



The impact on children of gender violence on their mother. Lessons learned from applied research

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Purpose

It was an applied research commissioned and funded by Barcelona City Council **to analyse the impact on children of gender violence from the perspective of those involved**: children and young people, mothers, fathers and professionals.

- ▶ To gain greater awareness of the impact of gender violence on children and on the mother-child relationship
- ▶ To identify key aspects in the understanding and intervention in the recovery process, both in relation to the child and to the mother and the mother-child relationship.

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Method



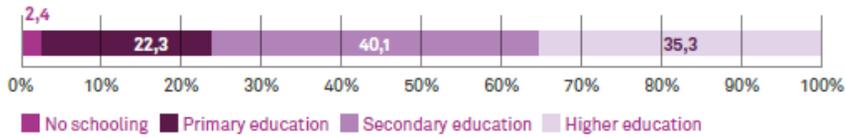
- ▶ A **mixed** methodological research design was implemented consisting of:
1. A **secondary analysis** of existing data from the City Council database for the 1995-2013 period, analysing 2,579 cases of mothers who had sought help, 272 of whom had been provided protection in shelters, and 357 cases of children who had received support.
 2. A **quantitative study** based on a questionnaire directed at mothers (N=339), young people (N=44) and practitioners (N=157) from social services, the child protection system and from services dealing specifically with gender violence.
 3. A **qualitative study** based on interviews and focus groups with children (N=40), mothers (N=9) and fathers (N=6), and focus groups with practitioners (N=24).



Some findings

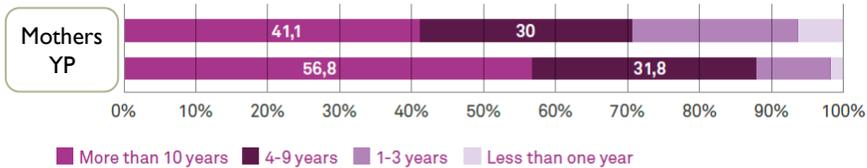


a) **Mothers and children do not stand out as a distinguishable sub-group**, except in regard to the mothers' low employment rate and low income.



b) **The children participating in the research display effects that are serious in many cases, that have lasted for many years and usually reach the services late.** There is a clear lack of prevention, detection and early treatment, and therefore the impact on and damage to the children is often quite significant.

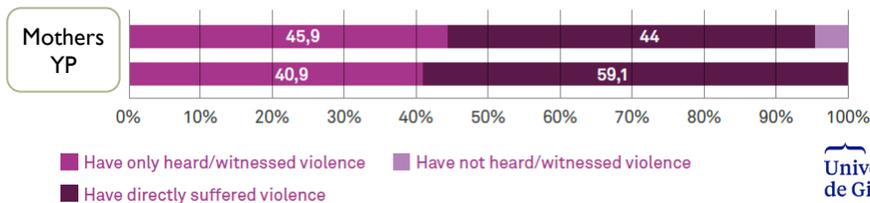
Duration of the violence according to mothers and to young people.



Age of the young people when the violence began.



Awareness of the impact of violence on children, according to mothers and young people.



- ▶ The young people describe in detail the process through which they **become aware of the violence** experienced.
- ▶ They express **the fear of repeating the patterns** of violence, and they hope this does not happen.
- ▶ **School is negatively affected** both in academic performance and in relationships with classmates and teachers.
- ▶ **Family relationships are altered** and **mistrust**
- ▶ Relationships with friends suffer and **they often feel alone**.
- ▶ In the emotional sphere, feelings of **fear, anger, hate, guilt**, feeling **unloved, powerlessness** and **frustration** all stand out.
- ▶ They have **difficulties talking** about it and **low self-esteem**, and **they mature too early**.
- ▶ Problems also appear in the area of **behaviour and development**, including problems with conduct and change in character, introversion and isolation or aggressiveness, delay or problems in development.
- ▶ **Health problems** are found in some cases, as well as mental health disorders and/or suicide attempts,

Quotations



- ❖ *“It affects everything right? They can’t bring friends home, or go out, or take part in activities, their circle of friends is very small, and studying is surely not very easy when they are shouting at home” (Focus group 15-17 year olds).*
- ❖ *“I’m currently being treated for anxiety and panic attacks, which started shortly after the situation [at home] returned to normal. I’m unable to handle situations where someone acts violently and find that I force myself to be watchful and alert all the time, for in case my father is nearby” (Young woman).*
- ❖ *“My daughter hated and feared males (men and boys) for a long time. Her studies have never gone well. She feels inferior and has very low self-esteem.” (Mother).*



c) The coping strategies used by children to handle gender violence are highly varied



- ▶ Girl 1: *Pick up a knife.*
- ▶ Girl 2: *Pick up your mobile phone and play. Yeah, so you don't have to listen to what's going on.*
- ▶ Boy 3: *You turn the radio on.*
- ▶ Girl 4: *Or otherwise, start crying and tell them "stop, please stop"... (Focus Group 11-13 year-olds)*

- ▶ Trying to protect oneself and finding ways to calm down; distracting oneself or trying to withdraw emotionally; starting to scream and cry; and asking for help from people close to them, the school or the police.

