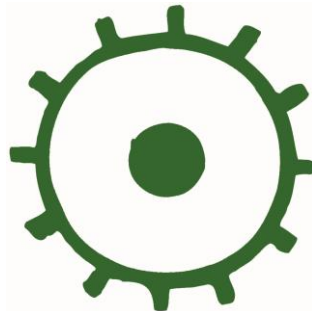


**ARBETSPAPPER FRÅN ÅLANDS FREDSINSTITUT
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CASE STUDY ON PROJECT “FAIR SEX”

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Abstract

The project “Fair Sex” aims at preventing gender based violence, promoting positive sexual experiences and advancing gender equality. Another aim is to provide support to upper secondary schools on the Åland Islands (Finland) in creating structures and routines for a sustainable gender equality process. The project uses a holistic approach to address sexual violence, not only by building awareness among students, but also by providing knowledge and skills for school staff and strengthening their capacity to be observant and intervene when witnessing any form of sexual violence or harassment.

1. Background

The Åland Islands Peace Institute (ÅIPI) is a politically and religiously independent charitable foundation, established in 1992. The ÅIPI works practically and with research into peace and conflict issues in a broadly defined sense, with Åland and the special status that Åland enjoys under international law as a starting point. The Institute focuses on forms of autonomy, minority issues, demilitarisation and conflict management. Its aim is to promote the peaceful development of society by combating violence and through empowerment, i.e. by raising awareness that enables individuals and communities to reach equality and to create opportunities to develop their full potential. A big part of the practical work is carried out in the framework of regional co-operation with partners in the neighboring areas, but also at a local level, in co-operation with civil society organizations and schools on the Åland Islands (Finland). As a part of civil society, the Peace Institute’s mandate is to generate new ideas and knowledge, and to complement and monitor other sectors of society.

The project “Fair Sex” originates from the joint Åland-Latvian cooperation project “Challenging Gender Roles for Prevention of Trafficking¹”, which aimed at combating stereotypical gender perceptions at a grass-root level in order to undermine conditions for development of gender related violence and human trafficking. The project activities in 2011 included an information campaign directed to young people under the title “Fair Sex”. The goal of the campaign was to address questions concerning grey areas in sexual situations and to encourage young people to reflect on such issues as identifying and expressing one’s own sexual preferences as well as understanding and considering the needs and desires of a sexual partner. The campaign highlighted the importance of communication as a pre-condition for positive sexual experiences and a way of reducing the risk of sexual violence. The idea of the campaign was also to initiate a discussion on social aspects of sex and the basic principles of respect, gender equality and mutuality in sexual relationships – topics that are often missing in a sex education curriculum at schools or in the vast sources of information about sex and sexuality available on the Internet and other media.

¹ The project was financed within the framework of the INTERREG IV Programme of the European Regional Development Fund. National co-financing was provided by the Government of Åland.

The campaign resulted, among the other things, in a request from school health representatives from upper secondary schools on Åland to further develop campaign material and hold interactive workshops for upper secondary school students on the central topics of the Fair Sex campaign. The school health personnel were alarmed by stories of young people involved in situations where students had sex in a way they did not feel comfortable with or experienced pressure to perform all types of sexual practices once they had started being sexually active.

Pilot workshops for youth were carried out during the period from autumn 2011 to spring 2012 with funding from the Government of Åland. All second year students in upper secondary school on Åland were provided with opportunity to take part in a pilot workshop session. Talking about sex in a structured non-formal and interactive setting was appreciated by students as something they had not previously experienced.

An incentive for developing a broader project against sexual violence in schools came up in connection to the publication of the results of the school health promotion study from 2011², carried out by the National Institute for Health and Welfare in Finland. It had shown that 30% of all girls in the lower secondary school, 25% in the general upper secondary school and 40% in the upper secondary vocational school on Åland had experienced sexual violence by being pressurized or forced into sexual intercourse or other form of sexual practices, offered money, luxuries, alcohol or drugs in exchange for sexual favors or groped against their will. The Government of Åland reacted to these results by inviting the Åland Islands Peace Institute to develop a project initiative against sexual violence that would involve both students and school personnel of upper secondary schools on Åland. The project “Fair Sex” was granted funding and launched in spring 2012.

