Theme: Intimate Partner Violence

Title: Dating Violence in Portugal: a preliminary study about the conceptions of young people

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Introduction

The primary prevention of violence in younger generations has been considered of crucial importance to avoid the generational reproduction of domestic and gender based violence in intimate relationships in future generations (Oliveira, 2016).

Scientific knowledge produced about violence in intimacy in younger generations indicates that its prevalence is closer than in older generations. In Portugal, several studies (Peixoto, Matos and Machado, 2013; Mendes, Duarte, Araújo and Lopes, 2013; Antunes and Machado, 2012) indicate a prevalence of violence between 20% to 25% in higher education students, despite public policies and a network of services that support and monitor victims of domestic and gender violence, since the publication of RCM 55/99 (Resolution of the council of ministers no. 55/99). This presence of violence in adolescence and young adult age, point to the necessity of a more systematic intervention with the younger generations, in order to deconstruct the acceptance of this form of violence (Dias, 2015; Magalhães et al., 2014; Guerreiro et al. al., 2014; Gomes et al., 2011). However, until this study, the understanding of the prevalence of dating violence among younger people, who are not university students, is still very scarce.

Since 2009 UMAR - Women Organization Alternative and Response, a feminist NGO, has been developing a study on teen dating violence. The previous results, of 2016, although not representative at national level, indicated that 22% of young people do not recognize violence in intimate and dating relationships.

UMAR's philosophy of intervention is to combine action with reflection and research for greater intervention effectiveness, as has been shown by several national and international studies (Barbier & Fourcade, 2008; Miranda & Resende, 2006). Effective intervention is only adequately achieved through a thorough knowledge of the problem.

For the school year of 2016-2017, UMAR has been developing the ART'THEMIS+ Project, funded by the Secretary of State for Citizenship and Equality, and reinforcing its intervention in the districts of Braga, Porto, Coimbra and Lisbon. With the implementation of this project, and with the purpose of having a better picture of the Portuguese reality, it is also contemplated a national representative study on the prevalence and acceptance of violent behavior in intimate relationships among young people.

This national study on teen dating violence aimed, first of all, to grasp the level of legitimacy of this form of violence among young people between the ages of 12 and 18, and to understand the representations and conceptions about behaviors and attitudes in intimate relationships. Secondly, it aimed to evaluate and reflect on the prevalence of the phenomena, and identify indicators on the likelihood of victimization rate in young people.

Given the scarcity of studies in these ages, this research proves to be innovative and empowering to develop educational and social public policies for the prevention of this serious social problem. Schools are ideal spaces for the implementation of a prevention program, since they cover all the national territory and can house a greater diversity of young population, be it cultural, ethnic and/or other groups living in Portuguese society (Costa et al., 2014).

This study is a contribution to a better understanding of the culture of younger generations with regard to gender equality and respect for others in intimate relationships.

Study - Methodology

This was a quantitative study, developed with young people in schools. Participants were male and female alike, aged between 12 and 18, and were from all Portuguese districts (mainland and Islands). The choice of schools was based on a random selection of socially, ethnically, culturally and economically diverse areas to make this sample nationally representative. In each school, several classes were also randomly chosen, but according to the availability of the school and to ensure a diversity of gender, social class, ethnicity and school level.

The questionnaire has a simple and short structure, with 15 questions that are adapted to the cognitive and socioemotional development of adolescents. It can be filled in a short amount of time, ensuring minimal interference in classes. It should be noted that, considering that this is a quantitative questionnaire, it is not possible to understand the answer's context.

This questionnaire is essential to better understand the perceptions of young people about dating violence at national level and to develop appropriate political strategies for this reality.

This quantitative instrument fits to the objectives of the study by allowing an extensive analysis of the phenomenon and is representative of the youth population. The choice of a questionnaire is justified by the advantages of the instrument to quickly collect data, throughout the national territory, with a target population. In each of the questions, young people are asked if they have been in a romantic, dating or casual relationship, and if they have ever been the target of the described violent acts. At the same time, for each question, young people are asked about their perceptions so that we can gauge the legitimacy of violent acts.

