What do children say about seeking help in situations of gender-based violence? Different perspectives depending on whether they have experienced such situations or not

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ABSTRACT

Background: As highlighted in recent studies, children could have a relevant role to play in seeking help in cases of gender-based violence at home, contributing to early detection and empowering them as rights holders and masters of their own lives. Notwithstanding, multiple obstacles to them doing so have been detected.

Objective: To find out expectations of help among children, seeking the differences between those who have experienced gender-based violence at home and those who have not, by gender and age.

Participants and Setting.

3664 schoolchildren from 8 to 18 years old (Mean$_{age}$ = 13.16, girls = 50.7 %, secondary school = 64.6 %, primary school = 35.4 %) in Catalonia (Spain).

Methods: Quantitative study. Children responded to an on-line questionnaire. Bivariate analysis and binary multiple logistic regression were used.

Results: Children would like to take an active role in seeking help, but were afraid of the consequences and did not know how, or who to ask. Older children and those who had experienced gender-based violence at home were less likely to ask for help (β = −0.66, [−0.99 - -0.34], $p <$ .001 and β = −0.67, [−1.04 - -0.27], $p <$ .001, respectively), and were less trusting of adults.

Conclusions: In seeking help, children demand safe services, with clearly identifiable helpers available, able to protect them and their family. Training adults they can trust such as teachers is key. Educating children about what gender-based violence is and where they can seek help is also important.

1. Background

1.1. Children experiencing gender-based violence at home: Victims and rights holders

Early detection of gender-based violence is key to helping women and children who experience violence (Cleaver, Unell, & Aldgate,

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2011): not only does it reduce the children's suffering, but also prevents the violence, and the damage it can cause, from becoming chronic. However, retrospective studies with adults, such as the one by Osofsky (2003), concluded that early detection is not widespread and that, in practice, children often experience violence that can last for years. Bracewell, Larkins, Radford, and Stanley (2020) pointed out that gender-based violence has both short- and long-term negative impacts on children's health and well-being, and can even end in death. In Spain, from 2013 to August 2022, 47 children were killed and 357 orphaned as a result of gender-based violence in their homes (Spanish Government, 2021).

This evidence gathered in recent years led the Istanbul Convention to identify domestic violence as a form of child abuse (Council of Europe, 2011) and it has been incorporated into different child protection system legislation (in Spain with laws 8/2015 and 8/2021, and in Catalonia with law 14/2020). Meanwhile, authors such as Øverlien and Holt (2019) have argued that children's right to protection is not only based on the necessity to protect them but also on their right to be protected, i.e. recognising them as both victims and rights holders.

Along these lines, Di Napoli, Procentese, Carnevale, Esposito, and Arcidiacono (2019) and Howell, Cater, Miller-Graff, and Graham-Bermann (2015) have linked children's involvement in early detection processes with improvements in both their well-being and a greater perception of control over their lives. Creating the right space in which to talk and ask for help is also seen as a way of perceiving children not only as victims but as the subject of their own rights. This is one of the aspects that accounts for the increase in studies that see children as expert informants about their own lives and life experiences, and which maintain that children should play an active role in seeking help in these situations (Øverlien & Holt, 2019).

1.2. Coping strategies

Most children who experience situations of violence in the home are fully aware of it (Eriksson, Bruno, & Näsman, 2013) and are rarely passive observers (Clarke & Widall, 2015). Moreover, there is consensus in underlining the active role of children in tackling domestic violence (Stanley, 2011). Thus, children experiencing gender-based violence at home often adopt the dual role of both victims and protectors at the same time (Hines, 2015; Katz, 2016; Øverlien, 2016): not only do they suffer the consequences of the violence, but they are able to develop a variety of active resistance strategies to protect themselves and those they love.

Variables such as age and having siblings determine the implementation of these strategies (Arai et al., 2019), which, according to studies in the field, are highly diverse. Firstly, coping strategies for self-protection may include covering their ears, getting angry, crying or refusing to eat (Chanmugam, 2015), playing music or turning up the volume, the use of headphones (Øverlien, 2016), running away (Georgsson, Almqvist, & Broberg, 2011) or playing with toys that are perceived as comforting and transitional objects (Bowyer, Swanston, & Vetere, 2015). Secondly, coping strategies for the protection of other family members, such as the mother, siblings or even pets, have been reported. Specifically, the work of Øverlien (2016) collected testimonies of younger siblings who explained that their older siblings would distract them during episodes of violence, either by singing to them or by reading them a story. Katz (2019) also showed how younger siblings were often removed from scenes of violence.

1.3. Barriers to seeking help

Asking for help and talking about experiences of gender-based violence is a complicated issue for children who are experiencing it, even in situations where the violence has been acknowledged (Georgsson et al., 2011).

One of the initial obstacles to seeking help is what is known as "breaking the secret" (Howarth et al., 2019). Children often feel insecure about disclosing their experiences, which they frequently see as shameful and stigmatising (Stanley, Miller, & Richardson, 2012). In addition, many children do not want to explain the situation to anyone because of different fears: the fear of violence towards them, coercion by the parent, negative consequences for the parents and the family, or for fear of being separated from their parents (Ermentrout, Rizo, & Macy, 2014; Gorin, 2004). Georgsson et al. (2011) reported two further obstacles: the defensive mechanisms that children use, such as denial or emotional shutdown, to avoid being overwhelmed by feelings when recalling the experience or situation; and uncertainty about how to interpret the situation they have experienced. Two further barriers identified in the research are the belief that if they explain the problem, no one can do anything about it (Howell et al., 2015), and the fear of not being believed (Callaghan, Fellin, Mavrou, Alexander, & Sixsmith, 2017; Georgsson et al., 2011).

Besides children's fears and beliefs, external obstacles have also been observed, such as parental/perpetrator control over both mothers and children, which restricts children's social life and extracurricular activities, and prevents them from interacting with family, other adults outside the family and their peers (Katz, 2016). Other studies have shown that adults' insecurity in talking about the issue can also be a barrier to disclosure (Miller, Devaney, & Butler, 2019; Radford et al., 2011; Roy et al., 2020; Weiss, 2014). Among the causes cited are concerns about children's vulnerability, the alleged inability of children to express themselves, or the distress that may be caused to them (Callaghan et al., 2017), as well as the adult's unwillingness or inability to listen to a person's account of such an experience (Weiss, 2014).

