager. The names of the people and places were changed during the analysis of the interviews. After completing the analysis, the interview transcripts were deleted from all sources, and the printed interview transcripts were shredded.

Analysis

Gender equality and gender norms

Overall, the interviews show that young people notice and see differences between boys and girls and masculinity and femininity. In their responses, the young people confessed that the stereotypical gender-based expectations of their families,

schools, and society as a whole limit both their expression and their freedom to choose, for example, their professions. They said that these norms affect their teachers' perception of their performance at school. Simultaneously, the surveyed young people often said that they wish society were freer from gender stereotypes and more equal. The following are some excerpts from the interviews as illustrative examples of what we have concluded here after analysing the interviews.

A 15-year-old from a small town, Anna initially answers questions about what is feminine and what is masculine behaviour as follows:

I think it is when a man defends a woman and doesn't act like a girl and doesn't cry over every little trifle. People say that men should not cry but I think that everyone should be able to decide that for themselves.

Then she follows with:

Actually, yes, because everyone expects boys to be strong — physically and emotionally strong. Everyone expects girls to be girly, lady-like, composed and that they do not behave indecently.

15-year-old Katrīna said:

I. (Interviewer) Alright. What about feminine behaviour — what is that like?

K. She takes care of herself, her family, her views, and the like.

I. And what is masculine behaviour like?

K. The same, I suppose. I think they have the same responsibilities, but it's different for men, of course. It's just that their responsibilities are the same.

I. Do you think girls and boys are different? How?

K. Well sure, physically, for example, and their character, too.

I. What do the people around you expect from teenagers?

K. They expect you to act like an adult and a kid at the same time. School is very important.

I. Do you think people treat young girls and boys differently?

K. Yes.

I. Why?

K. I think people are stricter towards girls.

I. Why are they stricter?

K. I don't know. They just make them do what is right more.

I. What about boys?

K. I think they let them be more... Not "free" ... But it's similar to what teachers expect — that you'll do what you are taught.

14 years old and from a small-town group, initially Liene strictly denied the existence of restrictions related to gender norms:

I. What is feminine behaviour?

L. I don't think there are rules or something for what it means to be a woman. Well, there are the obvious ones — that you need to bear children and all that

but you can be whoever you want to be, it's very popular right now. I agree with that.

I. That there are no differences between men and women.

L. Yes.

Then she proceeds to reflect about different societal expectations:

I. Is there any specific behaviour that is expected from girls and boys?

L. Of course. Girls have to wear dresses and behave themselves. Boys have to be strong and just like you said — they can't cry.

I. Do you care about your outer appearance? What do you do to take care of it?

*L. Well, sure, I care. Because if there weren't any people around, I'd just wear sweatpants and a t-shirt, but everyone at school judges you and if there's something wrong or someone doesn't like the way you look, they **humiliate** you.*

I. Is a friendship between a boy and a girl different?

L. Yes. There's a lot of things we don't talk about.

I. Well, what can't you talk about with a boy, for example?

L. You can't talk about the stereotypical things, like, I can't tell them that I cried last night, because that's just me being a typical girl, I can't do that.

Six months later, Liene acquired new words and language to speak about gender differences, and she is a lot more open and detailed in her observations, and she notices how people act and what people like her grandmother or teacher are trying to make her do.

I. Ok, different question. Is there any difference to being a boy or a girl?

L. To be honest, I don't believe all that — that it's any different and that stereotypes exist.

I. So you're saying there is no difference. That's what you're saying.

L. Yes.

I. No difference. What is feminine behaviour? What do you think?

L. I think that's... Let me think.

...

L. Yes. When you force those stereotypes on somebody but it's when you say the word "feminine" and then it all comes out. Taking care of children, for example. Cooking or taking care of yourself or caring for someone...

I. What does behaving in a masculine way mean?

L. Being a real man.

I. What is that like?

L. If someone needs a helping hand then... You know, it's manly to help.

I. Go on. What is it really?

L. To help around the house, to repair things because they say they are smarter and know all those things.

I. That intonation just now. What is it that they say? Your tone of voice changed just now when you said that they are smarter and that they know all those things. Why do you think your tone changed?

L. *Because that is what my granny always says.*

I. *And what do you think? Do you think she is right or wrong?*

L. *No. I keep telling her that that is not how it is. That is a really long story, but yes, I don't agree with that.*

I. *Well, try to sum up your thoughts in just a few sentences.*

L. *...well, say, there's a girl, for example, and she's smart, and she has **very good grades** and everything but if it's a boy, and he **gets a few good grades** then everyone immediately says that he's smart. But if it's a girl, it's like, well, yeah, you're supposed to be smart.*

I. *Basically, you're saying that people say different things to each. They treat boys and girls differently, am I understanding this correctly?*

L. *Yes.*

I. *If a boy gets a few good grades, he's considered smart. Girls get... belittled? What do you mean?*

L. *Because it's nothing special anymore because, really, a lot of girls, most of the girls, you could say, they have good grades and that's because they try very hard. But boys... I wouldn't say that they don't try...*

I. *But when they achieve something, people point it out more?*

L. *Yes, yes.*

I. *Mhm. Do you think it's important for girls to act feminine?*

L. *No.*

I. *Why?*

L. *Because you can do what you want; if you like boyish stuff, go for it!*

I. *What's boyish?*

L. *Well, if we split it two ways — there's boyish and girlish stuff. Girly stuff is pink dresses and things like that, while boys wear baggy clothes and stuff like that.*

.....