The distribution of the questionnaires was achieved through the participation of schools that were randomly selected and agreed to participate in this study. After obtaining the informed consent of the legal representative for this participation, young people were also asked about their motivation to participate in the questionnaire. Once the

conditions for participation were met, the questionnaires were distributed and collected by UMAR researchers and volunteers.
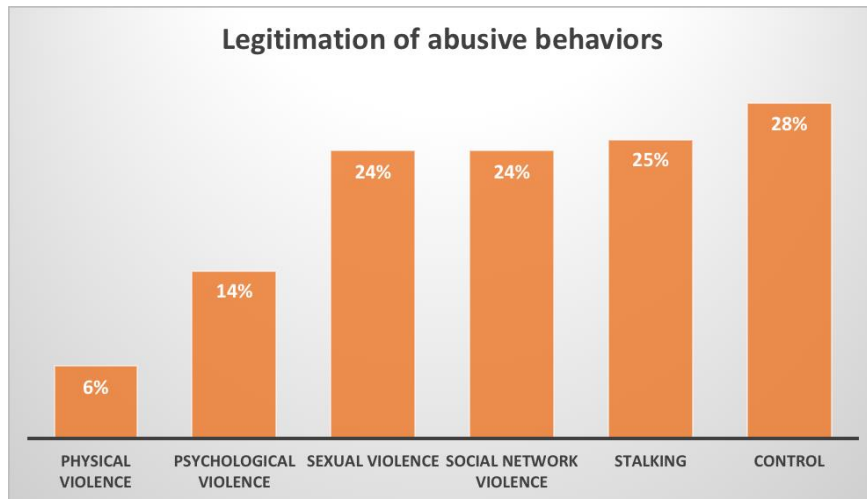
Being an anonymous and individual questionnaire, this study uses self-report to obtain its data. For this reason, these questions only give us indicators of victimization of teen dating violence based on what participants want to share.

The 15 questions represent acts of physical, psychological, sexual violence, social networking violence, stalking and control. The questionnaire was developed to include the various forms of dating violence that are closer to the reality of young people. Thus, young people are asked about controlling behaviors, such as prohibiting them from going out, prohibiting them from talking to colleagues or friends, prohibiting them from wearing any clothes, and forcing them to do something against their will. Other forms of psychological violence are also covered in this questionnaire, such as insults, humiliation, threats, invasion of privacy (eg, getting on a mobile phone or entering a facebook account without authorization) and stalking. Social networking issues addressing the invasion of privacy were included, such as sharing unauthorized content over the internet (eg photos, videos and messages and logging into your account without authorization) and insulting through social networks / internet. Physical violence is also addressed by questioning young people about physical aggressions that leave marks and physical aggressions without leaving marks, such as pushing or pulling hair. Also included were questions about sexual violence, such as pressure to kiss and pressure to have sex.

Study - Results

Legitimation of abusive behaviors

The sample of this study was about 5500 young people, with an average age of 15 years old, and was implemented throughout the national territory. For the legitimation results, the answers of the whole sample were analyzed. The results of the young people's conceptions about what they consider or not dating violence are presented in the graphic below.

Graphic 1: Legitimation of abusive behaviors.

As the chart shows, 6% of young people participating in this study do not recognize physical violence. It involves various forms of bodily aggression that may or may not leave marks or sores.

On average 14% of young people do not recognize psychological violence. More specifically, 9% of young people do not consider threatening another person to be a violent act, 11% consider that humiliating is not violence, and insulting during an argument or a moment of anger is not considered violence by 24% of young people.

Sexual violence in intimate relationships is usually in the form of coercion or abuse / rape. Studies show that this form of violence is still little recognized and reported, and that it is mostly committed by people in closer proximity to their victims, and in dating relationships. This study's data shows us that 24% of young people legitimize sexual violence in dating relationships. 36% legitimate pressure to kiss in front of friends, and in regards to the pressure to have sex, 13% of respondents legitimize this situation in dating.

