

Evaluation of a Gender-Based Violence Prevention Programme in the North of Portugal

A Follow-Up Study





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Context

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has profound implications for human development and the protection of fundamental rights. A growing body of evidence highlights that girls and LGBTQIA+ youth are disproportionately affected by dating violence, sexual violence, discrimination, and sexual harassment. In response, multiple school-based intervention programmes have been implemented to promote gender socialisation processes grounded in gender equality.

Schools occupy a privileged position and hold considerable transformative potential in the prevention of, and response to, SGBV. This perspective is echoed by key European institutions (e.g., the EU Directive 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence, the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe) and by Portugal in reference documents, including legislative instruments, to consolidate education as a central strategy for combating SGBV. Among the most impactful initiatives was the *Education, Gender, and Citizenship Guidelines: A gender mainstreaming strategy in the education system (2010)*, developed by the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) in partnership with the Portuguese Ministry of Education.

Nevertheless, the growing influence of conservative and populist movements is being reflected in counter-legislative proposals that undermine institutional and public support for integrating gender perspectives in education. The ideological instrumentalisation of gender equality and sexuality education, including the growing influence of social media in youth socialisation, constitutes one of the principal challenges currently confronting the implementation of gender-transformative programmes within school environments across Europe.

this phase between September and October, using a mixed-methods approach that combined surveys, interviews, and focus groups. In total, 227 students, 129 teachers, and 52 legal guardians participated through online questionnaires. 40 students, 22 teachers, and 2 legal guardians participated in interviews, and focus groups were also conducted with students and teachers.

Phase 2: Intervention

Conducted by the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto, and supervised and supported throughout by APF, this phase focused on testing a gender-transformative programme in schools. APF recruited and trained nine teachers to deliver six 50-minute sessions based on the European pedagogical “Safe from Sexual and Gender-Based Violence” Toolkit. This training was aimed at improving the implementation of the regular Citizenship and Development curriculum. The sessions were implemented during the 2023/2024 school year in four schools in northern Portugal, reaching around 300 adolescents aged 14–15.

For evaluation, a mixed-methods design was used, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches:

- ▶ A cluster-randomised controlled trial with two parallel groups (n = 286) – an Experimental Group (EG) that received the sessions and a Waitlist Control Group (WLC) that followed the regular curriculum and later accessed the programme four months after randomisation;
- ▶ A focus group with teachers (n = 8);
- ▶ Individual interviews with School Board members (n = 4), operational assistants (n = 8), and legal guardians (16 parents and one social worker).

Phase 3: Follow-up

Grounded in a gender-responsive framework, this phase assessed the long-term effects of the SfSGBV programme on students' attitudes and behaviours regarding gender equality and the prevention of SGBV, as well as teachers' experiences and competencies. A qualitative evaluation design was applied, including a gender-specific storytelling activity and focus groups with participating students (4 with girls, 4 with boys; n = 41). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers (n = 5), psychologists (n = 4), school board members (n = 4), operational assistants (n = 6), and representatives from APF (n = 2) and IPPF (n = 1). The final phase of the study was conducted by Kosmicare.

Reflections on Implementation: Limitations & Strengths

Implementation and evaluation were significantly affected by structural and institutional constraints. Tight timelines linked to the funding cycle, delays in public procurement, and the late formalisation of partnerships compressed preparation and reduced alignment between the intervention and its evaluation. These conditions required adapted rather than newly validated tools, limiting the precision of impact assessment across modules.

Participation from schools was uneven due to concerns about topic sensitivity, competing workload demands, and administrative burden. Teacher turnover, strikes, and limited working time further affected programme continuity and prevented systematic monitoring of implementation fidelity. Recruitment for the qualitative component began late in the academic year, resulting in low student participation, one less focus group, and reliance on convenience sampling, which restricts representativeness. The sensitive nature of the material may also have generated social desirability bias.

Mitigation strategies included confidentiality safeguards, trained interviewers, symbolic incentives and contextual supplementation. Findings were interpreted conservatively to avoid overgeneralisation. However, the programme ultimately reached only four schools rather than the twenty initially planned, reducing the overall evidence base.



