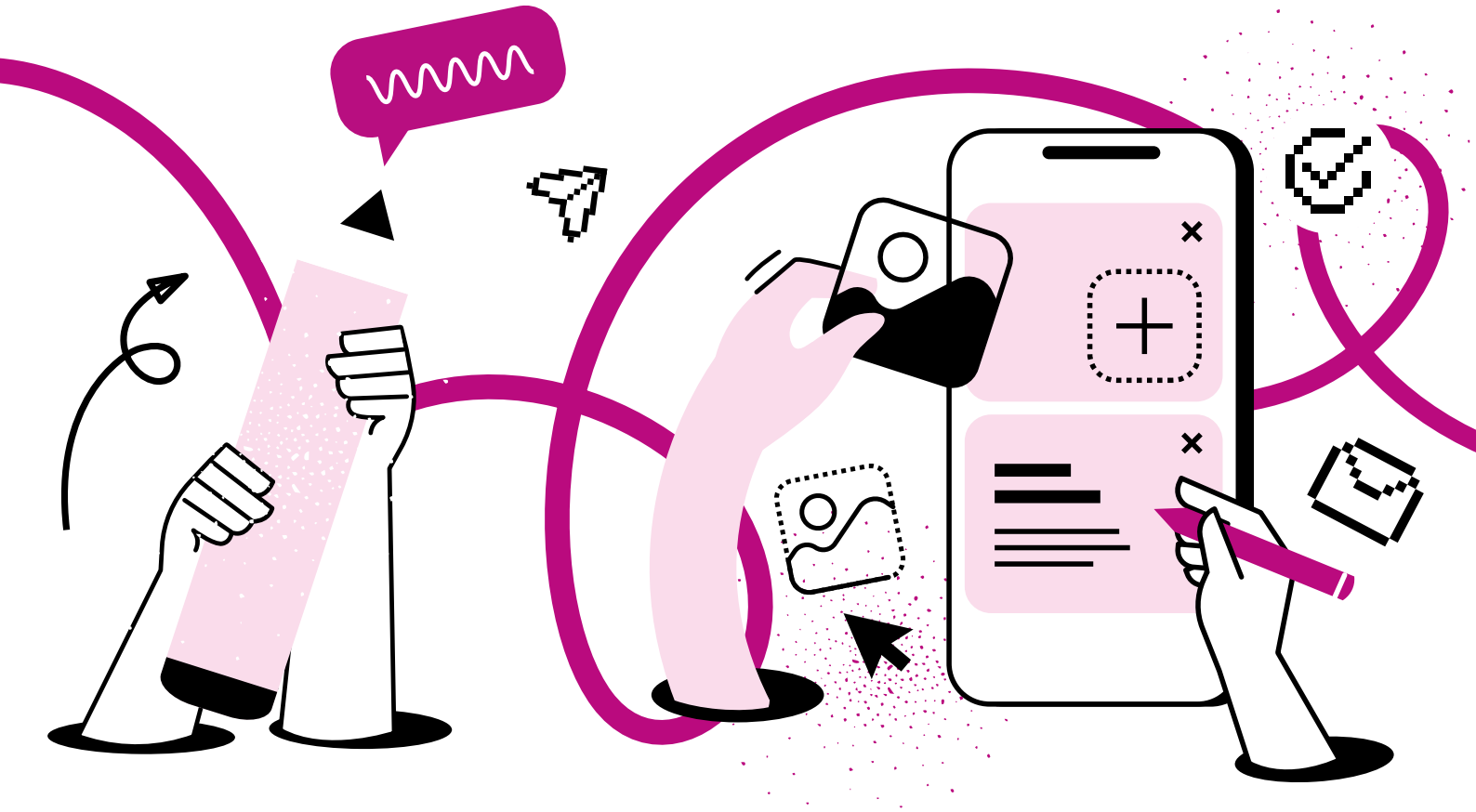
GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CROATIA, PORTUGAL, AND SPAIN

The final report integrating the results of the bE-SAFE Project
Raising awareness about gender-based cyber violence and advocating for a safer online environment for women and girls



Co-funded by the European Union

PRAVOBRANITELJICA ZA RAVNOPRAVNOST SPOLOVA

IDIZ Institut za društvena istraživanja u Zagrebu
Institute for Social Research in Zagreb

THE FINAL REPORT INTEGRATING THE RESULTS
OF THE bE-SAFE Project

GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CROATIA, PORTUGAL, AND SPAIN

CERV-2022-DAPHNE-101096462-bE-SAFE

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Domine – Organizacija za promicanje ženskih prava
Comissao para a Cidadaniae a Igualdade de Genero (CIG)
Platforma Portuguesa para os direitos das mulheres (PpDM)
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"Podizanje svijesti o rodno uvjetovanom kibernetičkom nasilju nad djevojčicama i ženama te stvaranje sigurnijeg online okruženja"

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The Institute for Social Research in Zagreb was responsible for the conceptualisation of the methodology in three countries: Croatia, Portugal and Spain. The research team included: Mirjana Adamović, Ratko Đokić, Anja Gvozdanović and Dunja Potočnik. The research was carried out in 2023 and 2024 in collaboration with the IPSOS agency in Zagreb, which conducted the research in Croatia, Portugal and Spain.

The partners that contributed to the realisation of the research are: Center for Education, Counseling and Research (CESI) and the feminist organization for the promotion of women's rights Domine (Croatia); Platforma Portuguesa para os direitos das mulheres (PpDM) and Comissao para a Cidadaniae a Igualdade de Genero (CIG) from Portugal and Lem Espania (Lobby Europeo de Mujeres en España) from Spain.

The network of national experts from Croatia, Portugal and Spain that contributed to this report are: Katarina Križan from DOMINE (Croatia), Alexandra Silva from Portuguese Platform for Women's Rights (PpDM) (Portugal), and Lola Ferre Abellán, Laura Diaz Chorne, Jacobo Blanco Fernández, Andrea Rivera Mateos and Camila Salgado from Spain.

The work on this report was coordinated by the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb (Croatia).

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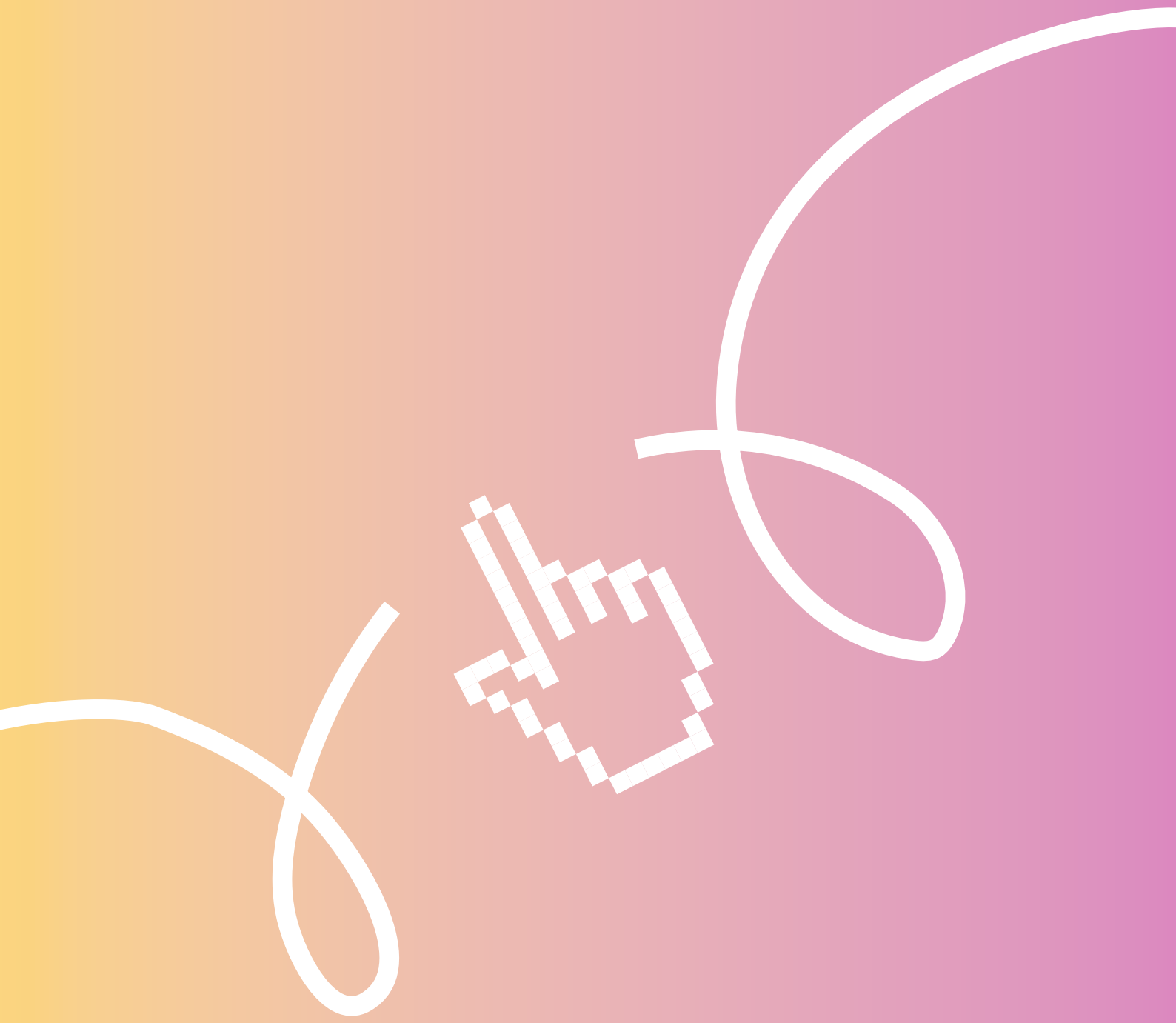


1. INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly digital world, young people are navigating complex online environments that significantly shape their socialisation, education, communication, and leisure activities. While digital technologies provide numerous opportunities for learning and connection, they also expose youth to various risks, including cyberbullying, misinformation, privacy breaches, and online exploitation. Among these risks, gender-based cyber violence (GBCV) has emerged as a critical and growing concern. GBCV refers to acts of violence directed against a person because of their gender, committed or amplified through digital technologies.

> *'Cyber-violence against women is an act of gender-based violence perpetrated directly or indirectly through information and communication technologies that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women and girls, including threats of such acts, whether occurring in public or private life, or hindrances to the use of their fundamental rights and freedoms. Cyber-violence against women is not limited to but includes violations of privacy, stalking, harassment, gender-based hate speech, personal content sharing without consent, image-based sexual abuse, hacking, identity theft, and direct violence. Cyberviolence is part of the continuum of violence against women: it does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it both stems from and sustains multiple forms of offline violence'.* (European Commission, Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 2020)[1].

Cyber violence against women and girls is a dimension of gender-based violence that is facilitated, perpetrated, and amplified through digital spaces and information and communication technology. Research suggests that adolescents, especially girls and women, are the most frequent victims of online violence, while men are most commonly identified as perpetrators.

Although GBCV primarily affects women and girls, this study indicates that young men and LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer/questioning) individuals are also involved and affected, particularly in relation to norms surrounding gender, sexuality, and masculinity. The nature and impact of violence differ across genders, underscoring the need for a nuanced and intersectional approach to research and policy development. With the advancement of artificial intelligence, perpetrators of GBCV now have access to new tools, particularly in the realm of image-based sexual abuse and online discrimination, opening up new and innovative opportunities for harassment.

1 European Institute for Gender Equality (2022). Combating Cyber Violence against Women and Girls. Available on: https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/combating-cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls

This report presents the main findings from the bE-SAFE research project, an international study examining GBCV among children and youth in Croatia, Portugal, and Spain. The project combines quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from focus groups and interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of GBCV. The research was conducted as part of the EU-co-funded project 'Raising Awareness About GBCV and Advocating for a Safer Online Environment for Women and Girls' (CERV-2022-DAPHNE-101096462-bE-SAFE).

1.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

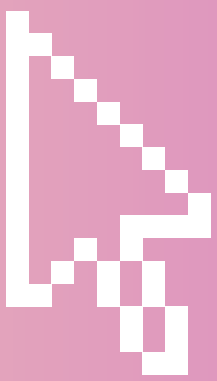
The primary objectives of this research were to:

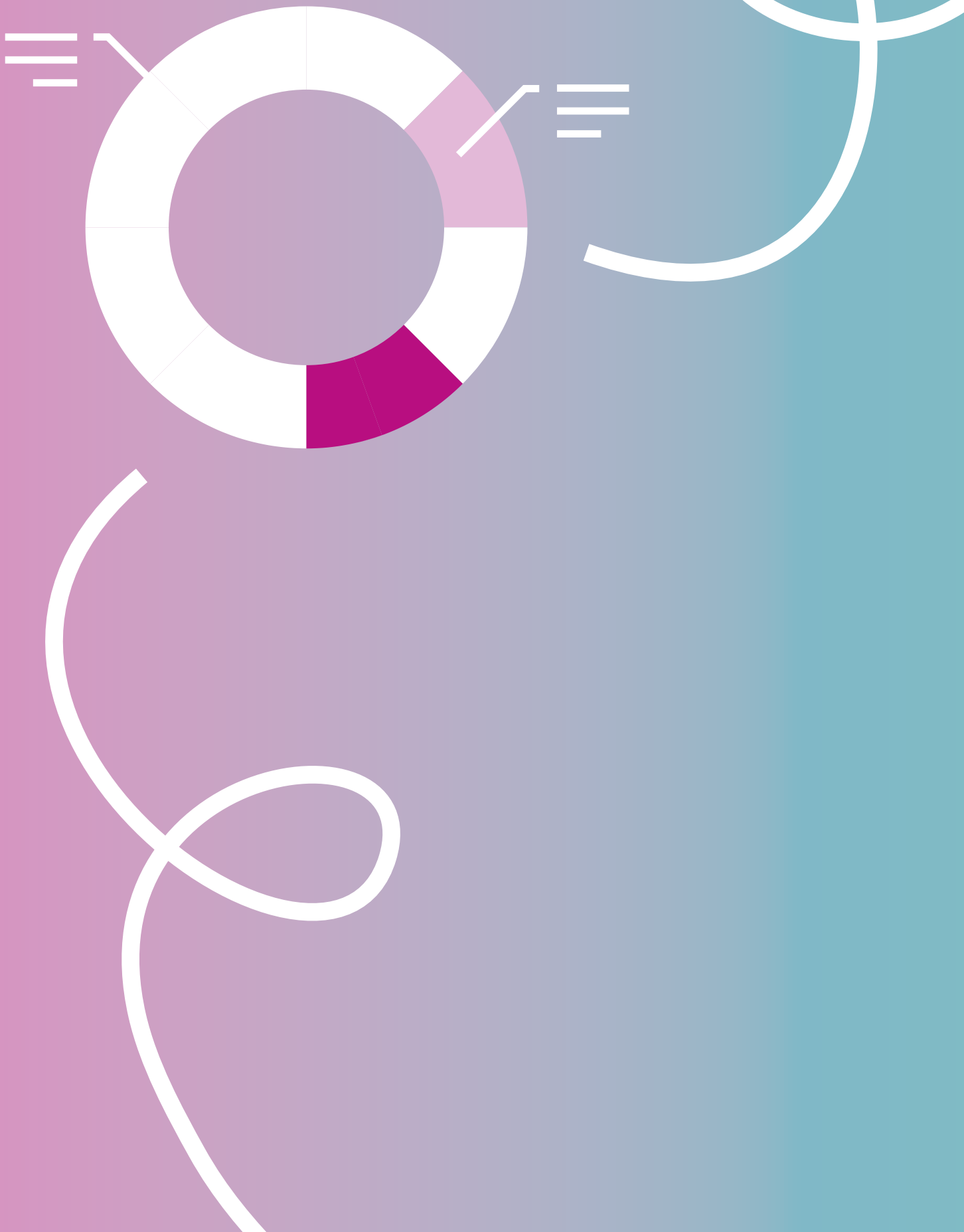
- examine the prevalence, manifestations, and effects of GBCV among children and young people aged 12 to 27 years;
- identify patterns of GBCV from three perspectives: witnesses, victims, and perpetrators;
- analyse gender differences and the specific experiences of LGBTIQ individuals;
- gather qualitative insights from young people, educators, and law enforcement;
- analyse the attitudes of parents/guardians towards the occurrence of GBCV among children and youth in Croatia, Portugal and Spain;
- compare findings across three European countries to identify similarities and differences;
- develop evidence-based policy recommendations for prevention and intervention.

1.2. STRUCTURE OF THE BROCHURE

This brochure is organised into ten chapters. Following the Introduction, which outlines the objectives of the bE-SAFE research project, the Methodology chapter describes the mixed-methods approach, including the quantitative survey design, sample characteristics across the three countries, and the qualitative component comprising focus groups and semi-structured interviews. To contextualise the main findings, we begin by analysing young people's and children's online habits and digital competences. The core of the brochure then presents country-specific findings for Croatia, Portugal, and Spain, each structured into two subsections that examine youth (18–27 years) and children (12–17 years) separately.

The Cross-Country Comparison chapter synthesises similarities and differences across the three national contexts, followed by the chapter presenting Qualitative Insights that illustrate key quantitative trends through respondents' quotations. The Consequences of GBCV chapter examines the behavioural, affective, academic, and professional impacts of online violence. The report concludes with the General Policy Recommendations for prevention and intervention.





2. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative focus groups and interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of GBCV among young people.

