

Article

Preventing Gender-Based Violence: Portuguese Youth Perspectives on Primary Prevention Programs

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Abstract: Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pressing societal issue that requires urgent attention. Although there have been efforts to implement GBV prevention programs in Portugal, research assessing their long-term impact on young people is notably scarce. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the perceptions and experiences of young individuals involved in these programs. The research captures a comprehensive view of the participants' perspectives through in-depth interviews. The findings reveal personal and interpersonal effects from participation in GBV prevention initiatives. They highlight the necessity for such programs to commence in early childhood to maximize their effectiveness and societal impact over time. Moreover, the research indicates that these initiatives influence youth's personal development, relationships, career aspirations and professional choices. Consequently, this study advocates for the broader implementation of holistic GBV prevention programs in educational settings and calls for further investigation into their long-lasting outcomes. It emphasizes the importance of adopting a holistic, structured, and interactive approach to primary prevention, ultimately empowering future generations and creating a safer society for all.



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1. Introduction

Violence, as a broad term, is defined by power and social structures and is deeply tied to patriarchy as the dominant system in global civilization (Applin et al. 2023). Gender-based violence (GBV) can be referred to as a complex phenomenon that has spanned centuries, hiding its deepest roots in the very constitution of patriarchal societies (Lange and Young 2019). It is a human rights violation that transcends cultural, social, and economic boundaries, with far-reaching effects and consequences for individual victims and on a social and economic level. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, GBV is estimated to cost the European Union EUR 366 billion annually, with violence against women accounting for 79% of this total, or EUR 289 billion. Efforts to combat its manifestations, mainly through primary prevention, are essential for protecting victims and crucial for the efficiency and effectiveness of states (EIGE 2021).

Hence, the primary prevention of GBV appears unyielding and paramount to avoid costs at a later stage (Crooks et al. 2019; Dunne et al. 2006; Ellis and Thiara 2014; Miller et al. 2014; Noletto 2008). An approach based on education and/or re-education that aims to reduce and eliminate GBV must be accessible to the entire population, ensuring that primary prevention efforts are consistently implemented and developed across all schools (Cahill and Dadvand 2020; Magalhães et al. 2007, 2016; Noletto 2008; Stelko-Pereira and de Albuquerque Williams 2016). Therefore, violence prevention programs, given their multidisciplinary nature, should have a central role in all educational institutions (Cahill and Dadvand 2020; Ngidi and Moletsane 2015; Petersen et al. 2005; Sullivan et al. 2017). Despite the growing number of school-based prevention programs, GBV victimization rates remain a persistent challenge (Debnam and Temple 2021). Although effective prevention of different forms of GBV among adolescents and young adults has improved, especially recently, it is essential to recognize that significant gaps in knowledge about prevention strategies for marginalized groups like Indigenous people, the LGBTQ+ population, and young women with disabilities persist (Crooks et al. 2019).

The Significance of GBV Prevention Programs in Portugal

GBV remains a pressing social issue in Portugal, making prevention programs particularly relevant. Despite the significant strides in recent decades, in addressing GBV through legislation and policy measures including advances in the educational field through the implementation of the National Strategy for Citizenship Education (see DGE—*Direção-Geral da Educação* 2017), the persistence of domestic violence, femicide, and other forms of gendered violence highlights the need for prevention programs, specifically robust primary prevention initiatives.

Moreover, Portugal's socio-cultural landscape contributes to the ongoing challenges in combating GBV. Although significant progress has been made towards gender equality, traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms still influence societal attitudes. Historical factors, including the lasting effects of the Estado Novo dictatorship (which reinforced conservative gender roles), continue to shape contemporary gender dynamics (Magalhães et al. 2020; Magalhães 2021). This historical backdrop makes preventive education crucial to challenging ingrained beliefs that normalize or trivialize GBV.

While Portugal has implemented comprehensive legal frameworks to combat GBV—such as the criminalization of domestic violence as a public crime and alignment with international conventions such as the Istanbul Convention (see Council of Europe 2011)—reactive measures alone are insufficient. The effectiveness of laws and policy measures relies on broader societal change, which can be achieved through primary prevention programs. These programs engage young people in discussions about topics related to gender equality, respectful and healthy relationships, violence and where to find support, and the importance of active bystander intervention.

Engaging the Portuguese younger generation in GBV prevention is particularly important. Studies suggest that attitudes towards gender roles and relationships are shaped at an early age, making adolescence a critical period for intervention (Magalhães et al. 2016; Pérez-Martínez et al. 2023). Educational programs implemented in schools and community settings play a vital role in challenging harmful stereotypes, equipping young people with the skills to recognize and prevent abusive behaviors, and promoting a culture of zero tolerance towards violence (Pérez-Martínez et al. 2023; Villardón-Gallego et al. 2023).

Despite the growing awareness of GBV in Portugal, challenges remain in the implementation and evaluation of prevention initiatives (Magalhães et al. 2020; Magalhães 2021). Funding constraints, inconsistent integration of GBV education into school curricula, and resistance from more conservative sectors of society pose obstacles to progress. Strength-

ening partnerships between government bodies, NGOs, and educational institutions is essential for the long-term sustainability of these programs.

In the Portuguese context, GBV prevention programs play a crucial role in addressing deeply rooted societal issues that perpetuate gendered violence. Given the high prevalence of GBV, the influence of historical and cultural factors, and the limitations of legal responses alone, primary prevention efforts, especially those targeting young people, are vital in fostering a more equitable and violence-free society (CIG 2020).

