



POLICY  
RECOMMENDATION  
PAPER



## INTRODUCTION

### About the project

The aim of the Cut All Ties project is to tackle gender-based violence (GBV) through the design, implementation and validation of an effective and innovative ICT gamification methodology, in order to raise awareness about, reduce and prevent gender-based violence among young people between 14 and 17 years old in six high schools of Spain (Barcelona and Madrid) and Italy (Milan), as part of a pilot intervention scheme.

The focus of the project is on changing attitudes and behaviors of young people regarding GBV through critical perspectives on young people's early emotional-sexual relationships. The project is funded within the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, and is coordinated by ABD (Spain) with the participation of ACRA (Italy) and Citibeats (Spain).

The specific objectives of the project are:

- To carry out educational and awareness-raising intervention focusing on primary prevention, through a methodology based on peer counseling and gamification, pivoted from high schools.
- To apply insights and practical tools from behavioral sciences in order to first identify the main drivers of GBV among young people's early emotional-sexual relationships, as well as the main behavioral causes, and thereafter to design a phase of pre-testing before implementing the pilot fully and evaluating its impact.
- To empower and increase young people's autonomy, providing them with skills and encouraging critical thinking to confront GBV through their own awareness-raising actions and strategies.
- Promote the skills-building of the educational community in order to identify and tackle GBV among their students.

With these objectives, the project has carried out **the following activities** between January 2021 and December 2022:

- Research to identify 10 best practices in the prevention of gender violence among adolescents.
- Collection and analysis of 78,434 documents through Citibeats' text analysis platform, to identify the predominant narratives around gender in social networks.
- Design of a Capacity Building training program to identify and prevent gender violence in high schools.

- Implementation of the **Cut All Ties Training and Education Program** in 1 high school in Milan, 1 high school in Barcelona and 1 high school in Madrid.
- Implementation and validation of the full **Cut All Ties program** (delivery of Training and Education program and implementation of gamification program) in 1 high school in Milan, 1 high school in Barcelona and 1 high school in Madrid, with awareness-raising actions created by young people to prevent gender-based violence through the app Cut All Ties.
- Evaluation of the implementation of the project and evaluation of the impact of the pilot in terms of changing social norms/behaviors in adolescents.
- Advocacy campaign at a national and European level.

### About this document

This document presents the key recommendations and suggestions developed as part of the Cut All Ties project, based on the main findings and learning outcomes obtained during the pilot scheme implementation.

The recommendations and suggestions have been developed by the Impact Evaluation Team, based on the results of the Impact Evaluation carried out, and have been enriched and complemented with the contributions of the professionals involved in Cut All Ties, as well as from the experience of the participant organizations deploying prevention programs with young people. In addition, this document gathers the valuable contributions made by third social sector organizations, professionals, experts and young people that participated in the final events of the project, held in Milan, Barcelona and Madrid. Finally, recommendations developed by national and international agencies and public bodies have also been considered.

With these, we hope to contribute to the design and implementation of effective and context-specific interventions that help to address gender-based violence among young people in formal education settings.

Accordingly, this recommendations document is particularly addressed to:

- Third-sector social organizations that work with young people in the areas of gender based-violence prevention, co-education, sex education and health promotion.
- Educational centers that already implement or wish to implement programs to promote healthy and positive relationships with educational community, and to prevent discrimination and violence based on gender, sexual orientation and gender identity.

- Public administrations and policy makers in the field of education and gender equality policies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **1. Provide an age-appropriate comprehensive sexual and emotional education throughout the entire educational curriculum**

Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE) democratizes access to reliable, critical and up-to-date information on sexuality, by promoting equal respect for the rights of all people. The creation of conditions that allow sexualities to be expressed freely and healthily is a matter of guaranteeing rights that **must be present in any educational environment and be reinforced by legislation and public policies**, and which cannot depend solely on the goodwill or on the capacity of understanding and the beliefs of governments or policy-makers.