2.1. QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

In all three countries (Croatia, Portugal and Spain), the surveys were conducted in 2024 using two complementary methods. For the youth sample (18-27 years), the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method was used, with participants completing surveys online. For the children sample (12-17 years), the Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) method was employed, with trained interviewers conducting face-to-face surveys in schools.

SAMPLES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

For the youth sample (18-27 years), three respondent categories were defined based on combined responses on sex and sexual orientation[2]:

Female heterosexual (Female): women who identified as heterosexual; Male heterosexual (Male): men who identified as heterosexual; LGBTIQ: Individuals who identified as homosexual, bisexual, or other sexual orientation, and/or identified their gender identity as 'other'.

Table 1. Sample structure of young people (18-27) by country and respondent's sex and/or sexual orientation (%)

Country	Croatia		Portugal		Spain		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	%
Female Heterosexual	362	44.9	296	37.3	281	44.1	42.0
Male Heterosexual	380	47.1	365	46.0	252	39.6	44.6
LGBTIQ	64	7.9	132	16.6	104	16.3	13.4
Total	806	100.0	793	100.0	637	100.0	100.0

For the children sample (12-17 years), the analysis focused on differences between girls and boys regarding research aspects of GBCV.

2 In this report, the term gender is understood to refer to gender identity.

Table 2. Sample structure of children (12-17) by country and sex of respondents (%)

Country	Croatia		Portugal		Spain		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Female	235	50.5	293	62.5	199	51.6	727	55.1
Male	230	49.5	176	37.5	187	48.4	593	44.9
Total	465	100.0	469	100.0	386	100.0	1320	100.0

RESEARCH WITH PARENTS

A total of 700 parents participated in the online survey across the three countries: 250 in Croatia, 250 in Portugal, and 200 in Spain. Each national sample was a convenience sample, with participation limited to parents or guardians of children aged 12 to 14 at the time of the survey. Data collection was conducted in 2024 using the CAWI method (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing). To ensure consistency, each parent was asked to respond about only one child within the target age range. In households with multiple children aged 12 to 14, the questionnaire was programmed to randomly select one child for whom the parent would provide answers.

2.2. RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

MEASURES OF GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE (GBCV)

The frequency of witnessing, experiencing, and perpetrating gender-based cyber violence (GBCV) was assessed using 20 behavioural items. GBCV refers to acts of violence directed against a person because of their gender, committed or amplified through digital technologies (European Commission, Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 2020)[3]. The items were organised into eight categories:

1. **Verbal harassment and stigmatisation** (3 items): insulting someone based on their body appearance; insulting someone based on the looks that may imply homosexual orientation; insulting someone with sexually derogatory terms.

2. **Defamation and public shaming related to sexuality** (3 items): spreading lies about someone's sexual behaviour or sexual orientation; sharing fake sexual photos, videos, or audio content; setting up an online survey with offensive questions about someone's sexual behaviour.

3. **Unwanted sexual communication** (3 items): sending/receiving unwanted sexual messages; pressuring someone to talk about sex and their sexual activities; ignoring or excluding someone online due to their refusal to engage in sexual conversations.

4. **Sexual coercion, blackmail, and threats** (3 items): threatening or blackmailing someone with sexual violence; threatening or blackmailing someone with physical violence; threatening or blackmailing someone with sharing of their semi-nude, nude or sexual photos or videos.s.

5. **Online control and dating abuse** (1 item): online monitoring or control by an ex-partner, current partner, or crush.

3 European Institute for Gender Equality (2022). Combating Cyber Violence against Women and Girls. Available on: https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/combating-cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls

6. **Privacy violations and data abuse** (2 items): sharing someone's personal, private, or sensitive data without consent; sharing someone's private conversations about sex without consent.
7. **Image-based sexual abuse** (3 items): pressuring someone to send their semi-nude, nude, or sexual photos or videos; sharing someone's semi-nude, nude, or sexual photos or videos without consent; hacking or creating a fake profile to share someone's semi-nude, nude, or sexual photos or videos, comments and messages about someone.
8. **Transactional pressures and commercial sexual exploitation** (2 items): offering someone money for semi-nude, nude, or sexual photos or videos; offering someone money for sex.

For each item, the respondents indicated whether they had witnessed, experienced (as a victim), or perpetrated the behaviour within the past 12 months. The Results section presents prevalence rates of any form of GBCV at least once in the past 12 months across all three perspectives (witnessing, victimisation, and perpetration), separately for the two age groups (youth aged 18–27 and children aged 12–17), and across all three countries (Croatia, Portugal, and Spain).

Besides these core questions about GBCV, internet use patterns, media literacy, and risky online behaviours were also analysed in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the digital context in which GBCV occurs and to identify factors potentially associated with GBCV experiences.

Media literacy was assessed using items where respondents assessed their perceived knowledge of: appropriate image sharing, managing contact lists, information disclosure, situational online behaviour, forming online relationships, reporting harmful content, and controlling content sharing). The respondents rated each item on a 3-point scale ranging from *Not true for me* to *Very true for m*e. The results presented here show the prevalence of the answer *very true for me*.

Risky online behaviour was assessed by using seven items measuring respondents' engagement in potentially harmful online activities over the past 12 months. The items included: sending personal information to someone never met face-to-face, adding people never met face-to-face as friends/contacts, pretending to be someone else online, exchanging sexual messages, sending intimate photos/videos, visiting websites with sexual content, and meeting face-to-face with someone first known online.

The respondents indicated whether and how frequently they had engaged in each behaviour over the past 12 months. The results presented here show the prevalence of each behaviour, indicating whether respondents had engaged in it at least once during the past 12 months.

2.3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The qualitative component employed focus groups and semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth perspectives on GBCV from young people, educational professionals, and law enforcement agencies in respective countries. This approach complemented the quantitative survey data by providing rich contextual understanding of how GBCV is experienced, perceived, and addressed.

The participants in focus groups were asked about their perception of and opinion on online communication and the risks involved, with a special attention to GBCV. In addition, they were asked about the perpetrators of this type of violence, the relationship between online and offline violence, the roles of the different actors involved, support for victims or the measures established at school level for prevention and action.

Educational professionals (teachers and specialist staff in schools) participated in focus groups addressing the following thematic areas: perceptions and attitudes toward cyber violence against girls, including understanding of the phenomenon and its perceived prevalence; professional experiences with cyber violence among female students, including specific situations and interventions undertaken; institutional frameworks and school protocols for responding to cyber violence cases; connections between cyber violence, offline violence, and various forms of discrimination; consequences of cyber violence for victims and their broader environment; prevention and intervention measures at school, community, and national levels; and professional training needs for teachers and school support staff.

The semi-structured interview, conducted with members of the National and Local Police, included seven sections in which the characteristics of GBCV, the different existing perpetrators, the links with offline violence, its causes and the existing procedures or protocols on the subject were discussed. The questions were asked informally, with follow-up items used as the discussion progressed. The interviews also included recommendations by the officials, which were incorporated in this study.

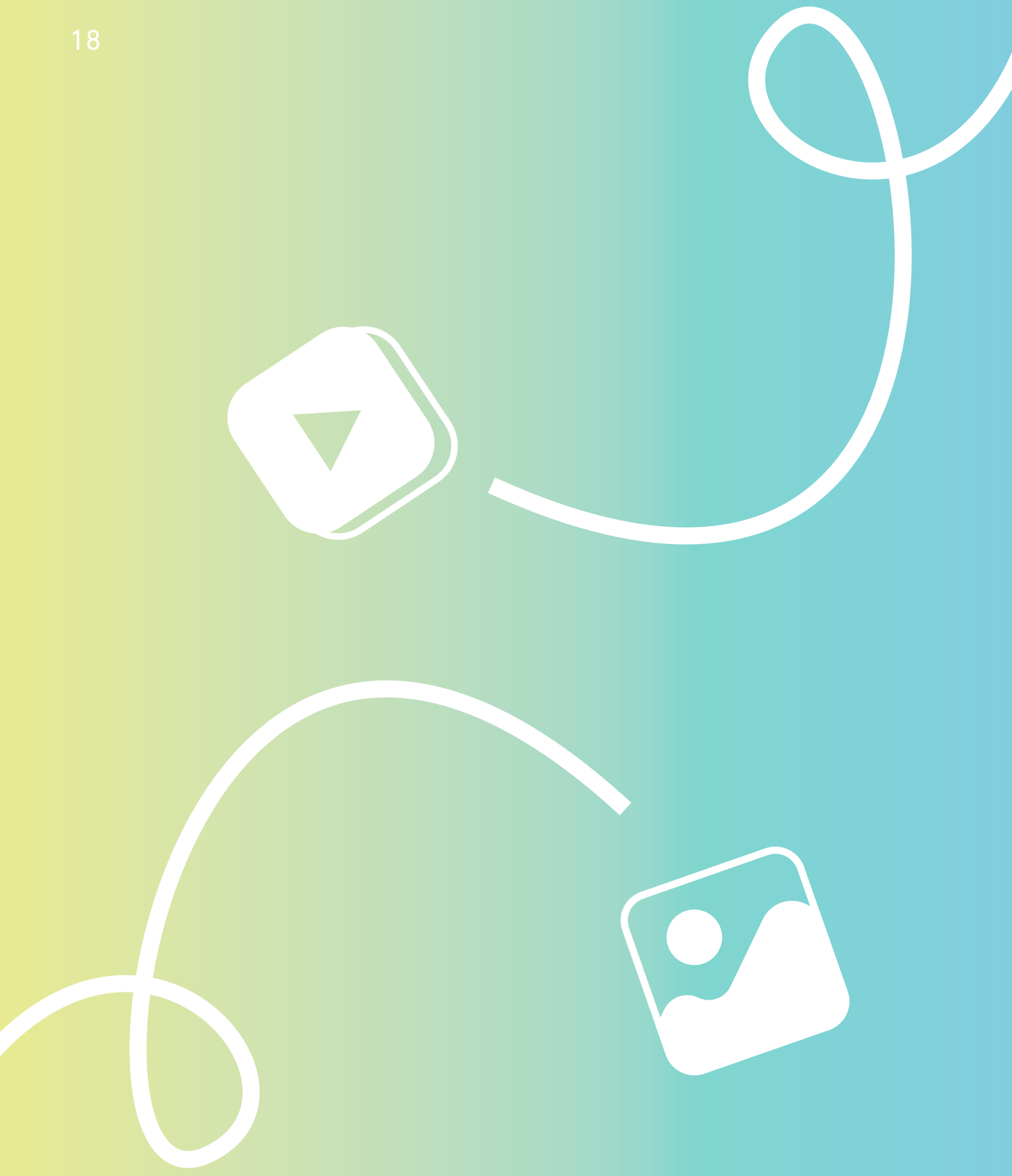
To complement the quantitative findings, we draw on qualitative data, presenting quotations that illustrate the main tendencies observed in the statistical results.

I have to say that from my own perspective, I had to continuously educate myself regarding terminology, how to find out certain things through Snapchat, what to click on, some things that you wouldn't normally think you would deal with. (High school, Zagreb, Croatia, Teacher)

Participant 3: What can we as a school do? That is more up to the parents.
(High school, Zagreb, Croatia, Teacher)

I think they need to, they need to talk about it, literally stand in the classroom and educate children about what violence is, what forms of violence are, who they can turn to, and show them some associations that could be useful. We only have a pedagogue and a librarian as far as professional services are concerned, so we don't have a psychologist or a special education teacher.
(High school, Slavonia, Croatia, Teacher)

If a case comes to us, we cannot turn a blind eye, we have to act.
(Varon; Teacher; R. Murcia, Spain



3. ONLINE HABITS AND DIGITAL COMPETENCES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CROATIA, PORTUGAL AND SPAIN

Understanding how young people and children navigate digital spaces is very important for contextualising their vulnerability to online harms. We interpreted the results with respect to age cohorts: children (12-17) and young people (18-27). Three interconnected dimensions shape this vulnerability: the amount of time spent in online communication, the digital competencies individuals possess to protect themselves, and the extent to which they engage in behaviours that may expose them to risk. The following sections examine each of these dimensions across the three countries and between age groups.

3.1. TIME SPENT IN ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Young people and children were asked how much time they spent daily using the internet to communicate with people other than their family members and caregivers in order to find out the extent of their digital social interactions with friends, peers, acquaintances, and strangers. The responses point to distinct national patterns, and some differences between age groups.

Croatian children averagely spend just over three hours (3.2 hours) a day communicating online. Boys and girls are nearly identical, with no significant gender gap. Croatian youth spend noticeably less time online than children: around two and a half hours a day on average (2.6 hours). Young women spend considerably more time in digital communication than young men (3.1 versus 2.6 hours). LGBTIQ youth show the same elevated level as young women (3.1 hours), well above the male average.

Portugal stands out as the country with the most intensive digital communication in both age groups. Children here spend an average of three and a half hours a day online, with a pronounced gender difference: girls communicate considerably more than boys (3.7 vs 3.2 hours). Among young people, the level remains high: around three hours a day (3.2 hours). However, the decline from childhood is less steep than in Croatia. Gender gap among Portugese youth virtually disappears.

Spain displays altogether different tendencies. Children here spend the least time in digital communication on average: under three hours a day (2.8 hours), and the gender difference is minimal, with girls slightly ahead (2.8 vs 2.7 hours). Young people in Spain spend slightly more time online than children (2.9 vs 2.8 hours), which is a tendency that diverges from the other two countries, where children report higher average usage. Gender differences between young men and women are minimal, while LGBTIQ youth spend more time online than both subgroups (3.1 hours).

These findings have important implications for the understanding of exposure to online risks, including GBCV, as more time spent in digital social interactions increases potential exposure to harmful content and behaviours.

This conclusion is in line with the declining sports and outdoor activities among children and young people, which is supported by a quotation given by a member of the professional staff at a vocational school in Croatia:

> *[...] I think that young people nowadays do too little sports and spend too much time on mobile phones, for they cannot spend two to three hours a day swimming in a pool as they can on mobile phones. If they went hiking, or if their parents took them by the hand and went to the cinema together, to the theatre, this way they would spend two, three hours without the mobile phone, and the space for the child to use the mobile would be limited. In my opinion, that's one of the ways of prevention.* (Professional staff, Slavonia, Croatia)

3.2. MEDIA LITERACY SELF-ASSESSMENT

Young people and children were asked how confident they felt about their digital skills across seven areas of media literacy.

Looking at those who said that having these skills was "very true" for them, differences can be detected among countries, with the gap widening even further among young people compared to children.

In Croatia, children report a moderately strong confidence, and young people report the highest levels of confidence in media literacy across all three countries. Among Croatian youth, over 80% expressed high confidence in most skills, which means that they know what information to share (86%), which images to share (84%), how to select content audiences (83%), remove contacts (81%), and behave appropriately online (80%). Croatian children show a similarly strong confidence in core privacy skills, particularly knowing what information to share (81%) and which images to share (76%), though they report a somewhat lower confidence in situational behaviour (61%) and reporting negative content (55%).

Portugal represents an interesting reversal: children report the highest confidence among the three countries, while young people fall to the second place. Over three quarters of Portuguese children felt highly confident in key skills such as knowing what information to share (83%), selecting content audiences (79%), and behaving appropriately online (77%). Portuguese young people maintained a moderately strong confidence, though 8 to 14 percentage points lower than Croatian youth across most skills.

In Spain, both children and youth consistently show the lowest media literacy confidence across both age groups and all the measured skills. Among Spanish youth, only around a half felt highly competent in most areas, with a particular concern around reporting negative content (49%). Spanish children follow the same pattern, with only 41% confident in reporting harmful content, which is substantially lower than in Portugal (64%) and Croatia (55%).

Across all three countries and both age groups, the skill with the lowest confidence was making new friends online with only one quarter to one third expressing high confidence.

3.3. RISKY ONLINE BEHAVIOURS

Young people and children face a range of online risks that can affect their wellbeing, privacy, and safety. To assess the extent of engagement in potentially risky behaviours, the respondents were asked whether they had done any of seven particular activities in the past 12 months (Sent personal info to someone never met face-to-face; Added people never met face-to-face as friends/contacts; Pretended to be someone else online; Exchanged sexual messages; Sent intimate photos/videos; Visited websites with sexual content; Met face-to-face with someone first known online). The overall prevalence reveals concerning tendencies, with Spanish respondents consistently showing the highest rates across both age groups.

While nearly two thirds of **Croatian** young people (62%) had added strangers as contacts and 45% had met online contacts face-to-face, rates were notably lower among children (47% and 33% respectively). Around 10% of Croatian children had exchanged sexual messages, which is less than half the rate in Portugal (20%) and Spain (24%). Similarly, 9% of Croatian children had sent intimate photos or videos, compared to 13% in Portugal and 20% in Spain.

Portugal generally falls in the middle across both age groups, though with some notable variations. Around half of Portuguese young people (55%) had added strangers as contacts, while 43% had met face-to-face someone they had first known online. Portuguese children show somewhat lower rates: 46% added strangers and 27% met online contacts in person. The exchanging of sexual messages was reported by 43% of young people and 20% of children, which situates them between Croatia and Spain.

Spain shows the highest engagement in risky online behaviours across nearly all the measured activities for both young people and children. Among Spanish youth, nearly three quarters (73%) had added strangers as contacts, over a half (54%) had met in person someone they had first known online, and a half had exchanged sexual messages (50%) or sent personal information to strangers (50%). Spanish children follow the same pattern: a half (50%) had added strangers as contacts, a third (32%) had met online contacts face-to-face, and over a third (37%) had visited websites with sexual content, which is nearly double the rate of Croatian and Portuguese children. Sending intimate photos or videos was also the most prevalent in Spain, with 34% of young people and 20% of children reporting this behaviour.