Thus, children often face the difficulty of not knowing who to tell or who to turn to for help (Montserrat & Casas, 2017, 2019). The study by Howell et al. (2015), with a sample of 703 young adults in Sweden, showed that although the majority of young people reported having told someone about the violence they had witnessed at home, 41 % concealed it. Children who decide to seek help often turn to family members, such as siblings, grandmothers and aunts (Chanmugam, 2015), or friends (Howell et al., 2015). In contrast, they make little use of the anonymous helpline or lodge a formal complaint (Howell et al., 2015) and, when they do, they report to the police.

Despite all these obstacles, studies show that children want to talk about their experiences of gender-based violence (Hines, 2015;

Stanley et al., 2012). They want to have their right to be heard recognised and their voice and opinions taken into account (Crowley, Larkins, & Pinto, 2020). To do this, they need safe spaces and services that enable and encourage them to break the silence about the violence they have experienced, with people available if they want to talk, thus enhancing their capacity to protect themselves and their family members (Hines, 2015). One way to create these spaces and bonds of trust between childcare professionals or adults and children is by listening to and respecting the views of the children themselves (Crowley et al., 2020).

With this in mind, this article poses the following questions: a) What coping strategies do children use when faced with situations of gender-based violence at home? b) What is the best way for them to ask for help? c) What obstacles to asking for help do they perceive?

We focus both on the voices of children who have experienced gender-based violence and those who have not, to delve deeper into the differences that exist between what children want and what actually occurs. In this regard, there is a gap in the literature in terms of studies with sufficiently representative samples comparing both groups - victims and not- in the same study in a synchronous manner, it is, in a unique sample. Also, there are few studies focusing on the perceptions of children's general population about gender-based violence. In this line, we aim to contribute to the design of programmes that reinforce the prevention and early detection of this phenomenon, providing tools for children of all genders and ages, both when they are experiencing this type of violence and when they can help a classmate to look for support. In addition, analysing the responses according to gender and age contributes to further concretising and refining the proposals.

2. Objectives

To find out the expectations of help among children, seeking the differences between those who have experienced gender-based violence at home and those who have not, by gender and age. The specific objectives are:

1) To analyse the frequency of different coping strategies
2) To identify who children would turn to for help and how they would go about it
3) To explore the main obstacles to seeking help as perceived by children
4) To identify the factors that would increase or decrease the probability of them asking for help.

3. Methods

This study was carried out within the framework of the research project "WeAreHere!" (https://www.udg.edu/ca/grupsrecerca/LIBERI/Projectes-de-recerca/WeAreHere) aimed at creating an early detection model of gender violence applicable in schools, giving children an active role in order to boost support that would be useful for them in bringing the violence to an end.

3.1. Participants

The targeted population of the study were schoolchildren in Catalonia (Spain), from 4th grade of primary education (9/10 years old) to 4th year of compulsory secondary education (15/16 years old).

To make the sample representative, a two-stage random cluster sampling was designed with the hypothetical participation of 101 schools and 5026 students, weighting the strata according to the universe distribution (a total of 3459 schools of primary and compulsory secondary education in Catalonia with 58,1815 students; Catalan Government, 2021). Clusters at the first stage were schools, stratified according to location (provinces, four in Catalonia), type (public/private), and territorial context (urban, semi-urban and rural).

Once the n was established for each of the 24 strata, schools were selected randomly from the total number of schools in Catalonia (Spain). Selected schools were contacted by the research team, who informed them about the research project and the questionnaire. Furthermore, the Department of Education of the Catalan Government also contacted the selected schools to encourage their participation. For each school that declined to participate, the research team randomly selected another from the list of each stratum.

In the second stage, the clusters were classes. As established in the sampling plan, participants were from 4th and 6th grade in primary schools, and from 2nd and 4th year in secondary schools. Clusters of primary schools were expected to be made up of 46 children (mean of students per class = 23), and in secondary, 56 children (mean of students per class = 28). Classes were randomly selected by the school. The research team was flexible, in order to facilitate schools' participation: other school years and more than a class per course were admitted if required by the school.

Finally, we received responses from 106 schools, 53 primary schools and 54 secondary schools (one is repeated since they participated with both primary and secondary school students). Regarding the location, 75.9 % were from Barcelona, 12.5 % from Girona, 6.5 % from Lleida and 5.1 % from Tarragona. Seventy-two point 7 % were state-run schools and the rest were publicly funded. Ten point 1 % were classified as "schools of maximum complexity" regarding their social composition (according to the USTEC, 2021). Furthermore, most of the schools were located in urban areas with >10,000 inhabitants (71.2 %), 24.4 % in semi-urban areas (from 2001 to 10,000 inhabitants), and 4.4 % in rural areas (up to 2000 inhabitants).

A total of 3664 children aged between 8 and 18 years old answered the questionnaire (Mean = 13.16; SD = 2.08), of which 64.6 % were secondary school children and 35.4 % were in primary school. Among them, 50.7 % were girls, 44.8 % were boys and 4.5 % preferred not to indicate their gender. Most of the participants and their parents were born in Spain (92.8 % and 71.6 %, respectively), and the vast majority lived with their birth family (98.2 %).

The distribution was very similar to that found in the overall student population in this age group in Catalonia, and to the

distribution of schools in Catalonia (Catalan Government, 2021), thus rendering the student and school samples sufficiently representative, as shown in the following tables (Table 1 and Table 2, respectively).

Finally, from the total number of participants, 312 children (10.3 %) self-reported having experienced gender-based violence at home. The 7.5 % of children did not answer this question.

3.2. Instrument and procedure

The questionnaire was developed together with six advisory groups of children aged 10–16 created specifically for this research project (Montserrat, Garcia-Molsosa, Planas-Lladó, & Soler-Masó, 2022): a total of 45 children participated from six different locations in Catalonia (Spain). To develop the questionnaire, 12 focus groups were conducted with them (1–1.5-h duration each) following the same structure, discussing the content and the wording of each question included in the questionnaire's brochure previously drafted by the research team.

The final version of the questionnaire (see Appendix A) consisted of 20 questions and was designed to be self-reported and completed online. MachForm software was used to design it. No question was compulsory, so the participants could choose not to answer. It was completely anonymous. Therefore, no data that would allow the student to be recognised was collected at any point. A telephone number and email address were provided for contacting the group to discuss further questions or make comments, if needed.

Once a school agreed to voluntarily participate in the study, it was sent a link to access the questionnaire. The schools received detailed instructions on how to explain the questionnaire and how to administer it. Students were provided with an electronic device (tablet, laptop) by the school to answer the questionnaire. However, a few schools preferred the questionnaire to be completed on paper. The questionnaire was administered in the classroom, during school hours, with a teacher as facilitator, or if required by the school, with staff from the research group and the teacher or other school staff assisting.