This year UMAR introduced dating violence through social networks in this study. The scope of social networks and the internet is an aspect that has gained more relevance in the daily lives of young people, and dating relationships are also part of it. However, online social networks have certain particularities than can render people in vulnerable positions, such as: the information placed online can never be deleted and, therefore, it will always be available to look up, it can be replicated (i.e. copied and disseminated, with or without the context of publication and authorization of the person), and unpredictable when it comes to how many people it will reach (publishing any content can be unpredictably disseminated, including going viral).
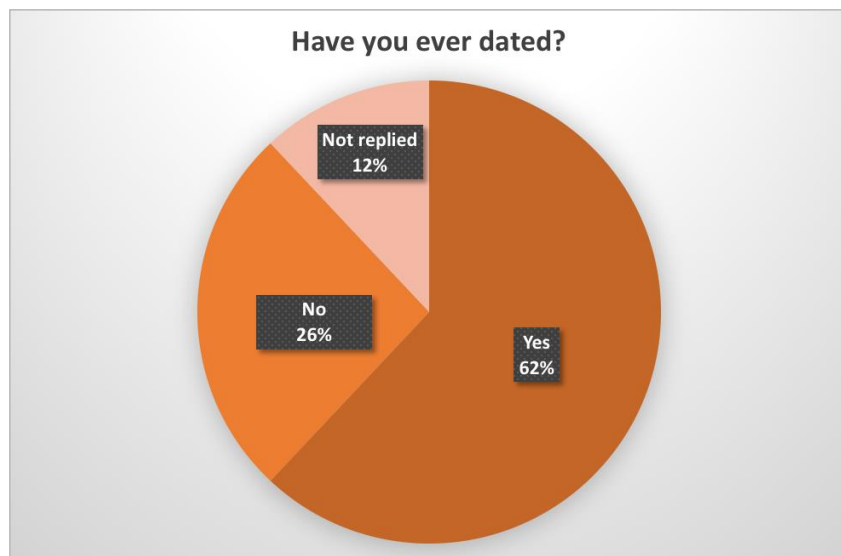
With this is mind, the results indicate that 24% of young people do not consider situations of control and abuse on social networks as violence, thus naturalizing these violent behaviors. Regarding unauthorized sharing of messages or photos (sexting, i.e. sharing intimate content), and given the legitimacy of this form of violence, 15% of young people do not consider these behaviors to be violence, which shows a high vulnerability to violence in online dating and possible exposure to revenge porn behaviors. Regarding online verbal abuse, the legitimation is quite high, and 16% consider that it does not constitute violence.

Harassment, during or after an intimate relationship, is one of the forms of violence that oppresses victims (criminalized in 2015). However, patriarchal culture involves such behaviors as demonstrations of "romantic love." This year, UMAR's team wanted to understand whether or not young people legitimize persecution behavior. When asked if the behavior of persecution is considered violent, 25% answered that it was not.

Regarding control, these behaviors are not recognized as violence by 28% of young people residing in Portugal. Forbidding their partner from going out without them was perceived as normal for 32% of the participants. As for the obligation to do something you don't want to do, 15% legitimize this behavior. Forbidding from seeing and/or talking to a friend was legitimate for 31% of respondents. In the question about prohibition of wearing a particular piece of clothing, 41% say that this is not a violent behavior.
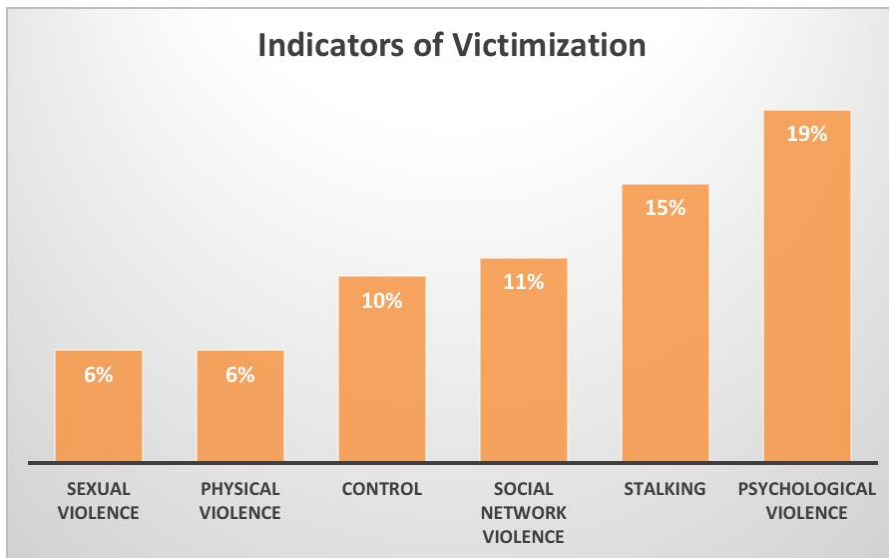
Indicators of Young People's victimization