Across both age groups, adding strangers as contacts and meeting online contacts face-to-face were the most prevalent risky behaviours, while sending intimate images was the least common. The majority of risky behaviours increases with age since young people consistently report higher rates than children.

These patterns align with self-assessed media literacy findings: Spanish respondents report both the lowest digital competencies and the highest engagement in risky behaviours, while Croatian respondents show the inverse pattern. The consistency across age groups suggests that national digital cultures and educational approaches may play a significant role in shaping online risk-taking behaviours from an early age.

Exploring one's own and other people's sexuality is an integral part of growing up and socialisation. Nevertheless, it depends on the developmental age of the child and young person whether some content is appropriate and whether it can leave psychosocial consequences for the individual. Patterns of initialisation of exploring sexuality are also related to the transmission of gender stereotypes, about which children and young people should be made aware from an early age. Also, in all three analysed countries, changes are needed at the level of value patterns and maintenance of stereotypes that are passed down from generation to generation, as is evident from the following statement:

Sexuality arrives much earlier, sexual information arrives much earlier and the information that arrives, we are already seeing it in the media and we see it through porn, through social media networks... a body image in the first and second year of ESO (Compulsory Secondary Education), as you said, very much in the traditional gender stereotype canon in both boys and girls, so I do see the risk in maintaining those stereotypes. (Teacher, Asturias, Spain).

She took a photo of herself dressed, had an open profile on Instagram, and they photoshopped it to make it look like she was naked.

(High school, Dalmatia, Croatia, girls)

And to my cousin too, her boyfriend shared her pictures all over [one croatian town] – everyone in my town knew about it. (High school, Dalmatia, Croatia, boys).

You've only got yourself to blame for getting into that situation. You could've lived like a normal person and nothing would've happened.

(High school, Dalmatia, Croatia, boys)

4. CROATIA

4.1. YOUTH IN CROATIA (18-27 YEARS)

4.1.1. WITNESSING GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE

The most commonly observed behaviours (Table 3) fall under verbal harassment and stigma, such as insulting peers based on their body appearance (60%), insulting someone's looks in the ways that imply homosexual orientation (53%), and using sexually derogatory insults (51%). Many young people had also witnessed sexuality related defamation or shaming, such as spreading lies about someone's sexual behaviour or sexual orientation (42%), as well as unwanted sexual communication, such as receiving unwanted sexual messages (38%). Nearly a third reported witnessing threats or blackmail involving physical violence (31%) and some claimed having been controlled or monitored online by a current or former partner, or someone they had a romantic interest in (30%).

Witnessed GBCV is unevenly distributed across gender groups (Table 3), with consistently higher exposure among women and among LGBTIQ young people. The largest disparity appears in unwanted sexual communication pointing to LGBTIQ young people, who are much more likely to encounter sexualised boundary violations in their online surroundings, and which may imply targeted harassment.

Overall, LGBTIQ respondents reported witnessing GBCV somewhat more often than heterosexual respondents, and within the heterosexual group, women reported higher levels of witnessing than men.

Table 3. Most commonly witnessed forms of GBCV among Croatian young people (%)

Witnessed behaviour	Total	Female	Male	LGBTIQ
Insults about body appearance	60	62	55	73
Insults based on looks that may imply homosexual orientation	53	56	48	64
Sexually derogatory insults	51	56	46	55
Spreading lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	42	45	38	44
Unwanted sexual messages	38	40	32	56
Threats of physical violence	31	28	34	34
Partner monitoring/control	30	32	27	41

Witnessing GBCV was more common among females and males who spent more time communicating online, while higher media literacy among men was linked to less often witnessing of cyber violence. However, risky online behaviour was the strongest and most consistent factor linked to witnessing GBCV in all three subsamples: young people who took online risks more often were also more likely to see these forms of violence happening to their peers.

4.1.2. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

The most common experiences in the past 12 months were appearance-based insults and sexualised harassment (Table 4). Nearly one-quarter of Croatian young people experienced insults about their body appearance in the past 12 months, which makes it the most common form of personal victimisation. Over one-fifth received unwanted sexual messages, while nearly one in five were insulted with sexually derogatory terms. Around 15% were pressured to talk about sex and their sexual activities, and a similar proportion experienced lies being spread about their sexual behaviour (14%) or online monitoring and control by a partner (14%). One in eight (12%) were pressured to send intimate images (semi-nude, nude, or sexual photos or videos).

Table 4. Most commonly experienced forms of cyber violence at least once in the past 12 months among young people in Croatia (%)

Experienced behaviour	Total	Female	Male	LGBTIQ
Insults about body appearance	24	18	27	35
Unwanted sexual messages	22	25	16	37
Sexually derogatory insults	18	16	19	25
Pressured to talk about sex	15	14	15	22
Partner monitoring/control	14	13	13	22
Spreading lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	14	10	16	27
Pressured to send intimate images	12	13	10	23

Appearance-based verbal violence and sexualised intrusions are the most prevalent forms of victimisation. The prominence of body-related insults implies the centrality of appearance in digital self-presentation and the vulnerability this creates. The high rates of unwanted sexual messages point to the normalisation of sexual boundary violations in online communication among young people. Males more frequently experienced insults about their body appearance (27% vs. 18%) in relation to girls, and were also more often victims of lies spread about their sexual behaviour (16% vs. 10%). Females, in contrast, were more likely to receive unwanted sexual messages compared to men (25% vs. 16%) and to be pressured to send intimate images (13% vs. 10%). These differences suggest that men face more appearance-based ridicule and direct intimidation, while women experience more sexualised forms of coercion and boundary violation. LGBTIQ young people reported the highest victimisation rates across all the measured forms. These compounded vulnerabilities show that LGBTIQ young people face both the sexualised harassment more commonly directed at women and the appearance-based attacks more commonly directed at men, alongside identity-specific abuse targeting their sexual orientation or gender identity.

We found links between young people's online habits and their personal experience of GBCV. Among male and LGBTIQ participants, those who spent more time communicating online reported being victimised more often. Among men, higher media literacy was associated with lower victimisation. Across all groups, the strongest and the most consistent pattern was related to risky online behaviour: young people who generally more often engage in risky online activities were also more likely to experience GBCV themselves.

There are standards for how every girl should look… and if a girl doesn't have "that something"… everyone will insult her… Yes. More is expected of them. (Elementary school, Zagreb, Croatia, girls)

We girls respect the girl code… We don't fight, we just gossip. (Elementary school, Zagreb, Croatia, girls)

Girls create fake profiles. Yes, girls create fake profiles. But they don't send them to boys. And they don't send nude or sexual photos. They just open accounts—for joking, for fun. Or when you need them. For stalking. For posting fake sexual images. (Elementary school, Zagreb, Croatia, girls)

Yes, I think we are more often victims of this, but of course men are as well. (Elementary school, Zagreb, Croatia, girls)

Until it happens to you, not really. You might think, "it won't happen to me, I won't be that stupid," but because of love—you do. (High school, Slavonia, Croatia, girls)

People with LGBTIQ orientations are also threatened with physical violence both offline and online. (High school, Slavonia, Croatia, boys)

I think girls are bigger victims than us boys when it comes to the spreading of nude or semi-nude images, while boys are less exposed to that.
(High school, Slavonia, Croatia, boys)

Yes, we are taught from a young age to ignore comments from men. They're boys and they do it because they like you.
(High school, Slavonia, Croatia, girls)

4.1.3. MOST RECENT EXPERIENCE OF VICTIMISATION

Young people who experienced GBCV were asked about their most recent incident: who targeted them, how they reacted, and whom they told.

How upsetting was the experience?

Young women reported the highest levels of emotional distress following their experiences, followed by LGBTIQ respondents, while men reported the lowest. These differences were consistent across the sample, with average distress scores of 2.5 for women, 2.4 for LGBTIQ respondents, and 2.3 for men (on a scale from 1 = not upset to 4 = very upset).

Who was behind it?

The majority of victims (60%) reported that the perpetrator was a male. The most commonly reported perpetrators were unknown individuals (23%), followed by a current or former partner (18%), online contacts with no real-life connection (16%), and friends (14%).

How did they respond?

Blocking the perpetrator was the most common reaction (24%), followed by doing nothing (19%), and deleting messages (13%). While blocking indicates some capacity for protective action, nearly one in five still chose to simply ignore the problem.

Who did they tell?

Friends were the most common confidants (34%), but nearly a third told no one at all (29%). Partners (11%) and family members (9% other family, 8% parents) were far less commonly told, which left many young people to cope with the harmful experiences in isolation.

4.1.4. ENGAGING IN GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE BEHAVIOURS

The most commonly reported behaviours that young people in Croatia (Table 5) admitted doing were appearance-based insults (11%) and sexually derogatory insults (9%). Some also reported controlling or monitoring a current or former partner, or someone they were dating, online (8%). Smaller but still notable shares reported insulting someone in the ways that imply homosexual orientation (7%) and spreading false rumours about someone's sexual behaviour or sexual orientation (5%).

The gender differences show that men were more likely to admit using sexualised insults and making hurtful comments about someone's body or appearance, while LGBTIQ respondents also reported these behaviours quite often, particularly in the case of partner monitoring.

Table 5. Most commonly perpetrated forms of GBCV among Croatian young people committed at least once in the last 12 months (%).

Perpetrated behaviour	Total	Female	Male	LGBTIQ
Insults about body appearance	11	5	16	13
Sexually derogatory insults	9	6	11	13
Partner monitoring/control	8	7	8	17
Insults based on looks that may imply homosexual orientation	7	5	8	11
Spread lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	5	3	6	13
Pressured someone to talk about sex	4	2	4	14

Among the factors examined, media literacy and risky online behaviour were consistently related to the frequency of GBCV perpetration, which indicates that young people who lack the understanding of the online environment and engage in risky activities are more likely to perpetrate GBCV.

4.2. CHILDREN IN CROATIA (12-17 YEARS)

4.2.1. WITNESSING GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE

Nearly two thirds of Croatian children (65%) witnessed someone being insulted about their body appearance in the past 12 months (Table 6). Close to six in ten witnessed sexually derogatory insults (58%), while about a half observed insults based on looks that may imply homosexual orientation (53%) or lies being spread about someone's sexual behaviour (48%). Nearly a half witnessed threats of physical violence (44%), and over a third observed unwanted sexual messages being sent to others (35%). By the age of 18, the majority of Croatian children had already witnessed multiple forms of cyber violence among their peers. These early exposures may shape attitudes toward violence and normalise harmful behaviours before children reach adulthood.

Girls reported higher witnessing rates than boys across most forms of violence. The largest gender gap appeared in witnessing unwanted sexual messages: 43% of girls compared to 27% of boys. Girls also more frequently witnessed lies about sexual behaviour (53% vs. 42%)

and sexually derogatory language (61% vs. 54%). Also, they were more exposed to verbal harassment regarding body appearance and insults implying homosexual orientation, as well as sharing of personal data and sexualised images without one's permission. Boys, however, more frequently witnessed threats of physical violence (47% vs. 42%), which is the only form where their rates exceeded those of girls.

Table 6. Most commonly witnessed forms of GBCV among Croatian children at least once in the last 12 months (%)

Witnessed behaviour	Total	Girls	Boys
Insults based on body appearance	65	67	62
Sexually derogatory insults	58	61	54
Insults based on looks that may imply homosexual orientation	53	55	51
Spreading lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	48	53	42
Threats of physical violence	44	42	47
Unwanted sexual messages	35	43	27
Partner monitoring/control	31	33	28
Sharing fake sexual content	24	25	23
Sharing sexual images without consent	24	27	21
Sharing personal data without consent	22	25	18

Children who spend more time communicating with people outside their family circle are significantly more likely to witness GBCV among their peers. Children who engage more frequently in risky online behaviours are also more likely to witness cyber violence, while children's self-assessed media literacy skills showed no significant relationship with witnessing cyber violence.

4.2.2. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE AMONG CHILDREN

In digital peer cultures, especially those shaped by image-centric platforms, children learn that their appearance is constantly under scrutiny, and that failing to meet aesthetic or behavioural norms can result in shame, mockery, or social exclusion. Therefore, it is not surprising that at the top of the list, one third of Croatian children was insulted about their body appearance in the cyber realm (Table 7).

Table 7: Most commonly experienced types of GBCV at least once in the past 12 months among children in Croatia (%)

Experienced behaviour	Total	Girls	Boys
Insulted based on body appearance	34	43	26
Insulted with sexually derogatory terms	29	33	25
Received unwanted sexual messages	26	35	17
Threats of physical violence	21	17	25
Lies spread about sexual behaviour/orientation	18	23	13
Ex or current partner or date monitored or controlled you online	13	17	8
Someone pressured you to talk about sex and your sexual activities	12	13	10

This is the most common form of cyber violence experienced by children, and girls are hit the hardest: 43% of girls compared to 26% of boys. In digital spaces, where selfies and appearance are constantly on display, children's bodies have become targets of ridicule and shaming. Nearly one in three has been called sexually derogatory names. Around 29% of children experienced this form of verbal abuse, with girls (33%) being somewhat more frequently targeted than boys (25%). One in four children received sexual messages they did not want. This is where the gender gap becomes the most pronounced: more than one third of girls (35%) experienced unwanted sexual contact online, compared to 17% of boys. Girls are twice as likely to have their digital boundaries violated through unsolicited sexual content.

Nearly one in five had lies spread about their sexual behaviour. Threats of physical violence were experienced by 21% of respondents overall, with higher prevalence among boys (25%) compared to girls (17%). Rumours about sexuality affected 18% of children overall, but again disproportionately targeted girls (23% vs. 13%). Sexual reputation has become a weapon used more often against girls to shame, control, or exclude.

Table 7 also shows behaviours that are related to control and coercion. These behaviours are less common, but are still important. Thirteen percent of respondents overall say that a partner or date is watching or controlling them online. Girls are about twice as likely as boys to say this, 17% to 8%. A total of 12% of respondents say they feel pressured to talk about sex, with a smaller difference between boys and girls: 13% for girls and 10% for boys. These items indicate that cyber violence encompasses not only peer harassment, but may also be integrated into early intimate relationships and patterns of digital control.

While both girls and boys experience cyber violence, girls face higher rates across all the measured forms, particularly those involving sexualisation and body shaming.

Early victimisation of girls is a process that lasts throughout the developmental period, as evident from the words of the research participants from Croatia:

> *We can't do normal things. Literally, because everything can be sexualised – because you're a woman, automatically.*
>
> (High school, Zagreb, Croatia, girls)

However, both genders are vulnerable to victimisation, although boys seemingly more often experience physical violence:

> *I think everyone expects to be exposed to some kind of violence. The society has kind of normalised it.*
>
> (High school, Slavonia, Croatia, girls)

Threats or blackmail involving physical violence – slapping, beating, and similar. I think that's more common among boys.

(High school, Slavonia, Croatia, boys)

The time spent in online communication and engagement in risky online behaviour emerged as a consistent correlate of GBCV victimisation, indicating that higher levels of online activity and risk-taking are associated with an increased likelihood of being exposed to GBCV.

Children's statements point to the normalisation of violence in online communication, as well as to gender-specific patterns of victimisation. Girls in particular highlight the sexualisation of everyday interactions, whereby their online presence is automatically interpreted through a gendered lens. Although both genders are exposed to violence, children perceive that boys are more often confronted with direct threats of physical violence and blackmail, reflecting traditional gender norms that associate masculinity with physical aggression.

4.2.3. THE MOST RECENT EXPERIENCE OF VICTIMISATION

Children who experienced GBCV were asked about their most recent incident. Compared to young people, important differences emerge, particularly regarding who the perpetrators are and whom the children turn to for support.

How upsetting was the experience?

On a scale from 1 to 4 (1 – not upset at all to 4 – very upset) children rated their most recent GBCV experience as moderately upsetting (M=2), with girls reporting higher levels of distress than boys (M=2.2 vs. 1.6).

I have a lot of experience, because I go to many concerts and in that scene of mine, there are many of these... I mean, there are many of my peers, but there are also many older men going to those concerts with us. And once, a guy contacted me on Instagram, I think he's 40 years old, saying something like I saw you at a concert... Horrible... Thank God it was on the internet, so I blocked him.

(High school, Zagreb, Croatia, girls)

Who was behind it?

Over a half (54%) reported that the perpetrator was a male. Unlike young people, where unknown individuals topped the list, children most often identified friends as perpetrators (37%), followed by online contacts (14%), unknown persons (13%), and partners (12%). This may imply that cyber violence among children is more embedded in their immediate peer networks.

How did they respond?

The most common reaction was doing nothing (26%), higher than among young people (19%). This was followed by blocking the perpetrator (20%) and closing the browser or app (10%). The higher rate of passive responses suggests that children may lack the tools, confidence, or support to actively address victimisation.

Who did they tell?

Friends were again the most common confidants (42%), followed by a parent or caregiver (20%). Notably, children were more likely to tell a parent than young people (20% vs. 8%), yet nearly one in five (18%) still told no one at all, though this is lower than the rate among young people (29%).

4.2.4. ENGAGING IN GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE BEHAVIOURS

Nearly one in four Croatian children has insulted someone about their body appearance. At 24%, this is the most commonly reported form of perpetration with slightly higher rates among boys. Body shaming has become a normalised currency of peer interaction online, used to assert status regardless of the perpetrator's gender.