2. The Fair Sex Method

The project “Fair Sex” aims at preventing gender based violence, promoting positive sexual experiences and advancing gender equality. Another aim is to provide support to the upper secondary schools on Åland in creating structures and routines for sustainable gender equality work. In this way, the project is using a holistic approach to address sexual violence, not only building awareness among students, but also providing knowledge and skills for school staff and strengthening their capacity to be observant and intervene when witnessing harassment or violence. The project “Fair Sex” thus includes two interrelated components – Fair Sex workshops for upper secondary school students and training and counselling activities for education staff. As a whole, these combined activities are being referred to as the Fair Sex Method.

² Lommi A., Luopa P., Puusniekka R., Vilkki S., Jokela J., Kinnunen T., Laukkarinen E. (2011) Enkäten Hälsa i skolan 2011. Rapport för Åland. Available at http://www.regeringen.ax/composer/upload/Halsa_i_skolan_2011_ak_8_och_9_och_gymnasiet, accessed 12 January 2015.

The Fair Sex Method is developed using a gender-aware, inclusive and norm-critical approach that questions the prevailing societal norms and expectations regarding gender, sexuality and violence. The Method has its basis in gender theory and views sexual violence both as a consequence of gender inequality and an obstacle in achieving gender equality in societal and individual contexts. In order to combat sexual violence one needs to address different areas of societal life where school plays a major role. Therefore both students and educational staff are seen as important actors in creating a school environment free from any form of sexual violence, including widespread everyday harassment in the form of inappropriate name-calling, sexual jokes, offensive sexual remarks or uninvited touching. This does not mean that sexual violence is a problem specific for a school environment, but school is a place which plays an important role in creating different norms, including norms and expectations with regard to gender or other aspects of human identity. Therefore school is seen as a suitable arena for preventive work that targets young people of certain age.

The Fair Sex Method also aims to challenge the normalization of everyday sexual violence and sexism, within a student community as well as a broader societal context. By using a norm-critical approach, the Method seeks to illuminate and question different norms taken for granted rather than focusing on the deviation from the norm. To belong to one or several norms, the “common” and unquestioned, means advantages, which are only highlighted when someone or something breaks the norm³. Norm-critical approach has proven to be a powerful way of addressing all kinds of stereotypes and prejudices in the framework of Fair Sex workshops, including the stereotype that all sexual contact is limited to heterosexual relationships and the view of sexual activity as mainly associated with penetrative sex and reproduction.

Another essential aspect of the Fair Sex Method is an ambition to empower individuals to defend their bodily integrity and physical autonomy and yet to be able to express and explore their sexuality in a safe and consensual way. The core of the Fair Sex workshops for students is devoted to discussion and reflection, which allows the students to listen to the thoughts and ideas of others and to come to their own conclusions and insights. The opportunity to talk about sexuality and sexual violence with specially trained adults is also seen as a way of empowering students to break free from peer pressure and gendered expectations.

3. Fair Sex workshops for students

Fair Sex workshops are tailored to respond to the needs and realities of students in the second year of the upper secondary school, which includes the age group of 16-17 years old. Fair Sex workshops have also been adopted for students with intellectual disabilities who are involved in a special vocational training program at the upper secondary vocational school on Åland.

³ (2012) *Guidelines for equal rights on UMO.se*. Available at http://www.umo.se/Global/Informationsmaterial/umo_Guidelines%20for%20equal%20rights_2TR.pdf, accessed 14 January 2015.

Apart from Åland, workshop leaders have been trained and the concept of Fair Sex workshops has also been introduced in the mainland Finland.