For the analysis of the indicators of victimization, the answers of the young people who said they were dating (62%) and those who said they weren't in an intimate relationship (26%) were separated. Only the responses of young people who claimed to be or have been in a romantic, dating or casual relationship were considered.

Have you ever dated?

Not replied 12%

No 26%

Yes 62%

In this section, we present the data regarding the responses of young people about self-reported situations of violence, as shown below.

Indicators of Victimization

Graphic 3: Indicators of Victimization of young people.

The results tell us that 6% of participants in this study reported that sexual violence behaviors had already occurred in their relationship. 4% of respondents said they had been pressured to have sex, and the same percentage reported pressure to be kissed in public, while 8% answered that it had already happened in a relationship.

The prevalence of physical violence unveils worrying numbers. Overall, we found an average of 6% of young people who said they had suffered violent physical behavior. Regarding physical violence that leaves a mark, the percentage stands at 4%, but the one that does leave a mark has a prevalence of 7%. Once again, this form of violence is the least legitimized, although there is still a percentage of young people who do not consider physical aggression violence.

The results obtained on violence by controlling behaviors show that 10% of young people report having been its victims. When it comes to the various controlling behaviors, it is observed that 5% of young people had already been victims of the prohibition to go out. Prohibition of seeing or talking to someone, totals a 21% of the respondents.

Looking at the obligation to do something you don't want to do, 8% have experienced this kind of behavior on the part of their boyfriend. Regarding the prohibition on wearing a particular piece of clothing, 7% of respondents answered affirmatively.

The results obtained on social network violence are alarming, and 11% of respondents say they have been hit a target of these new forms of abusive behavior.

Regarding the online sharing of unauthorized intimate content, we have 3% of young people which this happened. Given that, this is a very young population that is just beginning their sex life, these data are worrying. Online insult and humiliation has an incidence of 11%. These online abuse behaviors are disturbing as they cross aspects of humiliation, and may become viral and persist in time, and therefore have a very high potential for harm and indicate a use social networks as channels of abuse and oppression.

Results show that one-seventh of young respondents experienced stalking behavior (15%).

On average, 19% of young people reported having suffered some form of psychological violence, with the most prevalent being the insult (30%), followed by humiliation and demean (16%) and threat (10%).

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the legitimacy of violence amongst young people and the prevalence of victimization in intimate relationships.

After ethical procedures, an anonymous questionnaire was applied in schools, whose sample was around 5500 participants, randomly selected and with an average age of 15 years old.

The first main conclusion of the study is that, throughout all situations of violence (physical, psychological, sexual, control, stalking and violence through social networks), teenagers consider these acts acceptable in intimate relationships. The violence that was more frequently considered normal by these youngsters was control behaviour with 28% of acceptance. Regarding indicators of victimization, it was possible to conclude that violence is present in intimate relationships - with rates varying between 6% (physical and sexual violence) and 19% (psychological violence). It is important to highlight violence through social networks, as a relatively new dimension in intimate relations, and also because this has alarming results, both in legitimation (24% - almost a quarter of young people) and in victimization (11%).

Each behavior was also analysed with a gender lens and conclusions on these results will be explored later on, at another time. Generally, legitimization of violence is greater in boys, sometimes going as much as 4 times higher, when compared to girls (as for the example of legitimization of the pressure to having sexual relationships).

From this study we conclude the urgency and necessity of a gender violence primary prevention program to reach all young people in a systematic and holistic way, seeking to eradicate violent behavior through the critical reflection held by young people, making them the protagonists of their own change.

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