As international bodies like UNESCO have stated<sup>1</sup>, CSE is an indispensable tool for promoting gender equality, insofar as the lack of access to that wealth of information is particularly damaging to girls as the group most at risk of suffering serious and lifelong setbacks. On that account, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has urged States to adopt comprehensive gender and sexuality-sensitive sexual and reproductive health policies for youth, emphasizing that unequal access to such information, commodities and services amounts to discrimination. In its General Comment N. 20, the Committee recommends that “all adolescents should have access to free, confidential, adolescent-responsive and non-discriminatory sexual and reproductive health services”.

The Cut All Ties project has taken this approach as the basis of its design and implementation, and is committed to offering quality sexuality education specifically in adolescence, with the conviction that this is the most appropriate way to foster autonomy and the ability of young people to make informed decisions about their well-being and that of others, thus ensuring healthier relationships free of violence. Those who are more attuned to what pleases them are more aware about self-boundaries and limits, and are also more able to set their own safe zone.

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO (2017) Available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>

**The lessons learned during the project reaffirm the need to provide comprehensive sex education not only to adolescents, but also during all stages and periods of life.**

More specifically, it is advisable, for guaranteeing an appropriate sex education, that it:

- a. Begins at birth and is delivered in an adapted way to different age groups and training cycles, meaning that it should be included in all educational curricula. By the time that sex education programs are taught in schools in most European countries (usually during adolescence), young people already have notions of sexuality and have constructed their sexuality according to the available models and predominant narratives that maintain the hierarchical patriarchal order.
- b. Considers the cultural characteristics and level of development of people.
- c. Is based on scientific evidence and adopts a human rights approach.
- d. Welcomes all diversity, pursues gender equality, and is committed to people's ownership and choice over their own bodies.
- e. Contributes to the construction of inclusive and transformative societies.

Considering all the above aspects, it is strongly recommended that **CSE includes a feminist intersectional approach**, since it has the potential to be a tool to deploy with young people in order to challenge the cisheteropatriarchal order: it invites individuals to deconstruct themselves, to change and redefine views and connections in terms of rights and equality, to break with rigid schemes and stereotypes around sexual and emotional relationships and, ultimately, to open up to a broader view of human sexuality.

A feminist CSE is one of the main tools to deconstruct the stigma that is a powerful root cause for violence and discrimination based on sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, and therefore should be guaranteed as part of all educational curricula.

## **2. Involve teachers and educational community in the programs**

The educational community, and teachers in particular, have privileged access to students, given the time they spend together and the proximity of their contact with them. This allows them both to develop preventive measures and to detect possible situations of gender-based violence, which is why teacher awareness is crucial. However, in order to accompany adolescents in the construction of their sexualities and in the prevention and detection of violence, it is essential that **adult role models have the knowledge, openness and specific resources required.**

In this respect, an important learning outcome of the Cut All Ties project has been the manifest positive impact of **training for both students and teachers in the same high school**, and its multiplying and long-lasting effects. According to the evaluation results, one of the vectors of this impact was that the training and involvement of teachers made it possible to create safe spaces for students, who felt more confident to talk about issues that concerned them in relation to sexuality, violence or relationships in general.

As a general recommendation, effective teacher training should – as a preliminary to the consideration of other topics – aim to **promote self-reflection and deconstruct teachers' pre-established beliefs about gender, sexualities and relationships**. Although this process requires intensive and in-depth intervention, which is very often difficult due to the daily workload and demands faced by teachers, it is vitally important to work with and accompany them to bring about changes in their belief and value systems that can have an impact on their work with students. The whole educational community should be involved in this change. Otherwise, educational centers will continue to be spaces where the conditions that legitimize gender-based violence are reproduced.

This is related to another key aspect that should be transversal to any intervention with teachers that seeks their active participation in the prevention of GBV: **to problematize and question adultcentrism and adultcentric practices**, and to understand how the associated beliefs may contribute to the reproduction of gender stereotypes associated to youth and relationships within the high school and the educative practice.

The adult-centered outlook which permeates society has ignored children and adolescents as valid interlocutors, and therefore has not allowed their needs and concerns to be heard on many occasions. It is necessary **to be aware of the power relations that arise from this** and to bear in mind that, in this sense, we may be exercising violence or reinforcing the status quo from our position as adults when demanding changes in attitudes and behaviors from young people that we do not put into practice as a society.

