# Advisory groups of children in research on gender-based violence

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ABSTRACT

Involving children in research is not only advisable but mandatory from both a child rights and an academic perspective. Indeed, recent research has shown that children's participation enriches knowledge and contributes to an in-depth understanding of complex issues, even in sensitive questions such as gender-based violence, leading to improved policy and practice interventions. This article analyses the participation of children both as experts and informants in a research project aimed at creating an early detection model of gender violence applicable in schools. The aims of the study are as follows: i) to analyse the participation strategies used in the research conducted with children in the field of gender-based violence from an ethical and methodological point of view, focusing on strengths and weaknesses, and to identify improvements to be implemented; ii) to collect the experiences of children in this regard. Six expert groups were created specifically for this research project in different locations around Catalonia (Spain). A total of 45 children aged 10–16 participated in all stages of the research, including instrument design (children's questionnaire), discussion of results, building outcomes (model) and dissemination activities (final conference). The questionnaire was answered by a representative sample of 3664 schoolchildren attending 106 schools in Catalonia. This article discusses methodological questions, analysing the benefits and obstacles encountered in working with children, including power relationships, children's voices, engagement, protection, recognitions of capacities and remuneration.

## 1. Participatory research with children

The change promoted by the sociology of childhood, which places children as subjects of rights, led to a change in trends relating to policies, laws and practices aimed at strengthening the rights of children to participate in all areas that affect their lives and giving them an active role (Gaitán, 2014). Also, in terms of academic research, this new trend has been growing since the late twentieth century, with more and more studies directly involving children (Hill, 1997; Sevón, Mustola, Siippainen, & Vlasov, 2023). The authors of such studies consider that children can be key informants for both political decision-makers and professional practitioners, as well as in scientific research, and therefore avoid talking about them without their input. Moreover, this growing interest in conducting research with children suggests an important ethical and epistemological advance (Casas, González, Navarro, & Aligué, 2013; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012).

In a review of the scientific literature on research with children, Siklandera, Ernstb, and Storlic (2020) identified three categories, depending on how the child population was studied: children as objects, children as informants and children as contributors. Along the same lines, Montreuil, Bogossian, Laberge-Perrault, and Racine (2021) distinguish between two broad types of studies within the wider framework of so-called "participatory research with children": (a) those that seek different ways to include children in data collection; and (b) those in which children participate by making decisions within the framework of the research process, a category they call "the participatory research approach".

Casas et al. (2013) compiled different approaches by researchers with regard to the role children can play in research, establishing three models which, in the words of Kellett (2010), can be defined as follows: i) research about children, which has been the most traditionally used and aims to carry out research on childhood from an adult perspective; ii) research with children, which includes the perspective of children and considers them to be social actors; and iii) research by children, where they are positioned as co-researchers or co-creators of the research.

Regarding the latter model, Lundy and McEvoy (2009) coined the concept of co-researchers to claim the effective participation of children throughout the entire research process. In the same line, Sevón et al. (2023) defined the category "co-researchers" as one in which research is carried out together with children, with these members becoming active by helping define the theme, research questions and methods to be used in the study, collecting data independently or together with researchers, and providing perspectives for and participating in the data analysis. In other words, what Ansell, Robson, Hajdu, and van Blerket (2012) defined as "deep participation", which also included the results dissemination phase. These four phases were already synthesized in the key steps proposed by Green et al. (1995) when defining participatory research: (1) identifying or refining the research question; (2) choosing the most appropriate research design and data collection methods and/or collecting the data; (3) interpreting the data; and (4) identifying to whom to disseminate the research results. More recently, Shier (2019) built a matrix in which he further developed these phases of the research process into nine steps and included three degrees of children's participation according to their decision-making power (children are consulted; children collaborate with adult researchers, and children direct and decide for themselves).

Despite the growing tendency to incorporate children in research, and as pointed out by Hill (1997) and Montreuil et al. (2021), details of the specific techniques used are not always given and it is unusual for the pros and cons or ethical considerations to be made explicit. This therefore constitutes the central question we wish to address in the present study. Also, according to Sevón et al. (2023), there is a lack of studies that collect the perceptions and assessments of children themselves regarding their participation in research with the aim of identifying elements that can benefit them. There still remains, therefore, a broad path of in-depth investigation, analysis and discussion in the field of participatory research with children in which it is necessary for researchers to move forward in order to contribute to the full participation of children in our society. This study aims to contribute to progress along this path.

## 2. Participatory research with children on gender-based violence

Children's participation in gender-based violence research is still scarce. Traditionally, research on this phenomenon has involved adults, particularly professionals and women, and rarely focused on repercussions for childhood, let alone included children in the research (Mullender et al., 2002). At times, the reasons given to justify this failure have been their vulnerability, or the limited capacity of children to express their opinion on these types of sensitive issues. However, in matters of gender-based violence, as with other problems affecting children's lives, Øverlien and Holt (2019) stated that we should see them not only as victims but also as holders of rights. And this must influence their inclusion as key informants in research. In this respect, one of the debates surrounding children's participation in situations of adversity is precisely how to balance protection with participation (Cater & Øverlien, 2013; Laws & Kirby, 2007).

Studies such as those analysed here reveal that it is also necessary to consider the specific social and cultural contexts of children in these processes, and that their abilities must be understood within the context of their own development and well-being (Ben-Arieh, 2008), paying special attention to the relationship established between researchers and children. In terms of Cater and Øverlien (2013), both closeness (i.e. empathic understanding) and distance are needed (i.e. theoretical reflection that goes beyond the data and the informants' understanding).