L. *And it's not important at all, what you wear or something like that.*

....

L. *And it's the same with jobs, I sometimes hang out in my mother's office, and she has people coming in and boys usually feel ashamed if it's being a chef.*

I. *To study becoming a chef.*

L. *Yes.*

.....

L. *There's not a lot of us here... And kids hang around in groups, and they're like... If boys choose something like that, like becoming a chef, for example, I think other kids will laugh at them.*

....

I. *It's important to act manly because of the pressure from other kids.*

L. *Yes, that's exactly what I wanted to say.*

....

I. *Ok. Do you think it's better to be a girl or a boy?*

L. *A boy.*

I. *Why?*

L. *Because they get a lot of privileges in life. First of all, they get paid more.*

I. Ok, what else?

L. Let me think.

I. Would it be better if you were a boy right now?

L. I wouldn't have to care for...

I. The way you look?

L. Yes, and that's just how it is, and I think people would listen to me more.

I. Listen to you more?

L. Yes, in my class it's like, if we have to do presentations, then the teacher listens to boys more, and he treats them differently. I'm not very good at Russian, and there are three boys in my class who aren't good either, but they get special treatment, they make jokes in class... Whenever I try something like that, she [the teacher] gets very, very angry with me.

Over the six-month period, Liene has begun to analyse the impact that specific notions of gender roles in her immediate environment have on her life in more detail, rather than in general categories. Doing work with the group, Liene has acquired the ability to reflect (to observe herself and others) and analyse certain regularities around her.

One young boy who took part in the group sessions, on the other hand, said that it was better to be a girl, as girls have more variety with regard to what they want to do in life and who to be. They could, for example, be housewives or careerists, or choose a creative pursuit, seeking self-expression, while men are mostly expected to be financially successful.

Each individual or group interview with the participants shared this story, and the follow-up interviews revealed a more in-depth and detailed account of how young people view these issues. They had found a way to talk about them, they verbalized what they had experienced in their lives and in their surroundings.

Self-reliance and independence.

Here are some examples of why young people joined these groups. The very existence of these motivations already suggests that there is a lot of need for such groups. By discussing or touching upon the following topics with their peers in a safe and welcoming environment each participant receives support in building a positive identity, which is the foundation of self-reliance. The effect of the youth group is ensured by the principle of voluntary participation, which ensures that a young person has a certain openness to new experiences.

Youth groups may also find themselves working with young people who have experienced traumatic life events and experiences. If this is the case, participating in a group can encourage the young person to seek additional individual help. At least two such cases were identified during the interviews. Encouraged by the group leaders, the young women sought additional support. The ability to ask for support is part of independence or the ability to take care of oneself.

Young people with deviant behaviour or high school failure are generally reluctant to participate in such groups, as they need support to reintegrate into adaptive social life at this stage in their lives.

15-year-old Katrīna from a small town chose to participate in her group because:

I heard they discuss important things there, like violence, and I was interested because I think no one really talks about it.

14-year-old Baiba chose to participate because:

B. Because we had nothing to do.

I. You were just interested. There're all sorts of things discussed here?

B. No, we just wanted to come and see what it's like... So, I came.

I. What did you expect from the group? You read the poster. What did you imagine this would be like?

B. I didn't expect anything at all.

I. You were simply curious, so you decided to go. Just to see.

B. Yes. Bet everyone told me that they're discussing serious topics there.

And 14-year-old Liene said that:

Every time I speak at a gathering of relatives, everyone says: "Oh, yeah, you teenagers smoke behind every corner." I mean, no one thinks very highly of you at this age. It's not great.

In another part of the interview, she said:

I. Are romantic relationships important to you and why?

L. Well not yet. Schoolwork is more important to me right now, finishing school.

I. What do you think making love is?

L. I don't have any thoughts about it, I've never tried, but I talk to Dana about this. About losing one's virginity, I mean. Everyone says it's very special, but we're like: ok, let's just be done with it somehow.

In a conversation with her friends, 15-year-old Līga confessed that she can't talk about everything that goes on in her family. One sign of a healthy family is openness and not having any secrets. The fact that Līga could not talk to a close friend about the things

going on in her family is a reason in itself to celebrate the fact that Līga decided to join the group and began to understand how different life can be.

I. What is a good friend, in your opinion?

L. Someone you can trust, for example, when you can't talk about some things in your family. You can talk about it, and she'll understand what you're trying to say, of course, but sometimes you want to talk to someone who is the same age, because it's easier to express your thoughts, because they'll understand you, and you can trust your thoughts with them.