As a first step, it would be of interest to invite teachers to **question and deconstruct attitudes and beliefs that are linked to the concept of adolescence**. It is essential that teachers working with adolescents are able to provide a diversity of models and references, and avoid the reproduction of stereotypes as well as the stigmatization of the behaviors and needs of young people and adolescents.

Regarding particular aspects of teacher training, and based on the experience of the project, we suggest the following:

- f. Provide teachers with practical tools to work on situations they come across daily, using these to introduce different facilitation techniques such as role-playing or case work. Very often, teachers claim to have a solid theoretical basis, but lack the knowledge or strategies to apply it to their daily practice.
- g. Include more and place emphasis on information about emotional education, sexuality and violent relationships in the training provided, as well as activities and materials on these issues that they can directly implement in their classrooms.
- h. Provide them with guidance on how to apply learning in a cross-cutting manner in their teaching areas, not only in specific subjects.
- i. Give information on existing services, organizations and resources available in the local area which they can refer to for further support.
- j. Facilitate mechanisms for coordination and networking with anti-violence networks in the local area.
- k. The importance of shared responsibility with third sector organizations must be considered, highlighting the importance of building alliances and early intervention within schools, not only when a crisis situation breaks out.

### **3. Addressing GBV prevention through social, emotional and sex education**

When planning gender-sensitive and preventative intervention, it is important not only to address the issue from the perspective of violence. While it is very important to work on understanding and identifying violence, if this is the only way that inequalities and forms of discrimination are addressed, it can end up leading to negative consequences.

As indicated above, sex education from a gender and rights perspective makes it possible to address the prevention of violence. Although it is an indirect consequence, it is important **not to limit sexual education to violence**, but rather to **nurture it with positive and healthy issues that have pleasure and wellbeing at the center** of interventions. Obviously, this approach will make it possible to reduce the risks of gender-based violence, but without conditioning the paradigm of sexual education.

Therefore, we recommend **avoiding putting the focus of the intervention on violence** and, for example, considering the possibility of addressing and preventing violence by

showing violence-free relationships. In this regard, **presenting and highlighting alternative and positive models is a key aspect** which has proven to produce tangible results. Providing tools for the identification of violence will not bring about change in itself, however, being able to imagine, debate, ponder and create more respectful and pleasurable ways of relating to others will.

This is also relevant given that, according to the professionals involved in Cut All Ties and in other organizations that develop GBV programs, while present circumstances are particularly propitious for encouraging change – given the wide access to information that young people have, and their high level of knowledge – there is also significant polarization in relation to the issues at stake. Nowadays, anti-feminist discourses are very present socially, and high schools are not isolated from this. It has often been pointed out by Cut All Ties training staff that bringing up terms like feminism or other related concepts (e.g. gender perspective) provokes an immediate rejection among some adolescents. Young boys in particular feel attacked, blamed and singled out when issues related to male violence, discrimination and inequalities are raised. Although the basis of any intervention must be a feminist perspective, a shift of approach is needed when it comes to implementing educational strategies, and this is one of the biggest challenges that any GBV prevention program aimed at young people shall need to address.

Moreover, although we seem to be witnessing a wave of changes in traditional codes of behavior related to sexuality, the overarching power dynamics and gender relations remain the same, thus underlining the need to focus on these spheres.

Based on the experience of Cut All Ties in this line, our recommendations are to:

- a. Avoid interventions that focus on individual behaviors and practices, and instead **place the phenomenon of violence in its structural context** from a position of shared responsibility.
- b. Develop interventions that provide adolescents with **tools and strategies to identify and manage their emotions**, aimed at fostering empathy, respect and assertive communication.
- c. Promote **experiential workshops and create spaces where young people can debate, discuss, participate and share their knowledge, questions and concerns** in relation to everyday situations. Experiential learning achieved through practical examples close to their realities is much more meaningful, and brings critical thinking and reflection into play.



- d. Work on GBV through **positive sex and emotional education**. In line with the above recommendation, it is important to provide comprehensive and feminist sex education that places pleasure at the center of its discourse. Sex and sexuality are issues which generate a great interest among youth, and this provides a significant motivational advantage. Working on sexuality offers an entry point to address topics directly related to violence prevention, such as deconstructing stereotypes, body awareness, emotional education, negotiation strategies, personal limits and other people's limits, etc.