The methodological approach used for conducting Fair Sex workshops is based on the principles of equal participation, active listening, respect for diverse points of view and personal integrity. The workshops are interactive and inclusive, encouraging all students to reflect upon their own perceptions as well as general attitudes, society norms and values regarding sexual situations and sexual behavior. Fair Sex workshop setting is not an arena for discussing one's own sexual experiences – it is a discussion forum for exchange of ideas and thoughts where all students, regardless of their previous experiences, can participate on equal terms. Different ways of communicating one's consent or refusal to engage in sexual activity, grey area between consensual sex and sexual violence, depictions of sex in pornography, popular culture and media as well as the strategies for preventing sexual assault or rape are some of the core topics discussed in the workshop, which is divided into two 75-minute sessions.

Workshop leaders always work in couples and having completed 8-hour of training followed by an obligatory practical session that includes observation of two workshops facilitated by experienced workshop leaders. The practical part is important for getting a better understanding of how the discussion may evolve in a group of students and how it might be influenced by personal attitudes and values of workshop leaders. There are no formal requirements regarding the age of workshop leaders, however, it is preferable that the leaders are within the age range that allows the students to relate to their life situation, but a few years older than the participants in order to establish authority in the classroom. This is also important for strengthening the impact of the key message on the audience, which emphasizes the importance of understanding one's own preferences, communicating one's desires and learning about the needs and wants of a sex partner.

Fair Sex, according to the definition developed by the Åland Islands Peace Institute, is a type of sex that is mutual, giving one a feeling of comfort deep inside, and is safe – before, during and after the sexual act. In order to fulfill the criteria for having 'Fair Sex' with someone, it is of the utmost importance to communicate with each other throughout sexual activity and to be observant of the reactions and body language of one's sexual partner. It is the responsibility of the person who wants to engage in sexual activity to ensure that he or she has the consent of the other rather than making it the responsibility of the person who is exposed to unwelcome sexual behavior to say 'no'. For that reason, relying solely on nonverbal communication can lead to misunderstanding or confusion. The main focus of the Fair Sex workshop lies therefore on verbalizing and communicating one's feelings, wishes and intentions in sexual situations for preventing any type of sexual misconduct.

In order to facilitate a discussion in a group of students, a number of drawings and drawing series have been produced specifically for the project and are used as an integral part of the Fair Sex workshop. The drawings serve as a powerful visual tool for initiating a reflection on

a variety of potential sexual situations and actions that may be taken. Some situations covered in the drawings include nagging for sex, confusion caused by the use of euphemisms in sexual situations, pitfalls of assuming consent to sex on the basis of past sexual behavior or passivity of partner, gendered expectations regarding sexual behavior patterns etc. The use of visual material, which is partly humoristic, also helps the students to distance themselves from their personal experiences and to analyze the situation from a third party perspective. Moreover, the use of visual material injects some lightness into what otherwise can be perceived as a difficult subject matter. Overall, the general tone of the workshop is relatively positive in a way that it encourages students not only to reflect on situations involving potential sexual misconduct, but also on conditions for pleasurable and responsible sexual experiences.

The values clarification exercise is another method that is included in the workshop set-up, allowing the students to reflect upon their own thoughts and feelings and formulate their opinions. For example, the students are asked to take a standpoint on such statements as “Pornography can encourage people to try out things that they are not ready for”, “It is easy to express one’s willingness to have sex”, “Films and TV series can influence people’s view on relationships” etc. Throughout the project implementation period, group discussions and discussion exercises have received a highly positive response in the evaluation questionnaires for students that are given out in the end of the second workshop session. Many of the students have also indicated that they had appreciated the possibility to talk about sex in an open and non-judgmental way and to listen to the thoughts and arguments of others.

Based on the response from the students, self-reflection and evaluation by workshop leaders as well as new practices and theories in the field of gender equality and norm-critical perspectives in education, the workshop material has been continuously updated. For example, the way of approaching the rape issue has been revised a number of times in order to provide young people with a better understanding on what rape actually is as defined in the Criminal Code of Finland, but choosing not to put an extensive focus on this issue in order to leave space for discussion on other grey areas in sexual situations. The training of workshop leaders has also been updated to include a clear norm-critical approach to sexuality and sex, which is of great importance for creating an inclusive and open discussion climate in the group.