Firstly, the questionnaire presented a series of socio-demographic questions to find out the sample's characteristics. These questions referred to gender, year of birth, school year, name of school, place of birth, parents' place of birth and with whom they lived. Then, the questionnaire focused on asking about the research topic in a series of 5-Likert scale questions: the concept of gender-based violence and information about it, and strategies and ways of seeking help in case of experiencing gender-based violence at home. A dichotomous question about personal experience of gender-based violence at home was included ("Have you ever witnessed a situation of gender violence at home?") and children could answer who the victim/s of such violence was/were. Finally, children could add any comments (free text).

For the purposes of this paper, we present the analysis of the following set of questions.

- What would you do in a situation of gender-based violence at home? (Coping strategies). 17 items. Frequency Likert scale (from 1 = never to 5 = always)
- Why do you think there are children who do not ask for help when they experience violence at home? (Obstacles). 20 items. Agreement Likert scale (from 1 = not agree at all to 5 = completely agree)
- Who would you ask for help in a situation of gender-based violence at home? (Help: who). 12 items. Frequency Likert scale (from 1 = never to 5 = always)
- How would you ask for help? (Help: how). 8 items. Agreement Likert scale (from 1 = not agree at all to 5 = completely agree).

3.3. Data analysis

According to the objectives, bivariate and multivariate analyses were carried out. Tables 3 to 6 show bivariate analyses of the

Table 1
Student sample characteristics according to gender, school stage, origin, and repeated year. Comparison between the study sample and the Universe (%).

	No. students Sample (%)	No. students Universe* (%)
Gender		
Male	1631 (44.8)	300,042 (51.6)
Female	1848 (50.7)	281,773 (48.4)
I'd rather not answer	165 (4.5)	–
Total	3664 (100)	581,815 (100)
School stage		
Primary	1298 (35.4)	244,684 (42.1)
Secondary	2366 (64.6)	337,131 (57.9)
Total	3664 (100)	581,815 (100)
Origin		
Spain	3321 (92.8)	679,094 (84.2)
Foreign	259 (7.2)	127,216 (15.8)
Total	3664 (100)	806,310 (100)

Note. *Catalan students from 4th grade of primary school to 4th year of secondary compulsory education (Catalan Government, 2021).

Table 2

School sample characteristics according to type of school, school location and social complexity. Comparison between the study sample and the Universe (%).

	No. schools Sample (%)	No. students Sample (%)	No. schools Universe* (%)	No. students Universe* (%)
School type				
Public	84 (79.2)	2665 (72.7)	2345 (67.8)	538,250 (66.8)
Private	22 (20.8)	999 (27.3)	1114 (32.2)	268,060 (33.2)
Total	106 (100)	3664 (100)	3459 (100)	806,310 (100)
School location				
Rural	17 (16)	162 (4.4)	266 (7.7)	6862 (0.9)
Semi-urban & Urban	89 (84)	3502 (95.6)	3193 (92.3)	799,448 (99.1)
Total	106 (100)	3664 (100)	3459 (100)	806,310 (100)
Social complexity**				
High complexity	12 (11.3)	369 (10.1)	327 (9.5)	–
Non-high complexity	94 (88.7)	3295 (89.9)	3132 (90.5)	–
Total	106 (100)	3664 (100)	3459 (100)	–

Note. *Catalan schools and students from 4th grade of primary school to 4th year of secondary compulsory education (Catalan Government, 2021). **According to the classification of the Department of Education, when in the school there is a high number of pupils from vulnerable families or who have a socio-economic situation that may deny them future opportunities.

variables related to coping strategies, ways of seeking help and obstacles, according to gender, school stage and victims/non-victims of gender-based violence at home. Chi-squared test and Cramer's V were performed to analyse the statistical differences among these groups. Data processing was carried out with SPSSv28.

A binary multiple logistic regression was carried out to further analyse the obstacles for asking for help (Table 7). The item "I would ask for help" was taken as the dependent variable to develop the logistic regression model once transformed into a dichotomous variable (responses *never/rarely agree* were treated as a "No" and *often/always agree* were treated as a "Yes"). The logistic regression model was used to determine the main predictors of asking (or not) for help for children facing situations of gender-based violence at home.

The dependent variables included in the first place were: gender, school stage, victim/non-victim of gender-based violence, family origin (Spain, foreign-born), place of birth (Spain, foreign-born), type of home placement (birth family, foster family, kinship foster family, residential centre), type of school (public, private), and school location (urban, semi-urban, rural). The dichotomous variable of being told about gender-based violence (Yes/No) was also included as considered relevant for the study.

Those dependent variables with a significance higher than 0.05 ($p > .05$) were excluded individually for not being relevant in the model. The odds ratio for each of the independent variables was calculated in order to interpret the results of the model. Data processing was carried out with RStudio statistics.

The no-responses were considered missing and did not compute for the analysis being around 3 % in most questions and in no case exceeded 8 %.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Children participated on a voluntary basis and gave their informed consent and, if they were under 14 years old, their parents also gave informed consent. The participants did not receive any financial incentive. Confidentiality and anonymity of the data were respected throughout the entire process according to Organic Law 3/2018 on Data Protection and Guarantee of Digital Rights and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council. Besides, the study was conducted according to the guidelines and with the approval of the Ethical Committee of the University (CEBRU0009–21). The Department of Education and the Secretary of Childhood, Adolescence and Youth (Catalan Government) approved the procedure and reviewed the instruments.

4. Results

The results are presented according to the objectives.

4.1. Coping stategies

Children wanted to play an active role in situations of gender-based violence at home (Table 3). The items with the highest percentage of responses were: defend my mother (85.3 %), defend myself (84.7 %), ask for help (83.6 %), and stop the man who is attacking my mother (74.0 %).

Children who did not identify with either gender showed lower percentages on these items compared to those who identified as boys or girls, achieving significant differences in the case of stopping the aggressor and defending themselves ($p < .001$). In contrast, girls stated more strongly that they would defend the mother (90.5 % $p < .001$) and ask for help (89.1 % $p < .001$), and 83.2 % stated that they would *never or rarely* choose not to say anything to anyone ($p < .001$). However, they were not as categorical as boys in stating

Table 3

"What would you do in a situation of gender violence at home?" by gender, school stage and victims.