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, some of the most relevant studies that listened to children and gave them a voice were basically those conducted by Hendessi (1997), McGee (2000), Gorin (2004), Hogan and O'Relly (2007), Mullender et al. (2002). All of the above showed that adopting a child-centred approach to address gender-based violence enables children to understand the problem while, if necessary, also allowing them to explain their situation and seek help. Knowing how children perceive gender-based violence and who they can contact informs adults about when and how to act to help them. Morris, Hegarty, and Humphreys (2012) stated that the issues of methodology and context, consent, confidentiality, safety and risk assessment, distress and disclosure should be carefully planned and managed in order to provide high quality experiences and promote benefits to children participating in research.

In Catalonia, Montserrat and Casas (2017) studied the impact of gender-based violence from different perspectives, including children's. They analysed children's coping strategies and relationships, and difficulties in repairing the damage caused. The results showed that the effects on children are usually severe, last for years and are reported late to the social services. More recently, it is worth highlighting the study by Montserrat, Garcia-Molsosa, Planas-Lladó, and Soler-Masó (2022), which focused on how children understand gender-based violence through their participation as informants and experts. These studies included both children who have and have not suffered violence at home (Planas-Lladó et al., 2023), while reflecting on the role that schools should have in detecting violence according to both the children themselves and their teachers (Montserrat et al., 2023)

The aims of this article are to analyse in greater depth the active role that children can play in research on gender-based violence

and to delve into the weaknesses and strengths of participation models in which they act as informants and experts.

## 3. Objectives

This study is part of a research project co-created with children that aimed to create a detection model in schools of gender-based violence suffered at home by children in Catalonia (Spain). The present article does not set out the results of the research itself, which can be consulted at https://www.udg.edu/en/projectes/wearehere, but rather the aim is to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the co-creation process between children and the research team on a sensitive topic such as living in a context of violence. More specifically, the objectives are:

1. To analyse participation strategies used in research carried out with children in the field of gender-based violence from an ethical and methodological point of view, focusing on strengths and weaknesses, and to identify improvements that can be put into practice with this type of research.
2. To collect the assessment of the benefits perceived by children and adolescents participating in research carried out in the field of gender-based violence.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Design

The research involved children as co-researchers and informants and lasted two years. Concretely, children's participation followed a dual path:

(a) Children as co-researchers: six groups of children experts were formed. Participants were aged between 10 and 16 ($N = 45$) and had participated in developing the research together with the research team throughout the process, from the design of the instruments to the dissemination of the results.
(b) Children as informants: a questionnaire jointly designed with expert groups of children was administered to a sample of 3665 students aged 8 to 17 in order to gather children's views on gender-based violence and the role of teachers and schools in detecting it.

**Table 1**
The research process and the degree of participation of the children's groups of experts.

| Phases of the research process | Dimension of decision-making power or control | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Children were not involved | Children were consulted | Children collaborated with adult researchers | Children directed and decided for themselves |
| Deciding on the research question | | Previous research | | |
| Designing the research and choosing the methods | | | | |
| Preparing research instruments | | | Review and approval of questionnaire | |
| Identifying and recruiting participants | | | | |
| Collecting data | | | | |
| Analysing the data and drawing conclusions | | | Discussion of results | |
| Producing a report | | | Construction of model | |
| Dissemination of the report and its findings | | | Participation in final conference | |
| Advocacy and mobilisation to achieve policy impact | | | Dissemination of model through a video | |

Note. Table elaborated on the basis of the Matrix for Analysing Children's Engagement in research processes (Shier, 2019).

As seen in Table 1, the groups of experts collaborated with adult researchers in the following stages: questionnaire preparation, discussion of results deriving from the questionnaires and discussion of how to construct a model to detect gender violence in schools. Additionally, they created a video explaining their participation in the research, which also served to disseminate the model jointly created with them. Moreover, representatives of the expert groups also participated in dissemination of the research results at a final conference together with academics, politicians and local government managers. Finally, it is worth highlighting that although the prior design of the research was carried out by the university team, it was based on a proposal by children in a previous study in which they were consulted as informants (Montserrat & Casas, 2017).

## 4.2. Participants

### 4.2.1. Groups of children experts

To create the groups of experts, the research team contacted the town councils of six municipalities, chosen according to the following criteria: (a) having an active 'Children's Council' (see UNICEF, 2018), mixed gender and ages 9 to 16, although some were either 9–12 or 13–16 years old; (b) being located within the four Catalan provinces; (c) that both urban and rural areas were represented; (d) that the Town Council showed an interest and facilitated the participation of children in the research. Once the six municipalities had been selected, the local government managers were in charge of constituting the groups, asking those children on the 'Children's Councils' who wanted to volunteer to participate in the research. Volunteers signed the informed consent form (as did their parents or legal guardians in the case of children under 14) explaining the objectives and phases of the research.

As shown in Table 2, a total of 45 children participated as experts, more girls than boys (68.9 %), aged from 10 to 16 (Mean = 12.63, SD = 1.49). Each of the six expert groups had a maximum of 12 children. Two groups were located in rural municipalities, three in medium-sized towns, and one in a city of over 100,000 inhabitants. Approximately half were primary and the other half secondary school students. Most attended state schools (80 %), the 15 % had a migrant background, and two participants came from a residential centre for children in care.

### 4.2.2. Children's questionnaire

A random sampling by conglomerates was conducted in two stages. For each of the 24 strata - defined by location (provinces), school type (state/private) and territorial context (urban, semi-urban and rural) - schools were selected randomly, the N having been weighted according to the distribution of the study universe (students from Year 4 of primary to Year 4 of secondary education).

A total of 3665 students answered the questionnaire (8–17 years old, Mean = 13.16; SD = 2.08) from 106 different schools in Catalonia (Spain). This was a representative sample of similar distribution to the whole population of Catalan students of the same age range, the result of a two-stage random 9 cluster design (Planas et al., 2023)).

Table 3 shows the main characteristics of the sample, which similar percentage of boys and girls, with 4.5 % preferring not to state their gender, most born in Spain, although a certain percentage were children of foreigners, more secondary than primary school, and 72.7 % attending state schools. The percentage of students enrolled at schools of maximum complexity according to their social composition was 10.1 % (USTEC, 2021). When asked if they had ever experienced gender-based violence in their homes, 10.1 % of children answered yes, and 7.5 % left the question unanswered.