4. Training and counselling activities for educational staff

Since the launch of the “Fair Sex” project in 2012, educational staff have been involved in knowledge-building activities in order to be able to facilitate the development of sustainable strategies for addressing and preventing any form of sexual violence in a school environment. Teachers and other school personnel meet students on a regular basis and are bound to witness how students treat each other in both an in- and off- classroom setting. They are also carriers of norms and values that shape patterns of behavior and attitudes of young people. Therefore self-reflection and analysis of school’s response to incidents of sexual violence among students is an important tool for raising awareness among school personnel and providing

them with tools for effectively preventing, intervening and managing all forms of sexual violence.

In 2012, both lower and upper secondary school personnel on Åland were offered a series of training sessions covering such topics as gender norms regarding sexuality, the link between gender inequality and sexual violence, violence as expression of masculinity, normalization of sexual harassment in young people's lives, consequences of not conforming to traditional gender roles etc. The training participants were also presented with the concept of Fair Sex workshops and involved in a number of interactive exercises and group discussions for reflecting on the root causes of sexual misconduct and various forms of violence that girls and boys are subjected to.

As a part of the training, the school personnel had to review the school curriculum and other school policy documents to examine in which way they address the issues of equality, harassment and violence. Based on the collected findings and observations, the school representatives were provided with space to discuss concrete measures to be taken in situations of violence and harassment. The importance of having a common strategy for intervening in such cases was highlighted, for showing support to the victim, but also for demonstrating that this type of behavior is not acceptable and will not be tolerated.

The training for upper secondary school representatives included a session on the Finnish Act on Equality between Women and Men (1986/2005), which contains a provision that all educational institutions providing upper secondary education and training must prepare a gender equality plan annually in cooperation with staff and student representatives. The plan must include a survey of the gender equality situation within the institution and of related problems, and the necessary measures that are planned to implement with the purpose of promoting gender equality. Special attention must be given to the attainment of gender equality in student selections and when organizing teaching and evaluating study performance, and to measures to ensure the prevention and elimination of sexual harassment and gender-based harassment⁴. At the time of the training, none of the upper secondary schools on Åland had been able to meet this requirement, mainly due to the limited experience of similar work within the organization as well as the lack of external support and guidance. Thus, the next step in working with upper secondary schools was to build competence and commitment for developing gender equality work in line with the provisions in the Act on Equality between Women and Men.

In 2013, the three upper secondary schools on Åland appointed gender equality groups composed of representatives from teachers, other school personnel, students, and, in two cases, school management. The Åland Islands Peace Institute provided support and

⁴ The Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986) Measures to promote gender equality in educational institutions (232/2005,6 b §). Available at <http://www.tasa-arvo.fi/en/publications/act2005>, accessed 12 January 2015.

counselling to the groups in taking the necessary steps for drawing up a gender equality plan and identifying the most relevant gender equality problems, setting specific and measurable goals as well as selecting efficient actions to achieve them. As a result of this process, every school produced a gender equality plan based on situations and challenges in the individual school setting. Another task for gender equality groups was to update the existing action plan for responding to sexual harassment in a way that clarifies the concrete steps and measures to be taken in situations where students are affected. The Åland Islands Peace Institute stayed in contact with the gender equality groups throughout 2014 and offered individual counselling for discussing difficulties and requirements that had come up.

5. Conclusions/Lessons learned from the project “Fair Sex”

The project has first and foremost played an important role in raising awareness of sexual violence, and provided both students and school personnel with tools for preventing and responding to situations of risk. It has also initiated a discussion on the social aspects of sex, which had previously been missing in the sexual education curriculum and was strongly appreciated by students who have taken part in Fair Sex workshops. In the context of the Åland Islands, ‘Fair Sex’ has by now become an established term for consensual sex rather than a name of a specific method or project.

