

Article

The impact of gender-based violence on sons and daughters: the role of schools according to the pupils

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In the face of the ongoing problem of gender-based violence and the impact it has on children, the research project **WeAreHere!**, on which this article is based, recognises and encourages the role that children and adolescents can play in explaining problems occurring in their family environment, and in seeking support for themselves and their families. The aim of the project is to contribute to the early detection of this violence from a school setting and establish a model for action involving the pupils' voice. To this end, in the framework of the research, six expert groups were created, made up of children and adolescents aged 10 to 16 from six towns in Catalonia. The main instrument developed was a questionnaire completed by 3,650 children taking the last three years of primary education and all four years of compulsory secondary education, from a total of 106 schools in Catalonia. The results obtained describe their understanding of gender-based violence and the best ways, in their view, to get information and help. The results identify a series of obstacles when a situation of gender-based violence at home is reported at school and point towards how children could be helped and so come to form part of the solution to the problem. The children acknowledge the role of schools as an information source, but set priorities between who can help them and how. The research is intended to clarify the mechanisms in order to render this help and guidance effective.

Key points

1 Ninety-three percent of children have heard of gender-based violence, mainly at school, through the media, and on the internet. They clearly identify sexual and physical violence, but have doubts regarding forms of psychological, economic and vicarious violence. Nonetheless, girls show a greater degree of agreement in the identification of violence in all its forms and spheres.

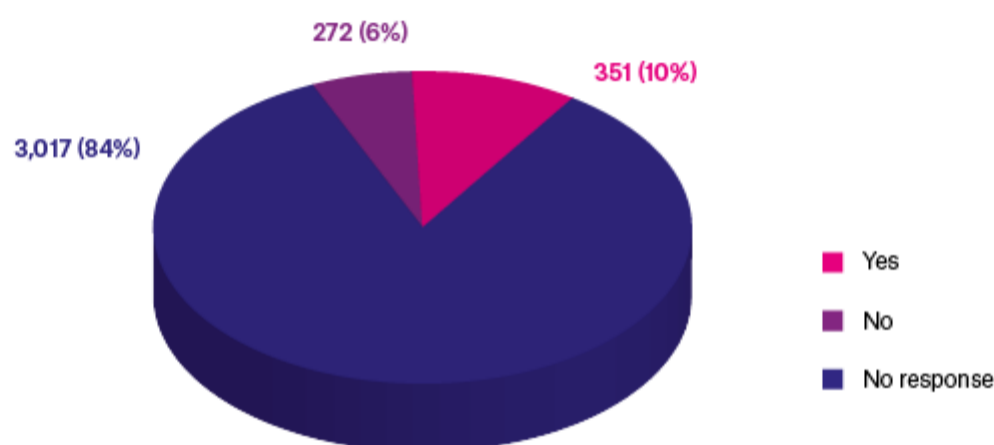
2 Most of the schoolchildren surveyed show willingness to get actively involved and stopping violence by defending the mother (85%) and asking for help (84%), although 59% state that they do not know where to go. Emotional blunting strategies are less common, and appear more frequently among those who have experienced violence at home.

3 Children prefer to obtain information about gender-based violence from an expert on the subject at school (72%) or a teacher (62%). However, they would report a situation of violence to the police, members of their family or an emergency telephone service rather than to their teachers.

4 They would also prefer to ask for help by mobile (80%) or face to face (74%), and less so through social media or by email, especially at primary school level. They also say that the person that helps them should be experienced and capable of solving the problem, and should listen to them and believe them.

Victims of gender-based violence at home

Schoolchildren who report having witnessed a situation of gender-based violence at home (scope of the survey; number and %)



Note: most of those who have witnessed gender-based violence report that the person who suffered it was their mother, and about 40% report that the violence was also directed against them.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the "WeAreHere!" questionnaire.

The Social Observatory of the "la Caixa" Foundation.

Gender-based violence: an unresolved issue

Gender-based violence is an ongoing and far-reaching social problem in Spain, where it has a huge impact on children: from 2013 to the beginning of 2022, 473 women were killed, 340 children were orphaned and 46 were killed. Of all the children who took part in the survey conducted for the research (3,650 children ranging from fourth year of primary school to fourth year of secondary school in Catalonia), 10% report having experienced a situation of gender-based violence at home, and of these, 40% suffered it directly. It should also be noted that 7% did not answer this question.