## 4.3. Procedure and instruments

### 4.3.1. Groups of children experts

Four meetings of one and a half hours were held with each group of experts (24 in total) throughout the research process (see details in Table 1). These meetings were led by members of the research team (both adults: one moderator and one support person) with the presence of a youth worker or teacher, who was the trusted person for the group prior to the research. The first meeting was held virtually due to the regulations derived from the COVID-19 pandemic and the following ones in person. The format of the meetings corresponded to a discussion group with a draft script as support material in visual presentation format (these can be consulted here ANONYMISED). The content of the script contained: i) a welcome address to the participating children; ii) aspects of the research to be discussed – design instruments, results obtained, model construction; iii) evaluation of participation in the research; and iv) agreements regarding the subsequent steps and scheduling of the following meetings. All sessions were recorded on video and audio and subsequently transcribed.

**Table 2**
Composition of the groups of experts.

|          |        | Advisory Group 1 | Advisory Group 2 | Advisory Group 3 | Advisory Group 4 | Advisory Group 5 | Advisory Group 6 | Total |
|----------|--------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|-------|
| Location |        | Urban            | Urban            | Rural            | Rural            | Urban            | Urban            | –     |
| N. participants |  | 6                | 7                | 9                | 3                | 8                | 12               | 45    |
| Age range |       | 11–13            | 12–13            | 10–12            | 13–16            | 10–12            | 14–15            | 10–16 |
| Gender   | Male   | 1                | 4                | 4                | 1                | 3                | 1                | 14    |
|          | Female | 5                | 3                | 5                | 2                | 5                | 11               | 31    |

**Table 3**
Characteristics of the sample of students ($N = 3664$) and schools ($N = 106$).

|  | Students (N and %) | Schools (N and %) |
|---|---|---|
| Gender |  |  |
| Male | 1631 (44.8) |  |
| Female | 1848 (50.7) |  |
| I'd rather not answer | 165 (4.5) |  |
| School stage |  |  |
| Primary | 1298 (35.4) |  |
| Secondary | 2366 (64.6) |  |
| Country of origin (child) |  |  |
| Spain | 3321 (92.8) |  |
| Foreign | 259 (7.2) |  |
| Country of origin (parents) |  |  |
| Spain | 2429 (71.6) |  |
| Foreign | 964 (28.4) |  |
| Experienced gender violence at home |  |  |
| Yes | 362 (10.1) |  |
| No | 3027 (84) |  |
| No answer | 214 (5.9) |  |
| School type |  |  |
| State | 2665 (72.7) | 84 (79.2) |
| Private (state funded) | 999 (27.3) | 22 (20.8) |
| School area |  |  |
| Rural | 162 (4.4) | 17 (16) |
| Semi-urban & Urban | 3502 (95.6) | 89 (84) |
| Social complexity schools |  |  |
| High complexity | 369 (10.1) | 12 (11.3) |
| Non-high complexity | 3295 (89.9) | 94 (88.7) |

### 4.3.2. Children's questionnaire

Once the random sampling was completed, in agreement with the Department of Education (Government of Catalonia), the research team contacted the selected schools to inform them of the research project and the questionnaire, randomly replacing those who declined to participate in the study. The schools received the link to the questionnaire and detailed instructions on how to explain and administer it. Some schools provided students with an electronic device (tablet, laptop), while others preferred that the questionnaire be filled out on paper. The questionnaire was administered in the classroom, during school hours, with a teacher as facilitator, or if requested by the school, with members of the research group and the teacher or other school staff in attendance. The children and their parents or legal guardians (for children under 14 years of age) were required to sign a previously informed consent form.

The questionnaire (available on Dataverse) was in electronic, self-administered and anonymous format. To develop the questionnaire, 2 meetings were conducted with each group of experts (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 fact that it was developed jointly with the group of experts meant that it was adapted to the recipients in terms of its content and vocabulary. The final version of the questionnaire consisted of 20 questions regarding children's perception of gender violence, information they have received, strategies and ways of seeking help in the event of suffering gender violence at home, and proposals for its detection, prevention and intervention. The questions mostly contained Likert agreement scales and an open-ended question at the end. The contents of these are analysed in the present study.

### 4.4. Data analysis

Regarding the first objective related to identifying strengths and weaknesses of the participation strategies used in research with children, a review of the research process and results was carried out by the research team to analyse the data based on the 14 ethical and methodological elements identified by Montreuil et al. (2021):

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Power dynamics | 8. Vulnerability |
| 2. Facilitating techniques or environment | 9. Shared expectations |
| 3. Authenticity of children's voices | 10. Remuneration/Reward |
| 4. Children's engagement and representation | 11. Advocacy |
| 5. Protection and Best interests | 12. Cultural diversity |
| 6. Informed participation | 13. Inclusion and Motivation |
| 7. Recognitions of children's capacities | 14. Privacy |

Interjudge analyses were carried out with the team's five researchers after the investigation was completed, based on the evidence recruited during the research process: i) participant observation records during the data collection process; ii) the recordings of the

meetings with the expert groups (video and audio); and iii) the children's comments on the questionnaires related to the research process. For each of the elements, the process involved collecting the strategies used, strengths and difficulties encountered and aspects that could be improved to advance the effective and ethically responsible participation of children in research. The opinions on which there was agreement have been included and controversial issues discussed, with researchers having reached agreement on their inclusion or exclusion for the final version. Finally, some of the elements identified by Montreuil et al. (2021) were grouped together in the presentation of the results (converted into 8 elements) in order to deepen in the analysis and avoid repetition, adapting their proposal to the current research.