...

L. My best friend.

I. What can't you share with this person?

L. Sometimes — family things. Sometimes you have to keep them to yourself, because you shouldn't tell anyone.

Offensive behaviour and violence.

The following are excerpts from interviews that show the group members' perspective and experience on abusive attitudes and behaviour, and violence. All interviewed participants have witnessed violence and experienced abusive behaviour from their peers. Half of the interviewees also talk about the abusive treatment of students by schoolteachers. In the section on gender stereotypes, the participants also shared their experiences about teachers' different attitudes towards boys and girls. This is understandable, because teachers are a part of our society and cannot be unaffected by the general context we live in. At the same time, young people under the age of 18 spend most of their time at school, so educating teachers about these issues is also an important part of violence prevention.

At the same time, the structure of schools implies pre-defined power structures and goals, with a focus on academically good student performance and grade assessment. With the introduction of competence education in Latvia, the focus could slowly shift to the needs, difficulties, and talents of the students, but it takes years for such reforms to settle in the culture of society as a whole. For the most part, the socialization of young people remains outside the focus of schools.

There are a lot of activities in schools that promote the socialization of children, but there are no groups that discuss "life as such". And this is normal. One structural body cannot satisfy all societal needs. This is why non-formal education exists — to fulfil that function in society.

15-year-old Dana, at the beginning of the group sessions:

I. Is there violence in your school? Have you witnessed violence?

D. Verbal violence maybe. Physical — I don't think you could call it that.
I. And what is verbal violence like? How does it occur? Between whom?
D. It can happen about anything, when someone reads a word aloud wrong, for example, everyone will laugh at them, or if someone wears something out of the ordinary to school.
I. Do you know what psychological terror is?
D. Maybe.
I. And what do you think it is?
D. I'm not really sure, but it's maybe when someone is traumatized or in kindergarten, for example, when someone pushes someone, and then they're scared that it might happen again.

15-year-old Dana, after the group sessions:

I. Do you know what psychological terror is?
D. I think that's when you're in an isolated environment and you don't have contact with others and you're being morally, verbally terrorized and humiliated.
I. What do you think sexual harassment is and have you ever seen it happen at school?
D. I haven't seen it happen in school, but I know people that have suffered from it. I think harassment is when others touch you, talk to you or talk about you in a sexual way, and you don't like it or you don't agree with it, and I think people should be brave and talk about it when it happens.
I. What do you do when someone is sexually harassing you?
D. Now I can say that you must tell someone — the police, your parents, someone who is responsible for you, and talk to the person who's doing it to find out what their motives are. If it were to happen to me, I'd probably keep it to myself for some time until I find the courage to tell someone.

Alberts, 14 years old, from a small town, at the beginning of the group sessions:

I. Next topic is: violence and harassment. Have you seen violence at your school?
A. No.
I. Do you know what psychological terror is?
A. No.
I. What do you think psychological terror is?
A. Name-calling. Something like that, I don't know.
I. What do you think sexual harassment is?
A. When you don't want to do anything like that, but someone forces you to.
I. Have you ever seen something like that happen at your school?
A. Only as a joke.

Alberts, at the end of the group sessions six months later:

I. Ok. A difficult topic — violence. What do you think violence is?
A. Hurting someone. Against their will. It's like doing something against their will.
I. Mhm, have you seen something like that at your school?

A. Yes.
I. What was it that you saw?
A. A fight.
I. Do you think boys and girls are equally violent?
A. Noo.
I. Which are more violent?
A. But it's different, well, it's different when girls talk, as opposed to boys.
I. You motioned with your fists before.
A. Yes.
I. Oh, so boys are more likely to get into fights, but girls will talk about you behind your back more, is that it?
A. Yes.
I. So, if I say that there's emotional terror and then there's violence, you'll have some idea of what those are?
A. Mhm.
I. And what is it?
A. Emotional terror?
I. Yes, emotional violence, emotional terror.
A. It's when someone says things to you or about you that make you feel bad.
I. Yes, and have you seen that happen around you, in your environment?
A. Yes, very often.
I. And who does that more — girls or boys, or is it somewhat the same?
A. I think it's the same.
I. And what are the most common ways when someone hurts someone with words? What is this usually about, what topics?
A. Well, about the way you look mostly and about how poor your family is.
I. They talk about this.
A. Yes.
I. About the way you look, about one's family's financial status, and what else?
A. I think that's it. Or when something embarrassing happens, others definitely talk about it. And laugh about it, and so on.
I. In the presence of others?
A. Mhm.
I. What are some embarrassing topics at your age?
A. No idea... When someone hooks up with somebody, or something like that.
I. What does that mean — when they "hook up"?
A. Oh my god. You know, kissing or sex.
I. They gossip about sex?
A. Yes, sometimes.
I. Sometimes, mhm, you don't care about the topic at all right now. But you see others talking about this all the time, is that it?
A. Mhm.
I. Do other kids in your class sometimes try to stop someone when they laugh at others about these things?