One in five has used sexually derogatory language against someone. Around 21% of children admitted to insulting others with sexual slurs, and boys using this type of violence somewhat more frequently than girls. Some 16% of children targeted others with insults implying homosexual orientation or gender non-conformity, which must be interpreted not merely as homophobia but as a mechanism of heteronormative enforcement. This form of GBCV is thus structurally embedded in the gender order, regardless of the gender of either the perpetrator or the target.

Table 8. Most commonly perpetrated forms of GBCV by Croatian children in the past 12 months (%)

Perpetrated behaviour	Total	Girls	Boys
Insulted someone based on body appearance	24	22	27
Insulted someone with sexually derogatory terms	21	19	24
Insulted someone based on their looks that may imply homosexual orientation	16	13	19
Threatened or blackmailed someone with physical violence	13	8	19
Spread lies about someone's sexual behaviour or sexual orientation	10	9	11

Perpetration is associated with a combination of factors: more time online, more risk-taking, and (although only in the female subsample) lower media literacy. Prevention efforts should address all three: the reduction of unnecessary exposure, discouragement of risky practices, and building of genuine digital competencies that help children understand the impact of their online behaviour on others.

4.3. CONCLUSION

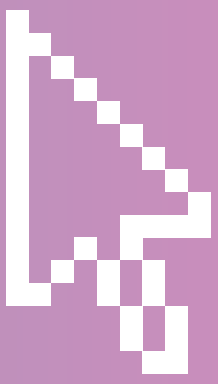
Witnessing GBCV is a widespread experience among young people and children in Croatia. Verbal harassment and stigma dominate, such as insults about body appearance, sexually derogatory language, and insults implying homosexual orientation. Witnessing is not evenly distributed across gender: women and girls consistently report higher exposure than men and boys, while LGBTIQ youth stand out with a higher prevalence across virtually all forms.

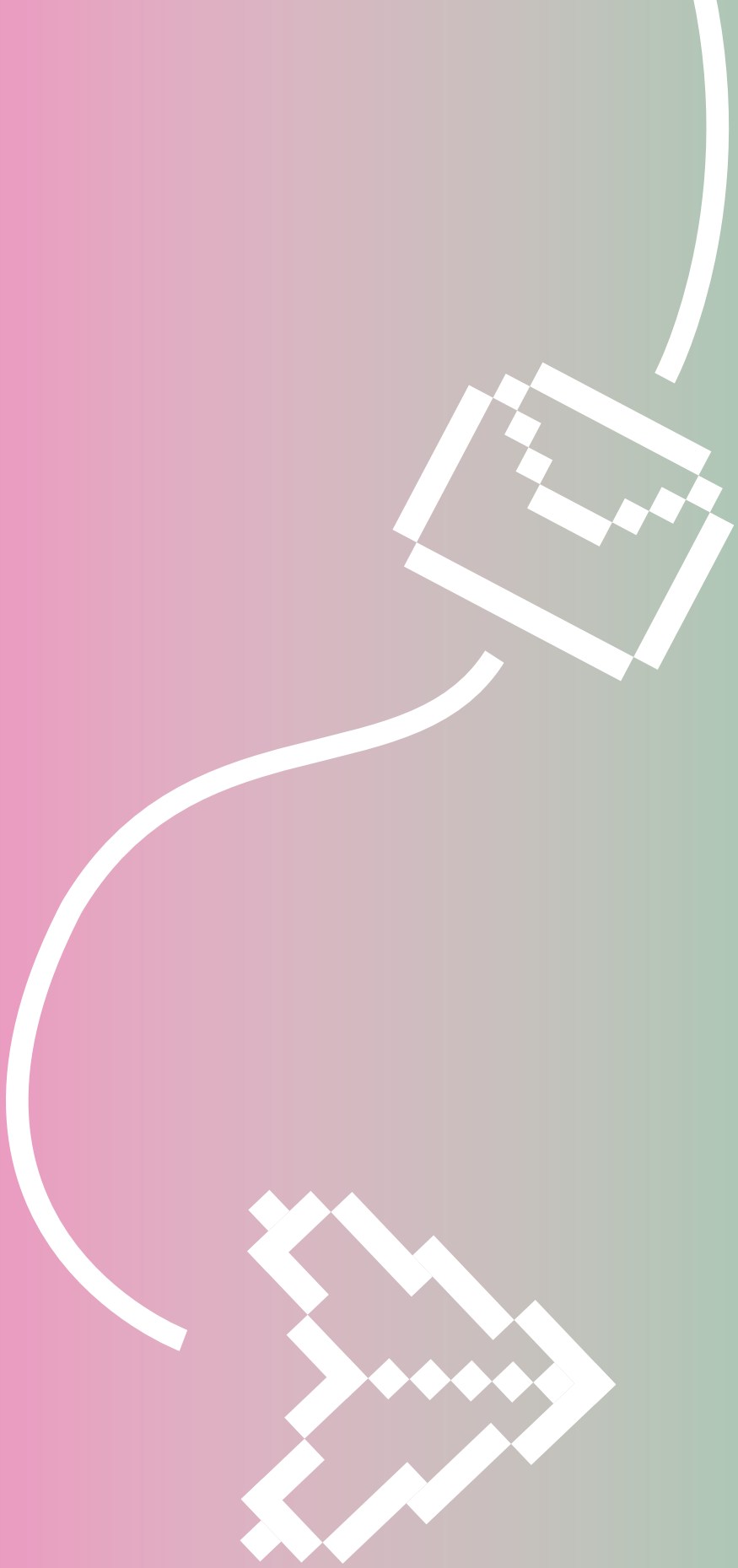
Personal victimisation follows a gendered pattern that differs by type of violence. Young men and boys more frequently experience direct threats of physical violence, while young women and girls are disproportionately targeted with insults based on body appearance and receiving of unwanted sexual messages. LGBTIQ youth report the highest victimisation rates across nearly all the measured forms.

Regarding the most recent experience of victimisation, perpetrators are predominantly male across both age groups, but their relationship to the victim differs by age. Among youth, unknown individuals top the list, followed by current or former partners. Among children, friends are by far the most common perpetrators. Responses to victimisation show concerning levels of passivity, particularly among children, where doing nothing is the most common reaction.

Silence is also widespread: nearly a third of young people told no one about their experience, and while children are somewhat more likely to confide in parents than youth, a substantial share still copes with the harmful experiences in isolation.

Perpetration is concentrated in verbal harassment, with children reporting significantly higher rates than youth. Body appearance insults and sexually derogatory language are the most commonly admitted behaviours across both age groups. Among youth, men are more likely to report using sexualised insults and appearance-based attacks, while LGBTIQ respondents also report elevated perpetration, particularly of sexualised insults. Among children, perpetration prevalence is similar between girls and boys, and it seems that in early adolescence this type of behaviour is not the exclusive domain of one gender.





5. PORTUGAL

5.1. YOUTH IN PORTUGAL (18-27 YEARS)

5.1.1. WITNESSING GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE

The most commonly witnessed behaviours among youth in Portugal were insults about body appearance (44%), insults implying homosexual orientation based on somebody's looks (38%), unwanted sexual messages (37%), sexually derogatory insults (34%), and false rumours about someone's sexual behaviour or sexual orientation (29%) (Table 9).

Women reported witnessing all five forms more often than men, and LGBTIQ young people reported the highest levels across all behaviours. The largest gender gap appeared in witnessing unwanted sexual messages. Overall, these results suggest that women, and especially LGBTIQ individuals, more often spend time in online spaces where these forms of abuse are present.

Table 9. Most commonly witnessed forms of GBCV among Portuguese young people at least once in the past 12 months (%)

Witnessed behaviour	Total	Female	Male	LGBTIQ
Insults about body appearance	44	45	39	56
Insults implying homosexual orientation based on somebody's looks	38	41	31	52
Unwanted sexual messages	37	42	27	53
Sexually derogatory insults	34	35	28	47
Spreading lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	29	30	23	45

Young people who engaged more often in risky online behaviour were more likely to see these incidents happening to others across all gender groups. Among male participants, higher media literacy was linked to less witnessing. One interpretation could be that young women, irrespective of their self-evaluated media literacy, are inherently more vulnerable to GBCV as targets, as bystanders in female peer networks where sexual reputation is monitored, or due to the platforms they predominantly engage with (Instagram, TikTok) being architecturally inundated with appearance-centric and sexualised content. Media literacy may offer boys a sufficient protective buffer, enabling them to avoid high-risk environments, whereas girls encounter exposure that is more structurally ingrained and challenging to evade solely through individual skill or awareness. In contrast, the amount of time spent communicating online was not related to how often young people witnessed GBCV.

5.1.2. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Nearly a third of Portuguese young people experienced insults about their body appearance (32%) or received unwanted sexual messages (32%) in the past 12 months: the two most common forms of personal victimisation (Table 10).

This is the result of the way society is manipulated by the media, by what is valued. Appearance is valued, and women end up being victims of this situation. You're constantly bombarded with it.
(Man, GD3, Portugal)

Around one fifth were threatened with physical violence (22%), pressured to talk about sex (21%), insulted with sexually derogatory terms (21%), or had lies spread about their sexual behaviour (21%). These rates are notably higher than those observed in Croatia, which may point to a more challenging online environment for Portuguese youth.

Gender differences between young men and women are not pronounced, except in two cases. Men more frequently experienced threats of physical violence (25% vs. 15%), while women were more likely to receive unwanted sexual messages (34% vs. 23%).

Table 10. Most common forms of GBCV experienced by Portuguese young people, at least once in the past 12 months (%).

Experienced behaviour	Total	Female	Male	LGBTIQ
Insults about body appearance	32	28	28	49
Unwanted sexual messages	32	34	23	50
Threats of physical violence	22	15	25	33
Pressured to talk about sex	21	19	18	35
Sexually derogatory insults	21	17	18	39
Spreading lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	21	16	18	38

LGBTIQ young people reported observably more victimisation across all forms. A half received unwanted sexual messages (50%), and were insulted about their body appearance (49%). Nearly four in ten experienced sexually derogatory insults (39%), lies about their sexuality (38%), or were pressured to talk about sex (35%). The prevalence of these experiences among LGBTIQ are often twice as present as those of heterosexual respondents, which points to their specific vulnerability in cyber space.

Young people in Portugal who reported more risky online behaviour were also more likely to experience GBCV themselves. Also, higher media literacy tended to go together with lower levels of victimisation, especially among LGBTIQ participants, and to a lesser extent among male participants.

Many times cyber violence can turn into physical violence. And even more so now that with social networks you can be located, there is a greater access to data (Female; Students; 1st-2nd Bachillerato; Murcia, Spain).

I think offline violence is milder, because when someone hits you, it will pass, but when someone insults you online, it takes a little longer for you to come to terms with it. (Elementary school, Slavonia, Croatia, boys)

I think it starts online and then it's all connected – or it starts physically and then continues online, or something like that...
(High school, Dalmatia, Croatia, boys)

In real life, it might leave bruises... but online, it can damage your mind and change how you think. (High school, Dalmatia, Croatia, boys)

5.1.3. THE MOST RECENT EXPERIENCE OF GENDER-BASED CYBER VICTIMISATION

Young people who experienced GBCV were asked about their most recent incident: who targeted them, how they reacted, and whom they told. Compared to Croatia, Portuguese young people show higher levels of passivity and silence in response to victimisation.

How upsetting was the experience?

Young women reported the highest levels of emotional distress following their experiences, followed by LGBTIQ respondents, while men reported the lowest. These differences were consistent across the sample, with average distress scores of 2.4 for LGBTIQ respondents, 2.2 for women, and 1.9 for men (on a scale from 1 = not upset to 4 = very upset).

Who was behind it?

A half (50%) reported that the perpetrator was a male. Unlike Croatia, where unknown individuals topped the list, Portuguese young people identified perpetrators more evenly across categories: unknown individuals (21%), online contacts with no real-life connection (17%), friends (16%), and current or former partners (15%). This balanced distribution highlights that threats come both from strangers and from those within intimate social circles.

How did they respond?

The most common reaction was doing nothing. Nearly a third (30%) ignored the problem or hoped it would go away. This passive response was particularly pronounced among men (40%) and LGBTIQ individuals (30%).

Who did they tell?

A third told no one at all (34%), which is the highest rate of silence observed across the three countries. This was the most common response for both women (37%) and men (35%), and ranked second among LGBTIQ individuals (30%). When disclosure did occur, it was most often to a friend (25%), a partner (12%), or a non-parent family member (7%). Parents were rarely told, which points to a limited supporting role of family and adults in general.

5.1.4. ENGAGING IN GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE BEHAVIOURS

In our sample of young people in Portugal, the most commonly reported forms of perpetration were verbal insults targeting physical appearance and perceived sexual orientation. A similar share reported monitoring or controlling a current or former partner, or someone they were dating (10%), as well as using sexually derogatory insults, threatening to physically harm someone, and spreading lies about a peer's sexuality (Table 11).

Table 11. Most commonly perpetrated forms of GBCV at least once in the past 12 months by young people in Portugal (%)

Perpetrated behaviour	Total	Female	Male	LGBTIQ
Insults about body appearance	13	10	15	14
Insults implying homosexual orientation based on somebody's looks	11	8	14	11
Partner monitoring/control	10	10	10	12
Sexually derogatory insults	10	9	10	13
Threats of physical violence	9	8	9	10
Spread lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	9	6	10	12

Men reported higher perpetration rates than women across most forms of violence, particularly when it comes to insults based on their body appearance (15% vs. 10%), insults implying homosexual orientation (14% vs. 8%), and spreading lies about sexual behaviour (10% vs. 6). The only behaviour with nearly equal rates between genders was partner monitoring and control (10% male vs. 10% female), which may confirm that digital surveillance in relationships has become normalised regardless of gender. LGBTIQ young people reported the highest perpetration rates across several behaviours, which includes , sexually derogatory insults (13%), and spreading lies about sexual behaviour (12%). Partner monitoring was also prevalent (12%).

Self-assessed media literacy and risky online behaviour were consistent predictors of the frequency of GBCV perpetration, which may indicate that young people who lack understanding of the online environment and engage in risky activities are more likely to perpetrate GBCV, and the other way around: those who perpetrate are more likely to be more media illiterate and prone to risky online activities.

5.2. CHILDREN IN PORTUGAL (12-17 YEARS)

5.2.1. WITNESSING GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE

Over half of Portuguese children witnessed insults about body appearance (54%) or sexually derogatory language (53%) in the past 12 months, which were the two most commonly observed forms of GBCV (Table 12). Nearly a half witnessed insults implying homosexual orientation (47%), while over a third observed unwanted sexual messages (35%), lies about sexual behaviour (35%), or online monitoring and control by a partner (34%). Around three in ten witnessed threats of physical violence (31%). At just over twenty percent, forms of violence such as sharing private sexual chats without consent, fake sexual content sharing, and sharing of personal data without consent are also represented.

Table 12. Most commonly witnessed forms of GBCV among Portuguese children at least once in the past 12 months (%).

Witnessed behaviour	Total	Girls	Boys
Insults based on body appearance	54	55	52
Sexually derogatory insults	53	54	52
Insults implying homosexual orientation based on somebody's looks	47	47	47
Unwanted sexual messages	35	40	27
Spreading lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	35	36	33
Partner monitoring/control	34	43	20
Threats of physical violence	31	33	26
Sharing private sexual chats w/o consent	24	26	20
Fake sexual content sharing	22	24	18
Sharing personal data w/o consent	21	22	18

The general prevalence of witnessing the listed forms of behaviour is somewhat lower than that found among Croatian children, yet still indicating that the majority of Portuguese children are exposed to harmful online content before reaching adulthood.

Girls reported higher witnessing rates than boys across most forms of violence. The largest gender gap appeared in witnessing partner monitoring and control, which was reported by 43% of girls compared to 20% of boys. This considerable gender difference suggests that controlling behaviours in relationships are far more visible in girls' peer environments. Similarly, girls more frequently witnessed unwanted sexual messages (40% vs. 27%) and threats of physical violence (33% vs. 26%).

Notably, witnessing rates for sexually derogatory insults and insults implying homosexuality were nearly identical between girls (54%, 47%) and boys (52%, 47%), which implies that verbal abuse that is targeted toward sexuality and gender expression is equally pervasive across peer environments regardless of gender.

Engagement in risky online behaviour and time spent in online communication, albeit only among female respondents, emerged as correlates of the frequency of GBCV witnessing. That may imply that higher levels of online activity and risk-taking are associated with a greater likelihood of observing GBCV among peers.

5.2.2. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE AMONG CHILDREN

Nearly 40% of Portuguese children have been insulted about their body appearance online (Table 13). This is the most common form of victimisation, with girls more affected than boys (42% vs. 34%). Online environments where physical appearance is subject to constant scrutiny expose young people to body-related harassment well before they reach adulthood.

Table 13. Most common forms of GBCV experienced at least once in the past 12 months by Portuguese children (%)

Experienced behaviour	Total	Girls	Boys
Insults about body appearance	39	42	34
Sexually derogatory insults	30	35	21
Unwanted sexual messages	27	33	16
Lies being spread about sexual behaviour/orientation	26	26	24
Threats of physical violence	19	19	18
Partner monitoring/control	17	19	15
Sharing personal data w/o consent	16	19	12
Pressured to talk about sex	16	19	12

Three in ten children have been called sexually derogatory names. Around 30% of children experienced this form of verbal abuse but the gender gap is significant: over a third of girls (35%) compared to one in five boys (21%). Sexual slurs have become gendered weapons, disproportionately targeting girls.