1.1. Exploring Prevention Typologies: A Focus on Primary Prevention in Portugal

Understanding the interrelationship between the multiple factors that influence the occurrence of violence and those that might spark change is crucial in preventing GBV and violence against women and girls (VAWG) in schools. Such an approach entails exploring child, adolescent, and youth social, emotional, and cognitive growth and the nature of learning and interaction within the school environment. In this context, fostering social ties and social skills within the school is essential to effectively address the issue related to violence against children (De Oliveira Neri 2023). In the same way, strengthening relationships—between students and staff, within classrooms, across the school, and between schools and communities—has the potential to reinforce a sense of belonging among students, enhancing their commitment to this environment and also to values, thus promoting prosocial behavior while reducing violence and aggression (Orr et al. 2022).

School-based prevention programs are consistently being improved (Pérez-Martínez et al. 2023), yet most interventions, such as awareness-raising actions, are either one-off events or implemented over short time periods. While well-intentioned, these initiatives frequently overlook the developmental stages and processes of children and youth and the pedagogical principles necessary for effective learning as in the past children and young people were seen as “clean states,” passively receiving new information, and learning occurred in a cumulative form (Magalhães 2021). Specialists and theories on education have criticized that children and youth (as well as adults) are active builders of their (our) knowledge, articulating the new pieces of information with the previous knowledge they have about the issue in question, filtering and transforming the latest information with their lens of understanding the world (Coll 1997; Freire 1996). To transform hierarchical social relations—particularly those based on gender—children, adolescents, and youth must be actively engaged in all phases of these processes. This includes critically analyzing the materiality (Pires 1997; Thomas 1999) of hierarchical social relations—that is, the social objectives and subjective conditions that shape both their existence and ours. When implication (Ardoino 1992) is incorporated into these processes, children and youth become multipliers of the message and active participants and architects of new gender relations grounded in equality.

The prevention of GBV has, in recent years, found its place of conceptual and empirical development in the international context (Brush and Miller 2019; Crooks et al. 2019; Debnam and Temple 2021; Martins 2017; Sheng et al. 2024) and, specifically, in the national context (Borges 2011; Dias 2008; Magalhães et al. 2016; Pais 2019; Magalhães 2021; Pacheco et al. 2024). In this line, it is essential to realize that, along with other sciences, such as medicine and health sciences in general (Adler and Rehkopf 2008; Rapoport 1969; Starfield et al. 2008), different types of prevention are identified and worked on in the everyday phenomenon of GBV in Portugal.

Drawing on the theoretical and reflective work, it is possible to categorize and conceptually define various types of GBV prevention (Magalhães et al. 2007, 2016; Magalhães and Rodrigues 2020). These include (i) primordial or universal prevention, (ii) primary prevention, (iii) secondary prevention, (iv) tertiary prevention, and (v) quaternary prevention

(Adler and Rehkopf 2008; Freeman 2018; Rapoport 1969; Starfield et al. 2008; Starfield 2011). Primordial (or universal) prevention refers to efforts aimed at preventing the emergence of risk factors for violence occurrence, targeting the social determinants and broader societal conditions that give rise to violence or other harmful behaviors in the first place, often being universal, and aiming to reach the entire population, regardless of their current risk level. Unlike primordial prevention, which addresses the root causes, primary prevention aims to intervene early to reduce the likelihood that individuals will engage in or experience GBV. This way, and according to the EU Directive 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, primary prevention focuses on raising awareness and educating the public about different manifestations of GBV, their consequences, and the importance of consent from an early age. Secondary prevention aims to detect and address violence early to prevent escalation. Tertiary prevention seeks to prevent reoffending and revictimization by managing the consequences of violence through bystander intervention, early intervention centers, and specialized programs (European Union 2024). Finally, quaternary prevention as suggested by some authors acts as a safeguard for other prevention levels by addressing the unintended harms of interventions, focusing on continuous evaluation and refinement of prevention programs to enhance their effectiveness, minimize negative consequences, and ultimately improve practices and policies (Harris et al. 2024). Considering the objectives of this paper, this review will center specifically on primary prevention within a national context. However, it acknowledges that prevention levels are not rigidly distinct but rather exist on a continuum with permeable boundaries, allowing for overlap and interaction between different levels (McCartan and Kemshall 2023).

Primary prevention actions can be a set of activities designed to prevent the actual problem from happening. It is understood as learning to inspect attitudes and behaviors that affect individual and fundamental human rights. GBV primary prevention programs in Portugal share several key characteristics, including a focus on education, community engagement, and the challenge of addressing profoundly ingrained gender norms (Magalhães and Rodrigues 2020). Many of these initiatives are tailored to specific audiences, such as young people, men, or marginalized communities, strongly emphasizing fostering dialogue and promoting behavioral change. These programs are commonly implemented in schools, private social solidarity institutions, children's and youth support housing, youth shelters, and other community-based organizations. Their development often involves creating and promoting an educational and training program designed to equip individuals with the skills to identify the signs and consequences of violence. Furthermore, these programs provide essential knowledge on how to respond to such situations, including understanding relevant legislation, accessing appropriate support services, and navigating available resources effectively. This way, primary prevention aims to teach and train in different personal and social skills such as education for affection, emotional literacy, the deconstruction of romantic love, reflection on the dominant capitalist ideology, disrespect for the natural and biological, disrespect for the age and personal history of each person, among other skills. Primary prevention of GBV in Portugal focuses on addressing the root causes of violence before it occurs (Dias 2008; Magalhães et al. 2016; Pais 2019). This approach seeks to change cultural attitudes, beliefs, and social norms that perpetuate gender inequalities and lead to violence. Primary prevention efforts can take various forms, including awareness raising, education, community interventions, and policy development (CIG 2020; Magalhães 2005; Magalhães et al. 2007, 2016). Several initiatives in the country exemplify this type of prevention, encompassing various formats and durations. For example, short-term awareness campaigns are often designed to target specific populations, aiming to raise immediate awareness of GBV. In contrast, long-term interventions foster