A. I was in secondary school before, now I attend a gymnasium, and there were a lot of kids like that in secondary school — they were laughed at, they didn't have any real friends. In the gymnasium, there are groups of friends and everyone defends you whenever there is something. There's no real name-calling anymore either.

I. Mhm. This was more typical in secondary school?

A. A lot more, yeah.

I. And did the other kids in class try to stop someone there?

A. No.

I. Did they stay silent or gang up on whoever was being laughed at?

A. Yes.

I. They joined in and laughed at them. Did the group sessions change your perspective on these things at all, or not really?

A. A lot, I mean, we discussed this. But I've never been one to laugh at others like this, and when something like this happens, I try to stop it.

Keitija, 15 years old:

I. What do you think sexual harassment is?

K. Oh, umm. That happens all the time on Facebook when someone writes something like that to you, it's awful.

I. You mean they address you personally in the comments section?

K. No. They send me messages.

I. You've received such messages?

K. Yeah, from guys from India.

I. And what about your classmates or other young people?

K. No.

I. Have you ever seen someone in your class get sexually harassed?

K. No.

I. Have you seen someone annoyed by sexual remarks?

K. Yes, but like a joke.

I. They were only jokes?

K. Yes.

I. Do you think those jokes aren't important or are they hurtful?

K. Depends.

I. Where is the difference between the two?

K. The way you say it, I guess.

I. The intonation?

K. Yeah, and where it is said.

Ilze, 15 years old, at the beginning of the group sessions:

In. Next topic is: violence and harassment. Is there violence in your school? How does it manifest?

I. I think there's no violence between pupils and teachers. The teacher raises her voice at someone sometimes but that's mostly just her reacting to something. Sometimes boys might get into fights or girls gossip or spread rumours, but no, not really.

In. Are boys and girls equally violent or is one more prone to violence?

I. I think both can be violent but I think boys can get physically violent more often because they are the stronger sex, but girls can get more morally manipulative and vengeful.

Samanta, 15 years old, six months later after the end of the group sessions:

Next topic: violence. What do you think violence is?

S: Violence... Inadequate behaviour, manipulation, breaching of someone else's privacy or, how should I put it, physically attacking someone. And, like I said, manipulation and all sorts of malicious intent.

I: Have you observed something like that in your school?

S: Not in school, no, when I went to secondary school, there were fights sometimes, but real violence — no, I haven't seen it. There may have been moments where someone is manipulating with someone, but then the whole school didn't know about it. That happens between the people involved, so it's hard to see it.

I: Do you recognize mutual emotional violence? Do these words mean anything to you?

S: That was more common in the younger classes, I think. We tended to hurt others with words more. Physically, too, sometimes, but mostly emotionally back then. We don't do that anymore.

I: Do you notice hurtful jokes, remarks, comments, and laughing at someone?

S: No. Well, if someone says a joke about me then I can laugh about myself, but there have been moments where even my family says something that I think might offend some other part of society, and then I feel a little ashamed about that. It's not nice.

I: And you notice that less at school?

S: Yes, because we're more worried about our studies in school, because...

I: What do you mean?

S: All the hustle and bustle, the studies, the teachers, the homework, exams, books, and lunch, and all that.

...

S: Well, maybe, if someone remarks about someone's body or the way they act, then yes. But if it's a joke, you can tell by the way that person says it, there's an intonation, and it matters who's around, because that joke can be okay if it's between two people, but if it's more people and you don't know them, you know, they're not your friends, then it can seem weird, intrusive.

I: Have you ever noticed it in secondary school, or did it happen to you, or you saw it happen to someone? In earlier classes, perhaps, when you were younger?

S: Sure, well, kids talk and say things like: "Yeah, that girl has big boobs, or a big ass, we saw her talk to this boy, and she spoke to that boy." And...

I: Girls could talk about these things amongst themselves.

S: Girls — yes. Well, there are guys who might know that that girl spoke to that guy or his friend, or some other friend of his, then, logically, they might think that she's "easy".

I: And do you think she deserved that, given what she did? The way they talk about her? Or do you think it's hurtful, and she doesn't deserve it?

S: Well, we don't know, because maybe... Yeah, maybe she was with that guy or maybe she was just...

I: Talking.

S: Talking, yes, they're friends or maybe they just hang out. With him and his friends. Maybe she just likes hanging out with boys...

I: Just spending time.

S: Spend time with them rather than with the girls, and we, well, we just don't know most of the time what goes on between them. And I don't think, most of the time anyway, that she deserves to be talked about like that — that she's "easy" and so on.

The significance of a group to its members.

Those who noticed the impact of the groups the most were not the participants but the group leaders. But we chose some illustrative examples from the interviews with the participants, nonetheless.