More than one in four received sexual messages they did not want. This is where the gender divide also becomes pronounced: a third of girls (33%) experienced unwanted sexual contact online, compared to 16% of boys. Girls are twice as likely to have their digital boundaries violated.

One in four (26%) had lies spread about their sexual behaviour, with relatively similar rates between girls (26%) and boys (24%), which may suggest that sexual reputation attacks are used against both genders. Nearly one in five (19%) experienced threats of physical violence, with similar rates across genders (19% girls, 18% boys). Digital monitoring by partners (17%), sharing personal data without consent (16%), and being pressured to talk about sex (16%) affected similar proportions, with girls showing somewhat higher rates in all categories.

Engagement in risky online behaviour emerged as the most consistent correlate of GBCV victimisation, which means that more frequent risk-taking online is associated with a higher likelihood of being personally targeted by GBCV.

We're not going to ask some teachers for help when they don't even know our names. We were talking, he kept me for 15 minutes after class and I think he caught my two words, which were hello and goodbye.

(High school, Slavonia, Croatia, girls)

Well, support should be individual, then it works best that way.

(High school, Zagreb, Croatia, boys)

No, if I have a problem I want to discuss with someone and it's not my parents, then I expect that my parents won't find out about it. I don't know, I'm just saying something here, psychologists, pedagogues, who have the right to do this, this problem won't stay between us, my parents will find out. I don't talk to them for no reason, I could have done it myself.

(High school, Zagreb, Croatia, boys)

They have not mediated, they give a warning and go home. The thing is that there is this role of mediator, but they do not carry it out.

(Female; Student; 1st-2nd Bachillerato; R.Murcia, Spain)

Even if it were a big deal, I think our teachers absolutely wouldn't do anything because our teachers are the type who simply won't help — they'll just say something like, 'I don't know what to tell you, just... be collegial.' (laughs)

(High school, Dalmatia, Croatia, girls)

5.2.3. THE MOST RECENT EXPERIENCE OF GENDER-BASED CYBER VICTIMISATION

Children who experienced GBCV were asked about their most recent incident: who targeted them, how they reacted, and whom they told.

How upsetting was the experience?

On a scale from 1 to 4 (not upset at all – 1 to very upset – 4) children rated their most recent experience as moderately upsetting (M= 1.9), with girls reporting higher levels of distress than boys (M=2.1 vs. 1.6).

Who was behind it?

A half (51%) reported that the perpetrator was a male. The most common perpetrators were people from children's immediate social circles: friends topped the list (34%), followed by current or former partners (20%), and neighbours or acquaintances (12%). Unknown individuals (12%) and online contacts ranked lower (10%).

How did they respond?

The most common reaction was doing nothing, over a third (36%) ignored the problem or hoped it would go away. This passive response was particularly pronounced among boys. More proactive measures, such as seeking help or reporting the problem online, were largely underutilised across both genders.

Who did they tell?

Friends were the most common confidants (38%), but more than one in four told no one at all (28%). Parents or caregivers were told in only 15% of cases. These findings point to a concerning normalisation of cyber violence among Portuguese children, which may potentially foster a broader culture of silence and inaction as one of dominant responses to violence.

5.2.4. ENGAGING IN GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE BEHAVIOURS

Over one in five Portuguese children insulted someone about their body appearance, which is the most commonly reported form of perpetration in which boys (27%) engage more frequently than girls (19%). It seems like body shaming has become a normalised tool of peer interaction, in order to assert dominance and enforce appearance standards (Table 14).

Table 14. Most commonly perpetrated forms of GBCV at least once in the past 12 months by Portuguese children (%)

Perpetrated behaviour	Total	Girls	Boys
Insults about body appearance	22	19	27
Insults implying homosexual orientation based on somebody's looks	18	15	22
Sexually derogatory insults	17	15	20
Partner monitoring/control	10	12	7
Threats of physical violence	9	9	10
Spread lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	9	9	10
Sharing personal data w/o consent	7	7	8
Sharing private sexual chats w/o consent	6	6	6

Around 18% of children targeted others with insults implying homosexual orientation, with boys (22%) significantly more likely than girls (15%) to engage in this behaviour. Homophobic language remains a common currency for enforcing gender conformity among peers. Around 17% admitted to using sexual slurs, again with boys (20%) more frequently than girls (15%). These verbal attacks function as tools for humiliation and social control. One in ten has monitored or controlled a partner online. This is the only behaviour where girls exceed boys (12% of girls compared to 7% of boys). Around one in ten has threatened someone or spread sexual rumours. Threats of physical violence (9%) and spreading lies about sexual behaviour (9%) were reported at similar rates, with boys slightly more likely to engage in both.

Engagement in risky online behaviour, and to a lesser extent, time spent in online communication emerged as predictors of the frequency of GBCV perpetration, which indicates that participants who engage in riskier online activities and spend more time online are more likely to perpetrate GBCV.

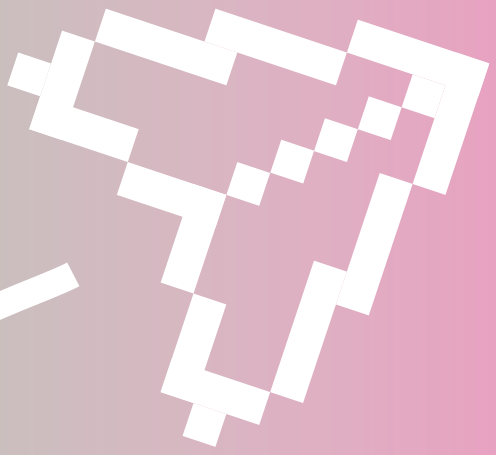
5.3. CONCLUSION

Witnessing gender-based cyber violence is a widespread experience among young people in Portugal and especially among children. Gender gaps are behaviour-dependent: verbal violence in cyberspace is witnessed rather equally by both genders among children, but receiving unwanted sexual messages and relationship-based behaviours are disproportionately witnessed by girls. Third, LGBTIQ+ youth have a consistently amplified exposure across all forms of cyber violence.

Around a third of both young people and children experienced verbal violence in the form of insults based on their appearance. Among children, a clear gender gap emerges, with girls reporting higher victimisation across most behaviours. Among youth, however, gender differences between men and women are less consistent and vary by type of violence. Identifying as LGBTIQ constitutes the single most powerful risk factor for victimisation.

Regarding the last cyber violence experience, there is a convergence of passivity and silence across both age groups. Compared to Croatia, Portuguese respondents are less likely to take any protective action and were more likely to tell no one. The even distribution of perpetrator types among youth, where strangers, online contacts, friends, and partners each contribute substantially, means there is no single relational domain where intervention could concentrate. Among children, the dominance of friends and partners as perpetrators, combined with the highest passivity rates in the study, points toward a normalisation of cyber violence within peer networks, and a broader climate of inaction that may be culturally embedded rather than merely reflecting individual helplessness.

Perpetration is concentrated in verbal harassment, with children reporting substantially higher rates than youth across all categories. Among youth, gender differences in perpetration are modest, while among children a clearer gap emerges, with boys consistently admitting higher rates of body appearance insults, homosexual orientation insults, and sexually derogatory language.



6. SPAIN

6.1. YOUTH IN SPAIN (18-27 YEARS)

6.1.1. WITNESSING GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE

Nearly half of Spanish young people (44%) witnessed someone being insulted about their body appearance in the past 12 months, which is the most commonly observed form of GBCV (Table 15). Close to four in ten witnessed unwanted sexual messages being sent (39%), sexually derogatory insults (37%), or insults implying homosexual orientation (37%). Around a third observed lies about sexual behaviour (32%), while over a quarter witnessed threats of physical violence (27%) or partner monitoring and control (25%).

Table 15. Most commonly witnessed forms of GBCV at least once in the past 12 months among Spanish young people (%)

Witnessed behaviour	Total	Female	Male	LGBTIQ
Insults about body appearance	44	42	44	54
Unwanted sexual messages	39	41	32	50
Sexually derogatory insults	37	35	36	44
Insults implying homosexual orientation based on somebody's looks	37	36	34	46
Lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	32	30	30	42
Threats of physical violence	27	22	32	31
Partner monitoring/control	25	25	22	34

Sometimes, young people are not aware of the consequences of joining a certain group online, which was noted in all three countries, but here we bring a quotation from Spain:

On Instagram you get requests that you have been added to a group, and it's like they have a link and they take you to porn pages. (Female; student; FP; Asturias, Spain).

These rates of witnessing GBCV are broadly comparable to Portugal and somewhat lower than in Croatia for some forms, yet still indicate that Spanish digital spaces are permeated with appearance-based judgments, sexual harassment, and the policing of gender and sexuality. Gender gaps point to distinct forms of exposure. Women more frequently witnessed unwanted sexual messages (41% vs. 32%), and slightly more frequently partner monitoring than men (25% vs. 22%). Men more frequently witnessed threats of physical violence (32% vs. 22%), which is the largest gender gap observed. For most other forms, witnessing rates were relatively similar between genders. On the other hand, LGBTIQ young people reported the highest witnessing rates across all the measured forms. Over a half witnessed body appearance insults (54%) and unwanted sexual messages (50%). Nearly a half observed sexually derogatory insults (44%), insults implying homosexuality (46%), and lies about

sexual behaviour (42%). A third witnessed partner monitoring (34%) and threats of physical violence (31%). These consistently elevated rates confirm that LGBTIQ individuals navigate digital spaces where harmful behaviours are particularly pervasive.

Engagement in risky online behaviour emerged as the most consistent predictor of the frequency of GBCV witnessing, indicating that participants who more frequently engage in such behaviours are also more likely to witness GBCV among their peers.

6.1.2. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Over a third of Spanish young people (34%) experienced insults about their body appearance in the past 12 months, which is the most common form of personal victimisation (Table 16). Nearly a third (32%) received unwanted sexual messages, while over a quarter (27%) were insulted with sexually derogatory terms. Around a quarter experienced threats of physical violence (25%), were pressured to talk about sex (23%), or pressured to send intimate images (semi-nude, nude, or sexual photos or videos) (22%). One in five experienced partner monitoring and control (21%) or were offered money for intimate images (20%).

Table 16. Most common forms of GBCV experienced at least once in the past 12 months by Spanish young people (%)

Experienced behaviour	Total	Female	Male	LGBTIQ
Insults about body appearance	34	34	29	48
Unwanted sexual messages	32	37	21	48
Sexually derogatory insults	27	23	25	41
Threats of physical violence	25	20	29	26
Pressured to talk about sex	23	20	20	36
Pressured to send intimate images	22	23	17	35
Partner monitoring/control	21	19	19	32
Offered money for intimate images	20	22	16	27

These victimisation rates are notably higher than in Croatia and comparable to those in Portugal, which suggests that Spanish young people face a challenging online environment with high exposure to multiple forms of harassment. Women, compared to men, more frequently experienced unwanted sexual messages (37% vs. 21%), pressure to send intimate images (23% vs. 17%), being offered money for intimate images (22% vs. 16%), and insults about body appearance (34% vs. 29%) and sexually derogatory insults (25% vs. 23%). Men, in contrast, more frequently experienced threats of physical violence (29% vs. 20%). LGBTIQ young people reported the highest victimisation rates across all the measured forms, often dramatically so.

Overall, these results indicate that victimisation in Spain follows gendered lines, with women more exposed to sexual boundary violations and men more exposed to physical intimidation. However, LGBTIQ young people experience the highest rates across all categories, which points to their particular vulnerability in digital spaces, where heteronormative standards are enforced.

Among the factors examined, engagement in risky online behaviour emerged as the most consistent predictor of the frequency of GBCV victimisation, indicating that participants who engage more frequently in such behaviours are also more likely to be personally exposed to GBCV.

6.1.3. THE MOST RECENT EXPERIENCE OF GENDER-BASED CYBER VICTIMISATION

Young people who experienced GBCV were asked about their most recent incident—who targeted them, how they reacted, and whom they told.

How upsetting was the experience?

Women reported the highest levels of emotional distress following their experiences, followed by LGBTIQ respondents, while men reported the lowest. These differences were consistent across the sample, with average distress scores of 3.2 for women, 2.8 for LGBTIQ respondents, and 2.3 for men (on a scale from 1 = not upset to 4 = very upset).

Who was behind it?

Just over a half (52%) reported that the perpetrator was a male. Uniquely among the three countries, current or former partners topped the list (21%), which highlights that intimate partner cyber violence is particularly prevalent in Spain. Unknown individuals ranked second (19%), followed by friends (16%) and online contacts with no personal connection (14%). This alternating pattern between close relationships and complete strangers shows dual vulnerability: Spanish young people face threats both from those they trust most and from anonymous aggressors.

How did they respond?

The most common reaction was doing nothing (22%): ignoring the problem or hoping it would go away. This passive response was pronounced among men (33%), exceeding the second most common option by 17%. This suggests that Spanish men may face particular barriers to actively addressing victimisation, potentially due to stigma around male vulnerability or expectations of self-reliance.

Who did they tell?

Friends were the most common confidants (33%), but nearly one in four of respondents told no one at all (22%), which is a rate consistent across all gender subgroups. Partners and family members were far less commonly told.

6.1.4. ENGAGING IN GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE BEHAVIOURS

Around one in seven Spanish young people (14%) admitted to insulting someone based on their body appearance in the past 12 months, which is the most commonly reported form of perpetration (Table 17). A similar proportion monitored or controlled a partner online (14%), while around one in eight used sexually derogatory insults (13%) or insults implying homosexual orientation (12%). Around one in eight also threatened someone with physical violence (12%) or shared private sexual conversations without consent (11%).

Table 17: Most commonly perpetrated forms of GBCV at least once in the past 12 months by young people in Spain (%).

Perpetrated behaviour	Total	Female	Male	LGBTIQ
Insults about body appearance	14	10	18	18
Partner monitoring/control	14	13	12	17
Sexually derogatory insults	13	8	16	19
Threats of physical violence	12	7	17	15
Insults implying homosexual orientation based on somebody's looks	12	7	17	16
Sharing private sexual chats w/o consent	11	9	10	17
Sharing fake sexual content	10	7	13	15

Clear gender asymmetries can be detected in perpetration patterns. Men, compared to women, reported substantially higher rates across most forms of violence, particularly insults about body appearance (18% vs. 10%), threats of physical violence (17% vs. 7%), insults implying homosexual orientation (17% vs. 7%), and sexually derogatory insults (16% vs. 8%). The two behaviours with similar rates between the two genders were partner monitoring and control, and sharing private sexual chats without consent, which points to a possibility that digital surveillance in relationships has become normalised across genders. LGBTIQ young people reported high perpetration rates across a few behaviours, especially those regarding partner monitoring and sharing private sexual chats.

Media literacy and risky online behaviour were consistent predictors of the frequency of GBCV perpetration, which implies that participants with a limited understanding of the online environment engage in risky activities and are more likely to perpetrate GBCV.

6.2. CHILDREN IN SPAIN (12-17 YEARS)

6.2.1. WITNESSING GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE

The majority of Spanish children (59%) witnessed someone being insulted about their body appearance in the past 12 months, which is the most commonly observed form of GBCV (Table 18). Over a half witnessed sexually derogatory insults (56%) or insults implying homosexual orientation (51%), while nearly a half observed lies being spread about someone's sexual behaviour (48%). Four in ten witnessed threats of physical violence (40%), and over a third observed unwanted sexual messages (35%).

Table 18: Most commonly witnessed forms of GBCV at least once in the past 12 months among Spanish children (%)

Witnessed behaviour	Total	Girls	Boys
Insults about body appearance	59	63	54
Sexually derogatory insults	56	56	54
Insults implying homosexual orientation based on somebody's looks	51	56	47
Lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	48	49	48
Threats of physical violence	40	37	43

Witnessed behaviour	Total	Girls	Boys
Unwanted sexual messages	35	35	35
Sharing personal data w/o consent	33	34	33
Partner monitoring/control	29	28	29
Pressuring to talk about sex	29	22	37

These rates are slightly lower than in Croatia (65% for body insults), but are higher than in Portugal (54%), which may imply that Spanish children navigate digital spaces where harmful content is pervasive.

Unlike Croatia and Portugal, where girls more often reported higher witnessing rates, Spain shows a different pattern. Girls more frequently witnessed insults about body appearance than boys (63% vs. 54%) and insults implying homosexual orientation (56% vs. 47%). However, boys more frequently witnessed several forms of violence: threats of physical violence (43% vs. 37%), pressuring someone to talk about sex (37% vs. 22%). Witnessing unwanted sexual messages showed no gender difference (35% each), unlike Croatia and Portugal where girls witnessed this form substantially more often. This reversal from the tendency of gender differences detected in other countries may suggest that Spanish boys have to navigate peer environments where sexualised coercion is more visible.

6.2.2. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE

Almost a third of Spanish children (30%) experienced insults about their body appearance in the past 12 months, the most common form of personal victimisation. Over a quarter were insulted with sexually derogatory terms (27%) or threatened with physical violence (27%). Nearly a quarter had lies spread about their sexual behaviour (23%), and over one in five received unwanted sexual messages (22%) or were pressured to talk about sex (20%).

