



## Involving High School Students in Human Rights Promotion and Critical Use of Media

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### 1. Introduction and brief background description

The FRA (Agency for Fundamental Rights) report on homophobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity starts with a clear denunciation of the situation at European level:

“The work shows that the current human rights situation for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transsexuals and transgender persons is not satisfactory. Many LGBT persons experience discrimination, bullying and harassment, while, more worryingly, occurrences of physical attacks were also detected: [...] In a European Union that bases itself on principles of equal treatment and non-discrimination legislation this is unacceptable” [8].

Homophobia and discrimination affect all the moments of LGBT persons' lives: from the early years in schools to the work place, in the media, in their family life, etc. One of the main impacts of the fear of discrimination is the “invisibility strategies” adopted by LGBT persons which contribute to the under-estimation of the real dimension of the phenomenon. Besides, they have consequences on LGBT people self-acceptance. Growing up in an hostile, stigmatising environment can lead to low-level of self-acceptance, anxiety and depression and, generally, make more complex and painful the process of identity formation [9].

The NISO project proposes an educational strategy aimed at engaging high-schools students in becoming protagonist of Human Rights promotion in the field of non-discrimination on the base of sexual orientation.

The structure of this paper mimics the structure of the NISO project: the first part is dedicated to the research carried out on discrimination attitudes and stereotypes, while the second part describes the NISO educational strategy. The conclusion introduces the next steps of the project and the expected results.

### 2. Discriminative attitudes and stereotypes according to LGBT people and students

The first part of the NISO project has been dedicated to a research on the main stereotypes and attitudes towards LGBT people in Europe and in the four participating countries. A desk analysis on the background situation has been carried out, followed by two surveys regarding LGBT people and students from secondary schools. Two distinct semi-structured questionnaires have been distributed to about 1.100 LGBT persons and 1.400 students. The results obtained from these surveys cannot be considered as statistically representative, and the data are currently still under analysis, but the preliminary results already confirm the picture that came out from the background analysis.

A majority of the LGBT persons declares to have suffered experiences of discrimination or prejudice linked to their sexual orientation or gender identity (86% of the LGBT respondents in Estonia, 84% in Belgium, 73% in Italy). The Italian data show that in general transgender persons, gay and bisexual men are more often victims of discriminations than lesbian and bisexual women.

There are differences between the countries on the contexts in which LGBT persons are more often discriminated, but the first three environments indicated are always family (48% of the respondents who experienced discrimination in Belgium, 42% in Italy, 47% in Estonia), school (56% in Belgium, 49% in Italy and 30% in school) and the media and Internet (52% in Belgium, 33% in Italy and 78% in Estonia).

These results are in line with European surveys [8] and suggest that school cannot be considered as a safe environment for LGBT persons. The types of prejudices suffered at school by LGBT respondents, and especially transgender and gay persons, are verbal and psychological violence, insults and jokes, but also physical violence. To plan efficient activities in the school, it was important for NISO to have a clear picture of the vision of the students on LGBT and gender issues. It appears that, even if some of the most traditional gender stereotypes are not very diffused any more among the students, the students, especially boys, still believe that some behaviours or roles belong mainly to one sex or another. For example, in Belgium, 57% of the boys declared that it is normal that girls use their outward appearance to get boys to do something, against 39% of the girls. The main gender stereotypes declared regard the relationship of women with their appearance, some characteristics of men (their independence, the importance to fight back when threatened, the love of danger) and the fact that some professions are more for men than for women.

Regarding the stereotypes attached to LGBT persons, the results are different for gay men and lesbian women: while the majority of students do not think lesbian women have any specific characteristics, a large number declared that gay men do have some (73% in The Netherlands, 40% in Italy). The stereotypes more often stated by the students for gay men are: effeminate in their behaviour or more feminine in general, sensitive, fashion conscious, attentive to their looks and with a particular way to speak. Regarding lesbian women, the students declared that they are masculine, they wear men's clothes, they often have short hair and they have a strong and tough personality. In general, few very negative characteristics were stated by the students (such as ill), partially in opposition with the opinion of LGBT persons on the stereotypes attached to them.



The students were also asked to give a definition of homosexuality, choosing from a list of potential definitions. While the first replies in all the countries were “a choice” (70% of the respondents in Belgium and 46% in Italy) and “a natural sexual orientation”, still a quite high number of students have a very negative vision of homosexuality or in any case consider it as something not “normal” linked to some kind of disease, disability or genetic problem.