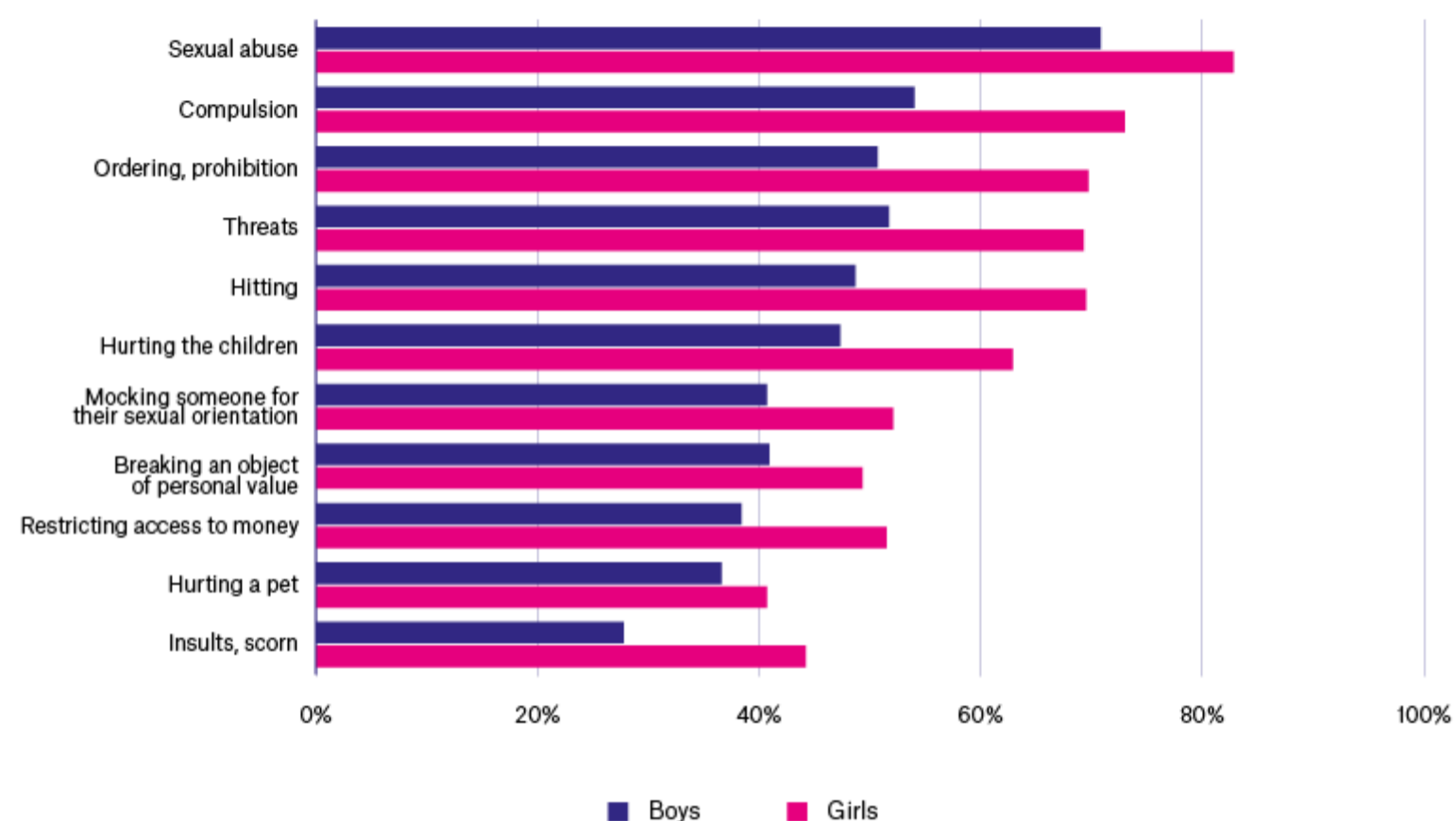
Spanish legislation (Organic Law 8/2021, of 4 June, on the Integral Protection of Children and Adolescents from Violence) recognises gender-based violence as a form of violence against children, who suffer its consequences directly or indirectly and over a time span of many years (Montserrat and Casas, 2019). The participation and implication of children is crucial for the development of effective tools for detection that enable them to minimise or overcome the obstacles and difficulties they encounter when talking about situations of gender-based violence at home. Schools, as safe places with familiar, trustworthy adults, can play a determining role in this regard (Chanmugam and Teasley, 2014).

The research on which this article is based was carried out with the assistance of six expert groups formed by children (a total of 45) who participated in the design of the questionnaire (Montserrat, Garcia-Molsosa, Planas-Lladó and Soler-Masó, 2022). The fact of considering their participation as experts is a key feature of the research. This questionnaire was then administered to a representative sample of Catalan schoolchildren engaged in the last three years of primary education and all four years of compulsory secondary education, comprising 45% boys, 51% girls and 4% who preferred not to answer the question about gender. The main results of the 3,650 questionnaires received are presented below.

I. Concept and information sources on gender-based violence

In general, boys and girls alike identified a wide range of situations of gender-based violence, especially those of a sexual and physical nature, but also “threats”, “compulsion”, “prohibition” or violence against sons and daughters. However, doubts were expressed about some situations of psychological, economic, vicarious or homophobic violence, especially by boys.

Figure 1. **Situations schoolchildren consider as gender-based violence**
Degree of agreement about considering the following situations as violent, by gender (%)



Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the "WeAreHere!" questionnaire.

