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EVALUATION OF A TRAINING PROGRAM AIMED AT YOUNG LAWBREAKERS TO PREVENT GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE

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Evaluation of a Training Program Aimed At Young Lawbreakers to Prevent Gender-Based Cyber Violence

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Abstract

This study focuses on the evaluation of a training program aimed at young lawbreakers designed to prevent Gender-Based Cyber Violence (GBCV). The program was implemented in five European countries (Spain, Finland, Italy, Portugal and Romania), and the training materials were developed by expert researchers, and then reviewed and discussed by the trainers and young people for their improvement and adaptation to the target group. A mixed research methodology combining quantitative and qualitative approaches was used. On the quantitative side, a survey was implemented with a pre-post design without a control group to examine changes in the youths' responses before and after the training. For the qualitative approach, open-ended interviews were conducted to gather participants' viewpoints. The results showed significant differences pre and post, with their conceptions of GBCV and sexism particularly improving after the training, while Internet safety actions also increased. The main lessons learned by young people were related to gender stereotypes, types of GBCV, discrimination and its forms, and recognizing themselves as perpetrators and/or victims. The trainers' evaluations of the group's knowledge, their participation in the training activities, and their development of emotional and digital competencies to cope with GBCV, were all positive.

Keywords: Gender-Based Cyber Violence; discrimination; intervention; victim; aggressor.

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Introduction

Gender-based cyber violence (GBCV), also known as gender-based violence in the digital sphere, takes the form of harassment, intimidation or aggression on digital platforms. This phenomenon is characterized by the use of electronic media, the Internet, social media, text messages, or emails to disseminate harmful information or insult, threaten or harass a person repeatedly and deliberately (EIGE, 2017).

Literature review

In a recent study surveying 2,400 Spanish adolescents ages 12 to 17, mostly at the Compulsory Secondary Education level, 46.8% of the young people stated that they had suffered some type of violence through cyber media in the preceding two months (Esteller, Flexas, Aguilar & Adrover, 2023). In Spain, according to the Ministry of Equality's study of violence in adolescence, the incidence of gender-based violence in adolescent couples through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) was up significantly in 2020 compared to 2013. Most young people, however, do not identify these actions as evident forms of gender-based violence in their personal relationships or those of their peers, and tend to find justifications for them (Díaz, Martínez, Martín & Falcón, 2021; Donoso, Rubio & Vilà, 2018).

The impact of GBCV is associated with symptoms of mental impairment, increased scholastic stress, and emotional and behavioral problems (Garaigordobil & Machimbarrena, 2019). Other symptoms associated with GBCV include health problems (George & Odgers, 2015), and it has even been found to have a strong association with suicidal ideation compared to traditional forms of bullying (Przybylski & Bowes, 2017; van Geel, Vedder & Tanilon, 2014). Similarly, lower overall assessment of satisfaction with their lives is observed (Esteller et al., 2023; Donoso, Vilà & Rubio, 2021; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Victims and aggressors have more social, emotional, behavioral and academic problems than other young people who are not involved in violent dynamics, suggesting that cyberbullying has negative consequences for all the adolescents and young people involved in it (Ortega, Del Re & Casas, 2016).

Situations of particular vulnerability, such as a lack of social support networks, or poor ones; isolation, and the acceptance of traditional gender roles, etc. are risk factors in the issue of cyber-violence, such that young people under state protection are considered to constitute a high-vulnerability group (World Health Organization, 2011). Data and research on gender-based cyberviolence regarding adolescents and youth in custody within juvenile justice systems are scarce, despite the fact that they are likely to encounter more situations of cyberviolence in this context. In this group, violence in general has received more attention than gender-based violence and cyberviolence. In addition, when addressing

GBCV in youth, the focus is often on romantic relationships and violence in past or current relationships (Gonzalez Monje, 2018). Juvenile justice systems, however, are often a masculinized sphere in which girls are a minority, such that their concerns and specificities often go unnoticed (Bodelón & Aedo, 2015). Addressing the concerns of these girls and young women in this masculinized setting is much needed in relation to GBCV (Ruiz & Cortés, 2023; Cinelli, Quattrociocchi, Galeazzi, Valensise, Brugnoli, Schmidt, Zola, Zollo, & Scala, 2020). Specialized training to prevent gender-based cyberviolence should pay attention to changes in gender roles, behavioral perceptions and the identification of the "perverse links between hegemonic masculinity and gender-based violence" (Ruiz, 2018). The educational challenge when working with young people is to turn them into agents actively averting GBCV (Donoso & Rebollo, 2018; Colas & Jiménez, 2006), strengthen their interpersonal skills and their ability to develop new competencies, as well as encourage them to share and communicate their knowledge and experiences with their peers, boosting their self-confidence and social skills (Kilkelly, Forde & Malone, 2016).