The answers obtained from the students vary considerably according to the typologies of schools they are enrolled in: students of humanities and scientific high schools show a less-stereotyped vision on both gender and LGBT people if compared to those enrolled in technical and vocational schools. For example, in Italy, 88% of the students in humanities high schools have few gender stereotypes, compared to 54% of the students in polytechnic schools. In the same way, the number of LGBT persons the students know appears to influence their opinion both on LGBT issues and on gender issues. It is interesting to note that the acquaintance with LGB and T persons has a consequence on the students' interpretation of gender differences.

According to LGBT persons, the main reason of their social exclusion are the ignorance and lack of education of the population (for 78% of the LGBT respondents in Italy and 44% in Estonia), the heteronormativity of the society (59% in Estonia, 26% in Italy), the cultural background and the fact that LGBT persons remain in the closet, especially in countries where LGBT rights are not widely recognised (44% in Estonia and 23% in Italy). In Italy, the second cause stated by the respondents was the Christian religion (63% of the respondents).

Coherently with these answers, according to LGBT people the two most effective ways to combat homophobia are the media (49% of the answers in Italy and 21% in Belgium) and the schools (22% in Italy and 19% in Belgium) as they are channels to address the lack of information and understanding of the society on LGBT issues. These answers validate the approach adopted by NISO project, which aims at working with the students inside the schools to promote human and LGBT rights through a participative use of media.

### 3. NISO educational strategy

As mentioned above, school and media are two central “environments” for promoting social inclusion, equal right and the overcoming of stereotypes and prejudice related to gender and sexual orientation. NISO focuses exactly on these two “environments” by combining peer-education [10], citizenship education and media education.

NISO engaged several schools in the 4 participating countries; in each school a team of media educators, teachers and facilitators support students in becoming active and in developing media products and concrete actions aiming at promoting LGBT equal treatment and fighting discrimination.

More specifically, students are engaged in a role-play called “Voice Out”: in each school students are supported in learning more about LGBT issues and human rights, but also about their own identity and how to express it at individual and groups level. By building a safe environment in which students can freely and securely express their opinion, they are guided in the creation of two groups. Each group is invited to develop its own “campaign” presenting their views on LGBT social inclusion and discrimination and by developing media products promoting their ideas. Each school will then vote the proposed campaigns and the winning group will compete at national level. National winning teams will then meet in a 3-day workshop in Brussels and will draft a white paper for the promotion of LGBT rights.

Voice Out finds its methodological foundation in peer education, intended as an instrument enabling young people to become active protagonist of their intellectual and emotional growth. Young people are, therefore, seen as competent actors, able to develop ideas and proposals on a specific subject and, moreover, able to transmit their knowledge to their peers in an effective way. Teenagers are not passive recipient of information, values and experience transferred by an expert adult, but, to the contrary, actors that – through facilitate group dynamics – can acquire and transmits complex ideas, behaviours and values.

One of the positive aspects of peer-education is the fact that “peer educators are less likely to be seen as authority figures ‘preaching’ about how others should behave from a judgemental position” [10a] compared to adult trainers. This may support NISO project in overcome the “politically correctness” that - in many context – surround sensitive issues such as homosexuality (and diversity in general) and jeopardize the possibility to openly discuss LGBT issues.

Peer education is accompanied by media education or, more limited, by the use of media in transmitting youth ideas and suggestions. Students engaged in Voice Out activities are supported in creating short videos (and other media outputs) promoting their personal view about LGBT rights, discrimination, homophobia, diversity and identity. With these visual products they will contact their peers in the schools and will use the videos as an instruments for talking and discussing LGBT issues. On one hand, the possibility to develop media products was interpreted as an attractive aspect of Voice Out activities and, on the other side, visual products permit to the engaged students to talk in a “mediate” way about their opinion on a sensitive subject such as sexual orientation.

The last innovative aspect of Voice Out is the structure of the role play that recall a three steps political election. This aspect should introduce students to participative citizenship and can support the development of more concrete options in fighting LGBT discrimination. This should be particular evident in the final white paper that the students will draft and present to EU institutions in Brussels.



#### 4. Conclusions

At the present stage NISO consortium is running the activities in the schools; it is therefore too early to propose any conclusion on the educational strategy and on the project in general. We will see in the next months if this combination of peer, media and citizenship education can be effective in achieving NISO goals and to what extent this approach can be transferred to other schools and other contexts.

To this end, the consortium intends to run a deep evaluation of the activities that are and will be performed, and of the Voice Out experience more specifically. It represents for all the participants a rich material to be analysed in order to improve the method before its transfer to other schools and national contexts. In line with this objective, the NISO project will also produce a tool-kit for teachers and educators containing all the teaching and facilitation supports used in the project.

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