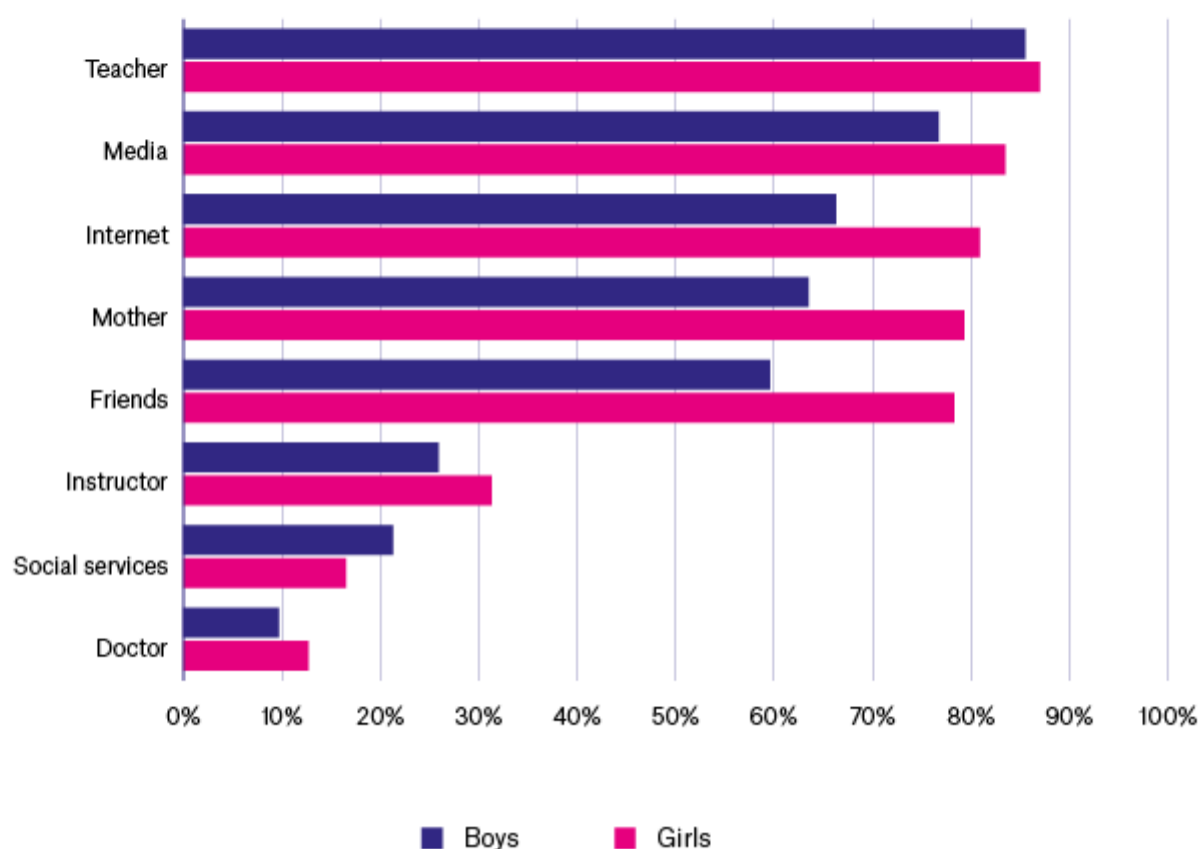
The Social Observatory of the "la Caixa" Foundation.

Ninety-three percent of the respondents had heard of gender-based violence on some occasion, mainly at school. They had also got information through the media, on the internet or in other informal contexts such as family (mainly the mother) and friends. However, few had heard about gender-based violence through an activity instructor, social services professionals or the doctor.

Girls showed a greater degree of agreement in the identification of gender-based violence in all its forms and spheres, and were more informed than boys, mainly through informal channels (the internet, their mother and friends). This may point to girls being more active than boys when it comes to seeking information and talking about the problem, and empathising more on this issue.

Figure 2. **Information sources on gender-based violence**

Schoolchildren who report having sought information about gender-based violence via formal and informal channels, by gender (%)