Regarding the second objective, a theoretical thematic analysis was conducted to encode and categorize the data from the expert groups' transcripts and the textual responses to the open-ended questionnaire (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive analysis was followed, which involved five researchers reviewing the data following an inter-rater reliability process. The procedure entailed incident-by-incident coding followed by a focused coding process in which each code was re-read and analysed to identify broader themes. The co-authors of this article reviewed the process and discussed the inclusion and exclusion criteria for each code. Finally, once agreed, the codes were grouped into the following categories:

(a) having the opportunity to talk about the issue of violence
(b) feeling useful and able to help fix the problem
(c) achieving some personal learning through research
(d) feeling listened to

The frequency of quotations assigned to the codes included in each of the categories was accounted. In addition, percentages were calculated to allow comparison between the responses of the questionnaire and those of the expert groups (Table 4).

### 4.5. Ethics

The children's participation in the research was voluntary, both in terms of joining the expert groups and answering the questionnaires, and they gave their written consent after being informed of the procedure and treatment of the research data. For those under 14 years of age, informed consent was also requested from parents or legal guardians. Authorization was also requested for image rights in the sessions of the groups of experts that were filmed. There was no economic incentive for participation. The researcher/expert children received a personalized diploma of participation at the end of the research process, signed by the principal investigator of the project. The confidentiality and anonymity of the data were respected in accordance with Organic Law 3/2018 on Data Protection and the Guarantee of Digital Rights and the European Parliament and Council's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679. In addition, the research was evaluated and approved by the University's Ethics Committee (CEBRU0009–21). The Catalan Government's Department of Education and Secretariat of Childhood, Adolescence and Youth approved the procedure and contributed to the review of the instruments.

The sessions with groups of experts took place in a respectful atmosphere that invited participation, reflection and debate. The authors of this article were responsible for moderating the group and stopping it if there a situation arose that threatened the dignity or freedom of any of the participants. Participants were informed that they were free to withdraw their participation at any time. Likewise, the facilitators of each group and its city council or school representative (depending on the composition of each group of experts) were responsible for personal assistance, support and accompaniment.

As for the questionnaire, there were no mandatory questions and it was completely anonymous. The children had a telephone number and an e-mail address available to contact the research group during their completion. The children and adolescents voluntarily completed it in a protected space (the school classroom) with in the presence of a reference adult (a teacher).

## 5. Results

### 5.1. The participatory research process: ethical and methodological considerations

Here, we analyse the strengths and weaknesses of our research with regard to the participation of children in research through 8 elements based on those proposed by Montreuil et al. (2021), specifying in each one the source of the data, that is: i) participant observation, ii) those who acted as experts in the different groups and iii) those who were informants in the questionnaires.

**Table 4**

Benefits perceived by the children regarding their engagement in the research process (number and percentage of quotations).

| Categories | Advisory groups | Questionnaire | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Having the opportunity to talk about the issue | 5 (19.2 %) | 44 (40 %) | 49 (36 %) |
| Feeling useful and able to help | 10 (38.5 %) | 30 (27.3 %) | 40 (29.4 %) |
| Achieving some personal learning | 4 (15.4 %) | 34 (30.9 %) | 38 (28 %) |
| Feeling listened to | 7 (26.9 %) | 2 (1.8 %) | 9 (6.6 %) |
| Total of quotes | 26 (100 %) | 110 (100 %) | 136 (100 %) |

a) Power dynamics and advocacy

This section is related to the power dynamics established in the adult-child or child-child relationship and their impact on empowerment and autonomy, and to the possibility given to children to inform change - take on an advocacy role - including after the research ends.

|  | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|
| In the expert groups | ✓ Children were empowered by appointing them as groups of experts<br>✓ Active role in the analysis and dissemination of results<br>✓ Co-creation of the questionnaire and the detection model | ✓ No participation in deciding the research question and objectives, the design of methods and data collection<br>✓ Children as collaborators (no space to decide for themselves)<br>✓ The adult was positioned as a moderator of the group. |
| In the questionnaires | ✓ Creation of the questionnaire together with groups of children of the same age as the recipients | ✓ Its administration in the school context and by an adult may gave rise to a power relationship that is not very emancipatory |

In the current research, children were considered as experts and had an active role throughout the research collaborating with adult researchers. The fact that the questionnaire was co-created by children of the same ages as the children to whom it was addressed, made it possible to correct its potentially adult-centric content. However, there is room for greater involvement of children in the research, both in extent (phases of the research) and degree (decision-making power). Concretely, the fact that children did not play an active role in managing the groups could be improved by assigning them rotating roles throughout the sessions (secretary, moderator, etc.). This would foster a more horizontal functioning of the group. Regarding advocacy, although this aspect did not arise explicitly, it could be seen in their participation in the final conference (explained in the next point).

b) Engagement, inclusion, and motivation

This section analyses of how the research promoted meaningful participation and increased children's interest. Also, it evaluates the sense of belonging during the research process, as well as withdrawal in the event that the children lose interest in continuing.

|  | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|
| In the expert groups | ✓ Continuous, real, visible and meaningful participation<br>✓ The topic was relevant, hot and close to the reality of children<br>✓ They learned about the results of the research<br>✓ The children who participated for the whole two years displayed a high sense of belonging to the group of experts and were highly motivated<br>✓ The researchers conducting the groups were the same in each session<br>✓ They were invited to the final public presentation of the research | ✓ Not all the children in the groups were there both years. Some joined later. We did not know the reasons<br>✓ Each group worked independently from the rest of the groups of children and only met for the first time at the final conference<br>✓ Two of the six groups of experts did not participate in the final conference |
| In the questionnaires | ✓ The topic of research was relevant, hot and close to the reality of children | ✓ Some found the subject matter unpleasant, too repetitive or did not agree with it receiving such focus and relevance<br>✓ We do not know to what degree the results were conveyed to the students who answered the questionnaires<br>✓ We do not know the reasons why respondents left questions blank or abandoned the questionnaire halfway through, nor how many did this. |

As pointed out by children in the expert groups as well as in the comments section of the questionnaire, it is a sensitive, current topic close to the reality of children, and one on which they want to comment and to be heard, which increased their motivation. Although on the day the questionnaire was administered the children were told that it had been created jointly with groups of children, perhaps this could be reinforced by presenting the instrument through a video recorded by the groups of experts to increase their motivation.