sustainable changes in behaviors and attitudes, addressing deeper cultural and structural dynamics (CIG 2020; Dias 2008; Magalhães et al. 2016; Pais 2019). In Portugal, an example of a long-term primary prevention initiative has been implemented in schools, since 2004, by UMAR (Alternative and Response Women's Association, a Portuguese NGO advocating for women's rights since 1976). This program integrates a systematic and holistic intervention as a primary prevention initiative against GBV in schools. The intervention program is delivered by a multidisciplinary team with pedagogical expertise and for the past 10 years has been funded by the Portuguese government, with oversight by the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG). Implemented in different parts of the country, its objectives include fostering collaboration within the educational community to promote human rights and prevent GBV, encouraging children and youth to reflect on and engage with these themes, and contributing to social and cultural change. The project emphasizes the importance of protagonism of young people when discussing the themes in classes and uses active and artistic expressions to foster communication. It is considered a long-term program given that it aims to work with each class for at least 3 academic years with sessions twice a month. Furthermore, some actions are also developed with stakeholders, school boards, parents and family, teachers, and other school staff.

1.2. The Missing Link in Primary Prevention of GBV: A Critical Approach to Evaluation and Impact of These Programs on Youth

Primary prevention is a key strategy for ensuring a sustained decrease in violence against women (Crooks et al. 2019; Kirk et al. 2017), so developing clear and standardized approaches to evaluate prevention interventions is crucial for assessing their actual impact and fostering the best practices (Limbos et al. 2007). However, a significant challenge persists regarding their limited long-term impact evaluation (Banyard et al. 2019; Farrell et al. 2001; Keller et al. 2017). While many initiatives are thoughtfully designed and succeed in raising immediate awareness, there is often a lack of systematic and robust assessment to evaluate their effectiveness over time (Magalhães et al. 2007, 2016). This gap in evaluation makes it difficult to determine whether such programs are achieving sustained changes in attitudes and reducing instances of GBV, which is crucial for refining strategies and securing ongoing support and funding (CIG 2020; Crooks et al. 2019; Farrell et al. 2001; Keller et al. 2017). This challenge becomes even more complex for school-based primary prevention programs due to the nuanced realities of prevention typologies and schools' functioning. While these frameworks offer valuable guidance, they are often challenging to implement rigidly in practice. Educators must acknowledge that primary and secondary prevention efforts frequently overlap, as group-based interventions may lead to disclosures from individuals who are victims of violence. This highlights the critical need for a clear and pre-established protocol to handle such disclosures effectively during educational sessions. These protocols should promote interdisciplinary collaboration, uphold ethical principles such as anonymity and confidentiality, and prioritize children's and youth's best interests and well-being (Magalhães et al. 2016).

Some studies exploring the impacts of GBV prevention programs have been recently exploring "what works" in these programs. Gender-transformative approaches to such interventions should be considered, as they, according to some authors, most effectively prevent GBV by getting young people to think critically about hegemonic masculinities (Pérez-Martínez et al. 2023).

Results from the systematic review of early intervention to prevent GBV conducted by Villardón-Gallego et al. (2023) indicated that educating against gender-based stereotypes is important in GBV prevention; low self-esteem and insecurity pressures increase vulnerability to violence in students, which makes it an imperative outcome of any prevention program to empower students. Furthermore, the studies show that GBV prevention pro-

grams contribute to improving relationships and the school climate while promoting youth development and effective learning. Also, the review's findings indicate that introducing these programs into the curriculum and adding community involvement substantially contributes to their success. Another significant result is that successful programs promote dialogue and student participation, and listening to their voices is crucial for creating a safe and inclusive learning environment. [Yount et al. \(2017\)](#) analyzed primary prevention interventions aimed at preventing victimization among women and girls during three key life stages: early adolescence (10–14 years), late adolescence (15–19 years), and young adulthood (20–24 years). The authors found that bundled interventions and multilevel approaches were the most effective since these strategies combine efforts at the individual level (such as skill building to enhance girls' voice and agency) with community-level actions to create more supportive environments. This way, the review concluded that addressing personal and systemic factors proved to be a promising approach to reducing vulnerability to violence. Another review conducted by [Heard et al. \(2020\)](#) analyzed the impact of applied theater interventions addressing primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention of intimate partner violence. Regarding primary prevention interventions, the authors concluded that this methodology has been used successfully to create awareness around such topics and to promote more healthy relationship training among young people. The analysis revealed that this kind of method has been effective, and reducing gender stereotypes, debunking IPV myths, identifying IPV and abuse warning signs, and practicing nonviolent conflict resolution are some notable results achieved during interventions.

[Becker and Reilly \(1999\)](#) argue that primary prevention programs to prevent sexual violence often focus on teaching children to avoid abuse; however, there are concerns about their effectiveness and potential harm. According to the authors, these programs may be poorly designed, leading to modest changes in children's knowledge and responses, so programs considering children's developmental levels show better results in helping them avoid victimization. According to the authors, the best approaches should also account for factors such as gender and environment, meaning that "one-size-fits-all" strategies are insufficient, as children may respond differently depending on age, gender, parental attitudes, and the perpetrator's age. Recent evidence suggests that programs aimed to prevent sexual violence, when implemented in school environments, are positively associated with the significant reduction in perpetration and experience of sexual violence among adolescents in general ([Piolanti et al. 2022](#)). However, among at-risk adolescents, they may help reduce perpetration, though no significant impact on victimization has been observed ([Arrojo et al. 2024](#)). These interventions may still be valuable in increasing knowledge and positively shaping bystander attitudes and behaviors regarding the occurrence of sexual violence ([Carmo et al. 2024](#)).