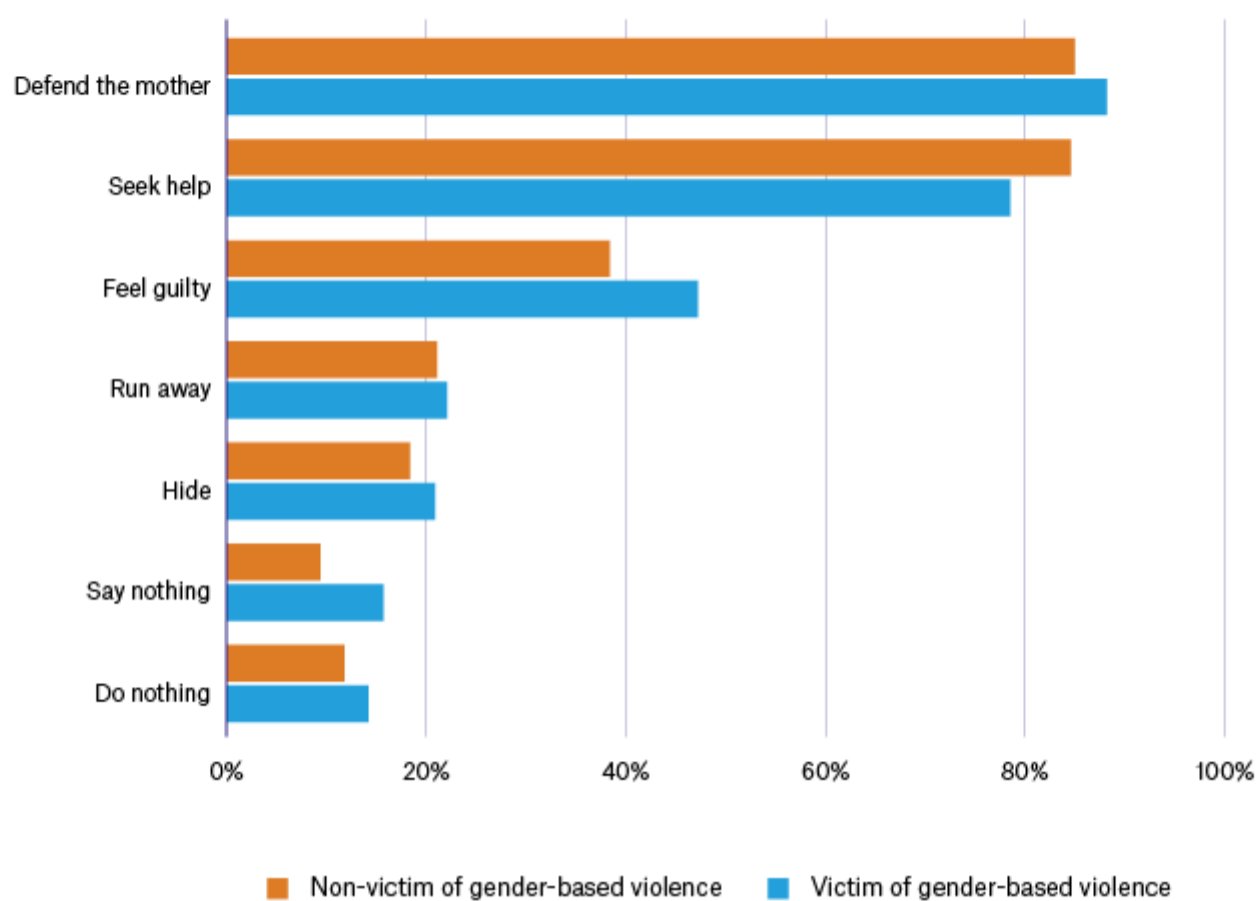
Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the "WeAreHere!" questionnaire.

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2. Children would like to seek help, but don't know where to go

The questionnaire respondents indicated their willingness to stop the violence and solve the problem by defending their mother (85%) and asking for help (84%); few said that they would do or say nothing, hide or run away. However, in the case of children who have experienced gender-based violence at home, a notably larger percentage would adopt a more passive attitude towards solving the problem. These respondents state more than the rest that they would feel guilty, thus showing a close emotional involvement in the conflict.

Figure 3. Children's response to a situation of gender-based violence at home
 Schoolchildren who state that they would often or always react more actively or passively, depending on whether they have been victims of gender-based violence at home (%)