Coping strategies	Gender			School stage		Victim?		Total
	Boy	Girl	Not say	Primary	Secondary	Non-victim	Victim	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Defend my mother								
Never/rarely	9.2	3.6	16.7	7.3	6.3	6.7	5.8	6.7
Somewhat	10.2	5.9	8.3	8.0	8.0	8.3	5.8	8.0
Often/always	80.6	90.5	75.0	84.6	85.7	85.1	88.3	85.3
Total N 100 %	1558	1803	156	1256	2274	2961	359	3530
p-value	<0.001***			0.508		0.109		
Cramer's V	0.121			0.025		0.042		
Defend myself								
Never/rarely	7.7	6.0	17.3	6.3	7.8	7.0	8.4	7.3
Somewhat	7.0	9.1	7.1	8.2	8.0	7.6	12.0	8.0
Often/always	85.3	84.9	75.6	85.5	84.2	85.4	79.7	84.7
Total N 100 %	1559	1806	156	1263	2271	2970	359	3534
p-value	<0.001***			0.077		0.008**		
Cramer's V	0.080			0.043		0.059		
Ask for help								
Never/rarely	11.0	5.1	22.7	7.2	9.2	7.9	11.5	8.5
Somewhat	10.6	5.8	7.8	5.6	9.3	7.7	9.9	8.0
Often/always	78.4	89.1	69.5	87.3	81.5	84.5	78.6	83.6
Total N 100 %	1554	1805	154	1256	2270	2968	355	3526
p-value	<0.001***			<0.001***		0.037*		
Cramer's V	0.133			0.079		0.050		
Stop the aggressor								
Never/rarely	14.7	13.0	24.7	16.2	13.2	14.3	13.2	14.3
Somewhat	10.2	13.0	11.0	12.5	11.3	11.3	12.0	11.7
Often/always	75.1	74.0	64.3	71.3	75.6	74.4	74.8	74.0
Total N 100 %	1549	1804	154	1257	2262	2958	357	3519
p-value	< 0.001***			0.008**		0.644		
Cramer's V	0.076			0.057		0.022		
Distract myself								
Never/rarely	61.7	53.6	54.8	58.9	56.4	58.2	50.3	57.3
Somewhat	16.0	18.8	14.2	15.3	18.4	17.2	18.3	17.3
Often/always	22.3	27.7	31.0	25.8	25.2	24.6	31.5	25.4
Total N 100 %	1560	1808	155	1265	2271	2966	356	3536
p-value	<0.001***			0.013*		0.021*		
Cramer's V	0.076			0.054		0.054		
Feel guilty								
Never/rarely	65.2	50.1	61.0	56.9	57.5	59.1	45.4	57.3
Somewhat	18.5	21.1	13.0	18.9	20.0	19.3	20.3	19.6
Often/always	16.3	28.7	26.0	24.2	22.4	21.6	34.4	23.1
Total N 100 %	1550	1797	154	1255	2259	2959	355	3514
p-value	<0.001***			0.186		<0.001***		
Cramer's V	0.123			0.036		0.099		
Freeze up								
Never/rarely	60.1	46.1	63.6	55.0	52.1	53.5	50.1	53.1
Somewhat	23.8	33.8	20.1	27.3	29.7	28.6	31.8	28.8
Often/always	16.1	20.1	16.2	17.7	18.3	17.9	18.1	18.1
Total N 100 %	1581	1815	154	1271	2292	2981	359	3563
p-value	<0.001***			0.089		0.417		
Cramer's V	0.113			0.042		0.029		
Not say anything								
Never/rarely	77.4	83.2	77.4	81.9	79.6	82.0	70.5	80.4
Somewhat	10.5	8.5	9.0	7.5	10.5	8.6	13.9	9.4
Often/always	12.1	8.2	13.5	10.6	9.9	9.4	15.6	10.2
Total N 100 %	1550	1796	155	1259	2255	2961	352	3514
p-value	<0.001***			0.002**		<0.001***		
Cramer's V	0.068			0.064		0.090		

Note. *p < .05 ** p < .01 ***p < .001.

that they would *never or rarely* opt for paralysing strategies or reactions (looking for a distraction, freezing up, feeling guilty).

Compared to primary school children, a lower percentage of secondary school children reported that they would *often or always* seek outside help (81.5 % vs. 87.3 % *p* < .001) and, conversely, a higher percentage would act to stop the aggressor (75.6 % vs. 71.3 % *p* = .008).

Among children who had experienced gender-based violence (victims), passive and conflict avoidance strategies such as *distracting myself with something* and *not saying anything to anyone* increased (*p* = .021 and *p* < .001, respectively), and they would ask for help less

Table 4
"Who would you ask for help when faced with a situation of gender violence at home?" by gender, school stage and victims.