Table 19: Most common forms of GBCV experienced at least once in the past 12 months by Spanish children (%)

Experienced behaviour	Total	Girls	Boys
Insults about body appearance	30	33	27
Sexually derogatory insults	27	26	27
Threats of physical violence	27	23	29
Lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	23	24	23
Unwanted sexual messages	22	24	20
Pressured to talk about sex	20	18	23
Partner monitoring/control	15	15	15
Sharing personal data w/o consent	14	15	12
Pressured to send intimate images	14	14	15

As can be seen in Table 19, children in Spain are more frequently exposed to a wider range of violent cyber behaviours directed at them than children in Croatia. Unlike Croatia and Portugal, where girls consistently reported higher victimisation across sexualised forms,

Spain shows more balanced ratios with some reversals. Girls more frequently experienced insults about body appearance (33% vs. 27%) and unwanted sexual messages (24% vs. 20%). However, boys more frequently experienced threats of physical violence (29% vs. 23%) and pressure to talk about sex (23% vs. 18%). Monitoring and control showed identical rates for both genders (15% each), which implies that digital surveillance in early relationships affects girls and boys equally. Also, the prevalence of sharing personal data and pressure to send intimate images are experienced by both boys and girls.

The time spent in online communication and engagement in risky online behaviour emerged as consistent correlates of GBCV victimisation, indicating that higher levels of online activity and risk-taking are associated with an increased likelihood of being personally exposed to GBCV.

Many of us don't give a shit about the photo, but the girls send it to their friends and make unnecessary comments."

(Boy, GD9, Portugal)

I see them as more carefree, their main social concern is to make themselves strong and macho, dominant, among other guys. On the other hand, girls, well, social networks also lead us to have to upload photos of a certain type in order to love ourselves, in order to be accepted by society"

(Female; Student; 1st-2nd High School; R. Murcia, Spain).

Unknown men talk to them and approach them offering them a sugar daddy. They feel it's like a risk"

(Female; Student; 3rd-4thESO; R. Murcia, Spain).

6.2.3. THE MOST RECENT EXPERIENCE OF VICTIMISATION AMONG CHILDREN

Children who experienced GBCV were asked about their most recent incident: who targeted them, how they reacted, and whom they told.

How upsetting was the experience?

Overall, participants reported a noticeable level of emotional distress when recalling their most recent experience of gender-based cyber violence. On a scale from 1 (not upset) to 4 (very upset), girls scored an average of 2.9 (above the scale midpoint), while boys scored somewhat lower at 2.4. Therefore, even when exposed to the same types of online behaviour, girls tend to experience a greater emotional toll.

Who was behind it?

Over a half (55%) reported that the perpetrator was a male. The most common perpetrators were people from children's immediate social circles: friends topped the list (27%), followed by current or former partners (17%), and contacts of friends or family members (13%). Online contacts with no personal connection ranked fourth (13%). This pattern, where trusted peers and intimate partners are the primary perpetrators, reflects the findings from Croatia and Portugal, and confirms that most harm comes from within children's own social networks.

How did they respond?

The most common reaction was doing nothing (20%) or ignoring the problem, hoping it would go away. This was followed by blocking the perpetrator (18%) and trying to get the person to stop (13%). Boys were more likely to adopt this passive approach, while girls were somewhat more inclined to take protective or help-seeking actions. This gender difference in coping strategies suggests that boys may face particular barriers to actively addressing victimisation.

Who did they tell?

Friends were the most common confidants (41%). However, one in five told no one at all (20%), and only 17% told a parent or caregiver. In Croatia and Spain, children confide in friends almost equally, unlike the slightly lower percentage recorded in Portugal. However, a significant minority still process these experiences in silence.

> *Violence isn't when someone says to me 'you're a stupid, retarded idiot.' Like, I send him a dumb TikTok and he says 'you're stupid, retarded, sick.' (laughs) It's not even funny. To me, that's not violence — that's friendly love.*
> (Elementary school, Dalmatia, Croatia, boys)

> *Yeah, because girls get judged way more. When it's boys, it's like — cool, awesome, whatever. But girls immediately come off as... I don't want to use bad words.* (Elementary school, Dalmatia, Croatia, boys)

Interviewer: And do you then share that content?
Participant 11: It depends. (all speaking at once)
Participant 12: If it's something good. (all speaking at once)
Participant 7: If it's quality. (all speaking at once)
Participant 14: We share what? What kind of content?
Participant 5: It depends, it depends.
Participant 1: Violent content.
Participant 1: Definitely.
Participant 1: Definitely? Why?
Participant 1: Because it's funny. (Laughter)
(High school, Dalmatia, Croatia, boys)

If a girl is bullied for her weight, hair or sexual orientation, she may often change her physical appearance to try to stop the comments and verbal abuse she suffers.
(Girl, GD5, Portugal)

I think that more girls than boys... Gender violence can affect both genders, that is, both sexes, but I think that it affects more and it is more common for women to be assaulted in this area.
(Female; Student; 3rd-4thESO; Asturias, Spain).

The thing is that if a girl passes a photo, she is labelled as a whore and if a boy passes it, they start to think: "Wow, that's cool!" Or a typical guy who has a profile picture without a shirt and then a girl with a top that shows her cleavage and is already a whore and you are without a shirt and you can see everything? And I can only see my cleavage? It's society's fault a little bit.
(Female; Student; 3rd-4th ESO; Asturias, Spain).

Because the internet is a reflection of what is in society, ...if society didn't have that...if you respect on the street, on the internet you generally respect...

(Female, Student; 1st-2nd Bachillerato; Asturias, Spain)

6.2.4. ENGAGING IN GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE BEHAVIOURS

Nearly one in five Spanish children (18%) admitted to insulting someone based on their body appearance in the past 12 months, which is the most commonly reported form of perpetration (Table 20). Around one in six used sexually derogatory insults (17%), while around one in eight threatened someone with physical violence (12%). One in ten insulted someone based on perceived homosexuality (10%) or spread lies about someone's sexual behaviour (10%).

Table 20: Most commonly perpetrated forms of GBCV among Spanish children (%, at least once in the past 12 months).

Perpetrated behaviour	Total	Girls	Boys
Insults about body appearance	18	12	25
Sexually derogatory insults	17	14	21
Threats of physical violence	12	9	16
Insults implying homosexual orientation	10	6	15
Spreading lies about sexual behaviour/orientation	10	8	12

Boys reported substantially higher perpetration rates than girls across all the measured forms. The largest gap appeared in insults about body appearance, where a quarter of boys (25%) admitted to this behaviour compared to only 12% of girls, more than double the rate. Boys were also more likely to use sexually derogatory insults (21% vs. 14%), threaten with physical violence (16% vs. 9%), use homophobic insults (15% vs. 6%), and spread lies about sexual behaviour (12% vs. 8%).

Spanish boys appear to engage in harmful online behaviours at rates far exceeding Spanish girls. Prevention efforts in Spain may need to focus particularly on addressing male perpetration while also supporting all children in developing healthy online behaviours.

The time spent in online communication and engagement in risky online behaviour were consistent predictors of the frequency of GBCV perpetration, indicating that participants who spend more time online and are more prone to risky online activities are more likely to perpetrate GBCV.

Participant 2: There's no point in asking for help when no one is going to do anything about it. That's how it always is.

Participant 1: And who is this 'someone'?

Participant 2: I don't know.

Interviewer: The school, the police?

Participant 6: Anyone. So much nonsense has happened at our school and they never did anything about it.

Participant 2: Yeah
(High school, Zagreb, Croatia, boys)

Honestly, I thought it was in a child's nature not to confide in a teacher or something. She would have to be just like that... She would have to be a really good teacher, which isn't very often.
(High school, Zagreb, Croatia, boys)

If something happens at school on a Thursday, it's still being talked about on Friday, on Saturday and Sunday it spreads to everybody and then on Monday it continues and there's a fight.
(Boy, GD9, Portugal)

Access is so easy that anyone can come home and do practically whatever they want.
(Boy, GD3, Portugal)

On social media you can block the person and in real life you can't. On social media, you're not as prone to humiliation as when people are watching you.
(Girl, GD3, Portugal)

We can no longer switch off from social media because of how we work, study, etc., and so cyber violence is constantly present in a person's life and ends up messing with that person's head.
(Boy, GD4, Portugal)

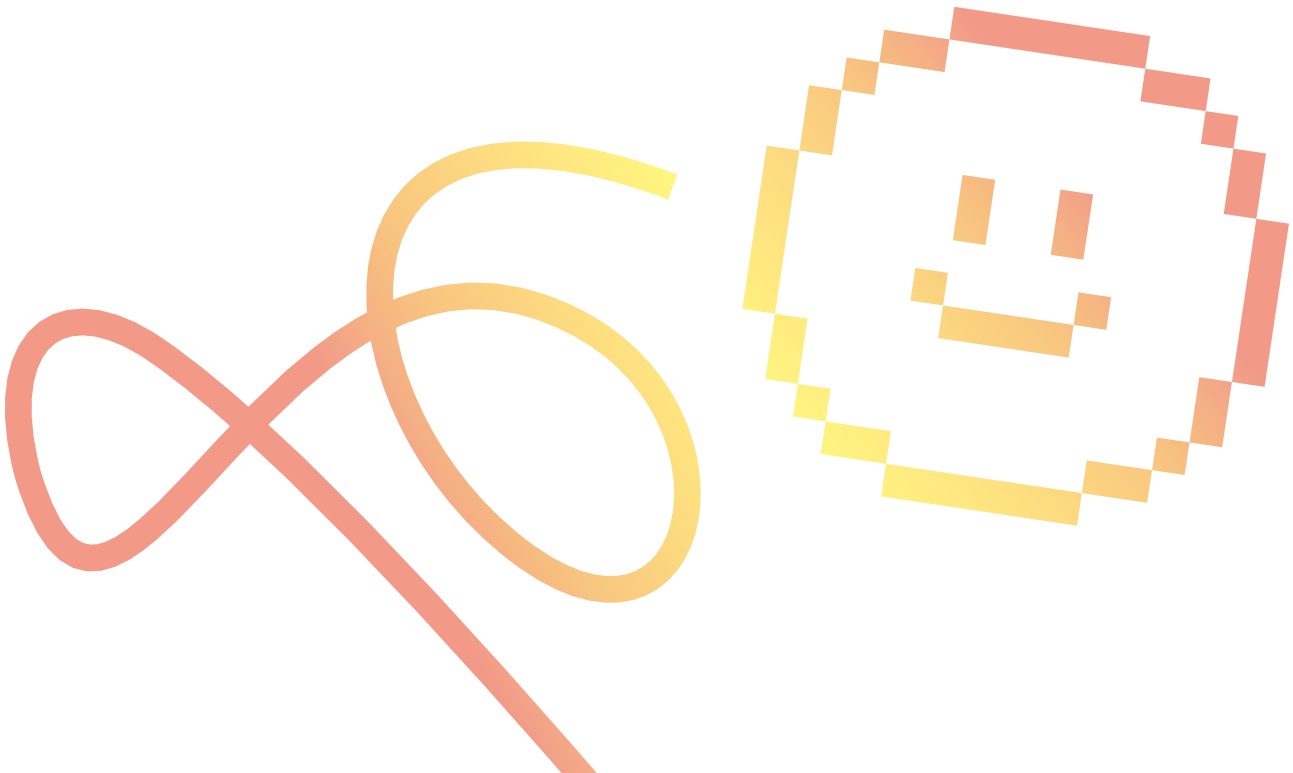
6.3. CONCLUSION

The observed tendencies indicate a pronounced presence of gender-based cyber violence among children and young people in Spain. Children report substantially higher rates of witnessing various forms of violence compared to youth, with insults related to physical appearance emerging as the most common form across both age groups. Witnessing GBCV can therefore be described as a pervasive feature of young people's digital interactions.

In terms of victimisation, youth generally report slightly higher rates of exposure to violence than children. Gender differences among youth are not uniform, but rather selective, depending on the specific form of violence. At the same time, LGBTIQ young people experience significantly higher levels of GBCV compared to both young men and young women, highlighting the importance of an intersectional approach in analysis and policy development.

With regard to perpetration, a clearer gender gap is evident: boys and young men consistently report higher levels of engagement in violent behaviours across both age groups, with the widest differences observed among children.

Furthermore, the analysis of the most recent experiences of cyber violence points to a pronounced passivity among male respondents. Boys and young men in Spain are more likely not to respond to experienced violence, suggesting gender-specific patterns of non-response. Such patterns may reflect socially embedded norms of masculinity that hinder the recognition, acknowledgment, and addressing of one's own victimisation.



7. WHAT IS LINKED TO GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE?

Across all three countries and both age groups, the findings point to a consistent and concerning pattern: involvement in GBCV, whether as a victim or a perpetrator, is associated with a range of negative outcomes affecting mental health, social connectedness, and everyday functioning. It is important to note that these findings reflect associations rather than causal relationships. The data do not allow us to establish the direction of causality, whether GBCV leads to adverse outcomes such as poor mental health, or whether poor mental health is itself a contributing factor to GBCV.

Young people and children who experienced GBCV victimisation reported poorer mental health compared to those without such exposure. This pattern was consistent across Croatia, Portugal, and Spain, and was observed among both girls and boys, as well as among women and men. Notably, those who perpetrated GBCV also showed poorer mental health, particularly among females, which may imply that engagement in harmful behaviour online carries its own psychological costs. The similar consequences experienced by both victims and perpetrators suggest that GBCV may not only be a cause but also an outcome of individual's mental health difficulties.

The abuse that took place in the online sphere often spills over into other aspects of reality of children and young people, for which we found support in the claims of focus group participants in all three countries, and here we cite one of the quotes from Portugal:

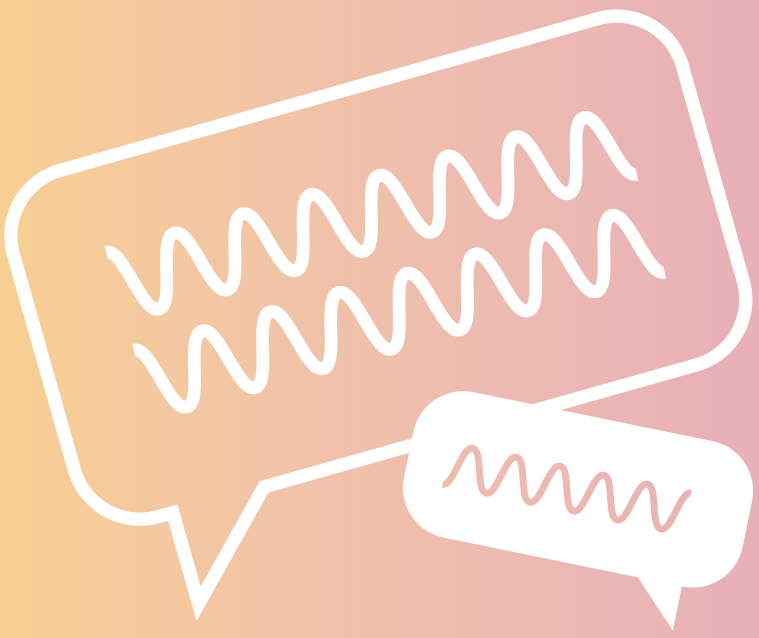
> *Sometimes it's the whole package: they threaten someone on the internet and think it's a joke, but then it's real and they get attacked in the middle of the street because of it.*
>
> (Girl, GD1, Portugal)

Such interconnectedness of events from the online and analogue world has a negative impact on well-being and mental health. Widespread feelings of loneliness and social isolation were consistently related to GBCV involvement across all three countries. Both victims and perpetrators reported feeling more disconnected from others than their peers who had not been involved in cyber violence. This finding held across gender subgroups, though the results among LGBTIQ respondents were less consistent and did not always reach statistical significance. Among young people, both victimisation and perpetration were associated with greater self-reported negative impacts on academic and professional life, for example: lower grades, missed opportunities, and school changes.

In the circumstances of multiple pressures on a young person, it is necessary to make young people aware of the importance of seeking help, not only in the form of reporting harassment or violence, but also participating in conversations with experts in the field of mental health.

I think, I myself think that I need a psychologist, and everybody needs a psychologist. Everybody needs professional help. I think they should give it to us at school or at work, wherever, they should give it to us for free.

(Female; Student; 1st-2nd ESO; Madrid, Spain).



8. CROSS COUNTRY COMPARISON

Spanish youth report the highest victimisation rates on most items, followed by Portugal, with Croatia generally being the lowest. The exception is threats of physical violence, where Croatia's youth report substantially higher rates than either Portugal or Spain.

Across all three countries, body appearance insults consistently rank first or joint first. This finding implies the centrality of bodily self-presentation as the primary target of online aggression regardless of the national context. One finding is consistent across all three countries: females are more targeted by unwanted sexual messages, and males are more targeted by threats of physical violence. This female-sexual/male-physical split represents the most robust cross-national gender pattern in the data. Beyond this, national specificities emerge: Croatia uniquely shows a higher male victimisation on appearance-based insults, while Spain shows pronounced gender divergences overall.

LGBTIQ youth are consistently the most victimised group across all three countries. The pattern is universal but its shape varies. Croatia and Portugal show the strongest LGBTIQ overrepresentation for reputational aggression (lies about sexual behaviour), while Spain concentrates LGBTIQ vulnerability in coercive sexual behaviours.

Regarding the children who are victims of GBCV in Croatia: being younger is associated with a higher victimisation, which means that children lack protective resources available to older youth. Croatian children may inhabit less supervised online spaces. As digital engagement intensifies through adolescence, victimisation likely accumulates. However, in Portugal and Spain children are more frequently exposed to a wider range of forms of violent cyber behaviours than the children in Croatia. Croatia shows the largest gender gaps among children, with girls being victims more often, followed by Portugal, and with Spain showing the most modest differences.

