



Concept – English Translation

HEROES®

Fighting 'suppression in the name of honour'.

For equality.

Strohthalm e.V.

ABSTRACT

HEROES® — fighting suppression in the name of honour. For equality.

HEROES® was founded as a project of Strohthalm e.V., a Berlin-based organization that provides sexual violence prevention training to educational professionals and parents. HEROES® has been working with boys and young men since 2007, broaching the issue of gender inequality and organising role play-based peer-to-peer workshops for schools and youth groups. The project caters to adolescents who are looking for a safe space to engage with topics such as gender roles, sexuality, human rights and identity and who want to stand up for social equality. These boys and young men attend our project voluntarily during their leisure time every week. They frequently experience restrictions on their self-determination and personal development due to traditional patriarchal ideals as well as structural discrimination against families with migrational backgrounds. HEROES® offers them a space to engage with their own identities and develop a set of ideals that reflects their own values. Our multidisciplinary group leaders support and guide them on this journey.

After a one-year training phase, certified HEROES® mentors—known themselves as “Heroes”—organise workshops for schools and youth groups. These workshops serve as icebreakers to address the gender-related expectations that concepts of honour place on adolescents of all genders. They also serve to open up further discussion between adolescents and their teachers. The project aims to raise teachers' and parents' awareness of these issues.

HEROES®' overarching goal is to create a safe space for adolescents in which they receive professional support to develop their unique identity and their own set of values in keeping with human rights. This caters especially to those who were socialised in environments where traditional concepts of honour play a major role. During the workshops, participants learn to reflect and refuse aspects of tradition that legitimise violence and restrict or exclude them or others, without fearing loss of their heritage or feeling torn between contradicting expectations. Engaging with different sets of ideals and power structures promotes various competences that are crucial for the adolescents' active participation in a democratic system. These competences also help to strengthen a society where everyone, regardless of gender, socio-cultural background, religion or sexuality, is equal.

APPROACH AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

HEROES® believes in a society where everyone, regardless of gender, sexuality or socio-cultural background, has the same rights and chances. HEROES® does not advocate for or against certain

cultures or religions, but against the restrictions patriarchal structures place on people's self-determination. HEROES[®] opposes these forms of suppression, which manifest in all parts of society, with a vision of a multifaceted and open-minded society in which we can live together as equals. With this vision we commit to questioning our own values and reflecting on our way of life. We do this hand in hand with adolescents as well as their parents and educational consultants.

Human Rights

This approach is built on the pertinent internationally recognized agreements related to human rights, especially those that explicitly address gender-specific discrimination. They serve as guidelines for the aim and approach of this project but also as an instrument for the analysis of societal structures in our work with the participants.

Scientific Framework

The HEROES[®] concept is based on a multitude of humanistic and socio-scientific approaches taken from sociology, psychology and political science as well as applied sciences, social work and pedagogy, among others. Multidisciplinary discourse particularly concerning gender and cultural studies continuously integrates into HEROES[®] applied theatre- and socio-pedagogical work.

Intersectionality

The intersectional perspective of this anti-sexist and anti-racist project manifests on an individual level in the adolescents' (socio-)pedagogical care. The better part of the target audience, as well as people involved in the project, are directly affected by multiple forms of discrimination, especially concerning gender and migration. The project creates visibility for the intersectionality of discrimination and seeks to bridge the divide between these experiences of inequality.

GOALS

Equality

HEROES[®] advocates for an equal society and against discrimination of any kind. The project focuses on gender equality especially concerning traditional concepts of honour, which restrict adolescents and adults of all genders in their self-determined development and lifestyles.

Participation

In line with our empowerment approach, HEROES[®] supports the project and workshop participants in articulating their needs and wishes and participating actively in their social environment, as well as standing up for the societal changes they desire. The project empowers adolescents to speak for themselves and to get involved in fighting suppression in the name of honour for gender equality. Thus, participants are also empowered to fend off racist attributions of "migrant masculinity". Since they actively take part in shaping societal discussions, the project also has an integrating function.

By initiating societal development and mediating between different groups, the participants' actions influence society as a whole via (post-)migrant communities.

Prevention

The HEROES® program is of a preventative nature. It does not specifically serve adolescent victims of suppression and violence or potential offenders. Reflecting on gender norms that legitimate violence should rather sensitise adolescents to individual and structural aspects of suppression and violence in the name of honour. The program is meant to motivate participants to stand up for gender equality and non-discrimination in their everyday lives and on a macro level.

APPROACH TO WORK — METHODS

Empowerment

HEROES® promotes the notion of empowerment by facilitating self-actualization in adolescents who experience multiple forms of discrimination. To achieve this, the project aims to help them discover and use their strengths and competencies. The empowerment approach is based on a shift in perspective away from attribution and deficits and towards resource management, individual character building and societal strengthening. The project supports the participants in changing self-proclaimed drawbacks and burdens in their lives. HEROES® operates within the three classic levels of empowerment: individual, group and social movement.

