

## 3.3. CROSS NATIONAL COMPARISON AND CONCLUSIONS

### Integration and comparison of the conclusions of the focus groups in Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Portugal, Scotland-UK and Sweden

#### Introduction

The objective of the qualitative study was to increase our understanding of gender differences in young people with regard to smoking. Whereas both the literature study and the quantitative study had enabled us to identify the range of factors that influence young people to smoke, they did not provide sufficiently consistent findings to identify many gender differences with regard to these factors. Therefore, a qualitative approach was used to explore these issues in greater depth, by way of gaining insight in the meaning and functions of smoking in the social lives of adolescent boys and girls.

The qualitative study was carried out in five countries, all of which used a common approach based on a collectively decided and developed method to conduct eight focus group discussions and analyse the data. The country-specific findings were reproduced in country reports, which formed the basis for a subsequent compilation, comparison and discussion of the findings across countries. As a result of this process, the following cross national conclusions emerged, based on 40 focus group discussions across 5 countries.

#### Conclusions

The qualitative study clearly revealed that smoking is part of the social worlds of boys and girls, and that these worlds – and therefore also the role of smoking – differ for both sexes. Although the boys and girls who participated in this study, when asked to discuss the role of smoking in their daily lives, did not talk about *all* of the factors that are mentioned in the literature or in the quantitative study, a number of these factors did emerge from the focus group discussions and were talked about in detail, giving us an in-depth insight in the different mechanisms and functions of smoking for boys and girls. Moreover, in addition to the gender differences that were the focus of the study, several relevant issues about adolescents and smoking were mentioned that were not related to gender. These similarities are also described briefly.

#### 1. Gender differences

When compared across the countries, the focus group discussions revealed six major gender specific differences with regard to the role of smoking in adolescence. In some cases these gender differences were similar in appearance in the different countries, but in most cases the way in which they emerged was different for some countries. Both the general aspects and the county specific elements will be addressed below.

##### *1.1. Instrumental use of smoking in coping with negative emotions.*

As appears from the qualitative study, boys and girls both use cigarettes to cope with negative emotions. However, the type of emotions they try to cope with through smoking is different for both sexes. For girls, negative emotions generally mean distress and boredom, whereas for boys they refer to stress and anger. Moreover, smoking to cope with negative emotions appears to be more typical for girls than for boys.

When looking at the country specific situation, anger appears to be the only negative emotion related to smoking in Austrian boys, and was one of the emotions, mentioned by Scottish boys. In contrast, Flemish boys rarely mentioned and Portuguese boys did not mention anger as a negative emotion related to smoking. Flemish boys mainly use smoking to deal with boredom, and Portuguese boys to deal with stress. In addition to boredom, Flemish girls use smoking to cope with stress, anxiety, and depression, while Portuguese girls reported smoking to cope with anxiety, distress and boredom. Stress and boredom were also factors found among Scottish girls and boys who smoked. In Sweden, the relationship between smoking and negative emotions was only stated by girls, who added that smoking gave them consolation. The main differences between countries with regard to the emotions which impact on smoking are summarised in the Table below, which also shows that the use of smoking to cope with negative emotions is more typical for girls than for boys.

*Table: Countries in which smoking was reported to be instrumental for specific negative emotions, by gender.*

Negative emotion	Boys	Girls
Feeling down, low, depressed		A, Fl, P, Sc, Sw
Anxiety	A	A, Fl, P, Sc, Sw
Stress	A, P,	A, Fl, Sc, Sw
Boredom	A, Fl, Sc	A, Fl, P, Sc, Sw
Aggression, anger	A, Fl, Sc	

*Legend:*

A: Austria      Fl: Flanders (Belgium) P: Portugal      Sc: Scotland (UK)      Sw: Sweden

### ***1.2. Sharing cigarettes to enhance friendship.***

In all of the participating countries, sharing of cigarettes was considered by the female participants of the focus groups as a way to reinforce female friendship groups and to increase the feeling of belonging to a group. The role of sharing cigarettes as a means to enhance male friendships was only mentioned in Austria. The differential role of sharing cigarettes for boys and girls is in line with the findings regarding the different homogeneity of adolescent friendships and the importance of peer approval for both sexes.