Spanish youth report the highest perpetration rates on all comparable items, followed by Portugal and then Croatia. This higher perpetration in Spain is consistent with the higher victimisation rates observed there, which may point to a context where cyber violence is both more commonly experienced and more commonly enacted.

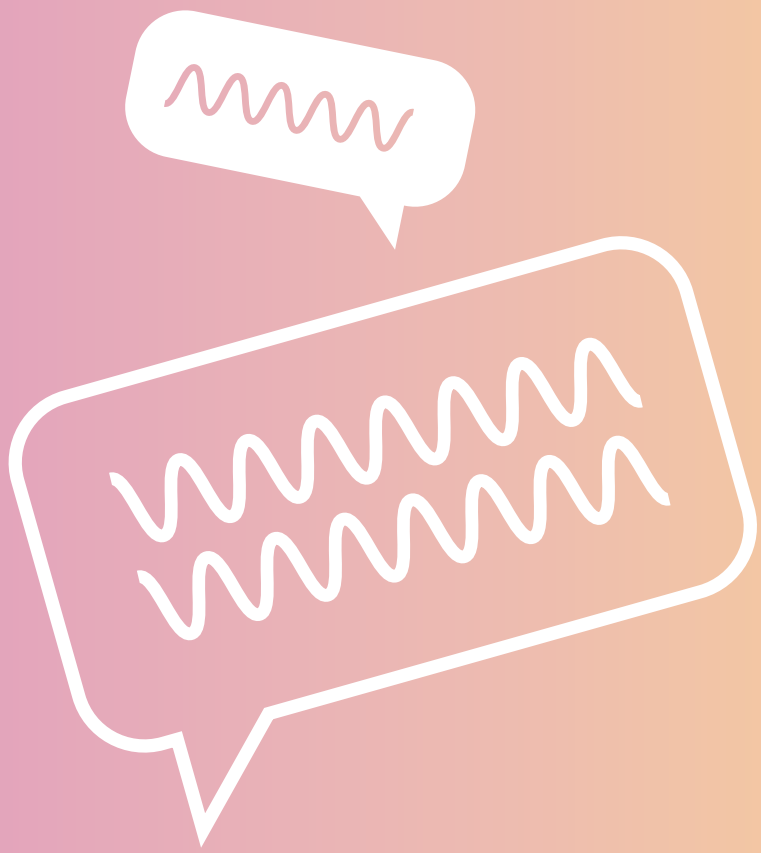
The three countries present three distinct developmental models for the gendering of perpetration. In Croatia, self-reported perpetration is gender-neutral among children and becomes male-dominated among youth. In Portugal, moderate male predominance among children partially attenuates among youth. In Spain, strong male predominance is present from childhood and persists into youth. These divergent trajectories may imply that the relationship between gender and cyber violence perpetration is culturally mediated.

It is interesting to note that Croatia and Portugal follow a "childhood peak" where both victimisation and perpetration are considerably higher among children and decline with age. In Spain, however, the prevalence of GBCV in terms of experience and perpetration is similar in both age groups.

Across all three countries and both age groups, generally, females are disproportionately targeted by sexually intrusive behaviours and males by physical threats. LGBTIQ youth are the most victimised group in every country.

Across all three countries, risky online behaviour emerged as the strongest and most consistent predictor of GBCV involvement, whether as a witness, victim, or perpetrator. Higher media literacy was associated with lower levels of both victimisation and perpetration in Croatia and Portugal, though this protective effect was less consistent in Spain.

Both victims and perpetrators reported poorer mental health, greater loneliness, and negative academic outcomes, though the data do not allow us to establish the direction of causality. Girls and women reported higher levels of distress following victimisation than boys and men, while men were more likely to resort to passive coping strategies. Interestingly, "doing nothing" was among the most common reactions to victimisation across all three countries, and substantial proportions of those affected told no one about their experiences. Perpetrators were predominantly known to victims (friends, partners, and acquaintances), rather than anonymous strangers.



9. PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE – CROATIA, PORTUGAL AND SPAIN

According to parents' assessments, most children have continuous internet access, most commonly via mobile phones, computers, and tablets, while roughly a third also use gaming consoles. Nearly all children in Croatia and Portugal use a mobile phone (96%), as do the majority in Spain (85%).

Children spend a substantial amount of time online during both weekdays and weekends to communicate with people outside the family. Cross-country patterns are similar, with Portugal standing out—children there use the internet for an average of four hours on weekdays and five hours on weekends. In Croatia and Spain, the averages are somewhat lower (around 3.5 hours on weekdays and more than four hours on weekends).

Parents in all three countries display a relatively permissive stance toward internet availability, allowing most children (80% or more) unimpeded access. In Portugal and Spain, boys use the internet more frequently than girls, whereas in Croatia there are no notable gender differences in the frequency of access. Only a small share of parents apply restrictive measures to the internet use, and many are unaware of online risks for their children, as indicated by one of the police officers:

> *What's going on? When parents buy that device, they open it, create an email address. We have cases where children or victims were abusers with credentials, with user data from parents because they gave it to that child. So here you are, the knife, look, maybe you'll fall for it, maybe you won't. Without awareness that it is sharp and dangerous.* (Police officer, Croatia)

Parents are aware of their children's risky online behaviours, noting that children most often add strangers to their friends or contacts and send personal information to unknown individuals (e.g., in Croatia 17% of boys and 13% of girls; in Spain 23% of girls and 19% of boys). Children frequently visit websites with sexual content (in Portugal 19% of girls; in Spain and Croatia 16%) and share personal data with the people they have never met in real life (16% of girls in Portugal and Croatia; 23% in Spain). Parents also recognise other risky behaviours like the creation of fake identities on social media and access to sexually themed content. For example, in Croatia, 10% of boys and 8% of girls aged 12–14 had met in person someone they had previously communicated with only online; in Portugal the figures are 17% of boys and 12% of girls, and in Spain 17% of girls and 16% of boys. Intergenerational differences, especially cultural contexts and patterns of the internet and social network use, are extremely important for understanding the circumstances that lead to increased vulnerability of children and young people, as is evident from the following quotations:

When someone asks you; Has your child been on that social network? So, kids don't go on Facebook. Facebook is for boomers, and boomers are anyone over 20. Facebook is for boomers. So, if you see that the child has Facebook or Facebook Messenger installed, it means that something is wrong. Children don't communicate with each other on Facebook, but mostly on Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. If it has a Facebook Messenger, then there is a problem. Who is he talking to on Facebook Messenger? So, he is talking to someone who is probably an adult. Kids communicate by WhatsApp, but they don't have Viber. Viber is for boomers, but if a child has Viber, then there is already an alert, something, something is not right. Why does he have Viber?

(Police officer, Croatia)

I think it is very difficult or almost impossible to control because no matter how much parental control you put, when the mother or father controls the main account... they have three or four accounts where they write whatever they want. (Female; teacher; Asturias, Spain).

Regarding digital safety, about half of parents in all three countries believe their children possess the skills needed to handle unforeseen situations online and to report inappropriate content.

Parental mediation varies across countries. In Croatia, around half of parents practice restrictive mediation, including limiting time spent online, while about a third impose bans or content blocking (restrict access to specific websites). Most parents explain which websites are appropriate and show interest in their children's online activities, with oversight more frequently directed toward girls. Similar patterns appear in Portugal, where parents more often talk with children about their online experiences and agree on the rules for sharing information online—especially with girls (80% - girls vs. over 70% - boys). Restrictive measures are the least common there as well. In Spain, the largest share of parents (about 80%) express interest in their children's online activities, while roughly a half apply restrictive forms of mediation. Restrictive mediation—banning or blocking specific websites—is the least common for boys (39%) and somewhat more common for girls (56%). As for limiting the time spent online, such restrictions are applied more frequently to girls (56%) than to boys (52%).

All the examined forms of GBCV—despite the young age of the children—are recognised by parents. The most prevalent type is body shaming, that is, insulting and degrading children based on physical appearance, linked to socially constructed standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness.

Across Croatia, Portugal, and Spain, parents identify appearance-based insults (body shaming) as the most prevalent form of online violence affecting children. In all three countries, girls are generally more exposed to sexualised forms of online abuse, although overall gender differences in average victimisation levels are not statistically significant.

In Croatia, about a third of parents report body shaming, regardless of gender. Boys are somewhat more likely to face sexually derogatory insults (16% vs. 13%) and threats of physical violence, while girls more often experience sexual exclusion (9% vs. 6%) and pressure to send intimate images (4% vs. 2%). More severe forms of abuse (e.g., sharing private data or fabricated sexual content) remain below 5%.

In Portugal, gender differences are more pronounced. Body shaming affects 27% of girls and 21% of boys. Girls are more frequently targeted by threats of physical violence (16% vs. 9%), sexual rumours (14% vs. 8%), unwanted sexual messages (12%), and sexual violence–related threats (10% vs. 5%). Notably, 7% of girls received offers for sexual services.

In Spain, girls are consistently more affected across nearly all forms of online violence. Twenty-seven percent experience body shaming, 21% receive unwanted sexual messages, and 16% are subjected to sexual rumours. Fourteen percent report sexual exclusion, pressure to discuss sexual activities, or threats of physical violence. Ten percent were offered money for sexualised images, and 8% of girls aged 12–14 were reportedly offered money for sex.

Overall, while specific forms of cyber violence show clear gendered patterns—particularly sexualised harassment targeting girls—the aggregate differences in reported victimisation between boys and girls are small and statistically non-significant.

Parents believe perpetrators are most often male, while female perpetrators are identified far less frequently. They also consider that threats most commonly come from acquaintances, friends, or individuals within the child's broader social circle.

Nearly 90% of parents in Croatia, 67% in Portugal, and 61% in Spain believe that children turn to them after receiving threats or having negative online experiences, indicating a higher level of trust in parents—especially in Croatia. Smaller shares of children turn to other family members or friends, while schools and school staff play a very limited role in addressing such situations. Only 4% of parents/guardians in the full sample reported contacting the police.

Parents rarely perceive their own children as potential perpetrators. Among those who acknowledge this possibility, the most commonly cited behaviours are insults based on physical appearance, the use of sexually derogatory language, and threats or blackmail involving physical violence.

Parents report a relatively limited awareness of the consequences of online behaviour. A small share of parents in Croatia (4%)—but a markedly higher share in Portugal (13% among girls) and Spain (11% among girls)—believe that children received lower grades due to negative online communication experiences. Notably, a smaller number of children changed schools, and some missed educational opportunities.

Assessments of children's mental health suggest a mildly diminished psychological state across all three countries. While gender differences are not significant in Croatia and Spain, they are statistically confirmed in Portugal, where overall levels of mental wellbeing are lower.

Overall, parents are permissive regarding the internet use, express moderate confidence in children's ability to cope with risks, and rarely view them as perpetrators, even though they recognise children's exposure to various forms of cyber violence. This raises questions about the extent to which parents understand these experiences as GBCV, as well as whether they recognise that some psychosocial difficulties are directly linked to intensive internet use and negative online experiences.

Interviewer: What do you think — how much do your parents know, not just about digital violence, but about how much of it actually happens? In general, how much knowledge do they have, how aware are they?

Participant 6: I think, for example, my parents never told me like, 'don't do that.' I don't think they're even aware that this actually exists.

(High school, Dalmatia, Croatia, girls)

No way — if I ever sent someone a picture of my private parts, there's no amount of money that would make me tell my dad. He'd call me an idiot, that's the first thing, and send me to Zagreb to a rehab centre to cure me of 'retardism'.

(Elementary school, Dalmatia, Croatia, boys)

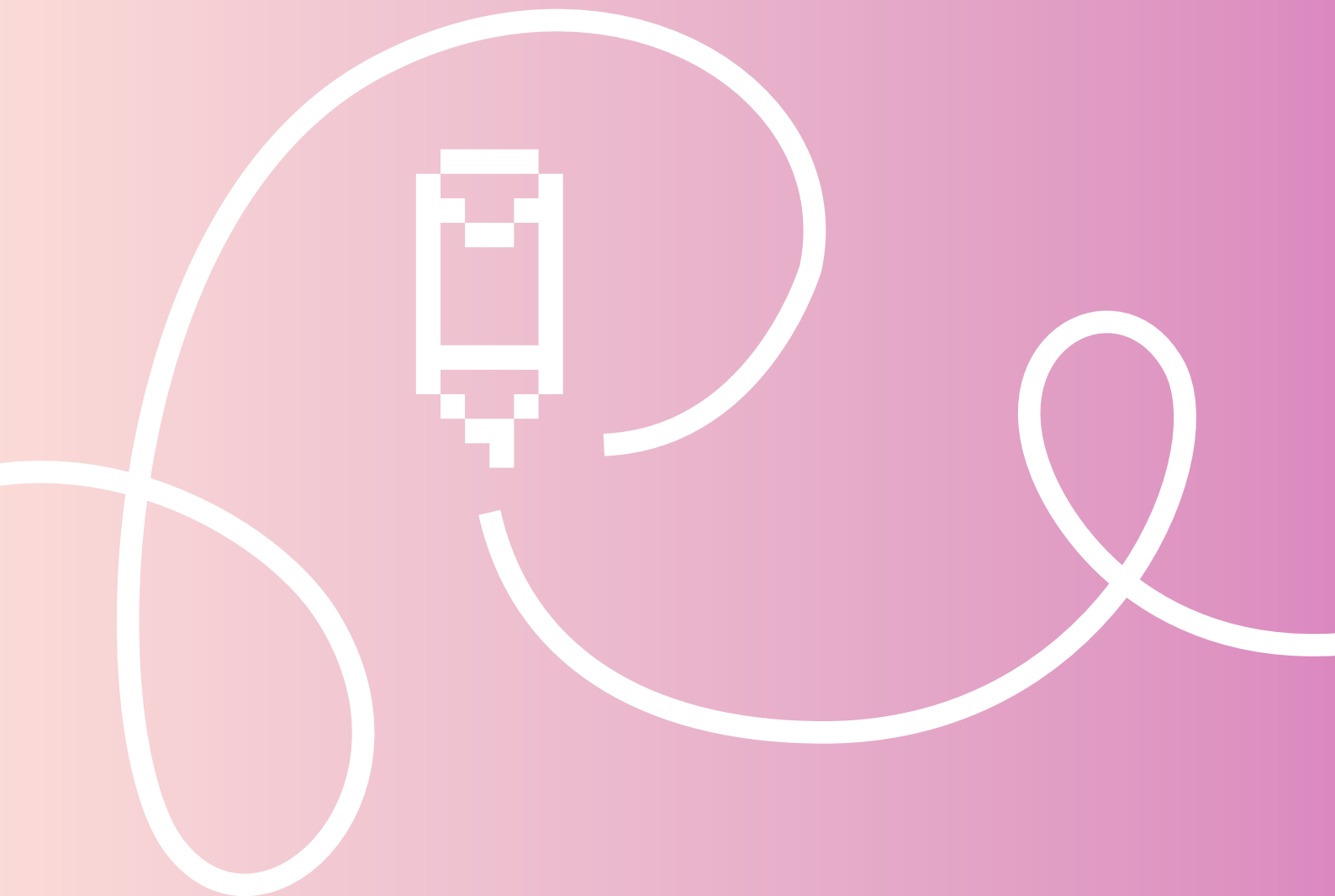
Interviewer: How well-informed are parents about what is happening online?

Participant 1: Poorly, very poorly.

(High school, Zagreb, Croatia, boys)

I think it is very difficult or almost impossible to control because no matter how much you use parental control, when the mother or father controls the main account... they have three or four accounts where they write whatever they want.

(Woman; Teacher; Asturias, Spain).



10. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Reflecting the results of the quantitative and qualitative bE-Safe research, the policy recommendations combating GBCV across Croatia, Portugal and Spain require a multi-level, intersectoral, and age-sensitive approach. In scope of this, we propose policy recommendations targeting the EU Regulatory Framework, followed by the recommendations targeting national regulatory frameworks, through general preventive and awareness-raising measures, to the educational measures and proposals in the domain of national curricula, and lastly, the recommendations targeting organisations working with children and youth, and the activists.

Recommendations targeting the EU regulatory framework

1. The EU institutions should ensure a full and harmonised transposition of Directive 2024/1385[4] on combating violence against women and domestic violence across all Member States, with explicit and enforceable provisions addressing online and technology-facilitated forms of violence. Particular attention should be paid to:
   - Non-consensual sharing of intimate or manipulated images
   - Cyberstalking, cyber harassment and violence
   - Online incitement to violence, hatred, and sexual exploitation.
2. The EU Digital Services Act[5] implementation should be strengthened to significantly improve platform accountability, including:
   - Proactive monitoring of gendered, sexualised, and sexuality-based harassment and violence
   - Mandatory transparency obligations regarding moderation practices
   - The development of specialised tools for detecting and responding to harassment and violence targeting girls, women and LGBTIQ individuals.
3. The EU legal frameworks criminalising digitally mediated sexual exploitation should be harmonised, which include:
   - The solicitation of intimate images from minors
   - The offering of payment for such content
   - Adequate capturing of the forms of coercion, blackmail, and commodification by the legislation.
4. A clear and legally binding EU-wide definition of GBCV that recognises it not solely as an individual harm, but as a structural and social phenomenon involving collective responsibility, and embedded gender inequalities should be developed and integrated in the relevant policy documents.

4 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1385/oj/eng
5 https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act

5. The EU-funded prevention programmes should explicitly address both victimisation and perpetration, recognising the high perpetration rates among children and adolescents.