All of these should be accompanied by the **creation of safe spaces in all educational centers** where students can freely share and speak about their concerns, openly and without judgment, and where they know that they will feel supported and accompanied. The recommendations of the students who participated in the final events were very clear in this regard: young people are eager to talk and debate about many issues that concern them, and they have a need to be heard and feel supported.

#### **4. Promote mid and long-term transversal and multi-agency interventions**

The results of the impact evaluation of the Cut All Ties project show that, through the 3-month implementation and intervention in high schools, talking about and highlighting GBV had a positive effect on young people' **ability to identify GBV**, both structurally and as it presents in the school environment.

In this same line, when the project was implemented in its extended version with the presence and facilitation of trainers over the course of a trimester, it led to an increase in students' ability to **acknowledge the existence of partner-to-partner GBV between peers in their school, and also to recognize the presence of violence in digital spaces**.

As these results have shown, and in line with the existing literature<sup>2</sup> and recommendations of organizations that work on GBV prevention in formal education settings (schools or high schools), it is strongly recommended that **long-term interventions, rather than one-off interventions or sessions, be implemented**.

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<sup>2</sup> Keith, T., Hyslop, F., & Richmond, R. (2022). A Systematic Review of Interventions to Reduce Gender-Based Violence Among Women and Girls in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380211068136>

Furthermore, a key aspect of the Cut All Ties intervention was to **work beyond the limits of the group-class and take the intervention beyond the classroom**. The fact that the trainers were visible, present and reachable for weeks at a time, during breaks and in the different areas of the schools, allowed the students to build relationships with them, and opened up spaces to intervene.

It is also advisable to:

- Carry out a **specific diagnosis of the realities and needs of each center** before any intervention is carried out, in order to adapt the contents, strategies and methodologies, and thus render them much more effective.
- **Work closely and in conjunction with schools** in order to create the favorable conditions for the roll-out of the intervention, the engagement and involvement of students and the commitment of all stakeholders involved.
- **Work or collaborate with organizations and anti-violence associations** for mutual learning and the establishment of strategical partnerships and alliances.
- Avoid interventions that see the collaboration with anti-violence associations as needs collectors, and **encourage the sharing of knowledge and practices**.

## 5. ICT and gamification tools for GBV prevention

The virtual world is an extension of the physical world. As such, to combat GBV in the real world, it is also important to provide students and adults with skills and knowledge to identify and tackle GBV online. In this sense, the use of gamification strategies should be encouraged as a means of fostering critical understanding in the use of digital tools.

In terms of the use of ICT – and, more specifically, the use of apps in programs aimed at raising awareness about and preventing GBV among young people – we offer the following suggestions based on the Cut All Ties experience of the gamification process<sup>3</sup>:

- It is advisable that, when working via a digital platform, that this be a **downloadable mobile app** which young people can quickly and easily access directly from their mobile phones, rather than a web or a desktop application.
- As far as it is possible, the procedures for signing up and for the identification of users should be simplified, as it has been proven that **two-step verification**

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<sup>3</sup> These recommendations refer to the specific use of a mobile application which is based on a methodology of social chains and social rewards. As such, they might not be fully applicable to different gamification tools or programs.

**processes** can be discouraging and hinder engagement. The nature of young people's use of social networks requires immediacy **and actions** that lead to a quick resolution.

- The **interface of the app** should be **attractive**, and its structure both easy-to-follow and intuitive. It should offer options that facilitate different uses and the possibility of customization. This makes it possible for users to take ownership of the tool, a key aspect in young people's engagement.
- The app **should be used within the training process**, and not just be for future distribution.
- Adults' role and presence in the application should, as far as possible, be kept to a minimum. For example, they should not supervise the totality of the content made by young people, instead eliminating only that which is ethically unacceptable.
- Materials posted **should be visible to a larger public**, for example, to all schoolmates, even if they are not registered as users.
- An option for **immediate reaction and response** to the content posted should be included, since it proves the type of immediate gratification that fosters user involvement.





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