



# Gender-sensitive youth with girls in an international perspective

Practice based research of girls' work in The Netherlands, Austria and  
Slovenia

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The research described in this article is a result of a 6 month Erasmus+ Internship of a Slovenian student in Sociaal Werk Nederland. Its aim is to provide information and comparison about girls' work in The Netherlands, Austria and Slovenia. Research included 15 interviews with youth workers working with girls. In The Netherlands, Jongerenwerk Utrecht-JoU, Participe from Alphen aan den Reijn, Combiwel from Amsterdam, Thuis Op Straat Leiden and Surplus Breda participated in the research. In Slovenia Študijsko-raziskovalni center za družino-ŠRCD, Najboljša Ti, Imenitnice, Mladi Zmaji and RampaLab, with programs Vzornice and Čipke from Ljubljana, Mladinski EPI center Piran from the city of Lucija, and Nefiks with programme Kolegice with the national reach, participated in the research. In Austria three organisations were visited, one in Graz called Mafalda and two in Vienna, \*peppa Mädchencentrum and Flash Mädchencafé.

Gender-sensitive youth work with girls, girls' youth work or feminist youth work is youth work that focuses on girls and their needs. It points out, that girls need different attention, but does not oppose gender-mixed youth work. Gender-sensitive youth work can be done in a mixed-gender setting or in gender-specific activities. In this research the latter are included. In The Netherlands girls work or *meidenwerk* in Dutch is often mentioned as an underrated part of youth work. Nevertheless, it received some attention in the last few years from the research team Youth Spot from Hogeschool of Amsterdam and The Netherlands Youth Institute. In 2018 there was a book published about girl's work and its methodical principals with the title *Kracht van Meiden*. In Austria *mädchenarbeit* or *feministische jugendarbeit* has a long tradition and in almost all federal states we can find a special women center that advises young women and girls. Austria has a tradition of gender-budgeting and mainstreaming so it is not a surprise that they have a lot of official documents describing gender-specific youth work. In Slovenian literature, there is no such thing as gender-sensitive youth work or rather it is not described as such. Youth work or *mladinsko delo* in Slovene, does not officially put special attention to any gender, however, there are some practices that only work with girl participants.

Austria has the most complex system of managing youth policies. It is a federalist state with 9 provinces, that have a youth department that implements youth policies according to their specifics. On a national level lobbying for youth work is done by several national organisations. In The Netherlands, municipalities are responsible for the whole continuum of welfare, support and care for all citizens, including children, young people and families in need of help. In Slovenia measures to implement youth policies are taken by the state or local communities. Although youth questions are there for the local communities to implement into their strategies, it still happens that they are not on a priority list.

### **How is youth work organized in the three countries and how does girl work fit in?**

For understanding girls' youth work we must first understand how youth work is perceived in the three countries and how girls' youth work fits in. Youth work is mainly financed by the municipalities, however, how the money is allocated is different in the three countries. The biggest difference is the use of public calls for financing youth work in Slovenia. Public calls require, written and predefined goals, methods and purpose of the programs. In Slovenia and in Austria, gender-sensitive youth work providers are usually NGO's, and in The Netherlands they are usually a part of a bigger organisation that is commissioned by the municipality. Definitions and understanding of youth work are also somewhat different. Slovenia has a legal definition of youth work, but it is very broad, Austria has many and The Netherlands does not have a legal definition of youth work. Slovene's youth work is best described as a planned program (especially experiential) of non-formal education with the aim to promote personal and social development of youth. In The Netherlands youth work is a set of support services and extensive leisure-oriented activities, and in Austria it is based on extracurricular youth work, with an emphasis on leisure activities and prevention. In all the three countries professional youth work is considered youth work, that is done by a professional for the young people and is free of charge for the participants. Girls work is mostly a part of professional youth work in all countries.

### **What are the official reasons for the implementation of girls' youth work in the three countries and why is it important?**

In Slovenia most of the programs started in the past year. In Austria and in The Netherlands, girls' work has an older tradition, considering most of the programs started at least five years ago. The reasons for starting girls' youth work are similar in The Netherlands and in Austria. The most common reason for starting in these two countries, is the lack of girls in youth work, observed either by the municipality or by the youth workers. The most common reason for the implementation of girls' work in Slovenia, that was also mentioned in Austria and in The Netherlands, is the observation of youth workers, that girls need special attention. This was also the most common response from the youth workers, when asked about the importance of gender-sensitive youth work approaches. Girls have some different developmental needs, they internalize problems more than boys, have a lower self-esteem and face gender-role conflicts. They also show a need to talk more and some sensitive topics are easier to discuss, if there are no boys around. This is also supported by practice, as all interviewees believe that girls need a safe girl's only space where they can talk and express themselves. However, safe space has a different meaning in Slovenia then it does in Austria and in The Netherlands. In Slovenia interviewees only mentioned safe space as a space where girls can talk, whereas in The Netherlands and in Austria safe space was also mentioned as a physically safe space where girls are not observed all the time and do not have to worry about their appearance as much. In Slovenia and in Austria, inequalities in the labour market were also mentioned as an official reason for the implementation of gender-sensitive youth work. Practical reasons for starting girls work were only mentioned in Slovenia.