Katrīna, 15 years old:

I. Do you think such groups could be held at your school?

K. No.

I. Why?

K. Because we didn't start with such topics in the beginning, we became friends and agreed that if we talk about such topics, we'll talk about them here [in the group]. So, no one says anything. If they were to happen at school and led by the teachers, it wouldn't be the same.

I. What's something that you wouldn't want others to find out?

K. I didn't really have anything like that. But there were others who shared their experiences.

Liene, 14 years old:

It's really cool. We laugh a lot sometimes that we come here just for the tea and cookies. But it's cool. First, we thought: all these strangers, we don't know anyone, what are we going to talk about? But we're good friends now.

Līga, 15 years old:

There were difficult topics about someone in particular and his beliefs, and then it was hard.

The following are excerpts from the observations of group leaders.

Two excerpts from interviews with group leaders, who led the groups together:

I. What were the differences you noticed from September till May?

L1. The girls became more acceptive. They became more tolerant of each other, began to accept the opinions of others, accept that some people are just the way they are. They became less judgmental.

I. They used to interrupt one another when they had differing opinions?

L1. That too, yes. They learned to listen to one another.

I. Became patient listeners.

L1. Yes, definitely.

...

L2.. Opinions can be different. We kept telling L1 that every opinion you say isn't wrong or bad, they're just different. I told them why I believed they are different. Everyone is entitled to express their opinion.

L1.. They became more open. They were very cautious at the beginning. Perhaps a little less with L2 since she is young, but I had a feeling that many of the girls treat me like I'm one of their teachers. Some time had to pass before they could ask me questions and feel relaxed.

I. What is a typical teacher, how did they treat one?

L1. A typical teacher is someone you can't joke around, someone you can't use slang with, someone you have to be careful around.

I. Ok, so they became more relaxed.

L1. Yes, they were fooling around, laughing. They were... The group was alive and loud. In the beginning they were very composed and sitting still, it wasn't normal.

I. And they loosened up over time...

L1. Yeah, it became very chaotic later, I think it was a good thing.

I. And what were they like afterwards?

L1. They were free but they always respected the rules.

..

L2. Yes, and then I remember how they could always see how someone else is doing that day when they came in.

I. They started to notice.

L2. Yes, they started to notice how a girl can come into the group, and they asked her what's the matter, but she said she was fine, but they kept pressing. They notice each other's facial expressions, they notice that something is wrong when they come in, so they ask them.

L1. There was one time when one girl's mother was sick, and she never really understood what kind of sickness her mother had, and one girl — not the whole group, just this one girl — wouldn't back down and tried to be supportive, I thought that was very nice. We didn't have to do it. She took responsibility for her.

...

I. Can you give me any examples about the difficulties of leading such groups?

L1. Well, there was one girl who became pregnant during the time when we had the groups. That was a first for me.

I. 12th grade?

L1. Yeah, and when we found out, the girls reacted. How it all played out, that was very interesting, I had never experienced that before. And to tell you the truth, I think it was very healthy, how the girls acted, it was very inclusive.

L2. Honestly, I never saw any of the girls give her glances or blame her, not once.

L1. Or laugh at her.

L2. No. It was very acceptive, that girl felt very safe within the group.

...

I. Which topics were the most challenging or difficult in the group?

L1. Let me think. The very beginning, I think, when we were doing trust exercises. Because we really, really wanted to avoid some friends clinging together and talking to just their friends. We wanted them to become a homogeneous group. That was difficult. Well, and the topic of violence, of course. Physical violence they could understand, that it occurs, that it's bad, but emotional violence was a difficult one.

I. And what was the most difficult?

L1. Making them understand what goes on among young people. What they do, that it's unhealthy, those relationships. Getting that message across was hard, I think. Conflict resolution too. Because you get stuck on something very often. If you tell a young person that cooperation is the best strategy, that you must talk things out, be proactive, and you realize that the conflict is with a teacher who...

I. Who doesn't accept the notion of "talking things out".

L1. Exactly. She doesn't want to cooperate, but then the young person knows what to do, and he or she is ready to sort things out and to approach that person but there's no one there. And you have to teach her something. Tell her: well, then don't approach her, there's nothing you can do. It's situations like these where the theory just doesn't work in practice. It's very interesting.

The following excerpt from an interview with another group leader clearly illustrates the importance of group work being a playful experience and how some preconceived notions about a person change the way they're treated. This was discussed, of course, within the context of gender stereotypes.

L3. We discussed... What was it... Mm, I remember that it was about the way people treat others and how you can change that. In the context of stereotypes, for example. That was their favourite topic, I think.

I. How others see you?

L3. Mhm, I handed out small slips of paper with labels on them. One said "smarty-pants", another said "slouch" and I had them put these labels on their backs at random. They stood with their backs against one another, then we all read what those labels said, and we had everyone treat each other like those labels said, and everyone had to guess what their label was. **They had to experience how everyone placed them in some sort of box.** They just loved this game.

The next excerpt illustrates young people's need for games, physical movement, and contact. How, through games, young people begin to connect with their own emotions and learn to express them. These excerpts also show how the participants changed during their work with the group.