6. Systematic EU-level data collection and monitoring, disaggregated by gender, age, and sexual orientation, should be established, with a particular attention to children under 14, who are a group currently underrepresented in official statistics despite early exposure to cyber violence.

7. The EU-level standards for age verification and parental control mechanisms as part of a multi-layered prevention strategy should be integrated in all instances, while recognising that technological solutions must be accompanied by educational, cultural, and relational interventions.

8. Restorative, educational, and relational approaches should be prioritised over exclusively punitive models.

Before going to more concrete recommendations targeting national regulatory frameworks, we remind of the following United Nations Global Programme on Cybercrime recommendations that should be implemented at the national level:

1. States should ensure that effective measures are taken to prevent the publication of harmful material that comprises gender-based violence against women, and for their removal on an urgent basis. States should adopt, or adapt (as appropriate), their criminal and civil causes of action to hold perpetrators liable. Such legislative measures should be applicable also to threats of releasing harmful information or content online.

2. States should clearly prohibit and criminalise online violence against women, in particular the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, online harassment and stalking. The criminalisation of online violence against women should encompass all elements of this type of abuse, including subsequent "re-sharing" of harmful content. The threat to disseminate non-consensual images must be made illegal so that prosecutors and judges may intervene and prevent the abuse before it is perpetrated.

3. States should apply a gender perspective to all online forms of violence, which are usually criminalised in a gender-neutral manner, in order to address them as acts of gender-based violence. Criminal or civil causes of action should allow women who are victims to pursue legal action, with adequate protection of their privacy, and avoid secondary victimisation of women; without such protection, victims attempting to erase content may be exposed to the risk of having their case made even more public.

4. States should provide protective measures and services for victims of online gender-based violence; this includes specialised helplines to provide support to those who have been attacked online, shelters and protection orders.

5. States should inform children and teenagers about the risks of taking, or allowing others to take, intimate images, and that the dissemination of such images is a form of gender-based violence and is a crime. Girls should also learn about safety on social media platforms and the internet.

Recommendations targeting national legal frameworks and public institutions[6]

1. Specific measures to combat cyber violence against women and girls should be integrated into national and local action plans, with structured funding and regular and transparent monitoring and evaluation procedures.

2. Legal and institutional responses to intimate partner cyber violence should be strengthened, recognising that partners and ex-partners account for a significant share of perpetrators.

3. Cross-sectoral partnerships at the national, regional and local levels should be institutionalised in order to include youth organisations, educational institutions and health providers in coordinated discussions of children and youth online engagements and viable pathways for healthy transition into youthhood and adulthood.

4. Justice system and institutional responses should be strengthened, including:

   - Training law enforcement officers to recognise cyber violence as a human rights violation
   - Ensuring fast response and victim-centred handling of reports related to intimate image abuse, blackmail and cyberstalking
   - Establishing specialised units and helplines offering gender- and age-sensitive support.

5. National and local governments should establish specialised support services for survivors of GBCV.

6. Family-centred prevention policies that equip parents to act as supportive first responders rather than punitive authorities should be promoted. Families should be systematically engaged in prevention efforts, training parents to recognise both victimisation and perpetration among their children.

7. Women's and LGBTIQ associations should be involved in developing public policies to prevent and combat cyber violence, as well as in the design and implementation of prevention and intervention programmes, including peer education and creation of safe digital spaces.

8. LGBTIQ-inclusive prevention policies should be prioritised, whereas legal and policy frameworks must explicitly address homophobic and transphobic online harassment and violence, and ensure safe and anonymous reporting mechanisms.

9. Youth protection frameworks that include youth-friendly institutions providing services in the areas of youth mental and physical health should be established at the local level.

10. Specialised services for LGBTIQ youth, including helplines, support groups, and online/offline safe spaces, should be funded and supported.

11. Gender-inclusive prevention strategies that challenge both boys and girls on perpetration should be developed, reflecting the near gender parity in appearance-based insults and sexual slurs among children.

6 https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/cybercrime/home.html

12. The widespread availability of violent and degrading pornography should be recognised as a contributor to violence against girls and women, and addressed as a major political priority in the coming years.

13. Digital platforms should be held accountable, which includes the enforcement of age verification measures and improved reporting accessibility.

14. Local governments should allocate funding to create and sustain accessible community spaces and programmes (e.g., affordable fitness centres and maintained outdoor spaces) that provide children and young people with affordable, offline opportunities for recreation, social interaction, and personal development, supporting their wellbeing and resilience.

Recommendations on general preventive measures

1. Actions for developing collective responsibility, reframing GBCV as a social problem embedded in peer cultures, digital norms, and gender inequalities, rather than an individual failure, should be introduced and promoted.

2. Male perpetration patterns should be addressed explicitly through interventions that challenge harmful masculinity norms, rigid gender and sexual norms, homophobia, transphobia, digital power imbalances, and the normalisation of body shaming and "minor" violence.

3. Building active response skills should be enhanced through formal and non-formal programmes and activities with children and young people. Children need practical tools and confidence to respond to online harassment and violence; they need to know how to block, report, save evidence, and seek help. Passive responses leave harm unaddressed and may signal to perpetrators that their behaviour is tolerated.

4. Youth-oriented national awareness campaigns should be launched, aiming at:

   - Clearly defining GBCV and its impacts
   - Challenging the normalisation of appearance-based harassment, sexualised "jokes," and symbolic violence
   - Raising awareness of the healthy modes of relationships and the importance of building resilience
   - Promoting positive digital role models and ethical online engagement
   - Normalising disclosure and help-seeking as a sign of strength and reversing the current state of exceptionally high levels of silence and passivity, particularly among LGBTIQ youth.

5. National campaigns should also address the full spectrum of GBCV behaviours, including:

   - Gendered or sexually derogatory comments and insults — including name-calling, slurs, jokes, body shaming, etc.
   - Demeaning language, stereotyping, and objectification — reducing individuals to sexual attributes or enforcing traditional gender roles.
   - Unsolicited sexual content or communication — unwanted messages or images aimed at intimidation or humiliation.

- Non-consensual sharing of intimate images or information — including threats to distribute private material.
- Digital monitoring or control in relationships — demanding account access, surveillance, or other forms of online control.
- Threats of physical or sexual violence — direct or implied, communicated via digital means.
- Coercion and manipulation — pressuring individuals into sexual or emotional compliance, including blackmail, emotional abuse, or leveraging private content.

6. Parents, educational institutions and institutions and organisations working with children and young people should focus on helping children and young people recognise and reduce risk-taking behaviours online, rather than simply limiting screen time.

7. Parents need guidance and support on responding supportively to their child's online threats, whether as the victims or perpetrators, without overreacting, while maintaining open communication about online experiences.

Recommendations for curriculum amendments and educational institutions' activities

1. Gender equality, digital citizenship, and violence prevention should be embedded into national curricula from primary education, supported by compulsory teacher training on identifying and responding to GBCV.

2. In line with the EU Strategy for a Better Internet for Kids[7], educational content and methods aiming at combating digital violence should be differentiated by age group. Mandatory early intervention, starting from the kindergarten age, intensive peer-group work, and programmes addressing the LGBTIQ victim-perpetrator cycle should be introduced. We propose the following age brackets and a set of skills and knowledge that would serve as a framework for devising more adapted and meaningful awareness-raising campaigns and intervention programmes:

   - Preschool age (2-5): how to be kind to other people, why not to share names or photos online, and how to ask adults for help.
   - Early school age (6-9): how and why digital messages may hurt themselves and other people, how to keep personal info and passwords a secret, awareness that not everything online is true, importance of telling adults what they are doing online.
   - Middle school (age 10-14): recognising and reporting cyber violence, understanding harm disguised as humour, building empathy and response skills.
   - Youth (age 15-29): relationship-based digital violence, sexual coercion, legal implications of non-consensual content sharing.

2. Mandatory digital literacy education should integrate:

   - Technical competencies
   - Relational and emotional skills
   - Understanding of consent in digital spaces

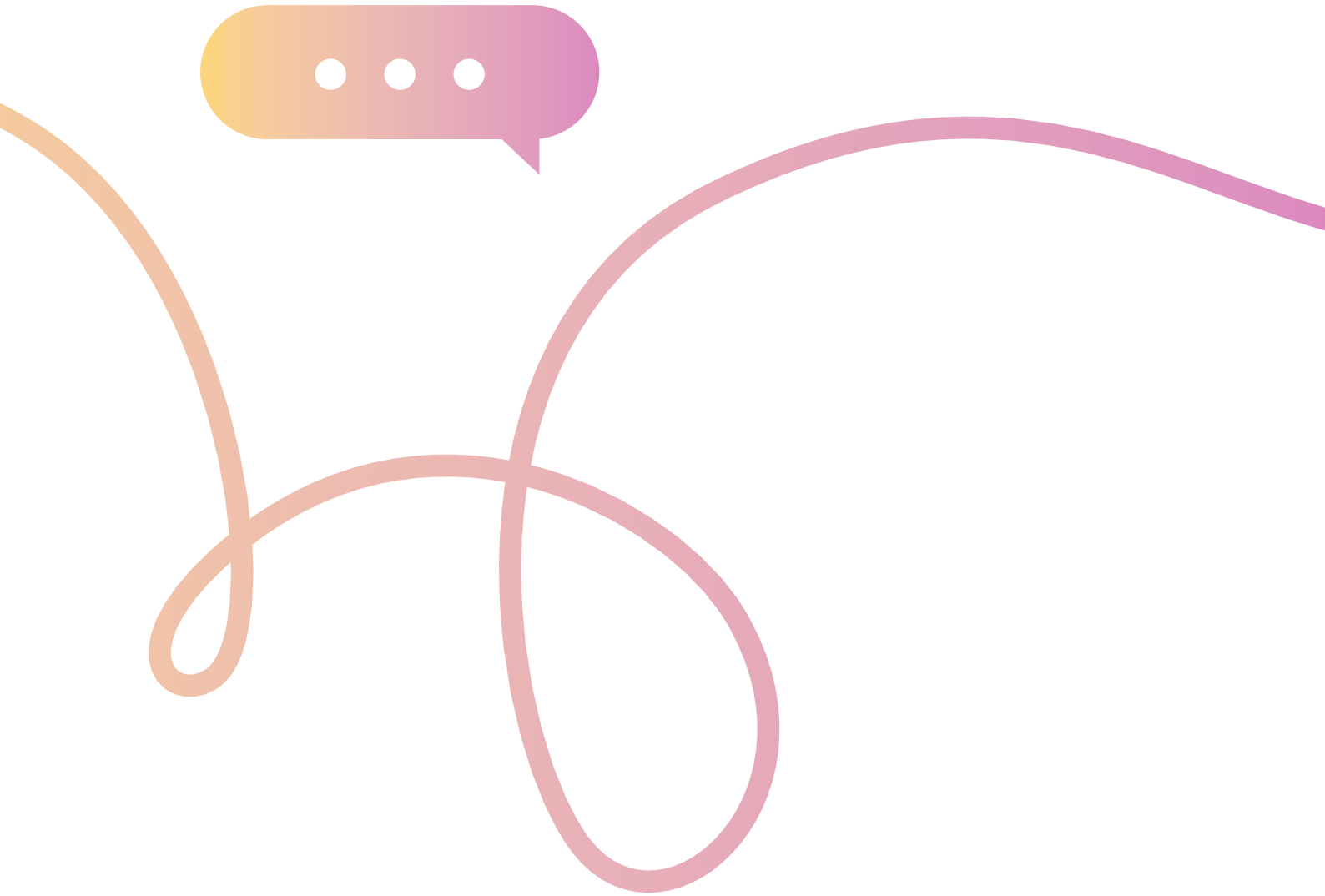
7 https://better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/en

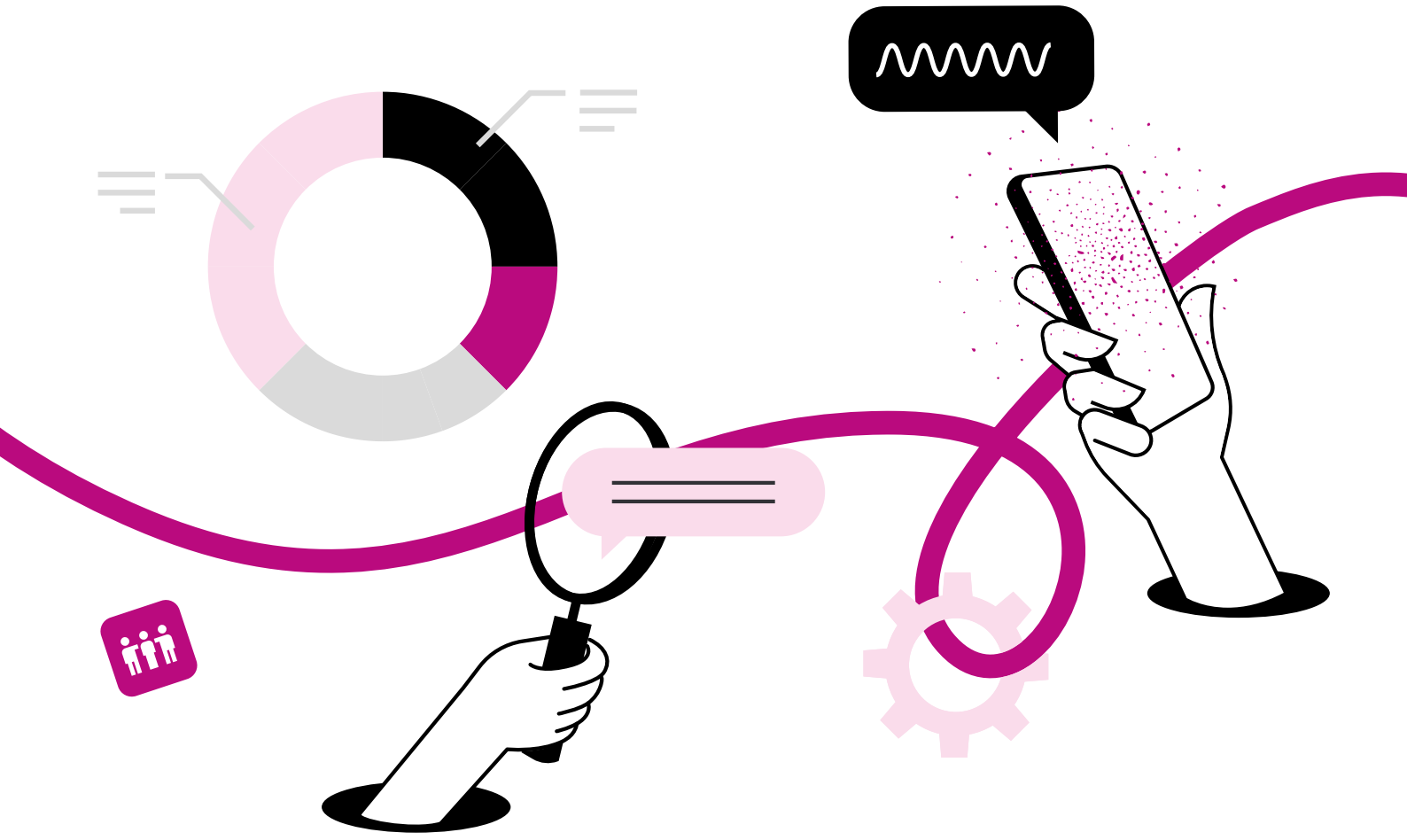
- Understanding sexual coercion and commodification of intimacy
- Recognition of harmful interactions
- Age-appropriate bystander intervention strategies
- Coping and reporting strategies.

3. Real-life scenarios should be incorporated into educational programmes and workshops to bridge the gap between knowledge and behaviour.
4. The educational programmes should rely on mixed-gender peer groups, with a particular attention to engaging men and boys in reflecting on their roles and responsibilities.
5. Change formats of training and awareness-raising on online harassment and violence. The "active listening" method should be chosen, avoiding "lecturing".
6. It should be provided that educational programmes are LGBTIQ affirming, with anonymous reporting mechanisms within schools, ensuring accessibility for all students regardless of gender or sexual identity.
7. Educational institutions should hire and additionally train counsellors, alongside engaging peer support networks.
8. Reporting protocols should aim at safeguarding children's rights and ensuring safe spaces where reporting protocols at the educational institutions are non-disclosive.
9. Rigid victim-perpetrator dichotomies in early adolescence should be abandoned, recognising that many children occupy both roles simultaneously within peer dynamics.
10. Restorative and relational approaches should be prioritised over punitive frameworks, helping young people understand the impact of their behaviour while supporting their own victimisation experiences.

Recommendations for organisations working with children and youth, and activists

1. Inclusive, community-based prevention programmes addressing both victimisation and perpetration should be developed through workshops that build empathy, emotional intelligence, and ethical digital engagement.
2. Youth-led initiatives and peer networks should be provided support, while recognising young people's digital expertise and ensuring their participation in policy formulation and awareness campaigns.
3. Awareness and prevention campaigns should be established not only in schools but also in general media and workplaces
4. It is highly advisable to promote the sharing of resources and good practices, for example, through international digital platforms created ad hoc, where experiences and effective strategies in the fight against bullying on social networks can be exchanged
5. Comprehensive post-violence support should be provided on an equal basis to all individuals, including:
   - Psychological and mental health services for victims and perpetrators
   - Accountability and rehabilitation programmes
   - Clear referral pathways to legal and social services.
6. Cultures of silence and self-reliance, particularly among boys and young men, should be reversed by normalising disclosure and collective care.





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