There is little research in Portugal on the impact or importance of prevention programs implemented in schools, despite the efforts of different prevention programs. More specifically, little is known about the long-term effects and perceptions of young people about these programs.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper aims to explore young people's perceptions about their participation in GBV primary prevention programs in Portugal. This contribution results from the project BOUNDS—Bonds, Boundaries and Violence: Longitudinal Study of Gender Violence Prevention Programs in the School Context (PTDC/SOC-ASO/31027/2017) funded by national funds of the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) and implemented between 2018 and 2022. The project aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of prevention

programs using different quantitative (e.g., survey) and qualitative methodologies (e.g., interviews with young people, teachers, and other school professionals).

This paper focuses on exploring the qualitative findings, namely the narratives of the young people who have participated in prevention programs while at school. Its main objective is to explore how the implementation of GBV prevention programs in the school context contributes to the transformation of students' perceptions and attitudes towards gender roles and its impact in their lives.

To do so, twelve semi-structured online interviews were conducted in 2021 and 2022 with young people who have participated in GBV prevention programs during their school years. The aim was to create biographical narratives regarding their participation in these programs and to focus on their perceptions of its impact in their lives.

A semi-structured guideline was used so that the focus could be directed to the project's impacts in the young people's lives. The script included prompts about their relationship with the school and teachers and how they would describe their experience with the project (including positive and negative aspects). Having a semi-structured guideline was preferred based on its flexibility, allowing the sequence of topics to be adjusted and introducing new questions to gather more detailed information where appropriate. The semi-structured interviews also create an informal and dynamic atmosphere, which is mandatory when working with young participants, to facilitate an in-depth exploration of their attitudes on specific themes (Crow and Semmens 2007).

The selection of participants was focused on the identification of those who might have been exposed to GBV prevention programs in schools. To get to these participants, it was necessary to establish a previous contact with staff and schools that worked in primary prevention programs. These professionals indicated possible contacts of young people who participated in these projects, and they were then contacted by the research team. The snowball sampling method was also introduced since some participants provide contacts of their colleagues who have also participated in prevention programs. Twelve participants were identified for this qualitative part of the research. The aim was to explore in detail their experiences and perceptions regarding the participation in the GBV prevention program.

As per Table 1, the participants were mainly female (eight girls and four boys), aged between 15 and 21. To support the results, some excerpts from the interviews are presented in the text with the participants identified by the letter P followed by their identification number (1 to 12).

Table 1. Participants' gender, age, and respective codes.

Participant	Gender	Age
Participant 1 (P1)	Female	15 years old
Participant 2 (P2)	Male	15 years old
Participant 3 (P3)	Male	21 years old
Participant 4 (P4)	Female	18 years old
Participant 5 (P5)	Female	18 years old
Participant 6 (P6)	Male	17 years old
Participant 7 (P7)	Female	16 years old
Participant 8 (P8)	Female	18 years old
Participant 9 (P9)	Male	18 years old
Participant 10 (P10)	Female	17 years old
Participant 11 (P11)	Female	17 years old
Participant 12 (P12)	Female	17 years old

The Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto Ethics Committee approved the study. The study was guided by ethical principles to guarantee

the rights of the participants. The interviews were preceded, in most cases, by a previous contact between the research team and professionals to identify the availability of potential participants. Following this, the research team contacted the potential participants via email or phone. During these interactions, the study's objectives and the prospective use of data collected were clarified. Privacy and confidentiality of the information provided were guaranteed during the data collection process. Written informed consent forms were signed by all participants and they were also reminded before the interview started that they would be audio-recorded to facilitate the transcription process. It was explained to participants that they could leave the interview at any moment without any need for an explanation and that they could refuse to reply to any questions. All interviews were conducted by researchers with experience in implementing GBV prevention programs with young people and with experience conducting interviews online. Interviews were conducted online on a date and time selected by participants, ensuring they would be at a convenient place. The interviews were, on average, about one hour.

Interviews were then manually transcribed and systematized into topics, and an e-book with biographic narratives was published (see [Magalhães et al. 2022](#)). In this e-book, the narratives are presented individually with the life stories of these young people explained individually (12 different and individual narratives). The reason for creating the narratives was to capture the perceptions of these participants, uncovering the meanings they assign to their lived experiences while participating in the prevention program. This required a flexible approach allowing for an understanding of the social world from the actor's perspective and ensuring that behavior is interpreted within the meaning systems employed by them ([Bryman 1984](#)).

This paper's innovative contribution is to analyze these narratives to identify commonalities and specificities of the young people's perceptions of these prevention programs. Two researchers with experience implementing GBV prevention programs and qualitative analysis were involved in the analysis of the 12 narratives. A thematic content analysis was conducted using categorization and data coding, following the analytical steps suggested by [Bardin \(2020\)](#): preanalysis, exploration of the material, and treatment of results (inference and interpretation). These two expert researchers coded the 12 narratives independently and then gathered all the results, discussing how to organize the main themes and sub-themes as well as which quotes were more relevant to illustrate such sub-themes. The initial categorization performed by each of the two researchers was discussed to be coded and grouped in sub-themes. Then, both researchers reanalyzed all narratives to identify and classify the quotes in these sub-themes that were the unit of analyses at this stage. Once all sub-themes were created and discussed, a thematic codification was proposed by each of the two researchers individually and discussed afterwards, leading to specific themes proposed in this paper. The other authors of this paper, who were not involved in the coding stage, verified the codification process. The result of this analysis was then evaluated by a senior expert who coordinated the project and who contributed to the validation and to ensure the reliability of these outputs.