It is worth mentioning that, through the comments section of the questionnaire, a significant group of answers opposing the topic and approach of the questionnaire were collected, highlighting the politicization of the research topic and its rejection by some children, who deny the problem or support anti-feminist discourses. It is therefore proposed that a section to collect these opinions continue to be allocated and that these be transferred to schools with material to be able to work on the topic in the classroom.

Just as the groups of experts received continuous feedback on the results and the final model, we cannot guarantee that the results were conveyed to the students who answered the questionnaires. It was sent to the schools so that they would take charge of this, but perhaps it would have been possible to send them an infographic in accessible format with the summary of the main results, adjusted to the age group, that could be hung in a visible place in the school.

As registered, 11 children did not continue participating after the first session. We did not know whether some of the children left the group due to lack of interest, or for reasons related to their family, incompatibility with other activities or the change from primary to secondary school. New actions can be incorporated to improve this aspect, such as: (a) holding joint meetings with all the expert

groups, with recreational activities to foster the feeling of belonging to a larger group; and (b) making the meetings of the expert groups closer in time, to avoid that children's participation in the research lasts more than one school year.

On a positive note, the participation in the conference to disseminate the results was one of the main motivational elements, according to them (expert groups transcripts): they were able to explain their experience of participating in research, discuss aspects of the treatment of gender violence in the classroom and participate in a conference with the presence of authorities and international experts, with subsequent press coverage. This also made them aware that they were part of a shared project and of the high value of their contributions. However, the fact that two of the six groups of experts could not attend due to due to logistical problems in the municipality beyond the control of the children. This could be resolved by looking for specific alternatives and support from each municipality or foresee the cost of participation in the research (food, travel, adult volunteers who accompany them).

In the case of the questionnaire, we do not know how many children abandoned the questionnaire halfway through, nor their reasons. What we do know is that most of children in every class-group participated and completed it.

c) Facilitating techniques or environment

Following the aforementioned authors (Montreuil et al., 2021), our aim was to analyse whether the techniques provided encouraged the children to participate, were adapted to age, and staged in an appropriate and inclusive environment so as to prevent symbolic participation from taking place.

|  | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|
| In the expert groups | ✓ Support material in visual presentation format during the group sessions <br> ✓ Use of open-ended questions for children <br> ✓ Brainstorming technique to encourage the exchange of ideas <br> ✓ Use of spaces known to children: municipal premises or school | ✓ Lack of diversity in dynamics and more creative forms of expression <br> ✓ Unequal participation by members of the children's group |
| In the questionnaires | ✓ Questionnaire adapted by children to the age of the children <br> ✓ Using a virtual format <br> ✓ Individual self-administration that respected the pace of each respondent <br> ✓ Administration of the questionnaire in school classroom and support from a reference adult | ✓ Difficulties on the part of some young children aged 9–10 years or with reading comprehension difficulties. <br> ✓ Demotivating effect in some cases due to technical problems with the electronic device in the classroom |

This analysis led us to consider the possibility of incorporating other techniques such as, on the one hand, knowledge dynamics to promote trust between members of the group and also with adults and, on the other hand, other forms of expression and creation than purely oral ones (written, plastic arts, musical, …). The latter would favour a greater diversity of participation styles and increasing opportunities for participation, so that more children would feel invited to contribute.

On the other hand, there was uneven participation of the children in the expert groups, as reflected in the videos recording the meetings: some participated a lot and continually took the floor, while others were more discreet, out of embarrassment when it came to giving their opinion, or because they had not yet formed one and needed more time for reflection and more information. To minimize these situations, dynamics could be carried out in small groups, proposing playful and easy exercises that favour the participation of all members by introducing the topic combining spaces for individual reflection with group spaces, or sending information prior to the session in order to favour the participation of all children.

As for the questionnaires, the purpose was for everyone to participate regardless of language difficulties or level of reading and written comprehension. As recorded in the researchers' participant observation reports, some found the questionnaire long and lost attention. Others found it difficult to answer some questions. This requires that an active role be adopted by a reference adult who can help the children if necessary, reading the questions and motivating them to continue. Problems arose when several students of these characteristics coincided in the same classroom and there were not enough adults, as observed by the researchers during the administration of the questionnaire in some schools. In such cases, there need to be alternatives to ensure proper attention, such as providing a detailed explanation question by question, for example.

d) Protection, best interests, and privacy

This point is mainly about weighing the benefits of children's participation versus the harm it may cause them or the burden it may

entail. Moreover, the section discusses how to increase protection of the children's privacy, especially if their private space or other personal aspects are exposed.

| | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|
| In the expert groups and in the questionnaires | ✓ The processing of research data was completely confidential and anonymous<br>✓ Participation was completely voluntary<br>✓ Carried out in a space known to the child, with an adult of reference<br>✓ Possibility of abandoning the research at any time if they felt uncomfortable<br>✓ Possibility of contacting the research team if they needed to (in person, by mobile or by email) | |
| In the expert groups | ✓ The children were not asked about personal experiences, but their opinion on the topic raised<br>✓ Their participation in the video and the final conference was contingent on both their consent and interest and those of their parents | |
| In the questionnaires | | ✓ Some found the subject matter unpleasant<br>✓ The university team would not have known if any delicate situations arose in administration of the questionnaires |

The research was always carried out in safe spaces known to the children and with the presence of a reference adult. The expert groups took place in a respectful atmosphere that invited participation, reflection and debate. The authors of this document were in charge of moderating the group and stopping it if a situation arose that threatened the dignity or freedom of any of the participants. Despite the topic covered, we were not aware of moments of discomfort or intrusion into the children's privacy during the research. However, we are aware that, given the breadth of the sample, in the administration of questionnaires where the university team was not present there were probably delicate situations in most schools that either the teacher had to deal with or went unnoticed in the eyes of adults. In the free text comments, some children expressed feeling uncomfortable or sad in relation to the topic discussed.