However, the work in this field should be seen as a start, and not an end. According to the recent school health promotion study from 2013⁵, the percentage of girls who had once or on repeated occasions suffered sexual violence on Åland remains as high as in 2011. A group of students from an upper secondary vocational school on Åland, who had been interviewed for a local newspaper in connection to the publication of the above mentioned results, indicated that Fair Sex workshops are useful, but this type of discussion should start already in a lower secondary school where the prevailing macho culture leads to negative consequences for both girls and boys. Feeling pressured into sex by external expectations is just one of the many examples of how young people are affected by gender stereotypes. According to the opinion of the interviewed students, teachers together with other school personnel ought to be more active in reducing ‘everyday sexism’⁶. The engagement of students in addressing the problem of sexual violence is a positive sign of a greater awareness among young people and a proof that the Fair Sex Method has generated a broader discussion on these issues.

However, the schools hold a responsibility to keep the discussion on gender roles and gender equality alive and maintain the work of the established gender equality groups; otherwise

⁵ Luopa, P., Kivimäki H., Nipuli, S., Vilkki S., Jokela J., Laukkarinen E., Paananen R. (2013) Enkäten Hälsa i skolan 2013. Rapport för Åland. Available at http://www.regeringen.ax/.composer/upload//socialomiljo/Halsa_i_skolan_2013_ak_8_och_9_och_gymnasiet.pdf, accessed 12 January 2015.

⁶ Hendersson, H. *Trötta på machokulturen*, 12.11.2014, Nya Åland.

there is a risk that the impact of similar project initiatives might be short-lived. There is a number of success factors for gender equality work in preschools and schools that have been presented by Mia Heikkilä in a report on sustainable gender equality work in Nordic schools and preschools – Hållbart jämställdhetsarbete i förskolan och skolan i Norden⁷.

Heikkilä's study shows that a crucial factor for the implementation of gender equality work in preschools and schools is attitude to and awareness of a specific knowledge on gender and gender equality that is needed for the process of development and change. Support from the school management is another necessary element of sustainable gender equality work. If the management does not clearly express its support for the development of work on gender and gender equality, then this work will not be sustainable and integrated. It is also very important to set common goals that are supported throughout all levels of the organization and to have an organization structure and resources for monitoring their implementation and follow-up.

Moreover, Mia Heikkilä points out the significance of the development climate, which characterizes the openness to develop opportunities in the field of gender and gender equality. Heikkilä also emphasizes the role of children and students in planning and implementing gender equality initiatives. If children and students are not involved in designing of these initiatives, there is a great risk that the planned activities will not be efficient or will not have a relevant impact on the target group. Last, but not least, the report shows that effective steering documents are critical to successful gender equality work. It is important that the school legislation and national curriculum are supportive of the work. The countries that do not have regulations regarding equality in the national curriculum also tend to not have an active work in progress, according to Heikkilä.

In order for the work that has been initiated and developed within the framework of the project "Fair Sex" to live on, there is a need to continue knowledge building activities on gender and norm-critical perspectives for the whole school personnel so that it is integrated into education and other school activities and not just limited to the work of gender equality groups or Fair Sex workshops. The topics discussed in the Fair Sex workshops should also be included into other school subjects covering the issues related to respect, communication and setting boundaries. The eventual resistance in making a long-term commitment to promoting gender equality and preventing sexual violence in a school environment can most effectively be overcome by providing an enhanced understanding of how gender inequality, gender roles and sexual violence are interlinked. The school representatives need to be continuously updated on research findings and statistics so that their work is based on facts rather than feelings and assumptions. Otherwise there is a risk that such work reinforces gender stereotypes and norms instead of challenging them.

⁷ Heikkilä, M. (2013) *Hållbart jämställdhetsarbete i förskolan och skolan i Norden: Med lärande exempel*. Available at https://www.delegia.com/app/Data/ProjectImages/3698/NMR_rapport_20130424_FINAL.pdf, accessed 12 January 2015.

Structured discussions on sex and sexuality with students are needed to balance out the flow of simplified and stereotypical images from TV, magazines, films, advertising and pornography that young people are exposed to. For a sustainable impact, Fair Sex workshops should be included into an educational curriculum on related topics. In this way, discussions and thought processes promoted by the workshop could be further developed and the dialogue on respect, communication, gender equality and mutuality in sexual relationships would be kept alive.