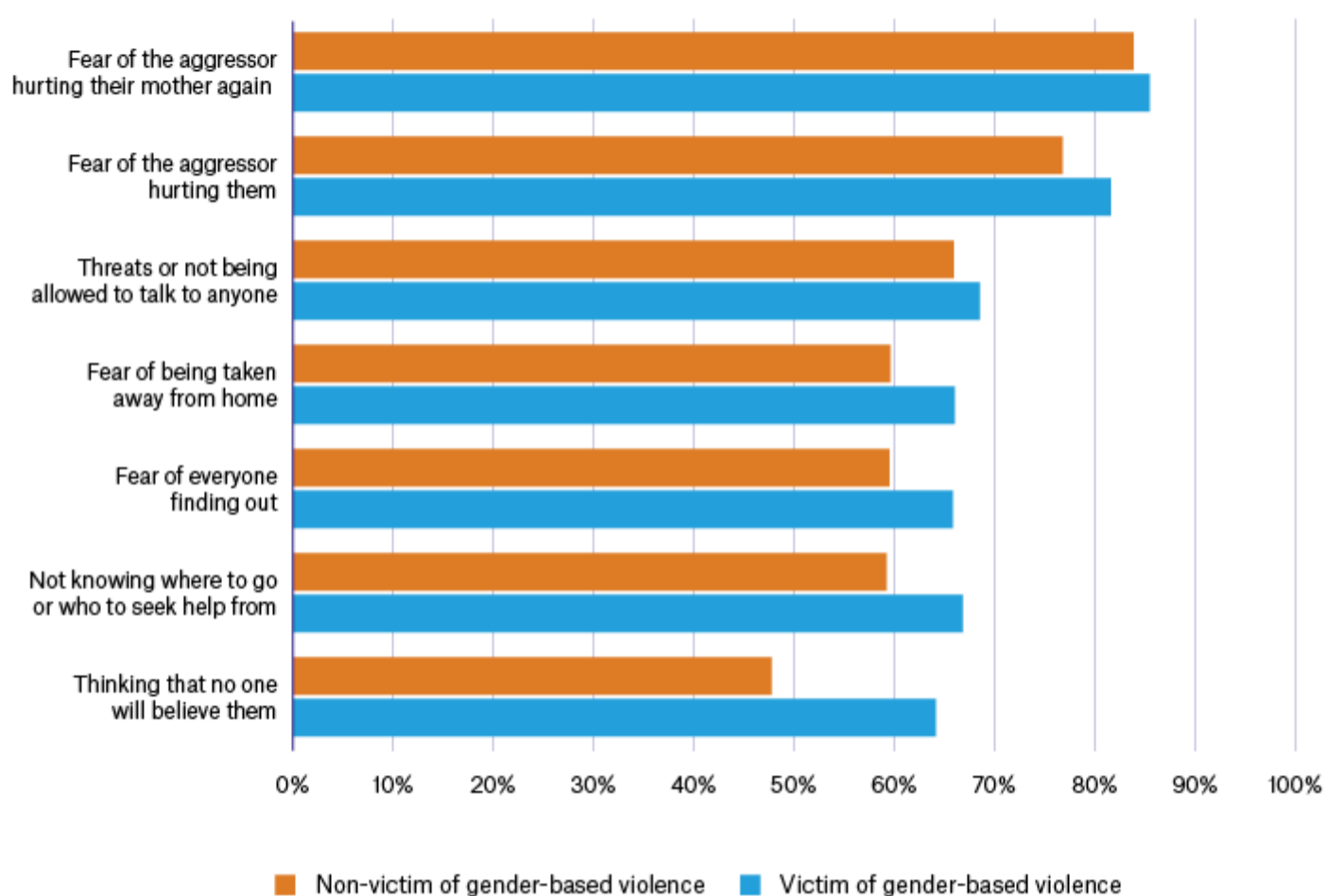


Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the "WeAreHere!" questionnaire.

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Despite their willingness to act in the face of a situation of gender-based violence at home, 59% state that do not know where to go or who to seek help from in a situation of this type, and the percentage rose to 67% among those who had experienced violence at home. According to the respondents, fear of the consequences for them and other members of the family was the main obstacle to reporting this type of situation, both for those who had been victims of gender-based violence and for those who had not.

Figure 4. Fear of the consequences for children and their families is the main obstacle to asking for help
Schoolchildren who consider that these situations can be obstacles to asking for help, depending on whether they have been victims of gender-based violence at home (%)



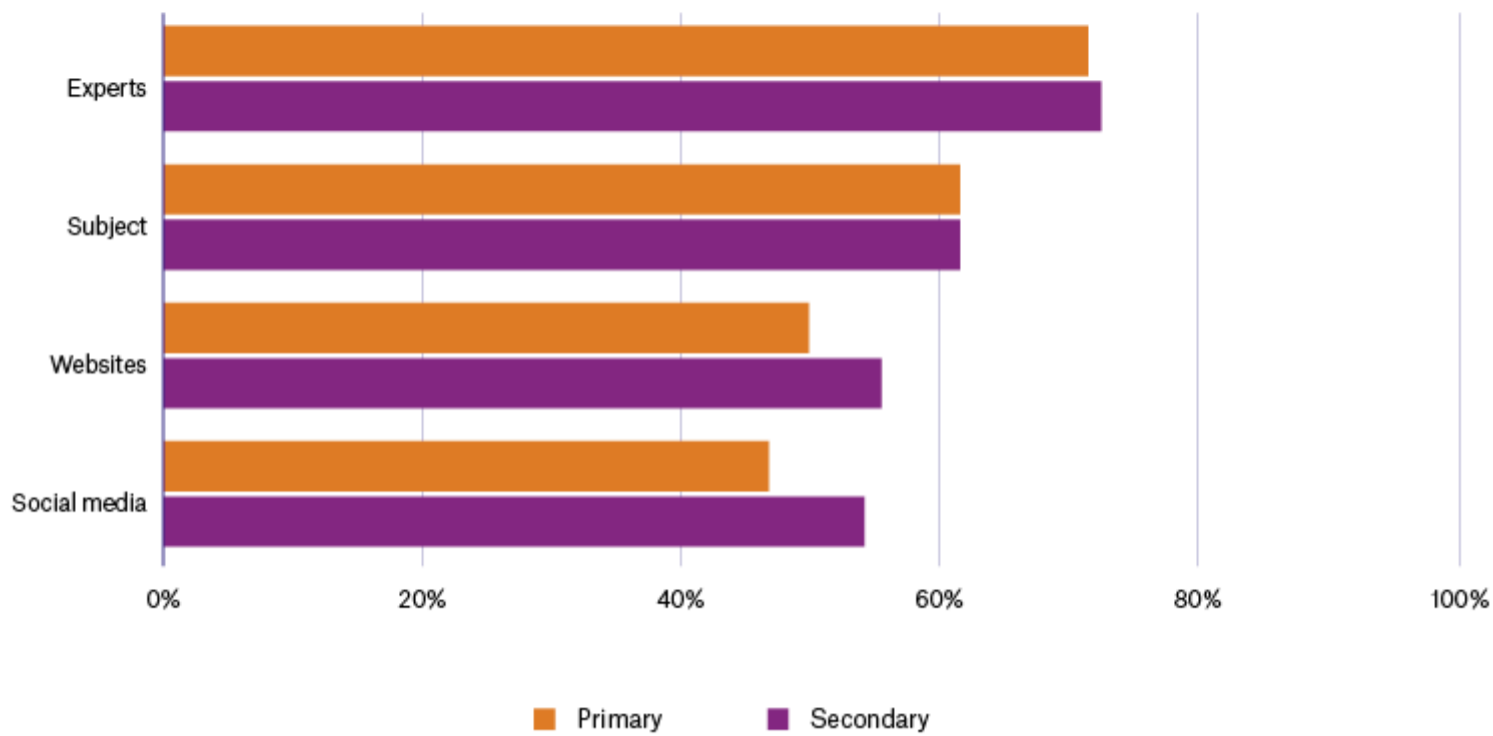
Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the "WeAreHere!" questionnaire.