Gender-Reflected Work with Boys and Young Men

The goal of the work with boys and young men is to offer them support in their development to emotionally well-balanced, reflected individuals who take social responsibility."

HEROES® offers boys and young men a voluntary, solidly united space to exchange and reflect on their experiences and generate outcome-oriented perspectives. Patriarchal structures based on fixed gender roles afflict adolescents of all genders in various ways. Boys may experience stress when they feel pressured to represent rigid ideas of masculinity or feel that their family constricts them—for example, in their choice of a partner. Being assigned to monitor and control the activities of a female relative may lead to further psychosocial strains. Against the background of gender-specific socialisation, the gender-reflected work with boys and young men is oriented towards their specific needs and priorities, allowing them to learn to identify with positive male role models. In some cases, the gender-homogenous safe space could be complemented by incorporating female group managers for a cross-functional approach.

Group Work

All elements of the project operate using methods of social group work and within a circular format. The process starts with the continuous reflection on and discussion of relevant topics within the

multidisciplinary team. The adolescents are then, in the course of their training, encouraged to explore the group's collective and individual responses and attitudes to the topics discussed. This enables them to look into those approaches and use the subjects covered in role play-based peer-to-peer workshops in schools and youth groups as part of their further training to become certified "Heroes." Serving as mentors opens up yet another safe space to engage with the project's main topics of discussion. Thus, those three spaces of reflection and discussion benefit from each other's outcomes.

Peer-to-peer education

Peer-to-peer education was first approached in the United States in the 1970s. Today, it is an established socio-pedagogical concept which assumes that adolescents have an easier time opening up to people of the same age who have a similar living environment. This is especially true when discussing intimate topics like sexuality, family structures, relationships and gender roles. HEROES® does not just make sure the people involved in peer-to-peer education are within a similar age range; more important is that they share a background of post-migration, including the associated identity-forming processes and conflicting expectations from different environments. From this perspective, the moderated trainings and work with parents fits into a peer-to-peer context, as well. All of our trainers, or so-called group leaders, grew up in post-migrant communities and know the associated challenges firsthand.

Theatre Pedagogy

The trainings and workshops use methods from theatre pedagogy with the goal of enabling adolescents to access and express their own thoughts and feelings. The workshops take place in the form of role play-based discussions, during which a theatre approach comes in handy as it presents situations from the adolescents' environment without them having to reveal real-life events. The participants can also get involved in the role plays, giving them access to experiences that may differ from their personal ones. They also actively work on solutions for problematic situations, creating alternate progressions and outcomes. Moreover, the theatre training promotes all-around useful competencies such as building a confident demeanour in front of an audience.

IMPLEMENTATION

Trainings

Group training sessions with coaching elements for future Heroes is the core of the projects (socio-)pedagogical work. They constitute the basis for the workshops offered to pupils, and coaching sessions provide an opportunity to develop, prepare and follow up on group training work. Participants gain in-depth knowledge, awareness of their own perceptions and empathy, and the opportunity to exchange personal experiences and strengthen their position. The main focus is the problematisation of male gender roles in the context of the suppression of girls and women as well

as the exploration of the restrictions that concepts of honour can create for young men. Structural and everyday forms of patriarchal suppression are the main concern here, and less so instances of violence or murder in the name of honour. The boys and young men learn to use their own experiences with discrimination to recognise various instances of inequality and to reflect on inequality-legitimising references to gender norms.

The project- and workshop-relevant term 'honour' and its different semantic levels are analysed and critically discussed. Semantic meanings of honour that refer to women's sexuality are relevant, but so are those referring to unconditional respect and obedience towards older male family members as well as male gender norms that legitimise violence between boys and young men. Analysing the abstract concepts of honour and its accompanying ways of life allows adolescents to differentiate between positive connotations of honour (dignity, prestige for altruistic deeds) and those that restrict people's rights of self-determination.

Coaching for those boys who are not yet certified as Heroes takes place at least once a week; for certified Heroes, who hold workshops, every two weeks. The permanent group leaders' work includes the topical preparation and management of group meetings, one-on-one conversations with the boys if needed, and providing support in individual reflection.

A significant quality of HEROES® is that we offer adolescents a supportive and safe space for self-development even at stages when they are testing boundaries. This is in opposition to possibly less understanding environments like school or the home. Heroes' experience allows them to create a comfortable atmosphere in school workshops where these conversations can take place. In addition to the weekly meet-ups, we organise thematic activities like cinema or theatre shows, panel discussions and other leisure activities. These shared experiences are essential to professional relationship building; establishing mutual trust is a prerequisite for successfully broaching controversial issues. Relationships built on mutual trust allow exchanges to take place on a level playing field and construct an atmosphere free of fear and pressure during all discussions throughout the project.