3. Results

The students' discourses regarding prevention programs were organized into two main themes (Table 2). The first relates to their perceptions and opinions about the prevention programs, and the second refers to their own experiences and impacts of participating in those programs.

Table 2. Organization of the results by themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-Theme
A. Perceptions about the prevention program	A1. Importance of protagonism and active participation A2. Dynamism and art as expression A3. Moments of leisure and fun A4. Importance of facilitator A5. Materiality of reflections A6. Collective learning and collective belonging A7. Importance of prevention
B. Impacts of the prevention program	B1. At a personal level B2. On interpersonal relationships

3.1. Theme A—Perceptions About the Prevention Program

The theme [A] perceptions about the prevention program was divided into seven sub-themes: the importance of protagonism and active participation [A1], dynamism and art as expression [A2], moments of leisure and fun [A3], the importance of facilitators [A4], the materiality of reflections [A5], collective learning and collective belonging [A6], and the importance of prevention [A7].

Participants highlighted that prevention programs were opportunities to express themselves, engage in protagonism, and participate actively [A1]. They stated that, in these projects, they have the chance to give their opinion, to talk, and discuss issues, unlike the classes where (according to them) it is expected that they are quieter. Furthermore, the project was described as an escape from the routine activities of the classes.

“It was games, it was conversation, there wasn’t much of that thing, that restriction, of ‘we have to be quiet’.” (P2)

“We saw the project as a way to take refuge from school fatigue.” (P9)

Students also expressed that there were moments in which they felt valued and that everyone was encouraged to give their opinions. More than one participant recognized that these interventions promote the active participation of all students, including those who are usually not as participative. They stated that some activities push them “out of their comfort zone” and that the protagonism encourages reflection.

“There were a lot of people who completely left their comfort zone, and we were all in it together, and even though it was a long time ago, I remember clearly we all enjoyed the sessions.” (P1)

“(. . .) she (the moderator of the sessions) even helped us to express our opinion, which was incredible because not everyone in my class knew how to do it. It was incredible!” (P2)

Protagonism and active participation are also mentioned as ways to promote the development of skills such as creativity and critical thinking.

“So, it ends up giving everyone a voice, but then it’s also good to train our other skills such as creativity, improvisation, this issue of having critical thinking, a way of reflecting on things.” (P4)

Furthermore, they stated that the sessions had many dynamics, namely using art as a way of expression and promoting discussions [A2], and believed this contributed to more active participation. This incites an active commitment to the project. The programs were dynamic and interactive, with practical tasks and opportunities to develop “cool ideas” while discussing important topics related to gender equality and violence. The sessions that encouraged debate and discussion remained in the young participants’ memories. The projects sometimes involved preparing for a final seminar where students could share

their artistic products and knowledge with other classes and students they did not know. This final moment of sharing was described as part of collective learning and mentioned by many participants as one of the most critical moments of the project. The reasons this seminar made a good memory were related to the opportunity to work together on a final product, self-expression, the fact they had the chance to present it, and the fact this presentation was in another location, outside the school.

“[use of art] This is always very good, and I think that in addition to being a moment that we all generally enjoy, it is also good for those people who are more shy to get involved in things and not be too quiet in these projects. So, it ends up giving everyone a voice.” (P4)

“It was a Project that impacted me so much that, sometimes, it is difficult to explain. Just experience it. The seminars were also amazing. (...) Because we could do anything: we could do theatre, films, dance ... (...) We were all making friends. I remember we made friends. We were all on Instagram at the time (laughs). The seminars were incredible! It was really cool!” (P2)

“I think that for everyone, the best part of the Project was the seminar! And I think it’s the same for everyone! (...) I think it was very educational. And this moment was important for the class, it was a moment when we had fun and were away from school, we weren’t under that pressure from the teachers.” (P9)

As stated in the previous quote, participants also reported that, when participating in the program, they also had moments of leisure and fun [A3].

“(. . .) and it was really cool because it was that time of the week that everyone was looking forward to, that time of relaxation!” (P1)

“And it could be a moment for us to relax . . . because the Project was this, I remember, we went to the sessions very relaxed, relaxed, thinking about what we were going to talk about and then when we reached the end of the year and made the artistic moment we committed ourselves. We were all doing it, and this was a moment when we relaxed, we didn’t have to think of this as something that would be evaluated. It was a time for us to relax and have fun as a class without feeling the pressure of grades.” (P10)

In all projects mentioned, the sessions involved the figure of the facilitator. Several participants referred to the importance of this facilitator [A4] as a person from outside the school, especially not a teacher. The reasons for that preference were the lack of expertise on the discussed topics and the possibility of feeling more “supervised” or “evaluated” when providing their perceptions and opinions about the topics under debate. By having a facilitator who is specialized in the issues and does not grade them, the students felt more comfortable being genuine. A younger facilitator was also mentioned as preferable, given that participants think that their perceptions would be more understandable by someone who does not have a significant age gap compared to them.

“We, at school, when we see an older teacher, try to have as much distance and respect as possible with the facilitators, as they were younger, we end up having more trust, and I think this was a good indicator, something positive from the Project so that we would commit more to the project and feel that we were not being supervised.” (P9)

Students also highlight that the facilitators created a good empathic relationship with them. In some cases, this relationship continued after the projects ended, and participants stated that, if they had questions, they would contact the facilitators again. Some students compared the relationship between the facilitators with teachers and the class principals and mentioned that they feel more trust in the facilitator.