Help: who		Gender			School stage		Victim?		Total
		Boy	Girl	Not say	Primary	Secondary	Non- victim	Victim	
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Police									
	Never/rarely	13.7	13.2	21.6	12.0	14.8	12.8	22.4	13.8
	Somewhat	11.5	12.9	15.7	8.5	14.8	12.7	10.5	12.5
	Often/always	74.8	73.9	62.7	79.6	70.4	74.4	67.0	73.7
	Total N 100 %	1499	1754	153	1230	2189	2950	352	3419
	p-value	0.014*			<0.001***		<0.001***		
	Cramer's V	0.043			0.106		0.086		
Mother									
	Never/rarely	18.1	10.4	22.5	16.2	13.3	13.9	16.3	14.3
	Somewhat	15.9	10.6	22.5	12.7	13.9	13.1	16.0	13.5
	Often/always	66.0	79.1	55.0	71.2	72.8	73.0	67.7	72.2
	Total N 100 %	1490	1753	151	1224	2180	2933	350	3404
	p-value	<0.001***			0.053		0.113		
	Cramer's V	0.117			0.042		0.036		
Other family members									
	Never/rarely	16.0	13.5	25.3	14.0	15.7	14.0	22.3	15.1
	Somewhat	15.8	14.3	19.3	15.0	15.2	15.3	14.0	15.2
	Often/always	68.2	72.2	55.3	70.9	69.1	70.7	63.7	69.7
	Total N (100 %)	1492	1746	150	1225	2172	2926	350	3397
	p-value	<0.001***			0.397		<0.001***		
	Cramer's V	0.059			0.023		0.071		
Emergency helpline									
	Never/rarely	17.8	17.2	24.0	16.7	18.3	17.2	23.6	17.7
	Somewhat	15.7	12.2	16.0	11.6	15.2	13.7	15.3	13.9
	Often/always	66.5	70.6	60.0	71.6	66.5	69.1	61.1	68.3
	Total N (100 %)	1470	1737	150	1212	2158	2909	352	3370
	p-value	0.006**			0.003**		0.005**		
	Cramer's V	0.047			0.058		0.057		
Friends									
	Never/rarely	33.7	23.1	36.6	36.4	24.0	28.2	25.6	28.4
	Somewhat	19.9	18.5	23.5	20.9	18.5	19.6	16.1	19.4
	Often/always	46.3	58.4	39.9	42.7	57.6	52.2	58.3	52.2
	Total N (100)	1494	1762	153	1228	2192	2947	355	3420
	p-value	<0.001***			<0.001***		0.079		
	Cramer's V	0.098			0.152		0.039		
Social Services									
	Never/rarely	27.8	29.3	37.1	27.8	29.7	28.1	37.9	29.0
	Somewhat	18.1	20.3	18.5	17.7	20.2	19.6	15.2	19.3
	Often/always	54.2	50.4	44.4	54.5	50.1	52.3	46.8	51.7
	Total N (100 %)	1481	1739	151	1209	2173	2918	348	3382
	p-value	0.037*			0.042*		< 0.001***		
	Cramer's V	0.039			0.043		0.068		
Teacher									
	Never/rarely	37.5	36.4	42.1	28.2	42.2	36.5	43.1	37.2
	Somewhat	23.2	23.1	18.4	21.8	23.6	23.0	22.1	22.9
	Often/always	39.3	40.5	39.5	50.0	34.3	40.6	34.8	39.9
	Total N 100 %	1492	1757	152	1225	2186	2937	353	3411
	p-value	0.543			<0.001***		0.042*		
	Cramer's V	0.021			0.163		0.044		
Doctor									
	Never/rarely	40.8	42.5	48.3	37.7	44.3	40.9	50.6	42.0
	Somewhat	22.2	21.9	22.8	21.5	22.4	22.6	17.9	22.1
	Often/always	37.0	35.7	28.9	40.8	33.2	36.5	31.5	35.9
	Total N (100 %)	1491	1743	149	1211	2183	2931	346	3394
	p-value	0.331			<0.001***		0.002**		
	Cramer's V	0.026			0.078		0.061		
Neighbours									
	Never/rarely	44.2	52.8	55.3	38.9	54.7	48.2	57.6	49.1
	Somewhat	20.5	16.5	16.0	18.5	18.1	19.1	11.5	18.3
	Often/always	35.3	30.7	28.7	42.5	27.1	32.7	30.8	32.7
	Total N 100 %	1486	1734	150	1213	2170	2924	347	3383
	p-value	<0.001***			<0.001***		<0.001***		
	Cramer's V	0.063			0.169		0.069		
Leisure time instructor									
	Never/rarely	56.8	60.8	59.9	54.0	61.8	58.7	61.2	59.0
	Somewhat	17.9	17.8	17.1	17.7	17.9	17.8	17.0	17.8

Table 4 (*continued*)

Help: who	Gender			School stage		Victim?		Total
	Boy	Girl	Not say	Primary	Secondary	Non- victim	Victim	
Often/always	25.3	21.4	23.0	28.3	20.3	23.5	21.8	23.2
Total N 100 %	1489	1749	152	1221	2180	2933	353	3401
p-value	0.116			<0.001***		0.664		
Cramer's V	0.033			0.094		0.016		

Note. *p < .05 ** p < .01 ***p < .001.

Table 5

"How would you ask for help?" by gender, school stage and victims.

Help: how Do you agree?	Gender			School stage		Gender-based violence		Total
	Boy	Girl	Not say	Primary	Secondary	Non-victim	Victim	
Telephone								
Do not/little	11.4	8.6	23.2	12.8	9.2	10.1	13.5	10.5
Somewhat	9.9	10.0	9.9	10.4	9.7	9.8	12.0	10.0
A lot/completely	78.7	81.4	66.9	76.8	81.1	80.1	74.5	79.5
Total N (100 %)	1479	1742	151	1227	2158	2929	349	3385
p-value	<0.001***			0.002**		0.046*		
Cramer's V	0.072			0.060		0.043		
Face to face								
Do not/little	14.6	11.0	21.3	17.5	10.6	12.8	13.3	13.1
Somewhat	14.3	12.5	16.0	15.5	12.3	13.4	12.1	13.5
A lot/completely	71.1	76.5	62.7	67.0	77.1	73.9	74.6	73.5
Total N (100 %)	1489	1758	150	1231	2179	2949	354	3410
p-value	<0.001***			<0.001***		0.794		
Cramer's V	0.060			0.115		0.012		
Social media								
Do not/little	24.7	27.2	30.7	31.1	23.5	26.4	24.2	26.3
Somewhat	17.3	15.9	19.3	16.7	16.7	16.9	14.0	16.7
A lot/completely	58.0	56.9	50.0	52.2	59.8	56.7	61.8	57.0
Total N (100 %)	1478	1738	150	1221	2158	2924	351	3379
p-value	0.178			<0.001***		0.158		
Cramer's V	0.031			0.086		0.034		
Anonymous place								
Do not/little	36.9	33.2	32.0	34.5	35.0	35.1	31.7	34.8
Somewhat	19.6	22.4	22.7	21.1	21.2	21.7	16.1	21.2
A lot/completely	43.5	44.4	45.3	44.4	43.8	43.2	52.1	44.1
Total N (100 %)	1476	1736	150	1215	2160	2920	353	3375
p-value	0.139			0.942		0.003**		
Cramer's V	0.032			0.006		0.059		
Email								
Do not/little	40.5	44.2	44.7	39.2	44.5	42.3	46.6	42.6
Somewhat	19.0	20.4	20.0	21.4	18.8	19.9	17.4	19.7
A lot/completely	40.5	35.5	35.3	39.4	36.7	37.8	36.0	37.7
Total N (100 %)	1478	1729	150	1217	2153	2916	350	3370
p-value	0.063			0.010*		0.272		
Cramer's V	0.036			0.053		0.028		

Note. *p < .05 ** p < .01 ***p < .001.

compared to children who had not experienced such violence (*p* = .037). A higher percentage (34.4 %) also responded that they would *often or always* feel guilty about the situation (*p* < .001) and were less determined to stand up for themselves (*p* = .008).

The effect size was small in all cases (Cramer's V < 0.2, v. Table 3).

4.2. To whom and how would you seek help?

The police were the first on the list of people children would turn to for help (Table 4). Similar percentages of children would *often or always* ask for help from the police (73.7 %) or their mother (72.2 %) when faced with a situation of gender-based violence at home.