To enhance the quality and comparability of future evaluations across the EU, the study highlights the importance of:

- ▶ Methodological rigor and continuity, ideally achieved through longitudinal designs implemented by a single research entity to maintain coherence.
- ▶ Representative sampling strategies, to ensure generalisability across diverse school populations.
- ▶ Validated and context-appropriate measurement tools, particularly for behavioural outcomes related to gender and SGBV.
- ▶ Mixed-methods approaches, integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence to strengthen interpretability and nuance.
- ▶ A gender-responsive research lens, systematically embedded across all stages of data collection and analysis.

Results: Learning across the Research Phases

Dimension / Indicator	Phase 1: Baseline	Phase 2: Experimental	Phase 3: Follow-Up
<p>Knowledge on gender, sexuality and SGBV</p>	<p>Students' conceptualisations revealed a predominantly binary understanding of gender, with limited and superficial knowledge regarding gender diversity and SGBV. Significant gaps were identified in recognising school and community support services. Students struggled to define SGBV, although they associated it mainly with dating and peer violence. Teachers and legal guardians considered themselves relatively informed, but their practices reflected limited engagement.</p>	<p>Students, teachers, and school staff reported increased knowledge and greater familiarity with the concepts addressed. However, results did not indicate structural or sustained changes in beliefs and behaviours. Normative conceptions and resistance persisted, particularly regarding gender and sexual diversity. The programme was acknowledged as a relevant learning opportunity, although its impact remained confined to participating groups.</p>	<p>Students reported broader perspectives and enhanced knowledge, especially concerning gender diversity, power dynamics, and manifestations of SGBV. They described greater ability to recognise signs of violence and to critically reflect on gender inequalities. Nevertheless, discursive resistance, gender stereotypes, and normalisation of control and jealousy in intimate relationships persisted.</p>
<p>Attitudes towards gender equality</p>	<p>Attitudes were primarily centred on formal equality between men and women, with limited critical capacity to identify sexism and power asymmetries. Students' and teachers' discourses reflected difficulties in challenging stereotypes and prejudices. Legal guardians, while reporting comfort in addressing these issues, indicated limited engagement in actual family-based discussions.</p>	<p>Data pointed to positive changes in attitudes and behaviours among some students, also recognised by teachers. The programme was perceived as relevant and conducive to reflection. Resistance, especially among boys adhering to traditional views, persisted. Teachers reported professional growth and increased confidence in addressing these issues but highlighted structural barriers to systemic change.</p>	<p>Students emphasised respect and empathy as central lessons learned. However, strong polarisation was observed between boys and girls: boys were more resistant to discussing violence and to deconstructing male privilege. Adherence to traditional stereotypes and narratives, and the influence of social media, remained a major barrier to attitudinal transformation.</p>

Dimension / Indicator	Phase 1: Baseline	Phase 2: Experimental	Phase 3: Follow-Up
Relational competences and violence prevention	<p>Competences to deal with SGBV were limited. The most frequently reported strategies included turning to adults or authorities, but students showed little knowledge of concrete school or community procedures. Teachers reported institutional constraints and lack of clear protocols to act effectively.</p>	<p>Some gains were observed in relational competences, such as students' increased willingness to intervene in peer violence situations. School staff reported positive impacts on how young people recognised and responded to SGBV. However, these effects were hindered because of the overall school climate.</p>	<p>Students showed greater ability to identify risk signals and to reflect on possible interventions. However, responses varied: some preferred informal solutions or peer-based support, while others emphasised reporting to trusted adults. A widespread perception of the inefficacy and lack of responsiveness of teachers and other school staff, undermined students' trust in formal mechanisms.</p>
Overall perception of the programme's impact	<p>Before programme implementation, schools were perceived as insufficiently prepared to address gender and SGBV issues. Shortages in training, material resources, and community articulation were also highlighted.</p>	<p>The intervention was considered globally positive and relevant. Teachers valued the programme's structure and alignment with curricular goals, recognising it as a useful and innovative tool. Main constraints identified were lack of time for in-depth implementation, shortage of school psychologists, and difficulty in ensuring consistent teacher engagement. Suggested improvements included the use of real-life testimonies, earlier implementation (before 9th grade), and more specialised support.</p>	<p>Students valued the participatory and dialogical nature of the programme, recognising personal gains in critical awareness and empowerment. However, they underlined the lack of continuity and limited time of the programme's sessions as obstacles to deeper engagement.</p>

Key Findings: Long-Term Impact of the SfSGBV Study

Several promising findings are gleaned from the study. The participatory design of the programme created safe spaces for collective reflection and discussion on SGBV, gender, and sexual diversity. Pedagogical tools proved effective in addressing sensitive topics and fostering student engagement. Teachers reported increased knowledge, confidence, and competence to integrate gender equality, sexual diversity, and SGBV prevention into their teaching practice. Positive effects were observed in students' interpersonal relationships and communication, including greater respect, openness, and sensitivity in classroom interactions. The programme contributed to long-term cognitive change, particularly in students' understanding of gender diversity, male privilege, and power dynamics in SGBV.