“I only met her [Project facilitator] because of the Project. I didn’t know her before, but five years later, I still talk to her. And at that school, there wasn’t even a teacher that I would have kept in touch with (. . .) And I think that if one day I had any doubts (. . .) that she would be someone I would turn to and ask.” (P1)

Discussing real topics, real situations, or cases was mentioned as being relevant to incorporating the learnings. This can be related to the importance of the materiality of reflections [A5]. Several participants recall how discussing real situations increased their attention and how these sessions remained in their memory.

“It was one of the exercises that impacted me the most because they were real texts that actually happened, and we had the privilege of reading and analyzing the issues that had happened. That was one of the ones that impacted me the most.” (P2)

The programs involve active participation, positioning young people as protagonists and encouraging them to express themselves through art, which is mentioned to contribute to collective learning and a sense of collective belonging [A6]. The stimulus to the participation of all people was viewed as a constructive process of learning, where all opinions matter.

“What happened in the sessions is that a topic would be opened, and then there would be discussion, and we would all comment (. . .) and then, as everyone added together the parts of what each person thought for the debate, we would arrive at the that it was final. So that helped us realize that ‘ok, that I was right about this, but he was also right about this’. So all the little points each person said formed the final perception.” (P1)

A feeling of collective belonging, even mentioned as a “community,” was expressed by some participants. The participation in these projects and the fact some tasks were prepared in groups (without the pressure of being marked by those tasks) were mentioned to have contributed to these feelings of union.

“‘I’m going to help you fight, face this and do other things, like raise your voice’, you know? And that happened there! I saw that! It’s just that everyone helped each other. And it was incredible; it was, like, a really united community.” (P2)

“then they also work a lot on the sense of unity in the class; when I mentioned just now that our class was very united, I don’t know, but something could also be due to this project too. Because when we are doing something together that is not group work to present and get a grade, which ends up being very formal things sometimes, it brings us together and makes us have an approach, as a group, different things.” (P4)

As previously mentioned, the participants felt their participation in the project was very positive. In some cases, students perceived themselves as lucky because they could participate in these activities.

At the same time, as expressed in the previous quote, students recognize that not all schools have the opportunity to participate in these projects. Furthermore, several participants stated, dissatisfied, that the projects ended when reaching a specific school level due to the mandatory examinations taken during those years.

“I was lucky enough to have the Project for two years at my school. . . Oh, but I regret that later, in other schools, there was no Project, especially now in high school.” (P1)

The participants demonstrated a deep understanding of the importance of prevention programs [A7], namely of starting at an early age and of a holistic and continuous intervention, including the importance of involving all school actors. They explained that they believed this would be important considering that the personalities of these children might not yet be developed and are, therefore, more permeable to change. Additionally,

participants believe that it is at the beginning of adolescence that people start to understand gender inequality and that most forms of GBV might be expressed; so, at this stage, discussions about these topics should already be in place.

“But I wish there were these projects because I think that the little ones are, mainly, the ones who listen the most because they don’t have fixed ideas yet. So, everything they hear, they’ll be thinking about it, whereas, if it’s already in high school, we all have a very formed opinion. We are all old enough to have an opinion, to know what we want, what we don’t like, what we like. On the other hand, little ones don’t.” (P1)

“We must draw more attention to young ages because that’s where it all starts; when you’re young, everything starts. And here we should draw more attention to gender inequality because I think it’s something that is being talked about a lot at the moment and needs to be debated.” (P9)

A few participants also mentioned the importance of promoting these projects not only at young ages but also during adolescence and young adulthood. A participant even supported their affirmation with data on dating violence released by an NGO, expressing the need to continue with the work on the prevention of this form of violence.

“And the fact that UMAR [Portuguese NGO] revealed weeks ago that 62% of young people trivialize and consider violent behavior during dating to be correct, I see that it is even more necessary for these projects to be integrated into schools, whether primary, secondary or higher.” (P3)

Prevention programs are noted as necessary in all contexts, but especially in schools, where socio-economic difficulties are more prevalent, and schools in more peripheral areas of the cities. Notably, four participants expressed the importance of these programs involving students, teachers, other school staff, and parents. They highlight the importance of involving the family to continue the discussions at home and inform parents who often lack knowledge or feel some of these issues are taboo.

“I think it would also be a really cool idea if there were these sessions for parents, too. Because... they have to know. Right? Yes, yes, it would be cool if they joined the project sometimes, wouldn’t it?” (P2)

Some participants explore the importance of holistic and continuous intervention. They refer to these topics as fundamental to society and, therefore, worth discussing in more depth. Participants explain that there might be some learnings in awareness-raising sessions, but when there is more time to discuss the topics, they are more likely to be better prepared for topics in which discussions are more frequent. Several participants highlighted the importance of the constant reinforcement of the emerging subjects, and one even stated it would be better if prevention programs could be implemented every week (and not twice a month, as this participant experienced).

“And although there are some occasional lectures, as it is not recurrent, and as we cover everything very, very quickly, in an hour or two hours, I think it ends up more coming in and out of our minds, despite some things remaining. But it’s much less than if we were supported for two years like I was. We had sessions every week (...)” (P1)

“(...) but there should be continuous moments throughout the school year, I say, for example, one per week, so that we have a common thread so that we can address various topics.” (P6)

“These projects should be something that continues over time, without a doubt, it makes a lot of difference.” (P9)

Finally, students acknowledge that, in these programs, it is fundamental to move from the awareness level to the consciousness level, using their own experiences as a starting point to develop discussions.