L3. ... they really need physical activity. A lot of it. Girls too. Perhaps something not as challenging — they often don't want to play football — but they need exercise. They really liked the river, for example. They were very excited about it. Overcoming obstacles.

Interaction is good for them; they learn how to communicate with boys. They liked the role-playing games. There was a role-playing game about emotions. They needed those emotions. I gave them a scenario: what would it be like if some girls arrive at your village. They don't know the place, the boys had to give them directions over the phone, tell them how to find them, and everyone had their own emotions. One had these emotions, another had something else. They really messed about. They liked that game. They loved going through those emotions. They were happy they learned to recognize them in themselves and express them.

They changed completely. You could see it — them suddenly coming alive. Now that they had the freedom to express anger, when they felt it, it set them free.

I. What were the most important milestones, in your opinion, when you look back at the participants over those six months.

L3. I saw how they formed friendships. They posed questions to one another. They posed questions to themselves. That's a lot! They began to observe. Instead of just listening and not taking it in. They began to think. That was the biggest achievement. Whenever they find themselves in some sort of situation, they'll think for themselves.

The following excerpts show the results of an atypical group that was held in a school environment, in the school format of 40 minutes, because, given the group leader's cooperation with the school, there were no other options in that particular school.

L4. The boys, despite the fact that half the group finished their classes in January, I think they were one class. There were 13 boys altogether. The following year, 5 boys and a few girls voluntarily kept coming to these groups. The class teacher said that they did not function as a group or as a class, but that they were all on their own. It was hard for her to take them anywhere, motivate them. They didn't want to participate or perform anywhere as a group.

What I saw at graduation was a close-knit group, a very beautiful class. Even the boys that quit after six months — they were amazing. They grew up.

1. Did they grow up as people?

LA. Yes, I think so. Initially they were all preoccupied with their phones, they had no interest. Of course, the end result wasn't just because of me. Their parents, their teachers, especially the 8th grade teacher, were all really nice. They took something from those sessions. Even those that didn't really want to participate in the work. I don't know why I have this association, but whenever you see a 7-year-old in front of you, losing their baby teeth — they're a little funny. When their teeth grow, it becomes different, they become pupils. And I saw that in them.

This excerpt from the interview is very important in that it illustrates the fact that non-formal education cannot be done following precise instructions, with a previously defined end result in mind. This is why it is called non-formal education. The aim of prevention programs in the context of non-formal education is:

- To provide program or group leaders with tools, knowledge and skills for effective program implementation; at the same time, this knowledge and skills should not be compared with the knowledge of professions like doctors, psychologists, social workers, and psychotherapists. Leaders of informal programs can also very effectively be peers to their trainees. Group leaders grow and develop alongside the group members.
- It's important to support the implementers of these programs (the leaders) whenever they face difficulties and obstacles. Within the framework of this project, some youth group leaders felt freer working with one topic, others found other topics easier. The main goal of youth groups and other non-formal education or support programs is to be as accessible and widespread as possible. The experience that the participants acquire influences their lives in a positive, enriching, and supportive way. It is a simulation of a living relationship without violence and without abusive behaviour. Such group experiences allow one to experience acceptance, ignorance, laughter, discussion, opposing views, even anger and conflict, and reconciliation, as well as one's own and others' boundaries and rules.
- To create a positive experience program, in this case — for girls 'and boys' groups. It is widespread knowledge that each experience either strengthens old

or creates new neuron connections in the brain. When they go back to their usual environment again after spending time with the group, young people may fall back to previous models of how they function (for example, the strategy to laugh at others, so that no one will laugh at me), but the newly formed neuron connections do not disappear. When the appropriate context arises, or in the presence of like-minded or similarly experienced young people, the newly acquired experience will manifest and be tested, gradually consolidating itself.

Conclusions

The main conclusions from the interviews with young people:

1. The results of the quantitative study conducted within the framework of the project are confirmed: young people discuss topics of personal importance (relationships, experiences, romance, and sexuality) with their peers; most often — with their friends.
2. At school and in the classroom, their main concerns in everyday life are studies, tests, teachers' requirements. Issues such as “how I feel”, “who I am”, “how I want to be treated” and “how I treat others” are not addressed. There is no time for that.
3. Working with the groups, young people become free in the sense that they become more authentic, spontaneous and they begin standing up for their rights, which has a side effect — this may lead to increased conflicts with the “system”, i.e., the demands of schools and teachers, but only in cases where the teachers don't treat them with dignity. It is true that young people first notice others' attitude towards themselves, and only then their attitude towards others, including teachers.
4. Young people see support groups as a place to talk about “interesting topics that are not addressed elsewhere”, make new friends, and have a good and interesting time.
5. Over time, the groups became a source of real support and protection. After spending time with the group, one of the interviewed members of the group decided to stop meeting with an older man who gave her a lot of attention — she blocked him from her contacts. Another group — made up of girls — had the opportunity to support and accept the pregnancy and love of a 12th grade girl.
6. The interviewed young people are now able to notice and talk about gender roles and gender in a deep and nuanced way, to distinguish societal expectations from their personal wishes and needs.
7. Young people are beginning to see that opinions can be diverse. As well as recognize their emotions. They are able to “contain” more, i.e., to recognize emotions and not immediately react on them, as well as express their emotions without offending other group members.