**How is girls work approached in the three countries and what methods are used in girls' youth work?** In Slovenia and in The Netherlands gender-sensitive youth work is usually organised in a form of weekly or monthly meetings of group of girls in a borrowed/rented separate room. The borrowed/ rented room can either be a part of a larger youth center or a community center, or is rented just for the purpose of girls' work, as we can observe in Slovenia. On the basis of this research, weekend getaways and camps in the nature, are specific for Slovenia. In Austria, all organisations have their own youth centres, which are used entirely by girls. Two organisations in Slovenia and one organisation in Austria provide different workshops with the aim to tackle inequality in the labour market. In Slovenia most of the organisations reported girls need to apply before coming to the activity, whereas in The Netherlands and in Austria, girls usually do not need an appointment and can just start participating when they feel like it. Austrian and Dutch practices also collaborate with schools, other professionals and parents, which is not so popular in Slovenia. Girls are divided into age groups in Austria and in The Netherlands, in Slovenia programs are organised for a certain age group in advance.

Talking is the most common and important method used in gender-sensitive youth work, however, it is approached differently. In Slovenia, talking is the core of the work. Almost all of the activities in the programs, have the aim to discuss important topics in girls lives and about their experiences, even other leisure activities are used to make talking easier. Other, leisure activities, such as cooking, makeup workshops etc. are also used in all the three countries. The biggest importance of leisure activities is emphasised in The Netherlands, as youth workers mentioned girls would not join youth work without them. Conversation is of course also important but it develops spontaneously with the activities. In Austria just spending time together with the girls is considered to be the core of girls' work. It probably has to do with the fact, their centres are easier to reach because they are opened more often and just for the girls.

**What are the goals of girls' youth work and how do they compare between the three countries?** Goals of girl's youth work are largely similar in all three countries. The aims of most organisations are empowerment, maturity, increasing of self-esteem, self-awareness, social skills and happiness. Other goals mentioned were stress relive, to provide a safe place, to educate the girls about the dangers of social media, to make a basis for future work with girls and specifically in Slovenia and in Austria, to promote equal opportunities in the labour market and in the society.

This research tried to shed a light on how gender-sensitive youth work is approached in The Netherlands, Austria and in Slovenia. There are some big differences especially between Slovenia and the other two countries. Slovenia, does not have a long tradition of gender-sensitive youth work and it is not considered very important. Programmes in Slovenia are more target oriented and usually have to follow predetermined outlines. Austria differs from the other two countries in the use of space. All organisations have their own girl-only centres, whereas in Slovenia and in The Netherlands organisations usually use a borrowed room or space. Girl only centres can provide safety for the girls better then borrowed/rented spaces, it is also more appropriate because girls can decorate the center according to their wishes and make it homelier. However, in this centres mixed-gender youth work cannot be done. The importance of gender-mixed youth work was strongly emphasised in the interviews of Slovenian and Dutch youth workers and even though it was not mentioned in the interviews of Austrian youth workers, it is strongly debated in their literature about gender-specific youth work. The big question therefore is how to make gender-specific

youth work safe and attractive for the girls and at the same time how to make gender-mixed youth work accessible. There are some similarities between the countries as well. The goals and methods used are largely the same, even though the focuses of practices are a bit different. Another interesting dilemma that was pointed out by most interviewees is the accessibility to teenage girls. Older girls from the age of 14 until 15 are the hardest group to reach. Youth work has to adapt to the needs of these girls and figure out what can be done to attract them. All in all, gender-sensitive youth work has shown to be important because girls need the attention of youth workers and need a safe environment where they can be themselves. It is important, because it promotes girls' participation in youth work and stresses that it is important to consider the needs of all young people and adjust the activities of youth work accordingly.

Perhaps the most interesting outcome of this research for the practices in The Netherlands are the girl only youth centers in Austria. You can read more about them on the following web pages:

- Mafalda: [www.mafalda.at](http://www.mafalda.at)
- \*peppa Mädchenzentrum: [www.peppa.at](http://www.peppa.at)
- Flash Mädchencafé: [www.jugendzentren.at/standorte/flash/](http://www.jugendzentren.at/standorte/flash/)

#### CORE LITERATURE:

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