Regarding privacy, the processing of research data was completely confidential and anonymous, except for the participation in the video and the final conference, which was subject to their consent and interest, as well as that of their parents. In the questionnaire, the only question about a personal experience ("Have you experienced any situation of gender violence at home?") came at the end of the questionnaire; it was not mandatory and 7.5 % of respondents did not answer it. The expert groups were never asked about personal aspects. At the starting point, the participants were informed that if a serious incident involving gender-based violence was revealed during the meetings, it would be reported in accordance with established protocols. In addition to providing personal assistance, support and accompaniment by the group facilitators and the representative of their municipality or school (depending on the composition of each group).

e) Informed participation and shared expectations

This element concerns encouraging informed participation in the research process, and even being able to train the children in research to facilitate their participation and promote their agency. It also has to do with analysing the mutual expectations established in the project and being transparent in the planning and research objectives.

| | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|
| In the expert groups and in the questionnaires | ✓ The objectives of the research and its planning were shared with children<br>✓ Use of the informed consent form, adapting the language and format to the children's age<br>✓ Children were informed that their contributions cannot always be included or put into practice | ✓ No information collected to compare prior expectations and their fulfilment |
| In the questionnaires | ✓ The reference adult was provided with a guide for the presentation and implications of the research and questionnaire<br>✓ There was direct contact with the research team to answer any questions or provide and required information | ✓ Logistical difficulties in obtaining informed consent from parents<br>✓ Uncomfortable situations when parents did not give consent but children wanted to answer the questionnaire<br>✓ Those who were not at school that day due to illness, absenteeism, etc. did not participate |

In few cases, families were reluctant to or did not give their consent due to fear of the topic being discussed, while some who addressed comments to the research team in this regard were informed more directly and thoroughly based on their concerns. The two most worrying issues, which were not resolved, are the ethical implications of excluding children from research when their parents deny authorization, and how schools manage alternative activities for children who do not answer the questionnaires. In most schools, those who did not present informed consent from their parents were offered another activity. Going further, we should also look for mechanisms to reach the population that, for various reasons, is not in class on the day the questionnaire is administered.

In the case of the groups of experts, they gave feedback on their expectations throughout the research, as recorded in the transcripts,

but we did not collect their prior expectations to make comparisons and find out if they had been met. The free text space for comments in the questionnaire also fulfilled this function.

f) Recognitions of children's capacities, authenticity, and vulnerability

The aforementioned authors refer to the need to promote and respect the opinions and thoughts of children, without belittling them, and listening carefully to their interpretation ("authenticity"). Recognizing children's competence as different, but not inferior, to adult competence ("recognitions of children's capacities") without imposing the adult view that children are a vulnerable population ("vulnerability").

| | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|
| In the expert groups | ✓ Children were invited to give their opinion freely, all contributions were respected and accepted<br>✓ All the contributions made by the members of the group were recorded and then sent to them, ensuring the authenticity of their contribution<br>✓ The issue of gender violence was discussed without taboos or protectionism on the part of adults | ✓ The notes were always made by an adult.<br>✓ The presence and/or interventions of the referring adults may have conditioned the responses. |
| In the questionnaires | ✓ The child could freely answer the self-administered and anonymous questionnaire, without value judgments on the part of the adult<br>✓ The free text space where children could express their opinion in their own words<br>✓ Questions were raised openly, directly, simply and sensitively, as would be the case with adults | ✓ Being in the school setting, they could think that their answers would be evaluated by the teacher<br>✓ The teacher's intervention may not be neutral, despite the instructions given |

The children's and adolescents' participation was encouraged without constraints in both the expert groups and administration of the questionnaire. However, in some cases interference from a reference adult external to the research team was detected (participant observation reports), which could condition the responses. Furthermore, if in the expert groups children could also take on the role of group "secretary" (rotating), or perhaps review the notes taken by adults, then the notes may look different.

The issue of gender violence was discussed without taboos or protectionism on the part of adults, based on the conviction that children and adolescents are capable of talking about sensitive issues and it is necessary to listen to their voice in relation to them.

g) Remuneration/Reward

This point considers how to remunerate or reward children's contributions to research.

| | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|
| In the expert groups | ✓ A diploma of participation was given to each child signed by the PI of the project<br>✓ They received a continuous message regarding the value of and recognition for their participation<br>✓ Some municipalities gave them a small gift for participating | ✓ No consensus across all municipalities/schools<br>✓ Diploma sent online |
| In the questionnaires | ✓ Verbal and written thanks for their participation | ✓ There was no specific reward |

The certificate for participating in the expert groups was well received by the children. Some municipalities also gave them a small gift. This should be discussed beforehand so as to unify this criterion across all municipalities. The diploma could have been hand-delivered at a ceremony at the university, to give more visibility to the value of children's participation. In addition, the feedback given to those who answered the questionnaires needs to be improved and they should at least receive some written recognition, like a thank you card signed by the university team with a mention of the topic of gender violence, for example.

h) Cultural diversity and representation

In addition, with this point, the promotion of respect and mutual understanding is analysed in terms of intercultural research. In addition, some aspects related to the representativeness of the expert groups and the questionnaire sample are discussed.

| | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|
| In the expert groups | ✓ The composition of the groups was culturally diverse<br>✓ All children's opinions were treated with respect and in an inclusive manner<br>✓ They were encouraged to share different points of view<br>✓ They were encouraged to share the discussions of the meetings with the larger group | ✓ Bias in children's councils' composition<br>✓ Some groups were more homogeneous, with no cultural or religious diversity<br>✓ Not all groups shared the discussions of the meetings with the larger group (municipal or school) for feedback and greater representativeness |