However, it was not sufficient to transform deeply rooted gender norms and harmful stereotypes related to sexuality, gender diversity, and intimate relationships as students continued to experience strong external influences—such as family expectations, peer pressure, and social media—that conflicted with the programme's messages. Positive outcomes were also hampered by structural and organisational challenges, including limited time and lapses in institutional support (from schools, Ministry of Education).

Recommendations

Programme-Level

- ▶ Ensure age, cultural and digital relevance of content, integrating media literacy and examples drawn from students' lived realities.
- ▶ Strengthen teacher training, with accredited hours and structured support from specialised teams to ensure confidence and fidelity in delivery.
- ▶ Improve implementation conditions by integrating the programme into the formal timetable, ensuring adequate time and flexible learning environments.

- ▶ Strengthened monitoring and evaluation systems, ensuring accountability, transparency and comparability of implementation and learning outcomes.
- ▶ Promote multidisciplinary facilitation models, involving teachers, school psychologists and civil society organisations to enhance emotional safety, expertise, and continuity.

Structural and System-Level

- ▶ Guarantee universal access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) through a compulsory, evidence based, age appropriate and inclusive curriculum embedded across school levels and aligned with a whole-school approach.
- ▶ Institutionalise and extend programme duration across school years, moving beyond short-term or stand-alone interventions to enable sustained behavioural and attitudinal change.
- ▶ Strengthen policy continuity, ensuring that CSE and gender-transformative education remain protected from political fluctuations and curricular interruptions.
- ▶ Establish multisectoral collaboration among schools, civil society organisations, decision-makers, parents, healthcare professionals, and other support services.
- ▶ Facilitate long-term sustainability through adequate resources, trained staff and consistent alignment with national strategies on gender equality and SGBV prevention.



European-Level

At European level, the findings of this study align with and reinforce the priorities set out in the **Roadmap for Women's Rights**², and the **EU Directive 2024/1385 on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence**³.

- ▶ The Directive explicitly calls on Member States to adopt preventive measures through formal education, including strengthening sexuality education, socio-emotional competencies, empathy, and the capacity to develop healthy and respectful relationships.
- ▶ It further emphasises targeted support for groups at heightened risk, including children, LGBTI youth, students with disabilities, and those facing linguistic or literacy barriers.
- ▶ The Directive imposes legal obligations on Member States to take specific measures to prevent rape, promote the central role of consent in sexual relationships, and raise awareness that sex without consent is a crime.

² [Roadmap on Women's Rights - Declaration of principles for a gender-equal society | European Commission](#)

³ [Directive - EU - 2024/1385 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

Conclusion

Despite the challenges, the SfSGBV Study demonstrates that schools can be a powerful lever for cultural change when properly supported. Equipped with interactive tools and a participatory pedagogy, teachers and students made clear gains in awareness, critical reflection and relational skills. The programme succeeded in creating constructive dialogue on sensitive issues and planted the seeds for deeper shifts in understanding of power and inequality – important foundations for long-term change.

Importantly, the findings confirm that sustainable impact requires systemic support. Short-term pilots are insufficient: lasting change demands continuity, institutionalisation and alignment with broader policy commitments.

With stable commitment and resources, gender-transformative programmes can scale beyond pilot schools to become standard practice. Investing in teacher training, ensuring compulsory, high-quality CSE, and strengthening monitoring systems are necessary steps to establish this reality. There are also opportunities for future research: to examine the influence of sociocultural and political dynamics, including shifting policy environments, on the sustainability of school-based gender equality programmes, as well as to assess the role of digital ecosystems, especially social media platforms, and the way they influence the gap in gender socialisation and relationship norms among young boys and girls.

Collectively, European instruments and the SfSGBV Study findings emphasise the need for systemic and coordinated action, ensuring that schools across the EU function as protective environments where equality, diversity, consent, and human rights are both taught and practiced – and where CSE contributes directly to the prevention of SGBV and the promotion of safe, inclusive learning environments.