8. Young people received a place to discuss “innocent violence” around them — jokes, as well as questions regarding addiction and safe sex.
9. Even though the participants may not necessarily always apply the new patterns of behaviour and attitudes outside the group, they have nonetheless gained new skills that will flourish and develop in favourable circumstances.

The main conclusions from the interviews with the group leaders:

1. After working with the group, young people open up, begin to trust, share, and cooperate. From initially being silent in the groups and demonstrating correct behaviour, they became spontaneous, perhaps uncontrollable at some moments, but ultimately — spontaneous but with boundaries.
2. Not all groups succeed. Voluntary groups were generally more successful than obligatory groups.
3. The interviews with the group leaders suggest that for successful long-term work to be possible, group leaders would need supervision, i.e., meetings with an experienced group leader once a month or two. The aim of this supervision would be to support those youth group leaders who are experiencing some difficulties, to strengthen their self-esteem and self-confidence, and to develop their group management skills. At one point, two of the group leaders interviewed felt that they aren’t doing so well with their groups, they felt that perhaps they should quit. The project manager in Latvia has successfully performed this supportive role for the leaders in the project.
4. An additional topic to be included in the methodology should be “Objectives”. Two of the four youth group leaders interviewed said that this should be discussed as a topic.
5. The practical exercises of the methodology, such as “Crossing the river”, help a group come together, even if it is a mixed group. Role-playing exercises are very important, as well as all the exercises that have an element of play and physical movement. It is these exercises that keep one motivated to stay in the group, and they enable young people to be spontaneous and to begin reflecting on themselves and their peers.
6. The most successful way to achieve openness and mutual trust among the participants were the joint events in nature — skiing, cycling, summer camp,

joint excursions to another city. The group discussions had a bigger depth to them after these events.

Risks

1. One of the groups was held in a school setting, i.e., the sessions were 40 minutes long instead of 120 minutes. In the first half of the year, the group consisted only of boys from the same class. The group sessions were held in place of the “education classes” with 12 boys attending in total. Some boys in the group were not motivated to participate. 4 months later, the group leader suggested that some girls from the same class join the group. This gave the boys who weren’t interested in the group, the opportunity to leave it if they wanted. The girls had participated in another group in the previous year that was led by the same group leader. The result was a highly motivated group.
2. The question regarding the young people who leave the groups — how they feel and how they’re doing — is an issue. More specifically: their self-esteem and how they communicate with their peers — does their way of communicating become more aggressive or do the kids take a defensive position. Note: as with any means of non-formal education, it is not possible to ensure good work and trust without participation being voluntary.

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Annex no. 1

Guidelines for holding structured interviews with group members individually or in small groups (up to 5 young people).

1. General questions

- 1.1. Name, age, and class.
- 1.2. Family (parents / adults, sisters or brothers, others close to the family).
- 1.3. Free time (extracurricular activities and activities outside the girls' / boys' group, leisure activities, interests).
- 1.4. How did you decide to join the girls' / boys' group? (Expectations regarding joining the group. How did you like the sessions until now?)
- 1.5. Did you like being in a girls' / boys' group? (What did you expect from your participation in the group?)

2. Roles

- 2.1. What does it mean to be a girl? What does it mean to be a boy?
- 2.2. What is feminine behaviour; what is masculine behaviour? (Can girls behave in a manly way / can boys behave in a feminine way? If they can, why do they behave that way; if not, why?)
- 2.3. Are girls and boys different? (What is the difference? Is it important for boys and girls to behave differently? If so, why?)
- 2.4. What do people in your environment expect from teenagers, what do they expect from girls/boys? (Do expectations towards girls differ from the expectations towards boys? Do you feel these expectations are being targeted at you? Is it easy to live in accordance with other people's expectations? Do you do what people expect from you?)
- 2.5. Why is being a girl / boy better / worse? (A question for boys and girls alike) (Is there something that one can only become or can only do if he or she is a boy / girl? Why?)
- 2.6. Is your outer appearance important to you? (How do you take care of your appearance? Why do you do it? When do you do it?)
- 2.7. What would you like to do in the future? (Do you have a dream profession? Why do you like it? Do you think you're going to do it in the future? Is that possible?)

3. Relations outside the family

- 3.1. What is a good friend? (What qualities do you want to see in a friend? In your opinion, what does a friend expect from you?)