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3. Schools are the preferred information source, but do not inspire trust, in situations of gender-based violence at home

The children identified schools as a source of information, but not as a priority place for reporting situations of violence at home and seeking help. The respondents would like to receive information through talks by experts or through a school subject, with a broad consensus. Primary schoolchildren showed a lower tendency to receive information through digital channels.

Figure 5. Children prefer to be informed about gender-based violence by experts
 Children who would like to receive information about gender-based violence through school or digital channels, by educational stage (%)

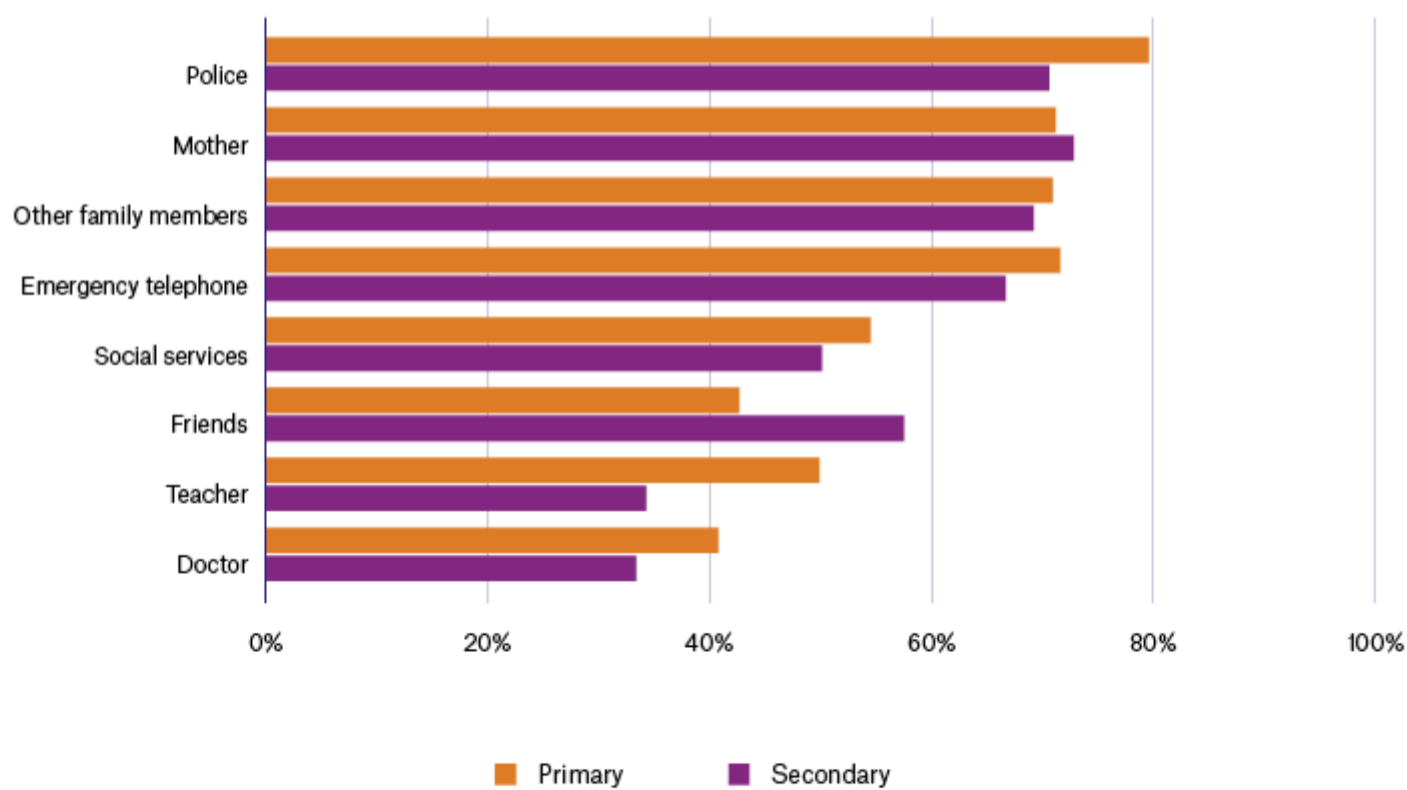


Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the "WeAreHere!" questionnaire.