(*continued*)

|  | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|
| In the questionnaires | ✓ The sample was representative<br>✓ The questionnaire was available in Catalan, Spanish and English and newly arrived students could receive support with translation | ✓ Greater difficulty answering questions when someone needed an oral translation on-site |

In terms of the composition of the groups of experts, using children's councils as a starting point may have the bias that there is not always a vulnerable population, from an intersection perspective, in these bodies of social participation. Regarding cultural diversity, in some locations the expert groups were very homogeneous, losing representativeness and richness with regard to points of view and perspectives. On the other hand, the groups of experts not always shared the work done with the largest group - the children's council representing the municipality or the school - (as mentioned by them during the meetings). Thus, they could not collect their colleagues' opinions for enriching the debate and to gain greater representativeness.

On the other hand, the representativeness of the sample was guaranteed in the questionnaire (see Participants section). In terms of cultural diversity, it is worth mentioning the question of language in the questionnaire: given the great cultural diversity existing in some of the schools, it would be necessary to provide the translated questionnaire into more languages and offer auditory and visual support (for those who did not know any written language and to whom the adult had to read the questions and answers) to ensure that all students can respond autonomously and with the corresponding privacy.

### 5.2. The children's own perceived engagement in the research process

The main elements highlighted by the children and adolescents in relation to their interventions can be consulted in Table 4.

The first thing to note is that the results of the questionnaire and expert groups are distributed differently. In the case of the participants in the questionnaire, the fact of having the opportunity to comment on this topic and the fact of carrying out some personal learning stands out. In the case of the children participating in the expert groups, the notable finding was that they felt useful, able to help and listened to. Below are some verbatim phrases that illustrate these different topics.

Having the opportunity to comment on or talk about the topic

With regard to the opportunity the research project offered them to give their opinion on or talk about the issue of gender violence, they highlighted that this was not usually the case:

> *"I think this questionnaire has been very interesting, and it can help us reflect on this issue, which is sometimes not talked about too much"* (Girl, 11, questionnaire)

Also what it means to break possible barriers of silence due to it being a sensitive issue:

> *"With the issue of gender-based violence, I think it should be talked about more from a very young age so that it is not such a delicate and taboo subject."* (Girl, 12, advisory group)

And encouraging people to talk about it in all spheres, especially at schools:

> *"I really enjoyed participating in this workshop because I think it's a very important issue that needs to be discussed more."* (Girl, 14, advisory group)

> *"I think this type of questionnaire is great for all people our age to deal with these issues both at home and at school…"* (Girl, 13, questionnaire)

They also link the fact that the subject is talked about from an early age to both prevention of the problem and knowing how to act in self-defence.

> *"I think this issue should be discussed from a young age in school to prevent these terrible accidents from happening."* (Boy, 11, questionnaire)

> *"I think at school we should have a class to talk about these kinds of issues. Where we could give our opinion and where they tell us how we should defend ourselves if we ever find ourselves in this situation."* (Girl, 12, questionnaire)

Feeling useful and able to help

The children emphasized their desire to contribute to eradicating the problem of gender violence through their participation in the research, especially the groups of children experts; that is, they found it a useful vehicle for identifying solutions, and this made them feel useful and capable of helping people who suffer or may suffer situations of this type.

> *"Because I hope that with all the work we and you have done, that it doesn't happen so many times or very few or zero, and that it doesn't continue to be normal!"* (Boy, 10, advisory group)

> *"I really enjoyed participating in this research on this topic, and it's been a pleasure to be able to help with that. I'm looking forward to seeing what we've all accomplished together. I also loved the experience."* (Girl, 11, advisory group)

The children who answered the questionnaire also hoped doing so might help solve the problem.

*"I hope this will help you advance your research and that there'll be no more gender violence or violence of any kind."* (Boy, 15, questionnaire)

In this sense, they link the increase of knowledge through research with the resolution of the problem. Also, many of them highlighted the questionnaire as a useful tool to help children cope with the problem, even the youngest ones.

*"I think it's great that we did this questionnaire and I'm also really glad to be a feminist because I want to see an end to all the sexist men hurting girls. I hope this questionnaire will be administered in more schools, even primary schools, because I think if we talk about sexism from an early age children will be able to defend themselves or know what to do when there is violence".* (Nonbinary, 14, questionnaire).

Achieving some personal learning

The children emphasized that thanks to their participation in the research they achieved some new learning, discussed their own point of view and were able to come to an understanding with others.

*"I think this research project has been very interesting and I've been able to learn quite a few things that I didn't know about… gender violence… I think it's helped me understand more what it's about and see different opinions and different ways of trying to resolve it or work on it… It's helped me quite a bit."* (Boy, 15, advisory group)

Also, many of the children who answered the questionnaire found it interesting both to gain confidence and know what to do in situations of gender violence, as well as for the fact that it helped them reflect on themselves and empathize with the victims.

*"I think this questionnaire is very good for all people. I highly recommend it. It opens your eyes by putting you in the shoes of a person who's suffering from it and [shows you] how to help them".* (Girl, 15, questionnaire)

*"I really liked this questionnaire, because I managed to find out things about myself, and get a clearer idea. I don't like gender violence."* (Girl, 11, questionnaire)

Feeling listened to

The members of the expert groups emphasized that children should be asked about these issues and listened to and taken into account. In the questionnaires, there were many answers that simply thanked us for the questionnaire that have not been categorized in this study.

*"I really enjoyed participating in this project that we've done because I think it's very good that they take our voice into account."* (Boy, 10, advisory group)

*"I was pleased to have been able to share my opinion with you."* (Gril, 13, questionnaire)

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

The results obtained have allowed us to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a joint creation process between children and the research team on the topic of gender-based violence at home. In addition, they provide evidence that research design based on recognizing children as rights holders generates different and valuable learning opportunities (Øverlien & Holt, 2019). The active participation of children helps the research team understand certain aspects of language and interpretation, sometimes beyond the reach of the adult universe, since they are approached from a genuine child's perspective (Kellett, Forrest, Dent, & Ward, 2004).