As for other informal agents, apart from the mother, children would *often or always* ask for help from other relatives living at home (69.7 %), from a friend (52.2 %) or, less frequently, from a neighbour (32.7 %). In relation to more formal contacts, apart from the police, participants would also resort to an emergency helpline (68.3 %) and less frequently to social service professionals (51.7 %), a teacher (39.9 %), the doctor (35.9 %) or a leisure time instructor (23.2 %).

Children who did not identify with any gender responded with significantly lower percentages that they would *often or always* seek help from the different agents, both within formal and informal relationship networks, except in the case of the teacher, the doctor or

Table 6

"Why do you think there are boys and girls who do not ask for help when they are experiencing violence at home?" by gender, school stage and victims.

Obstacles	Gender			School stage		Victim?		Total
Do you agree?	Boy	Girl	Not say	Primary	Secondary	Non- victim	Victim	
Afraid more harm to mother								
Do not/little	12.7	6.7	18.7	11.8	8.9	10.0	7.8	9.9
Somewhat	7.7	4.9	6.5	7.0	5.8	6.1	6.7	6.2
A lot/completely	79.6	88.4	74.8	81.3	85.3	83.9	85.4	83.9
Total N (100)	1553	1804	155	1265	2261	2981	357	3526
p-value	<0.001***			0.006**		0.403		
Cramer's V	0.095			0.054		0.023		
Afraid more harm to themselves								
Do not/little	16.6	9.6	23.2	20.2	9.5	13.4	11.5	13.3
Somewhat	12.0	7.0	11.6	11.3	8.4	9.7	6.7	9.4
A lot/completely	71.4	83.4	65.2	68.5	82.1	76.9	81.7	77.2
Total N (100 %)	1518	1780	155	1243	2223	2956	356	3466
p-value	<0.001***			<0.001***		0.089		
Cramer's V	0.110			0.165		0.038		
Afraid of being taken away from home								
Do not/little	25.7	18.1	27.0	25.9	19.7	22.2	16.8*	21.9
Somewhat	19.7	15.9	23.7	15.0	19.5	18.1	17.3	17.9
A lot/completely	54.6	66.0	49.3	59.1	60.7	59.7	65.9	60.2
Total N (100 %)	1514	1761	152	1228	2213	2935	352	3441
p-value	<0.001***			<0.001***		0.040*		
Cramer's V	0.088			0.082		0.044		
Don't know where to ask for help								
Do not/little	26.1	18.3	23.2	28.7	18.4	22.5	16.2	22.1
Somewhat	20.0	16.1	18.1	18.8	17.4	18.1	16.8	17.9
A lot/completely	53.9	65.7	58.7	52.6	64.2	59.4	67.0	60.1
Total N (100 %)	1542	1794	155	1252	2253	2972	358	3505
p-value	<0.001***			<0.001***		0.010*		
Cramer's V	0.084			0.128		0.053		
Afraid everyone will know								
Do not/little	26.2	22.2	29.9	33.8	19.2	24.7	22.2	24.4
Somewhat	14.8	16.3	14.3	15.9	15.3	15.7	11.8	15.5
A lot/completely	58.9	61.5	55.8	50.2	65.5	59.6	66.0	60.0
Total N (100 %)	1544	1786	154	1256	2242	2966	356	3498
p-value	0.034*			<0.001***		0.045*		
Cramer's V	0.039			0.171		0.043		
Mother asks them not to say anything								
Do not/little	31.7	23.6	31.4	38.2	21.7	28.5	18.4	27.6
Somewhat	23.2	20.1	19.6	19.9	22.2	21.9	18.1	21.4
A lot/completely	45.1	56.3	49.0	41.8	56.1	49.6	63.6	51.0
Total N (100 %)	1510	1766	153	1229	2212	2942	354	3441
p-value	<0.001***			<0.001***		<0.001***		
Cramer's V	0.081			0.180		0.089		
Think no one will believe them								
Do not/little	39.4	24.6	36.4	41.7	26.2	32.6	22.5	31.7
Somewhat	19.7	17.6	18.2	17.9	19.0	19.5	13.5	18.6
A lot/completely	41.0	57.7	45.5	40.4	54.8	47.9	64.0	49.7
Total N (100 %)	1536	1768	154	1236	2236	2942	356	3472
p-value	<0.001***			<0.001***		<0.001***		
Cramer's V	0.124			0.165		0.100		
Think they will be laughed at								
Do not/little	44.4	36.7	39.4	49.2	35.3	41.6	31.5	40.3
Somewhat	17.5	20.3	20.6	17.1	20.3	18.9	18.0	19.1
A lot/completely	38.1	43.0	40.0	33.7	44.4	39.6	50.4	40.6
Total N (100 %)	1531	1776	155	1243	2232	2948	355	3475
p-value	<0.001***			<0.001***		<0.001***		
Cramer's V	0.054			0.137		0.072		
Think adults won't know how to help								
Do not/little	51.2	45.4	49.0	59.1	42.0	49.5	36.0	48.1
Somewhat	18.2	21.4	20.8	17.1	21.5	19.7	20.4	19.9
A lot/completely	30.6	33.2	30.2	23.8	36.5	30.8	43.6	31.9
Total N (100 %)	1528	1785	149	1246	2229	2954	353	3475
p-value	0.016*			<0.001***		<0.001***		
Cramer's V	0.042			0.167		0.092		
Think the problem will sort itself out								
Do not/little	48.6	50.7	53.8	64.6	41.7	50.8	42.8	49.9
Somewhat	19.7	19.8	19.2	15.5	22.1	19.7	19.3	19.7

(continued on next page)

Table 6 (*continued*)

Obstacles Do you agree?	Gender			School stage		Victim?		Total
	Boy	Girl	Not say	Primary	Secondary	Non- victim	Victim	
A lot/completely	31.8	29.4	26.9	19.9	36.2	29.5	38.0	30.3
Total N (100 %)	1524	1776	156	1248	2222	2959	353	3470
p-value	0.495			<0.001***		0.003**		
Cramer's V	0.022			0.222		0.059		
Think it's normal or all right								
Do not/little	65.9	62.9	60.6	76.3	57.3	65.1	54.8	64.1
Somewhat	14.5	15.4	12.9	10.4	17.5	14.7	18.4	15.0
A lot/completely	19.6	21.7	26.5	13.3	25.2	20.3	26.8	21.0
Total N (100 %)	1532	1783	155	1250	2234	2961	354	3484
p-value	0.177			<0.001***		<0.001***		
Cramer's V	0.030			0.191		0.066		

Note. *p < .05 ** p < .01 ***p < .001.