### ***1.3. Stigmatisation of smokers.***

In general, girls in the focus groups more often saw a relationship between smoking and stigmatisation for girls. However, also in this regard some country specific differences emerged. In Austria, both genders showed a positive attitude to non-smokers in addition to stigmatisation of female smokers. It was also found that Austrian girls were more concerned about spoiling their image through smoking than Austrian boys. Flemish girls felt more ashamed about smoking, but not stigmatised. In Portugal, girls who smoked did feel stigmatised but also embarrassed, whereas Swedish girls felt stigmatised and looked down upon by boys and others as well as guilty and ashamed. In contrast, a relationship between smoking and stigmatisation was not reported by the Scottish youngsters.

### ***1.4. Impact of smoking on physical condition.***

An important factor related to smoking among boys found in most countries was the perceived impact of smoking on practising sports, fitness and physical condition. Sports and physical activity remain important in smoking boys' lives, and thus the negative impact of smoking on the physical condition is considered as a strong disadvantage, about which boys are concerned. This way, sports and the need to maintain a good physical condition serves as a protective factor for boys in relation to smoking. In Sweden this relationship was also found for girls who also practised sports.

### ***1.5. Acceptance of policies and rules.***

In general, girls seem to be more likely than boys to accept smoking policies at school and at home. However, this difference was not equally strong in all countries. The strongest confirmation of this gender difference was found in Portugal and in Flanders. In the latter, Flemish girls actually regarded rules and policies with regard to smoking as a good way to keep their smoking prevalence down. In contrast, gender specific differences with regard to acceptance of rules were less obvious in Sweden, where adolescents reported to hide their smoking from their parents, and in Scotland, where no gender specific differences were found regarding attitudes towards smoking policies at school, and further research was recommended regarding smoking rules and policies in the home environment. In a similar vein, the Austrian researchers could not confirm a gender difference in acceptance of rules and policies and recommended further research.

### ***1.6. Smoking and other substances.***

As appears from the focus groups, smoking is often related to the use of other substances such as alcohol, cannabis or snuff tobacco. Again, there is a gender difference regarding this relationship, yet the actual nature of this difference varies across countries. In Austria, Flanders and Sweden smoking was linked to the use of alcohol in both sexes. In Portugal, a relationship of smoking and alcohol consumption was found mostly for boys, whereas for girls smoking was more related to the use of cannabis or hash. In the Scottish groups, a relationship was found between smoking and cannabis use among boys, and between smoking and alcohol use for both genders. However, the latter was particularly important for girls who had a high consumption of alcohol. Finally, Swedish youngsters reported a clear relationship between smoking and the use of snuff tobacco among boys.

## **2. Gender similarities**

In addition to the gender differences reported above, the focus group discussions also revealed a number of similarities for girls and boys with regard to the role of smoking.

### ***2.1. Instrumental role of smoking in relations with the opposite sex.***

Both boys and girls use smoking as a means to facilitate contacts with members of the opposite sex. Whereas offering cigarettes or accepting them when offered is considered as a way to initiate contact and conversation with the opposite sex, adopting one's partner's smoking behaviour was mentioned as a strategy to maintain the relationship by boys and girls alike.

### ***2.2. Parents, siblings and friends as role models.***

Parents, siblings and friends appear to be important role models with regard to smoking for adolescent boys and girls, in that their smoking related behaviour and attitudes serve as examples. Young people also mention the ambiguous and ambivalent messages, which adults sometimes give with regard to smoking.

### ***2.3. The process of smoking***

As reported by the participants in the focus groups, the process of becoming a smoker and the different stages one goes through from starting to smoke to becoming a regular smoker is fairly similar for both sexes. Boys and girls also mentioned that they regretted having started smoking. Quitting was also reported as an important issue, and relapse was described as a failure, often attributed to a lack of support from parents, siblings or friends. The Austrian adolescents also mentioned peer pressure as a reason for failing to quit smoking. With regard to intentions to quit, the adolescents in the groups appeared to have no clear plans and were low in perceived self-efficacy.

### ***2.4. Relationship between smoking and alcohol.***

As reported above, a relationship between smoking and the use of alcohol among young people was found in all five the participating countries. Having a drink and a cigarette at the same time appears to be a "natural" thing to do.