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d) There is very little direct intervention with children



- ▶ Only **half** of the children (according to database and the questionnaires answered by the young people and mothers) received **direct care**, despite suffering chronic and serious violence
- ▶ It is more common **to attend to the mothers directly**, understanding that they are the ones affected and that the intervention with them will also have an impact on the children (with differences by the type of services)
- ❖ *"They should take the children into account. They are the ones who hurt and suffer the most, and who will have to bear the scars in the future. They should be given a lot of help" (Young boy)*
- ❖ *"I believe that yes, it (the group) helps a lot, especially because you see that you're not the only one (...) I went and I have very fond memories, because you're with people your age, they joke with you, nothing depressing, and it helps you a lot" (Young woman).*

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e) The impact on mother-child relationships. Discrepancies expressed between professionals and mothers

- ▶ The mother-child relationships are very **much affected**. The children pin the **expectation of change** on the mother in particular, and the fact that she does not act to free herself or free them from the violence → difficult or disappointing, or ambivalent relationships appear. The professionals also pin this expectation on the mother.
- ▶ The **professionals and mothers stand at opposite ends of the spectrum in considering maternal abilities**: the professionals consider that the mothers have great difficulty playing their role as parent, while the mothers basically attribute great ease → **there is a complex starting point for intervention**. Do the professionals overestimate the difficulties? or Do the mothers overestimate the ease, either due to self-conviction or fear when faced with the service?



Quotations

- ▶ *“They should think about how they can’t really take care of their children if they’re not taking care of themselves, and that their children need to leave this environment, because otherwise, they will not be able to grow in the manner that they deserve. And if they don’t grow up properly, they will be in bad shape...you have to take care of yourself in order to take care of others” (Focus Group 15-18 year olds).*

f) Support required by children and mothers

- ▶ Mothers and young people think that the **children did not receive assistance** from the services.
- ▶ Among the services they have had, they agree on highlighting **leisure** activities. **school** and **psychological support** as useful for children
- ▶ They have not found assistance from the judicial system

g) Serious difficulties in repairing the damage done

- ▶ The mothers say it can be repaired by loving them, but the children think that it is necessary to leave and get away from the aggressor and that it does not happen again
- ▶ The importance of receiving both psychological care as well as care from other professionals, such as social educators and teachers and support from family and friends, being able to talk about it openly.
- ▶ It is worth highlighting the number of times they say the damage cannot be repaired.

Quotation



- ▶ ***“Well, it helped me, I asked the teacher for help, I stayed a little while after class. Because the teachers knew that my father abused me, well, he abused all three of us. But I asked them if I could stay to talk with the teachers and I talked about the problems, I liked it because I felt like a weight was lifted from me” (Focus group 8-11 year olds).***



h) Lack of available treatment for the father and difficult father-child relationships

When you're at home you think that it's normal for your father to hit you. When you ask him why he's hitting you, he hits you even more. You don't expect anything from your father” (Interview with a young woman).

i) The debate surrounding the issue of shelters for women and children

“You can't go to school, I can't even go out, the food is gross, you can't use your mobile, you can't play on the laptop, to be honest with you, this is worse than being in jail (Focus group 11-13 year olds).



j) The absence of a results evaluation system for interventions and policy-making

Results cannot be evaluated with the databases available:

- ▶ The objectives at the start of the intervention are not recorded in a manner that allows them to be used electronically, nor does it allow for analysing the results, or reason for closing the case.

k) High level of satisfaction of mothers with the support received and differences among services

	M	DT
Satisfaction with the services (mothers)	7,57	2,287
Satisfaction with the services (YP)	8,40	1,443
Satisfaction with the work done (professionals)		
Shelter centres (public)	8,15	1,182
Service specialised in gender violence (public)	7,41	1,047
Basic Social Services (public)	5,67	1,583
Child Protection Teams (public)	5,37	1,802

Mothers, children, fathers and young people recommend that the professionals have patience (even faced with their possible inappropriate remarks), flexibility, adaptation to each person's pace, empathy and an attitude of active listening.



Recommendations

- ✓ Early detection and care from all agents. Think about safe spaces where children express their fears and worries.
- ✓ As regards early detection, it is important for the information to actually be accessible to children
- ✓ There is a clear need to take children more into account in interventions in situations of gender-based violence
- ✓ Considering the children's stability as a key topic: avoiding changing schools, separation from friends and leisure activities
- ✓ The importance of providing protection and safe environments to children BUT without reducing their rights → a big dilemma



Recommendations

- Strengthening and improving interventions and treatment techniques with the mothers and children, focusing on mother-child relationships.
- Diversifying and increasing treatment resources for aggressors, taking into account the father-child relationships.
- Establishing a system that makes it possible to systematically evaluate the results of the intervention, useful for professionals, policy makers and research.
- Urgently improving the entire mechanism of the judicial system
- Reviewing the care pathways and roles of the services.



Final thoughts

- ▶ ***“They should think that in desperate situations, we all go to extremes, and they shouldn’t judge. They should be patient with the changes, be supportive and give advice with no pressure. Most of all, they should value people and make them feel good about themselves” (Young person)***
- ▶ ***“The professionals focus a lot on the home, on the family, and very often, the family - where the problem lies - cannot help the child” (Adolescent).***

References

- ▶ **Montserrat, C. and Casas, F. (2017).***The impact of gender-based violence and recovery processes on children and young people, mothers and mother-child relationships. Applied research.* Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona. Available at:
- ▶ http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/sites/default/files/arxiu-documents/impacte_violencia_masclista_en.pdf