At the same time, from the perspective of the children, their participation helps them to get to know themselves better and learn more about the issue of gender-based violence. In this sense, it is interesting to note that many children claim the role of knowledge as a tool for the prevention and approach to a problem that sometimes is very much marked by political ideology and self-interested disinformation. More concretely, the children who answered the questionnaire found it a useful tool to think about it, a topic that is very present in public debates but in which, from their point of view, children rarely have a voice. On the other hand, among the participants of the expert groups, the feeling of being useful in the face of a relevant problem increased and the research motivates them to want to contribute to being part of a socio-educational response to the subject of gender-based violence. That is, to use their power as agents capable of exerting political influence.

If applied well and under the right conditions, participatory research gives rise to processes for exercising power and influencing politics (Bradbury-Jones, Isham, & Taylor, 2018). However, this requires a review of power relations between adults and children, the establishment of mechanisms to ensure the participation of all children, and recognition of the contributions they make. Therefore, the training of adults who want to undertake this type of research is also essential.

The results highlight the interest and potential benefits of applying the ethical and methodological elements identified by Montreuil et al. (2021) in their literature review. A careful analysis of these aspects allowed us to conduct an exhaustive evaluation of the proposal to include children in this research and, above all, to identify proposals for improvement. At the same time, it has also demonstrated the validity and usefulness of these authors' proposal, revealing it to be a practical and useful resource for planning and evaluating participatory projects with children.

The improvements identified - which will be considered on future occasions - are related to different areas: a) regarding the approach to participation throughout the research: attributing rotating roles to the children participating in the research throughout

the sessions with the idea of favouring a horizontal functioning of the group; also introducing in the sessions alternative forms of expression and creation beyond written or oral work, and proposing that the objectives also be established by the children; b) in relation to the questionnaires: reaching children who for various reasons are not in class on the day the questionnaire is administered; delving into the ethical implications of excluding children from research when their parents deny authorization, providing for the questionnaire to be translated into more languages and offering auditory and visual support; c) in relation to the dissemination of the results: presenting the instrument through a video recorded by the group of expert children participating in the research; providing an infographic in accessible format with a summary of the main results obtained, so that it can be hung in a visible place in each school, and sharing the work done with the Children's Council i.e. the largest group; d) finally, regarding completion of the research, the idea would be to hold a closing act beyond the final conference, with all the children participating in the research, and requesting that the municipalities continue these groups as advisors on the topic, thereby establishing a channel of participation for them. These actions would, at the same time, allow the research results to be returned to all the participating children.

All of the above has allowed us to carry out a thorough review of the participation process and draw together effective proposals that would substantially improve children's participation and their qualitative and equitable contribution. The analysis carried out using the methods proposed by Montreuil et al. (2021) has been contrasted with other didactic guidelines and guides to facilitate the participation of children. Specifically, the results have been contrasted with the proposals contained in the Council of Europe's manual on child participation, drafted by Crowley, Larkins, and Pinto (2020), which presents proposals for improving skills and abilities for "listening to" children, "acting" on lessons learned and "changing" some of the decisions that affect these children. The results are very satisfactory and agree with the analysis carried out, so they allow us to consider that the different guidelines, proposals and recommendations that appear in this latter contribution have also been taken into account.

The approach carried out and results obtained from this research confirm, and even more so after the analysis carried out in this work, that it constitutes a clear example of a "participatory research approach" from the perspective of children as contributors or, in the words of Lundy and McEvoy (2009, 2012), children as co-researchers. In line with other research, it also confirms the wisdom of considering child co-researchers in a sensitive topic such as violence experienced in the family home (Powell et al., 2018). But their participation in these issues is often not considered, citing their protection and vulnerability. These authors conclude that the context in which children live; the experiences they may have; and their prior knowledge of the topic must be taken into account, as all of these elements influence how the research may impact them, in different ways. Furthermore, in line with research on this topic (Cater & Øverlien, 2013; Davis, 2009), central importance should be given throughout the design and management of the research to creating a safe environment and respectful relationships - with both the researchers and the other children - without leaving these aspects to chance or to the good will and know-how of the researchers. The research projects should be paid more attention to these elements.

The recent work carried out to define and investigate ethical challenges and dilemmas that arise in some situations when working with children involved in research processes (Barnikis, MacNevin, & Berman, 2019; Loveridge, Wood, Davis-Rae, & McRae, 2023) is absolutely necessary. Thus, the permanent line of dialogue between research teams and between them and the participating children as social actors (Christensen & Prout, 2002) can contribute to opening up unresolved issues such as when children want to give their opinion through a questionnaire and their families do not give them permission to do so. Our recommendations on this issue - some of them implemented in this research - would be to open channels of direct communication with families in connection with research and to organize an information day for the families, together with the teachers, so that they can mediate (as trusted referents) in cases where the families do not see clearly the participation of their child.

In short, childhood, understood as a stage in itself and not focused solely on education or future employability (Ben-Arieh, 2008), requires approaches that facilitate learning and the perfecting of approaches to participatory research where children are also considered co-researchers. The purpose should be none other than to improve and perfect these processes in order to respect and contribute to the well-being of children and allow them the possibility of exercising the power they have. The experience gained encourages us to carry out future research by deepening the extent and degree of their participation (Shier, 2019): incorporating children in the design and data collection phases and increasing their decision-making power and control over the research process.

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## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Marta Garcia-Molsosa:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Carme Montserrat:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Pere Soler-Masó:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Anna Planas-Lladó:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Resources. **Edgar Iglesias:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## Data availability

Available on CSUC repository "CORA" (doi:10.34810/data247).

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