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However, when reporting a situation of violence at home, they would prefer to go to the police, family and friends or social services, rather than tell their teachers. However, there are notable differences in the responses depending on the educational stage: in comparison, primary schoolchildren would be more inclined to go to the police and to use the emergency telephone, and would trust more in school staff and other formal contexts. On the other hand, secondary school pupils would seek help, in a notably higher percentage, within their circle of friends and family.

Figure 6. Depending on the educational stage, children resort to different people or services when reporting a situation of violence at home
 Schoolchildren who say they would report a situation of gender-based violence to different people or services, by educational stage (%)



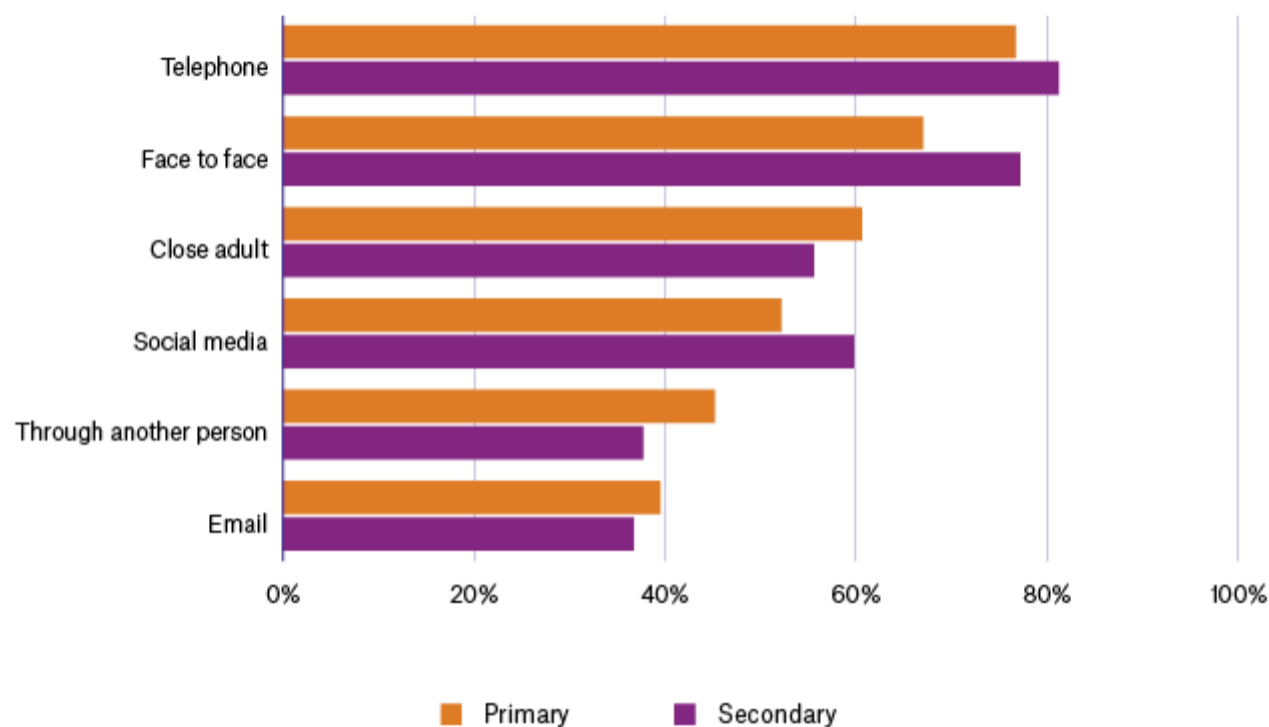
Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the "WeAreHere!" questionnaire.

The Social Observatory of the "la Caixa" Foundation.

4. When help is sought, person-to-person contact is preferred to social media or email

For the survey respondents, personal, direct and immediate contact is important when asking for help. Thus, most of them would prefer to seek help over the telephone (80%) or face to face (74%), rather than via social media or email. Among primary schoolchildren, preference for social media is notably more residual, and greater trust is placed in seeking direct support from a close adult or asking for help through them.