The European-level convention (Istanbul Convention, 2011), which has been a fundamental step in the fight against gender-based violence, includes some key points to work on the prevention of gender-based violence, including awareness and education programs. Along this line, there are intervention programs in GBCV, but not all have been evaluated, and most are for adolescents and young people, in general, but not for specific groups such as the one we are dealing with in this paper.

Methodology

Objectives

The general aim was to evaluate the impact of a training intervention aimed at young offenders, designed to prevent gender-based cyber violence (GBCV) among those in this group. The specific objectives were:
– To analyze the perceptions of young people as regards GBCV and on sexist stereotypes, as well as to identify the frequency of their safety actions on the Net before and after the training.
– To gauge the young people's perceptions of lessons learned after the training.
– To get the trainers' perceptions of the participants' knowledge, their participation in the training activities, and their development of emotional and digital competences to deal with GBCV after the training.

The intervention focused on training young people on five topics addressed in specifically designed materials on GBCV: Introduction to GBCV and its origin; Sexual cyber-violence; Controlling cyber-violence; Online hate speech against women; and Intersectionality and multiple discrimination. The materials were designed by the expert research staff, and reviewed and discussed by 11 trainers and

12 young people, who gave their feedback for the improvement of the materials. In this way the materials could be adapted to the target group (Rubio, Donoso & Luque, 2023). The training methodology was mainly active-participatory, and lasted 10 hours.

Design

A mixed methodology (Creswell, 2009) was used, combining a quantitative and qualitative approach. In the first case, a survey method was applied using both a post and pre-post design, without a control group (Cook and Campbell, 1979), allowing the latter to explore differences in the young people's responses between before and after the training via the data collection instruments. In the qualitative approach, an open-ended interview was conducted, allowing the participants' perspectives to be gathered.

Sample

The study involved young people and the professionals charged with training them. The total number of young participants was 94, 82% of whom were under judicial measures, and the rest were at social risk. Their average age was 18.4, the youngest being 13 and the oldest being 22. With regard to gender, 68% identified themselves as male, and 30% as female. The young people came from five countries: Spain, with 36 participants; Portugal, with 11; Italy, with 10; Finland, with 10; and Romania, with 20. There were 11 professional trainers, who work in the field of Social Education.

Instruments

Ad hoc instruments were designed to get both the perspectives of the young participants and those of the professionals in charge of conducting the training.

The youths' perspectives

For the study of the youths' perspectives, responding to the first and second objectives, three scales and an interview were designed.

These are three-point scales aimed at measuring the views of young people on the following key aspects worked on in the training, before and after the program:
- Concept of GBCV: a scale consisting of 7 items, where 1 = Not violent, 2 = Somewhat violent and 3 = Very violent. The scale shows a good level of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha of 0.8).
- Concept of sexism: a scale formed by 5 items, where 1 = It's not sexist, 2 = It's a little sexist, and 3 = It's very sexist. The scale shows a good level of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha of 0.8).

– Frequency of safety actions on the Internet: a scale made up of 7 items, where 1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes and 3 = Always. The scale shows a good level of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha of 0.9).

The scales are based on the Gender Violence 2.0 Questionnaire (Donoso, Rubio & Vilà, 2018) and their content was validated by experts. They were answered on paper, and each participant's informed consent was obtained.

The interview sought to gauge the young people's perceptions of what they learned after the training, and consisted of two questions addressed to each of them. It was conducted by the trainers, who recorded the answers. They were asked:

– What did you learn in each module (what contents and what has changed in you, in terms of your beliefs or behaviors)?
– What surprised you most about the training you received?

The system of categories for the first question was established a priori and includes the topics of the modules, as well as other aspects that were not addressed, but are related: (1) Basic concepts of gender violence; (2) Hegemonic masculinity and new masculinities; (3) Online sexual violence; (4) The dangers of social media; (5) Responses to online gender violence; (6) Intersectionality; (7) Other concepts related to online gender-based violence. The category system for the second question was established a posteriori.

Professional trainers' perspectives

For the study of the trainers' perspectives (third objective), a scale was designed to determine their perceptions of the group's previous knowledge and what they learned, the interest and participation they showed, their development of emotional competencies (emotional awareness and regulation, emotional autonomy, social competence, life skills and well-being) and their digital competencies (Digital Contents and Data Literacy, Safety, Problem-solving, Communication and Collaboration). The scale has 8 items and four points; 0 = Not at all, 1 = A little, 2 = Enough, and 3 = A lot. The scale has a good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha of 0.8).