### ***2.5. Lack of enforcement of school policies.***

The adolescents in the different countries mentioned that they did not perceive much enforcement of the smoking policies in schools. Many teachers appeared to be tolerant and permissive with regard to smoking and no measures were taken if pupils were caught smoking.

### ***2.6. Availability of cigarettes.***

Regardless of whether or not there was legislation with regard to selling tobacco to minors, participants in the focus groups generally found it easy to obtain cigarettes and they always found ways to buy them. As with school policies, there was an apparent lack of enforcement of such laws.

### ***2.7. Perception and understanding of the smoking prevalence.***

In the different countries the young people had a clear perception and understanding of the smoking prevalence by gender among adolescents in their country.

## **Evaluation of the method**

In this study, a qualitative research approach was used in five different countries to explore gender differences in young people with regard to smoking. While the cross-national dimension of this qualitative study was quite innovative and produced interesting findings as such, it also created special challenges. Firstly, since the focus group method is less standardized than the more often used quantitative methods, there was a need to standardize the procedures of collecting and interpreting the data. Secondly, an additional problem arose from the fact that the data set essentially consisted of verbal data obtained from countries where different languages are spoken. To overcome this problem, a research process was set up in which the researchers and co-ordinators of the five countries met three times in the course of the project to reflect on and decide collectively on further steps and procedures. In order to have a common ground and to develop a common understanding of the data, a protocol and topic guide had to be developed for the focus groups, as well as a collective framework of concepts for the analysis and interpretation of the data. These protocols proved to be helpful and necessary tools for the process, and the efforts that were made to develop this method were a worthwhile investment.

### **1. Strengths**

The five research teams which participated in this study were unanimous to conclude that the study produced a broad, rich and elaborated view on the subject of adolescent smoking in general and of gender differences in the role of smoking among adolescents in particular. The cross-national dimension of the study, which was obtained by conducting focus groups discussions and analysing data in a parallel way in five countries, was considered to have added much value to the study, both in terms of the process and in terms of the results. By looking at the findings deriving from this study both within and across studies, the insight obtained about the role of smoking among young boys and girls becomes much more meaningful. The number of five countries seemed to be adequate, to keep the interactive parts of the research manageable and at the same time generating enough added value from the international perspective.

With respect to the management of the project, the research process used, involving the researchers and co-ordinators of each country and deciding collectively on further steps and procedures, as well as the development of the protocol, topic guide and a collective framework for the analysis and interpretation of the data, was evaluated positively. The same applies to the sampling criteria for the focus groups. Using single sex groups of acquainted smoking adolescents that were homogeneous with respect to SES not only contributed to a fluent flow of discussion in the groups but also made the analysis and interpretation of the data easier.

Finally, the combination of several methods within one research project (literature study, quantitative and qualitative study), allowing to build on to findings and to take results of other parts of the project into consideration for subsequent steps, was experienced as a very recommendable procedure.

## 2. Weaknesses

Apart from the inherent shortcomings of the methods employed for the purpose of this study, which were pointed out in the method section of the previous chapters yet also addressed by the very fact of combining various methods in one project, a major weakness of the present project was its limited time frame. More particularly, the short time in which the study was carried out set some limitations on different aspects of the qualitative method. Most country partners felt that the number of focus groups per country was rather small to reach a level of data saturation. An increase of this number to 12 or 16 rather than 8 focus groups would have made the findings, interpretations and conclusions per country more convincing. Furthermore, the phases of reflecting on the data, interpreting the different findings and drawing conclusions was rather short to do full justice to the chosen method of qualitative research. Thus, an additional phase of data collection providing for extra focus groups aiming specifically at strengthening and refining the findings, and a final collective reflection on the results, would have increased the confidence that the project partners had in the conclusions that they could draw from their data.

Another issue related to the time period in which the study took place was the fact that in most countries schools were very close to final examinations at the time the focus groups had to be organized. This made the process of recruiting more difficult than it should have been. It also may have had an impact on the content of the focus group discussions, since exams are a period of extra stress. This may have induced a stronger emphasis on the stress managing function of smoking than it would have in other periods of the school year.

Finally, the focus group method may be less appropriate to study more confidential aspects of adolescent smoking behaviour, such as its perceived weight control function.