



Interview of the Month

MENENGAGE EUROPE

*Interview with Anna Lindqvist,
Co-coordinator of the MenEngage Europe Network & Director of MÄN, Sweden*

INTERVIEWED BY VIBEKE THOMSEN, SHECANHECAN

1) You are part of the coordination team of MenEngage Europe. Can you tell us more about the work and objectives of this network, an Alliance of over 700 members worldwide? How does the Alliance work to engage men and boys to promote gender equality?

The Global Alliance of MenEngage gathers organisations from all over the world working to promote gender justice by engaging men and boys in multiple ways. Among our members you will find everything from small activist groups to large international organizations. You will find organizations focusing on one specific issue and those who cover a wide array of thematic issues such as prevention of gender based violence and work with perpetrators, Sexual and reproductive health and rights, activism to counter demand in prostitution, gender transformative work with boys or work to promote engaged fatherhood and gender equal parenting.

The MenEngage alliance functions as a platform for joint action and a learning network for all its members. We strive to make knowledge and methods available to many and to highlight the important contribution that work on men and boys can give to the feminist struggle for gender justice by the women's movements and other social justice movements. Within the European network we are facilitating the exchange of experiences between organizations from different parts of the region. We bring organizations together so that they can learn from and inspire each other and to facilitate collaboration and joint action. Work on men and boys is still a young field and many organizations are quite alone in their own contexts doing the work that they do. For that reason, coming together with like-minded organizations from across Europe is of great importance.



2) What measures, if any, have you seen implemented by MenEngage Members, involving men and boys have been successful in terms of addressing violence against women?

This work can and must obviously be done in many ways, and with many complementing strategies. Some of the things that we know are working are the following:

- Broad interventions to foster gender equal attitudes and behaviours among (for example) young men. We know that violence against women does not happen in a vacuum. If the surrounding society is condoning sexist attitudes or male control over women's bodies and sexuality - violence against women is more likely to occur. Therefore, interventions aimed at shifting these attitudes among specifically men and boys will have an impact on perpetration of violence.
- Linked to the point above, programs focusing on encouraging bystander interventions when one witnesses violence have proven quite effective. We know that the silence of others, and especially of peers, can create a sense of support for whatever violent behaviour is being displayed. Men are often reluctant to stand up against other men, because the risks involved are perceived as high, so to train and encourage constructive bystander interventions can be very helpful.
- To foster care is a potential remedy to violence. Many men are disconnected from care and trained to be numb in front of both their own feelings and the feelings and needs of others. When men are involved in day-to-day care work, of children or relatives, they are less likely to use violence.
- We know that it matters when men speak out against men's violence against women. To take a stand against violence against women and for gender justice, especially when it is uncomfortable and lacks rewards, is an important way to show allyship.

3) Sweden is often hailed worldwide as a model in terms of gender equality. What are some of Sweden's shortcomings in this sector and areas for improvement?

Yes, well, we are perhaps among the less gender unequal countries, but I would say there is room for improvement in almost every aspect of gender equality here as well.

Violence against women is still a major problem in Sweden and we have serious problem with bringing justice to survivors of violence. There are still very few perpetrators being convicted, for example in the case of rape and many women perceive the contact with the judicial system as a second violation.

I really think that the #metoo movement (which was very strong here) really showed that Sweden is far from a gender equal paradise. However, the way the movement affected the public debate and shaped political and private action would perhaps not have happened unless there had been a fairly strong consensus that gender equality is something that we strive for.

Another example is the gender pay gap. Not only does women earn less than men for the same kind of jobs, they also work involuntary part-time to a much greater extent. Sectors that are female dominated are more likely to have lower salaries and as a consequence of the above, women receive lower pensions than men and many elderly women live on the verge of poverty, even though they have worked their entire lives. Stereotypical ideas of femininity and masculinity still permeate the Swedish society and continuously shape our lives. So, there is still quite a lot of work to do.



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4) How can we encourage young men and boys to stand up against rape and challenge the current rape culture? How can we encourage men and boys to be allies without breaking the often much needed feeling of camaraderie between them?

I think that it is almost impossible to stand up against the norm in a group of peers without being uncomfortable and potentially at risk of breaking the feeling of camaraderie. It could be helpful to not do it alone, but to team up with someone who shares your values, and act together. Men's silence in front of what other men do or say is intimately linked to status and the hierarchy among men, therefore, men with high status have a greater responsibility to act.

5) MenEngage and SafeTeens published 10 action items to teach teenagers about consent. What advice would you give parents who want to start a conversation and encourage a better understanding of what consent means, with their teenagers?

There are several things you can do to raise empathetic and respectful boys in a gender unequal society. The key is to counter-weight the negative impact that stereotypical masculinity norms have on boys as they grow up, and give them the opportunity to develop helpful skills. These are some of the important things that come to mind:

- Help boys recognize and verbalize their feelings and needs - if they are in touch with their own feelings they will easier detect and understand others'. A great way to support the developments of these skills is that you as a parent (and especially a father) are in touch with your feelings and can talk about them.
- Foster and model respect for boundaries, one's own and others'. Maintain physical closeness with boys as they become teenagers. When they enter into puberty, many boys are deprived of gentle physical closeness with friends and family and they are left to channel all their need for intimacy into romantic or sexual relationships and this increases pressure on girls.
- Model and foster respect for women. Be attentive of degrading and objectifying talk about girls and women and help your son to see all humans as whole persons with similar needs and feelings.
- Be aware of how heterosexual intimacy and sex is depicted in popular culture and create the space to reflect on it with your teen. Is there consent? How can you tell? Talk to your teen about sex, intimacy and how bodies function. If you feel embarrassed, start training by talking to a friend or partner. Teens are often left quite alone with their curiosity and questions around sex and most adults are actually really bad at talking about it.



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- It's impossible to talk about young men and consent without addressing the violent and misogynistic content in most porn. Porn is a really terrible source of information on consent. Most teens, and especially boys, view pornography with some frequency. Make sure you know what today's mainstream porn looks like and engage in critical conversations with teens around what is actually displayed in porn. If you can support your son to abstain from mainstream porn and instead satisfy his curiosity on sex through other means, do so.

6) Can you tell us what is in the pipeline for the MenEngage European Network in 2021?

We are planning for a big membership meeting where we bring all our members together for exchange of experiences, capacity building and strategic discussions in early 2021. We will continue to support the creation of communities of interest around key topics that our members work with such as fatherhood and care; gender-transformative work with youth and violence prevention. From the fall of 2020 we will have a stronger secretariat for the European network and we look forward to having an increased ability to stay connected and be visible in the public debate.

Find out more:

MenEngage: www.menengage.org

MenEngage Europe: www.menengage.org/regions/europe/



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