Data analysis

The SPSS (v27) statistical package was used to analyze the quantitative data. Central tendency index analysis and inferential analyses of contrast of means were performed using nonparametric tests, since the data did not follow a normal distribution. The qualitative analysis of the interviews was carried out using the content analysis strategy (Krippendorff, 2002). Through this analytical method, the information obtained was classified into a system of categories (both deductive and inductive) that subsumes all aspects of the reality studied and assigns them new meaning and significance. As a support tool for the management of all the qualitative information, the ATLAS.ti program was used (Version 22).

Results

From the young people's perspectives, all the scores on all the items, on all three scales, and also the totals, were better post-training. After the training the young people recognized more violent acts, and more sexist stereotypes, and increased the frequency of their online security actions. Where the training was most effective was in relation to the concept of sexist ideas, and safety actions on the Internet, as shown by the total results on Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the three scales

Items	Number participants	PRE	Number participants	POST
Are violent this actions?				
Calling by cell phone or sending insistent e-mails or messages to a person to have sex with them	88	2.40	91	2.71
Sending unrequested sexual content by Internet to the recipient.	88	2.47	91	2.76
Ridiculing/making fun of someone in virtual environments because of their sexual orientation (LGTBI+)	88	2.39	90	2.69
Checking several times on the Internet or on a cell phone where one's partner is and what they are doing	88	1.93	91	2.42
Making denigrating/disrespectful comments about women and/or LGTBI+ persons on the Internet	88	2.43	90	2.71
Blackmailing a person through the Internet to have sexual relations.	88	2.68	91	2.89
Sharing photos or videos of erotic, pornographic or sexual content, without permission, for revenge with an ex-partner	88	2.69	90	2.90
Are sexist this ideas?				
The man must earn more money than the woman to support the family	88	2.40	91	2.49

If girls show their body, they will have more impact (likes, followers, comments etc.)	88	2.47	91	2.65
On the Internet, in photos and videos, it is preferable that girls look beautiful (with make-up, dolled up, filter-up etc.)	88	2.39	91	2.56
In social media men should be always strong, masculine, etc.	88	1.93	91	2.51
Boys are naturally better playing videogames than girls	87	2.43	89	2.65
How often do you do these actions?				
Say NO to inappropriate proposals made to me by other people	86	2.36	91	2.62
Explain what is happening to people I trust so that they can help me	88	2.13	91	2.53
Blocking people who bother me in virtual environments	87	2.29	90	2.63
Activate all social network privacy conditions	88	2.05	91	2.46
Turn-off the geolocation of your phone	88	1.99	91	2.58
Report photos that are inappropriately uploaded to the network	88	2.13	91	2.33
Do not open questionable social media messages etc. from unknown sources	86	2.09	91	2.56

The differences in means were statistically significant according to the Wilcoxon test (p=.000) for the recognition of violence (Scale 1), for the recognition of stereotypes (Scale 2) and for the frequency of security actions on the Net (Scale 3). See Figure 1.
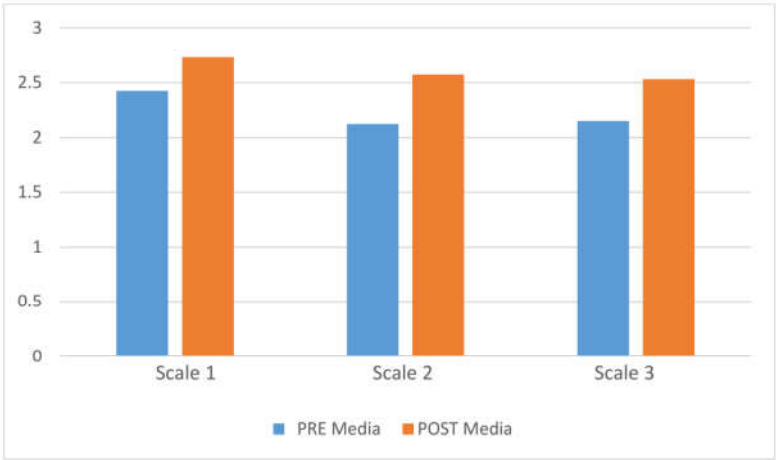
Figure 1. Contrast of means on the three scales pre-test and post-test.

In the meta-reflections collected via the interviews, the participants express that they have learned the basic knowledge related to the topics covered. In general, they highlight having learned about gender stereotypes, types of gender-based cyber-violence (GBCV), discrimination and its forms, and recognizing themselves as perpetrators and/or victims. The comments show that they have learned the contents of each module, and in some cases the workshops served to reinforce previous knowledge.