Workshops for Adolescents

The workshops are built around the concept of peer education. Adolescents learn best from people of similar age and with similar cultural and social background, especially if the topics are intimate and personal. The Heroes' and project leaders' personal closeness to the project topics makes room for discourse beyond racial attributions. The workshops create opportunities for discussion via role plays. They cater to participants of all genders with or without migrational family backgrounds and are instructed by two adolescent Heroes with the support of one group manager. The Heroes develop the role plays themselves, making sure to depict the effects of concepts of honour in the scenes. The workshops aim to 'break the ice', but are also overseen by educational consultants to ensure their long-term effectiveness. The workshops run for around three hours including breaks. Teachers are usually present as silent observers during this time.

Parent Groups

Parents are often struggling to find safe spaces to discuss and get support in raising children who live within various cultural norms. Conveying to children the cultural heritage of their family's home country while also teaching them essential competencies for a successful life in German society can be challenging.

Workshops and consultations for parents and legal guardians incorporate the project's main focus of gender equality while taking into account the different life situations of mothers and fathers, as well as their sons and daughters. Some topics covered during parent events include the parental relationship as an example for and projection on the parent-child-relationship, gender roles in the context of bringing up children, communication within the family, children's identity development in the context of belonging to and exclusion from cultures, and self-determination as an individual and part of a collective. The work with parents is structured in smaller steps than the workshops for adolescents are. We offer parents a space where they can express fears, hardships and needs they might have regarding the upbringing and support of their children. This takes place in a safe space without worry or shame about disclosing family conflicts, which often keeps parents from seeking advice. We appreciate where the participants are coming from, recognise that they might see things differently and adapt our approach accordingly.

The project relies greatly on the parents' ability to take part in their children's lives and to appropriately incorporate comprehensive social resources. This happens in the workshops setting as well as while engaging with the topics during exchanges with other parents and the group managers.

Further Education and Sensitisation for external employees

There are two goals to the workshops that we offer to educational consultants, socio-pedagogical employees and volunteers. The first goal is to support them in their roles as permanent contact persons to the adolescents and to encourage their dedication to the adolescents' equality. The second goal is to expand the space where adolescents discuss the topic of suppression in the name of honour in order to increase the effectiveness of the school and youth group workshops and ensure their long-term effects. That is why at first external staff and employees have access to theoretical topical input, on the basis of which they view the praxis afterwards. Case studies from the educational staff members' vocational everyday life serve as examples on which they develop strategies and solutions for working with pupils.

This sensitises our employees to their pupils' environment and supports them in the enforcement of necessary boundaries regarding gender norms that violate human rights, and in preventing violent behaviour by the adolescents. The employees are also sensitised to their own prejudices, stereotypical assumptions and cultural expectations, as well as to how much their students are personally affected by discrimination and how much the school system reflects societal power dynamics. The workshop serves to create a space for open discussion between teachers, parents

and pupils of different backgrounds. Thus, schools become a place of encounter between families and educational staff where adolescents are supported in their development.

TEAM

Multidisciplinarity and Diversity

HEROES® teams are staffed in a multidisciplinary and diverse way in order to be able to access a broad spectrum of approaches and perspectives for the implementation of our project. This regards individual resources as well as the professional transfer between theory and praxis. Our team currently comprises staff from political sciences, psychology, social pedagogy and educational science. The staff's additional qualifications (peer education, diversity training, kinesiatrics and cross-functional collaboration, among others) complement their professional approaches. Knowing (post-)migrant realities firsthand in the context of traditional concepts of honour and reflecting them, as well as distancing oneself from traditional forms of oppression, are requirements for the position of group manager. Diverse employees' cooperation and willingness to share personal experiences is important in order to generate multi-perspective insights that participants can gain from the range of project topics.

Flat Hierarchy

Self-reflection, which is a core value of any professional social work practice, is of special significance to our project. The topics covered in the workshops affect not only the participants' but also the organisers' gender role-related behaviour and social status. That is why we need a level of trust and manner of communication that allows for everyone to express their personality equally. A perspective critical of power is essential for working with intersectional approaches. For these reasons we emphasise flat hierarchical structures within our teams. Thus, the main difference between leaders and group managers lies in their legal obligations and scope of duties.

HEROES® Network

Since 2011, we have spread the HEROES® approach from Berlin to other federal states in Germany and Austria. Our network currently comprises eleven locations. Continuous exchanges allow all locations to develop varied and multidisciplinary expertise. Our common quality standards and steady advancement of the project ensures the sustainability of our approach.

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