Table 7
Binary multiple logistic regression with asking for help (dichotomous) as the dependent variable.

Dependent variable: asking for help (Yes)	Coefficient	Odds Ratio	Std. Err. (OR)	z	P > z	[2.5–97.5 % Conf. Interval] (OR)
Constant	1.32	3.74	0.20	6.44	<0.001***	0.92–1.73
Sex (ref: boy)						
Girl	0.85	2.34	0.15	5.58	<0.001***	0.55–1.15
I'd rather not answer	−0.77	0.46	0.25	−3.04	0.002**	−1.26 - -0.26
School stage (ref: primary)						
Secondary	−0.66	0.52	0.16	−3.99	<0.001***	−0.99 - -0.34
Family origin (ref: Spain)						
Foreign	−0.52	0.59	0.14	−3.58	<0.001***	−0.80 - -0.23
Victim? (ref: no)						
Yes	−0.67	0.51	0.20	−3.36	<0.001***	−1.04 - -0.27
Being told about gender-based violence (ref: no)						
Yes	1.60	4.95	0.20	8.02	<0.001***	1.20–1.98

Note. *p < .05 ** p < .01 ***p < .001.

the leisure time instructor. In these cases, percentages were similar or even somewhat higher than among those identifying as boys or girls (Table 4).

Differences by school stage were mainly found in the case of formal contacts, towards whom primary schoolchildren showed greater trust: they would ask for help from the police, an emergency helpline, social services, a teacher, a doctor or a leisure time instructor more *often or always* than secondary school pupils (Table 4). In contrast, only 42.7 % of primary school students would *often or always* ask their friend for help compared to 57.6 % of secondary school students (*p* < .001).

Children who claimed to have experienced gender-based violence at home showed less trust in all agents, with significantly lower percentages in all responses (*often/always*), except for trusting friends. In this case it was higher than in the group of non-victims (58.3 % vs. 52.2 %), albeit not reaching statistical significance.

The effect size was small in all cases (Cramer's V < 0.2, v. Table 4).

Children wanted a more direct relationship when asking for help and preferred to seek help by talking on the phone (79.5 %) or face to face (73.5 %) rather than by other less direct means such as social networks (57.0 %) or email (37.7 %) (Table 5). Here the gender differences were striking: 81.4 % of girls preferred to use the telephone and 76.5 % preferred to ask for help face to face (*p* < .001 in both cases).

Differences were observed in the use of ICT by school stage: 23.5 % of secondary school pupils *did not agree at all* or only *a little* with using social networks (vs. 31.1 % of primary school pupils, *p* < .001), and in contrast, 39.2 % of primary school pupils responded that they *did not agree at all* or only *a little* with using e-mail (vs. 44.5 % of secondary school pupils, *p* = .01).

Children who reported having experienced gender-based violence at home showed a greater preference for seeking help in an anonymous place (*p* = .003). On the other hand, they were less in favour of talking on the phone (74.5 % vs. 80.1 %, *p* = .046), although it was still their first choice, along with talking face to face.

The effect size was small in all cases (Cramer's V < 0.2, v. Table 5).

4.3. Obstacles to asking for help

On a general level (Table 6), fear of the tangible consequences of the disclosure stand out as obstacles: a large majority of the participants either *agreed a lot or completely* that fear of the father hurting the mother (83.9 %) or them (77.2 %) more, was an obstacle to asking for help. Fear of being taken away from home also appeared as one of the most reported obstacles (60.2 %) – 65.9 % in the case of children who had experienced gender-based violence, *p* = .04.

A large number of children also identified as an obstacle the fear of the social consequences that explaining a situation of gender-based violence at home may involve: the fear that everyone will know about it (60.0 %) or that they will be laughed at (40.6 %). In this case there was also a significant difference in the percentage of agreement, higher among children who had been victims of gender-based violence (Table 6).

Lack of knowledge and distrust about how adults would react to disclosure were also considered relevant obstacles: 60.1 % of children agreed *a lot or completely* that not knowing whom or where to ask for help could be an obstacle, as well as thinking that no one would believe them (49.7 %) or that adults would not know how to help them (31.9 %). In all these cases the percentage of agreement among child victims of gender-based violence was also significantly higher (Table 6).

Fifty-one percent of the children considered that being asked by their mother not to say anything to anyone could be an obstacle to asking for help. This percentage reached 63.6 % in the case of children who had experienced gender-based violence at home ($p < .001$).

In contrast, downplaying or normalising the problem received the lowest percentages of agreement in all groups. However, children who were victims of gender-based violence at home identified as an obstacle the belief that the situation would sort itself out or that it was "normal" more frequently than non-victims ($p = .003$ and $p < .001$, respectively).

Differences were found by school stage in all the items: secondary school pupils were found to have higher percentages of agreement with all the obstacles mentioned (Table 6). Gender differences were also found in all items (with the exception of normalising the problem or thinking that the situation might sort itself out): in all cases girls showed significantly higher percentages of agreement than boys (Table 6).

The effect size was small in all cases (Cramer's V < 0.2, v. Table 6).

In order to delve deeper into the objective of the study, a multivariate analysis was carried out to identify the factors that would increase or, alternatively, decrease, the probability of asking for help in a situation of gender-based violence at home (Table 7). "Asking for help" (see bivariate analysis in Table 4) was treated as a dichotomous variable (Yes/No) and taken as the dependent variable to develop the logistic regression model. The demographic and school variables of the study were included as dependent variables, as well as being a victim of gender-based violence and being told about it (93.2 % of children in the sample received information about gender-based violence and 6.8 % did not).

The binary multiple logistic regression model was statistically significant ($p < .001$) although it showed a modest fit to the data (*pseudo* R^2 "McFadden" $= 0.09$).

The model showed that the odds of asking for help would be 5 times higher if children were told about gender-based violence than if they had never received any information about it. The odds were 2 times higher among girls than among boys.

In contrast, the children that were less likely to ask for help in a situation of gender-based violence at home were: those who did not identify as boys or girls ($p = .002$); those in secondary school (in Spain, from 12 to 16 years old) ($p < .001$); those whose parents were born in another country ($p < .001$); and those who were victims of gender-based violence at home ($p < .001$).

The type of home, place of birth, the nature of the school and its area (urban, semi-urban, rural) were excluded from the model since they did not reach a *p*-value of <0.05.