They also point out competency aspects such as learning to avoid "macho" behavior, to be respectful of others, to avert violence by not provoking or responding to provocations, to protect themselves from cyber violence through different safety actions on the Net, and to express their feelings (Table 2).

Table 2. Categories of analysis and excerpts by way of example from the interviews.

Module	Categories	Examples
1	Basic concepts	"Gender Stereotypes; Hegemonic Masculinity; Difference between sex and gender; Violence online" (c2, m1, q1) "I learned about gender differences" (c4, m1, q20) "To express myself and talk about cyberharassment" (c1, m1, q16) "online violence and its different forms" (c3, m1, q6)
	Hegemonic masculinity and new masculinities	"I learned not to always be macho" (c4, m1, q2) "Men are allowed to be free too" (c4, m1, q5)

	Other related concepts	"That you don't have to look down on anyone" (c1, m1, q11) "I learned that it's good to express my feelings" (c4, m1, q12)
2	Basic concepts	"women are more vulnerable" (c3, m2, q3) "We learned that we should respect others" (c4, m2, q3) "We learned that we shouldn't talk to strangers on the internet" (c4, m2, q1)
	Online sexual violence	"Information about revenge-porn, nudes, generally more infomation about online violence and different forms and consenquences of the online behaviour" (c5, m2, q2)
	Other related concepts	"I learned to express my emotions and feelings" (c4, m2, q15) "I've learned that it's not good to be influenced by other people" (c4, m2, q3)
3	Basic concepts	"Being careful with strangers" (c2, m3, q4) "What is gender-based violence" (c3, m3, q11) "I've learned not to do nasty things on the internet, not to give hate" (c4, m3, q8)
	Dangers of social networks	"Different examples of hate speech online, information on racism, and the general informtion about the world of social media" (c5, m3, q3) "To be careful in social networks" (c1, m3, q1) "social network and violence" (c3, m3, q3) "We learned about abuse on social media" (c4, m3, q6)

4	Basic concepts	"I've learned that I need to be careful with people older than me" (c4, m4, q2) "I've learned to be careful who I talk to online" (c4, m4, q19)
	Responses to gender-based violence online	"gender-based violence must be reported" (c1, m4, q3) "to report cyber violence (any type)" (c3, m4, q5) "to use carefully your social profiles" (c3, m4, q10) "I learned to protect myself from online harassment" (c4, m4, q1)
	Other related concepts	"I learned that you have to be a good person" (c4, m4, q12) "I've learned to be kind and respectful, to not pick on people on the internet. To be good in my own way" (c4, m4, q17).
5	Basic concepts	"what means to be a víctim" (c3, m5, q7) "We learned that we must not discriminate" (c4, m5, q4)
	Intersectionality	"The term and concept of intersectionality; how broad it is; how much influence does it have when we are talking about the discrimination and harassment" (c5, m5, q1)
	Other related concepts	"We learned that it is important to know how to speak and how to choose our words" (c4, m5, q2)

In relation to the aspects that generated the most surprise and those about which the young people were most ignorant, the consequences of online violence, everything bad that can happen on the Internet, hegemonic masculinity, and hate speech on social media stand out (Table 3). Young people were also surprised by the learning activities implemented in the training: videos, examples, games, debates and the possibility of being able to express themselves freely. This shows that young people lack forums in which they can express themselves and discuss these issues. This was a theme emerging from the analysis.

Table 3. Categories identified in the question "What surprised you most about the training received?" and excerpts as examples.

Categories	Examples
Hegemonic masculinity	Micro male chauvinisms I surprised revenge-porn
Consequences and actors of online violence	Being an actor on cyber harassment It surprised me that we can be victims of violent behavior online. It surprised me that if I don't respond to the abuser, he'll stop. Online violence and different forms and consenquences of the online behaviour. I was surprised by the things that can happen online.
Advertising influence	The importance of publicity in the creation of stereotypes
Hate speech online	Racism and denigration. That many people are victims of bullying. I have to be careful what words I use. I can be harassed on the internet.

Finally, the trainers' assessment of the young people as a group in all the modules was good (with averages ranging, in general, between 2 (Enough) and 3 (A lot), with the highest score for Module 4 (Online hate speech against women), in which the young people assimilated the knowledge best, and showed greater and better participation, according to the trainers. Likewise, the trainers believed that the participants began with poor knowledge of the topics addressed, this being the item with the lowest scores. The trainers also generally issued higher scores for participation, and lower ones for the development of digital competencies. The details of these data can be seen on Table 4.