“I think the learning is much easier if the student is familiar with the topic. If he is generally within the topic, and has the knowledge and experience.” (P6)

3.2. Theme B—Impacts of the Prevention Program

The participants expressed different impacts of the prevention program [B]. These were categorized into two main sub-themes: at a personal level [B1] and on interpersonal relationships [B2].

Regarding the impacts of the program at a personal level, participants reported an improvement in academic performance, development of critical thinking, maturity and self-reflection, communication, activism/civic participation, and at a professional level. Regarding their academic performance, young people reported greater engagement in classes and an improvement in their grades. The project’s interactive and thematic approach was highlighted as motivating and transformative within the school environment.

“(. . .) so much so that this project significantly raised our grades according to the class board because, in the classroom, we were very participative, truly engaged, and we also took advantage of the sessions because we enjoyed listening to discussions on these topics.” (P1)

Regarding the development of critical thinking, the young participants reported that the project fostered critical reflection and debate, helping them to reassess their opinions, being more prone to learning and to understanding different perspectives.

“One thing I struggled with at the beginning, but that helped me evolve a lot, was the aspect of having moments of critical reflection, asking questions like ‘what does gender-based violence mean to you?’ and making us think about things, then forcing us to critically assess things that perhaps I never thought before.” (P4)

The participants also stated a positive effect on maturity and self-reflection, namely personal growth and maturation, with accounts of changes in their thinking and increased social awareness.

“I honestly think that the Project and, of course, the education I received, but the Project made me form my own opinion and views on these topics. It made me someone who is not easily influenced (by peers).” (P8)

“The Project has influenced this my freer side, something I realize now while being interviewed. Given that the Project always conveyed that we should always strive to be more, to express our opinions, and to help others. So, I’m doing that! And the project also helped me to think about other topics, other paths. Of course, it opened my mind to have strength and do (. . .). I became a more open person!” (P11)

Regarding the improvement in communication, the participants mentioned progress in their ability to express themselves, overcoming fears such as public speaking, and more assertive communication.

[Young person with a stutter issue] “But I think it’s projects like these that, testing me . . . because I have to share, take away some of that anxiety about speaking in public, and I think I discovered a much more open side of myself, this openness to speak with an audience, rather than just (speaking) more at a personal level of communication, within a small group.” (P6)

Regarding activism and civic participation, participants said that, after their involvement in the project, they were more interested in engaging with social causes such as

gender equality and human rights. The project also served as a catalyst for practical activist and civic actions, such as participating in marches.

“I learned a lot about Human Rights, not just knowing about them, but knowing how to act nowadays. That is, how we can make a difference as individuals, and that also gave me a very different perspective on things and made me want to be more active in society as well.” (P4)

“So, I started to get more interested, and that’s when I started going to marches, I started attending protests, you know? It was this whole set of things that led me to see how society is today.” (P2)

Regarding professional impact, the project stands out for its influence on the participants’ career choices and in empowering them to make informed professional decisions, mainly through the development of essential skills such as empathy and respect for diversity. Participants highlighted communication as a critical skill influenced by the project, namely respectful, tolerant, and inclusive communication, especially in interactions with the public.

“And the Project also taught us to be more tolerant and respectful, and that I can make me a more conscious professional, especially when dealing with the public.” (P12)

“And let’s say it was even an eye-opener because I’m a public relations professional, and my job involves relating to both men and women, regardless of gender and sexuality. So... I can’t just communicate (as I was talking with) with heterosexual men because my profession is about interacting with diverse people, having interaction, and communicating...” (P3)

The desire to align career choices with personal values and the aspiration to create social impact stemming from the experiences gained through the project was a recurring theme. Participants revealed that the project influenced their professional choices and how they conceived the social impact of their future careers, thus acting as a vector for personal and professional transformation, aligned with practical learnings of ethical and social values.

“I would love to be part of a Project, I would love to belong to something where I could help and share this opinion I have, which I believe is right, at least from my point of view, with as many people as possible, and help people as much as I can.” (P8)

Lastly, the project had an impact on interpersonal relationships, particularly in identifying toxic relationships. Overall, participants highlighted the project as a unique and enriching experience, creating a safe and empowering space to learn and debate relevant topics. It was considered an important turning point in their educational and personal trajectories. The project was also identified as a catalyst for substantial changes in participants’ perceptions of themselves, their relationships, and society. Specifically, the transformative role the project played in the lives of these young people was highlighted, offering tools to identify and overcome abusive relationships.

“And also because, besides the issue with my parents, at the time I was in a relationship that wasn’t particularly healthy. It was a toxic relationship, and sometimes my freedoms weren’t respected, particularly the fact that I wanted to spend time with my friends... well, it also made me feel strange that I was in a relationship and reached the point of avoiding being with certain people just because my girlfriend didn’t like it. And she didn’t respect this, and my parents thought I should get involved in this project because of this...” (P3)

The interactive and practical approach was highlighted as particularly effective in engaging the young people and bringing to light issues often neglected in the traditional school environment.