Figure 7. **Children prefer to ask for help by mobile or face to face**
Children who prefer to seek help via the channels shown in the chart, by educational stage (%)



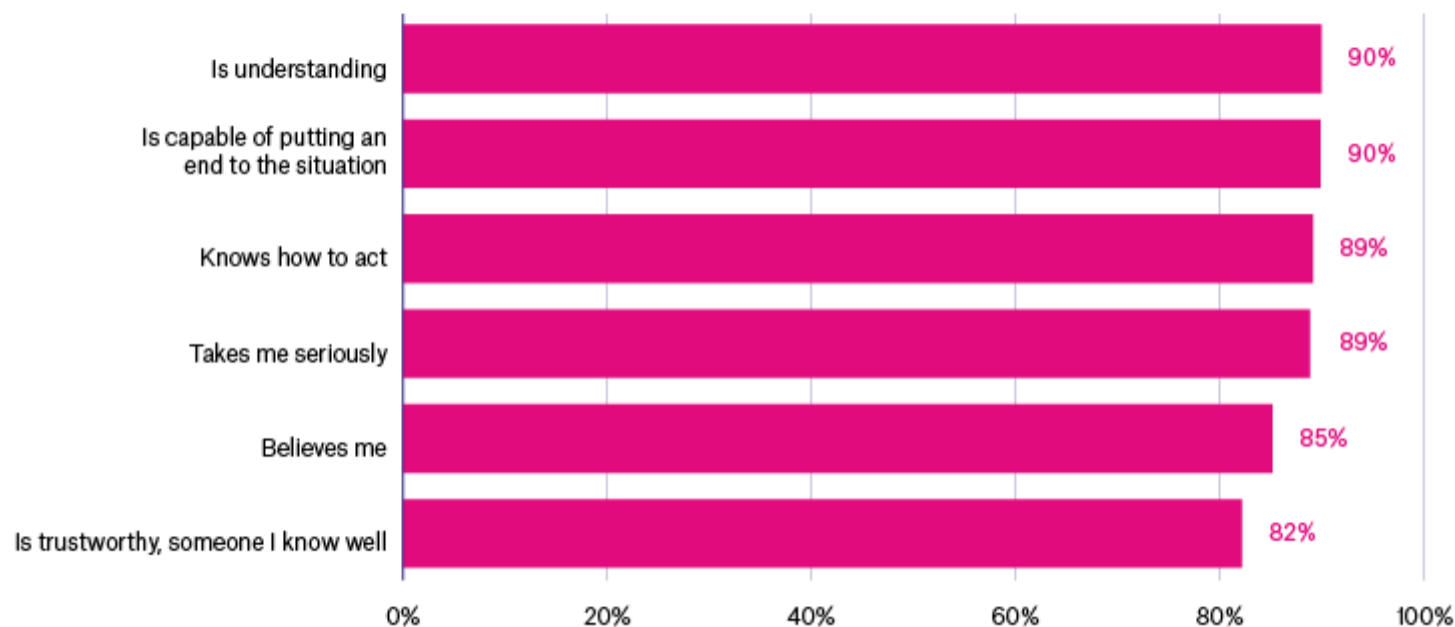
Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the "WeAreHere!" questionnaire.

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When asked what the person who could help them in a situation of gender-based violence at home should be like, the respondents showed a broad consensus, highlighting three essential characteristics. First of all, he or she should be a capable person, or in other words, should know what to do in these cases and be able to put an end to the problem. The person helping them should also empathetic: capable of listening to them and understanding them, and at the same time taking them seriously and believing them. Finally, he or she should be a person of trust, someone they know well.

Figure 8. Understanding and the ability to put an end to the situation of violence are foremost when defining the profile of the person who could help them

Children who state that they would like the person helping them to have the following characteristics (%)



Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the "WeAreHere!" questionnaire.

The Social Observatory of the "la Caixa" Foundation.

5. Conclusions

The study on which this article is based shows that most children receive information about gender-based violence, although some boys, to a greater extent than girls, express doubts about forms of psychological, economic and vicarious violence, issues which it is important to continue to tackle. The school setting is the preferred information source, but in the face of a situation of gender-based violence they have doubts about whether it would be the right place to find help. Judging from their responses, they want to form part of the solution to the problem, by taking action and seeking help, but many state that they would not know where to go in the event of gender-based violence. These results open the door to building an in-school detection model offering children and adolescents safe places they can trust in order to be able to express their concerns and report situations of violence as early as possible, directly and personally, to an empathetic and trusted listener with knowledge about how to proceed in the framework of the established protocols.

6. Study characteristics

This article is based on data sourced from the questionnaire prepared in the framework of the research project "WeAreHere! Detecting gender-based violence from children's perspective", conducted by Carme Montserrat, Marta Garcia-Molsosa, Pere Soler, Anna Planas, Edgar Iglesias and Paula Boned of the Liberi, Children, Youth and Community Research Group of the Universitat de Girona, with a representative sample of 3,650 children ranging from fourth year of primary education to fourth year of secondary education in 106 schools in Catalonia. The findings reported above belong to the first stage of the project, in which the schoolchildren's responses were compiled. The second stage will deal with the perspective of the administration and teaching staff of the 106 schools involved in the study. The third stage will focus on the design of the detection model that is proposed for implementation in the school setting. This research project, funded by the "la Caixa" Foundation, has been conducted in cooperation with the Department of Social Rights and the Department of Education of the Catalan Government.

7. References

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