Table 4. Statistics of the items on group assessment in each module.

Items	M1 Mean	M2 Mean	M3 Mean	M4 Mean	M5 Mean
The group had some knowledge to the topic worked on in the workshop	1.75	1.60	1.60	1.60	1.50
The group had sensitivity to the topic worked on in the workshop.	2.20	2.60	2.20	2.40	2.00
The group has shown interest in learning from the work done.	2.40	2.60	2.40	2.60	2.25
Participants have shown signs of having assimilated the concepts worked on.	2.00	1.80	2.40	2.60	2.50
The group has actively participated in the activities	2.60	2.40	2.80	3.00	2.50
Participants have commented on personal or other people's experiences related to the concepts worked on	2.40	2.60	3.00	2.80	2.50
The group has developed their emotional competences necessary for each topic worked on.	2.40	2.20	2.40	2.20	2.25
The group has developed their digital competences necessary for the topic worked on.	1.80	1.40	2.20	2.20	1.75
Total	2.19	2.15	2.37	2.42	2.15

Discussion

The study pursued the general objective of demonstrating the impact of training aimed at the prevention of GBCV among young criminal offenders, with three specific objectives designed to gather the perspectives of both these young people and their trainers.

Regarding the first objective of gathering young people's perceptions of GBCV and sexist stereotypes, as well as identifying the frequency of their safety actions on the Net before and after the training, the results show a significant difference pre and post. Their conceptions of GBCV (Donoso & Rebollo, 2018) and sexism improved after the training, and their online security actions also improved, although to a lesser extent. Recognizing seems to be easier than taking action.

The results are consistent with those of other studies, such as that by Navarro, Carbonell and Oliver (2019), where students ages 12-17 reduced their sexist ideas after an intervention via an app.

With regard to the second objective of getting the young people's perceptions of the lessons learned after the training, the results show that the aspects about which the young people were most ignorant were those related to the consequences of online violence, hegemonic masculinity, and hate speech on social media. The main lessons learned were related to gender stereotypes, types of GBCV, discrimination and its forms, and recognizing themselves as perpetrators and/or victims. Likewise, young people perceived improvements in their capacity to be emotionally aware and to regulate their behavior on the Internet in order to avoid GBCV, both as victim or aggressor. Other intervention programs in GBCV also yielded good results in the form of improved emotional skills among law-breaking adolescents (Hernando, 2007; Martínez, Morales & Pozas, 2018: Zych et al., 2017; Cantillo & Moreno, 2020). Likewise, young people positively evaluated participatory training strategies (role playing, debates, viewing videos, dialogue, co-creation, ...), which also yielded good results among adolescents participating in other training programs (Banyard et al., 2019; García, Planas & Solé, 2022).

Regarding the third objective, to gather the views of the trainers in relation to the group's knowledge, their participation in the training activities, and their development of emotional and digital competencies to cope with GBCV after the training, the results were positive. They indicated, however, that the participants' digital competencies did not improve much, perhaps because the training and its activities were not focused on them. Other studies coincide in evidencing the young people's participation and involvement in the interventions' training activities (Hernando, 2007), as well as the role of emotional competencies in the fight against cyber-violence (Garaigordobil, 2012).

Conclusion

The training had a positive impact, according to both the young people and their trainers, with both highlighting the participation and the possibility of expressing themselves, thus emphasizing the importance of generating forums where young people are given a voice and where practical activities are carried out aimed at developing competencies to deal with the complex phenomenon of GBCV. Young people who have had trouble with the law are less exposed to these actions than other young people, and, in this study, showed surprise at and interest in them. A recurring outcome through this training was that the participants recognized themselves as victims and/or aggressors, a key aspect to be able to protect themselves, in the former case, and to change their attitudes, in the latter. Also repeated was their recognition of hegemonic masculinity and sexist stereotypes, which is necessary for them to be able to adopt new, more egalitarian

roles. Programs such as the one proposed, which help to deconstruct hegemonic patriarchal discourse, are necessary. It is also vital to promote a culture of peace and good habits on the Internet in order to fight against one of the aspects about which young people are most ignorant: hate speech on the Internet.

The intervention shows that change is possible through preventive and group interventions that modify the cognitive structures leading to gender-based cyber-violence, achieving emotional and behavioral changes.

Limitations

Although this study focused on GBCV training among young lawbreakers is pioneering in this group, it has some limitations. On the one hand, its methodological design, without a control group, does not allow us to compare the results with people who did not receive the training. Another limitation is its limited sample of young people, and also the difficulty of comparing some of the results obtained with those of other studies, given the scarcity of research focused on this group.

Acknowledgments

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