“(. . .) the Project made me want to help them beyond just respecting them.” That is, I’m thankful for the Project for coming and exposing the problems because maybe some people understood, and it probably bothered them since they were such innocent . . . it’s a good thing this Project was here!” (P11)

4. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of schools as settings for prevention programs. They are not only educational spaces but also arenas for social struggles and conflicts tied to social class, gender, sexual orientation, and other intersectional factors. Through the narratives of the youth, it becomes evident that schools often act as microcosms of broader societal dynamics, where violence can manifest daily. This reinforces the critical need for GBV prevention programs in school contexts (Crooks et al. 2019; Kirk et al. 2017). Moreover, youth reflections revealed that the sessions developed within the GBV prevention program provided valuable self-expression, active participation, and protagonism opportunities. Participants frequently emphasized the facilitators’ role in fostering respectful and dynamic discussions, which created a supportive and inclusive atmosphere for learning. These expressions have also been identified in the review of Villardón-Gallego et al. (2023) where it was concluded that prevention projects would be more effective in programs that promote dialogue, spaces to be heard, and students’ participation.

The use of art as a way for expression emerged as a particularly impactful approach, enabling participants to engage with complex topics in tangible ways while fostering a sense of collective belonging. These findings align with prior research indicating that interventions with creative expressions effectively raise awareness, reduce gender stereotypes, and promote healthy conflict resolution among youth (Heard et al. 2020). Additionally, participants highlighted the significance of the leisure and fun spaces created during the sessions, allowing them to express themselves freely in a secure environment. This corroborates evidence from Villardón-Gallego et al. (2023), emphasizing the importance of such initiatives in supporting youth development and enhancing the overall learning environment as well as improving the school environment. Another interesting conclusion from this study is how participation in such programs has impacted young people’s personal growth, allowing them to improve their critical thinking and communication skills. Also, as a result of the exposure through the programs, the students felt encouraged to engage in civic participation and activism places or platforms of action, and their professional development was also positively influenced. This critical thought about the world and their personal development is also an identified result of projects that are participatory and gender transformative (Banyard et al. 2019; Pérez-Martínez et al. 2023).

The findings further suggest that involvement in initiatives of this nature harnesses the potential for significant transformation in participants’ values and outlooks (Villardón-Gallego et al. 2023). Beyond fostering personal development, the effects extend to their interpersonal relationships and professional aspirations as individuals become adept at identifying and addressing toxic dynamics (Farmer et al. 2023). By offering an engaging and empowering educational experience, the program served as a catalyst for profound changes in participants’ self-perception, their interactions with others, and their understanding of broader societal issues (U. N Women 2016). The importance of GBV prevention programs was strongly affirmed, with participants advocating for their implementation from a young age to instill awareness and resilience early on (Crooks et al. 2019). The

study also points to a critical challenge: addressing school violence in all its forms, whether perpetrated by peers, teachers, or other professionals. Educators and other stakeholders must take proactive measures to protect victims, hold perpetrators accountable, and implement violence prevention strategies (U. N Women 2016). Discussing GBV prevention with children and youth who are simultaneously experiencing violence may lead to counterproductive outcomes. As such, primary prevention efforts must acknowledge that children and adolescents learn about violence not only in familial contexts but also within schools and other places. The whole-school approach and blended interventions are also supported as fundamental by the participants in this study and by the literature (Magalhães et al. 2016; Yount et al. 2017)

To ensure sustainable progress, prevention programs must be evaluated beyond their immediate impacts (for example, through follow-up evaluations) (Fagan and Catalano 2013; Farrell et al. 2001). While measuring short-term effects is crucial, it is insufficient to measure and assess long-term social change. Comprehensive evaluations should focus on broader indicators, including shifts in youth perspectives, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (CIG 2020), as illustrated by the narratives analyzed in this study.

In summary, this study highlights the value of GBV prevention programs in schools, demonstrating their positive role in promoting personal growth, communication, and civic engagement. The findings highlight the positive impact of these programs on youth at personal and interpersonal levels, emphasizing the importance of early implementation and long-term evaluation.

Limitations and Further Studies

The methodology implemented has some limitations. Conducting individual interviews, especially remotely using videoconferences, may have influenced some responses due to social desirability. Participants might have felt compelled to give responses aligned with perceived expectations. Moreover, the sample consisted only of voluntary participants who were likely more engaged with the program, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings.

The research also faced challenges due to the age of the participants (adolescents), who may lack the confidence to articulate their views on school dynamics and violence. Similarly, they might not have reflected on the prevention program's impact on their lives. As a result, responses may not fully capture the nuances of their experiences and perceptions.

Future studies should aim to include the perspectives of young people who have participated in similar programs in a broader range and analyzing all types of prevention programs (e.g., from awareness-raising to long-term holistic programs). Interviewing young adults or adults about their past participation in these programs is also important for identifying potential impacts in the longer term.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study aims to clarify the complex role that schools play as both educational institutions and spaces where social dynamics, including issues of GBV and intersecting identities, unfold. The findings underscore the necessity of implementing GBV prevention programs within educational settings, as these initiatives not only promote self-expression and critical engagement among youth but also contribute to creating a supportive learning environment. The transformative potential of these programs is evident in the participants' experiences, which highlight their role in enhancing personal growth, developing critical thinking, and encouraging civic participation and a deeper understanding of societal structures.

Recognizing schools as key spaces for addressing GBV and cultivating healthy communication is essential, as these environments support both personal and professional development. A comprehensive and holistic approach to GBV prevention must prioritize early integration into school curricula, incorporating creative methods such as art to engage students effectively. Moreover, a whole-school approach—one that actively involves both students and educators—is crucial in creating safe, inclusive, and supportive environments that empower young people and promote lasting behavioral change.

Beyond implementation, the study also highlights the need for continuous evaluation of prevention programs to ensure their long-term impact. Sustainable social change requires ongoing efforts that address shifts in attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors over time. Thus, GBV prevention must be seen as a continuous commitment, starting from an early age, to not only tackle immediate concerns but also contribute to the development of a more equitable and respectful society.

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