- 3.2. What, in your opinion, makes a good boyfriend / girlfriend? (What qualities do you want to see in your boyfriend / girlfriend? What do you think your boyfriend / girlfriend expects from you?)
- 3.3. Is there anyone you can share anything with? (Who is this person? Why can you tell this person everything? What can you tell this person that you can't share with others?)
- 3.4. Do you have anyone to talk to about romantic relationships? (Who do you talk to? What do you talk about?)
- 3.5. Are your friends both boys and girls? (Is friendship with boys different from that with girls? If so, why? Is the gender of your friend important? If so, why?)
- 3.6. Are romantic relationships important? (Why? Why not? What characterizes a good romantic relationship? Is there any specific behaviour expected when you're in a relationship?)
- 3.7. What is making love? (How do you know that you have loved someone? When you've fallen in love, do you behave in any particular way?)

4. Harassment, hurting someone, and violence

- 4.1. Is there violence in your school? (What type of violence? Have you seen it? Are boys and girls equally violent? If not, what is the difference between them?)
- 4.2. Is there psychological terror in your school? (What is psychological terror, in your opinion? Why are there people who psychologically terrorize others? What are they like? Why is psychological terror done towards some people? What are they like?)
- 4.3. What is sexual harassment, in your opinion? (Is there sexual harassment in your school? Does the jargon used in school have a sexual tone to it (talking about someone in a sexual way, making comments about their bodies, etc.)? Could this be considered sexual harassment? What do you have to do if you think you're being sexually harassed?)
- 4.4. What is rape, in your opinion? (Is rape just intimidating someone which makes them give themselves to that person? Is paying for sex possible?)
- 4.5. Is there something that an individual can do to avoid being raped? (Which situations should be avoided? What behaviour is better not displayed?)
- 4.6. Do people around you talk about rape? What are these discussions like?

5. Sex

- 5.1. (What is sexuality? What are the existing sexual norms? Is the way in which men and women's sexuality different "natural" (the only difference being due to biological aspects)?

- 5.2. Do the people around you talk about sex? (In class. With parents. With friends. What do they talk about?)
- 5.3. Do girls and boys talk about sex differently? (If yes, what do girls talk about and what do boys talk about? What is the difference? Why are there differences?)
- 5.4. Do girls perceive sex differently than boys? (Do they both have different needs? Do they expect something different?)
- 5.5. Is the existence of sex important? (Why is it / is it not important? When is it important? Does society expect sex? Are sex and love connected? Do boys and girls understand it differently?)
- 5.6. How do you know that someone considers you attractive / that they are willing to have sex with you? (Does that have to be verbally expressed? Is it shown with body language? What do you say / do in these situations?)
- 5.7. What can sex be like? (Can you have sex with different partners? If not, why?)
- 5.8. Can sex be bought? (Why are there people who pay for sex?)
- 5.9. Can sex be sold? (What do you think is the sale of sex? Do you think that your friends / peers / classmates have the same views about buying and selling sex?)

6. The group

- 6.1. Which topics from the group sessions do you remember the best?
- 6.2. Which classes were the most interesting ones? Why exactly?
- 6.3. Which subjects were the most important? Why?
- 6.4. Which topics were difficult to discuss? What was hard about them?

7. Conclusion

- 7.1. Is there something I did not ask you, but you would like to say, add?
- 7.2. Why would you recommend other boys / girls to attend these groups?

Annex no. 2

Guidelines for structured interviews with group leaders.

1. Basic information

- 1.1. Name and age.
- 1.2. Occupations besides group leadership (work, studies, etc.).
- 1.3. Why did you want to become a group leader?
- 1.4. Do you have previous experience with girls' / boys' groups?
- 1.5. Do you have experience in leading other groups?
- 1.6. What did you expect from the groups?

2. Context of the group and the group leader

- 2.1. How was your particular group formed? Had you met the group members beforehand?
- 2.2. Where and when were the group meetings held? Did the group members know each other before the group?
- 2.3. How were you previously associated with the organization through which you started working with the group members?

3. Group meetings

- 3.1. How did you decide what you are going to talk about / what you will do in each group session?
- 3.2. Did you suggest questions or activities that you thought were necessary? (What were they? Why did you think those questions / activities should be discussed / performed? Did the young people agree to these suggestions?)
- 3.3. What subjects were the participants most interested in? (In your opinion, why?)
- 3.4. What are your relationships with the participants? (Did you observe any changes? Do they try to muster the courage and speak to you more openly?)

4. Method

- 4.1. What has been the process of the group so far? Have you succeeded at leading the group? How would you compare your leadership of the group to your expectations in this regard? (Did something surprise you? If so, what?)

4.2. What, in your observations, do you think are the most important results regarding the participants? (Have they changed their minds on any issue? Has the dynamics of the group changed? Has the behaviour of the participants changed? Can you give examples? How have the group members changed?)

- 4.3. Can you give interesting examples of difficulties concerning the leading of groups?

4.4. Have you also acquired new knowledge about a particular topic or field? (Has the experience so far been positive? Have there been any discussions on gender equality, gender-based violence, etc.?)

4.5. Have you used the newly acquired knowledge elsewhere (at work, in everyday life, etc.)?