5. Discussion

The results of this research provide us with the opportunity to understand what coping strategies, expectations of help and obstacles children perceive in the event that they are faced with gender-based violence at home, depending on age, gender and whether or not they have experienced such situations. The importance of these results in designing programmes for preventing and detecting gender-based violence and providing support is evident because they enable us to know what the people who have experienced it need. At the same time, it gives tools to those who have not experienced it should they themselves face such a situation or have to help a friend in the future. We can also tailor these programmes to be age appropriate and adopt a gender perspective to make them fully inclusive. But, above all, the findings highlight the importance and need to recognise children's right to be heard and have their own voice and opinions taken into consideration (Crowley et al., 2020), in keeping with studies that regard children as expert informants about their own lives and life experience (Øverlien & Holt, 2019).

It can be seen from the responses that, in general, children would like to play an active role in these situations that affect and concern them, especially girls, as highlighted by other studies (Hines, 2015; Stanley, 2011; Stanley et al., 2012;). However, among children who had experienced gender-based violence, passive and conflict-avoidant strategies increased and they were less likely to ask for help, in line with the literature in the field (Bowyer et al., 2015; Chanmugam, 2015; Georgsson et al., 2011; Överlien, 2016). In other words, children would like to form part of the solution, but when they find themselves in such a situation they are not equipped to do so.

In this regard, the data obtained make it clear that children demand and need services that strengthen their self-esteem and self-confidence, help them acquire problem-solving skills and strategies, and empower them to cope with the violent conflicts they are experiencing or might be experiencing at home (Hines, 2015; Katz, 2016). Further studies are needed to enable us to analyse and present proposals aimed at empowering children who do not identify with either gender to trust in support services. According to the findings of this study, they were less likely to ask for help, to stop the aggressor, and to defend themselves. They also showed a greater distrust of adults.

The results have shown that children often do not know whom to ask for help or how, as reported also in the work of Georgsson et al. (2011) and Callaghan et al. (2017). The children in this study felt that no one would believe them or that adults would not know how to help them, in line with Howell et al. (2015). This lack of trust towards adults was especially noticeable in the case of children who had experienced gender-based violence, which leads us to believe that their experience of asking for help has not been positive,

either because they did not find anyone to confide in or because the consequences were not satisfactory for them. Older children were also less confident than younger children in being able to ask for help, for example from their teachers and tutors. This leads us to ask ourselves why the passage through the different support services and the contact with various professionals that the system makes available to them, including the education system, may have the effect of diminishing their confidence in these services.

Despite this assessment, and a low predisposition to trust in adults, existing studies support the positive relationship with and support from an adult as a key element of help for children who experience gender-based violence (Howell, Graham-Bermann, Czyz, & Lilly, 2010; Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, & Semel, 2002; Martinez-Torteya, Bogat, von Eye, & Levendosky, 2009; Muller, Goebel-Fabbri, Diamond, & Dinklage, 2000). Studies also warn of the insecurity of adults, including child care professionals, in caring for and helping children in response to a conflictive situation such as gender-based violence (Miller et al., 2019; Radford et al., 2011; Roy et al., 2020; Weiss, 2014). Increasing or enhancing the knowledge and training of professionals (teachers, medical staff, social services, etc.) can help to minimise this insecurity. This training should include coaching on how to relate to traumatised children, improve coping strategies and address the recognition of the effects of gender-based violence on children (Hines, 2015).

When asked how and from whom they would prefer to seek help, children generally expressed a preference for a more direct and committed relationship when seeking help, preferably face to face and less through social networks or email. This finding was consistent with authors such as Howell et al. (2015), who found that children tended to make little use of anonymous helplines or making formal complaints. However, at the same time, the results have indicated the police as the first port of call for help; a distant agent towards whom they generally have no direct access or relationship of trust. Although this contradicts the previous finding, it is in line with the work of Howell et al. (2015), who noted that the police officer was seen as someone likely to have sufficient strength, and was particularly sought after by younger people. In contrast, the teacher was not valued as a trained professional for such confidence and support by children and young people. Schoolchildren, especially older ones, would rather talk to friends, or to social services. This suggests that ways must be found to combine the need for expertise, proximity and the ability to respond quickly and effectively to the problem, whilst protecting children.

In general, children identified the same main obstacles when asking for help, whether they had experienced a situation of gender-based violence or not, showing both a good capacity for analysis and empathy. In this respect, it is worth highlighting their fear of the consequences of explaining what is happening to them for both themselves and their families, in line with other studies (Ermentrout et al., 2014; Georgsson et al., 2011; Gorin, 2004). Similarly, fear of the social consequences of everyone knowing and being laughed at stands out, and is also consistent with other studies (Stanley et al., 2012). The greatest differences in these items were found according to age; in general, older children showed greater awareness of the obstacles that may exist when asking for help.

Finally, it is important to point out that, based on the findings of this study, the information given to children about gender-based violence is one of the elements that has made the greatest qualitative difference between asking for help or not, regardless of socio-demographic aspects. Thus, programmes aimed at improving early detection involving children should necessarily include training schemes specifically targeting children.

The methodological robustness of this paper, with a large and representative sample, ensures that the results can be extrapolated to other settings, at least in areas with socio-cultural similarities. Moreover, the fact that within the sample it was possible to identify a subgroup that had experienced a situation of domestic violence enabled us to compare responses among the two groups with very relevant differences. However, it is worth mentioning the limitations of this type of study: school sampling units may fail to include children who are receiving specialised services, as well as the fact that surveys of this type are self-administered and also the issue of the social desirability bias. On the other hand, although the percentage of missing was low throughout the questionnaire, the fact that 7.5 % of the children did not specifically answer the question of whether they are victims of violence in their family raises the question of how to interpret this non-response.

These results open the door to the construction of a screening model in schools that offers safe and trusted spaces to children and adolescents where they can express their concerns and report situations of violence as soon as possible. This can be done directly and personally with sympathetic and trustworthy interlocutors, who know how to proceed within the framework of the established protocols, and with a gender perspective at their centre.

6. Conclusions

To summarise, children do an empathetic and realistic analysis towards the real or hypothetic situation of witnessing gender-based violence at home, even without the need to have lived it. Also, they are predisposed to ask for help and to be active in case they find themselves in such a situation. However, this study highlights the difficulties victims face in asking for help and finding a trusted adult when confronted with a real situation of gender-based violence at home. Thus, there is a need to design programmes for preventing and detecting gender-based violence and providing support from children's perspective which must include the training of trusted adults. Finally, hearing children on this issue in early stages is crucial to strength their resources and empower them to seek help in such situations.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on CSUC repository "CORA" (https://doi.org/10.34810/data247, accessed on 13/12/2022).

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Appendix. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106349.

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