

**Theme:** WORKSHOP

**Title:** ART'THEMIS+'s Project: Gender Violence Prevention Program in Portuguese Schools

**Author(s):** Maria José Magalhães<sup>1,2</sup>; Ana Margarida Teixeira<sup>1</sup>; Ana Teresa Dias<sup>1</sup>; Cátia Pontedeira<sup>1,3,4</sup>; Ana Beires<sup>1,2</sup>; Alexandra Rodrigues<sup>1</sup>; Joana Cordeiro<sup>1</sup>; Ana Guerreiro<sup>1,3,4</sup>

**Affiliation(s):** <sup>1</sup>UMAR – Women Organization Alternative and Response; <sup>2</sup>FPCEUP – Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences; <sup>3</sup>Faculty of Law of University of Porto; <sup>4</sup>ISMAI-University Institute of Maia

**Email contact:** art.themis.umar@gmail.com

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## Introduction

UMAR - Women Organization Alternative and Response is a feminist NGO (Non - Governmental Organization) with more than 40 years of experience promoting Women's Rights and fighting Gender and Domestic Violence in Portugal.

Since 2004 this Portuguese NGO has been developing a program for primary prevention of gender violence in national schools, using action research, feminist philosophy and Freirean pedagogy while promoting a systematic intervention. Over the years, UMAR has had several gender violence prevention projects funded by various national and international institutions and has a wide recognition in this area.

As of 2014, UMAR has been setting in motion a prevention project named ART'THEMIS+, that is funded by the Secretary of State for Citizenship and Equality and Committee on Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) .

ART'THEMIS+ is a project directed to children and young people, and its main goals are promoting a culture of equality, peace, non-violent conflict resolution and women's rights, as well as preventing gender based violence through the reflection about stereotypes and myths.

Gender-based violence is nowadays considered a public health problem (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002) with serious consequences for society and, in particular, for victims. This type of violence is based on the attribution of differentiated stereotypes to men and women, namely the association of men with the aggressiveness and strength, and women with sensitivity and affectivity (Barry & Barry, 1976).

The Project's baseline for intervention is that "violence against women" is a form of violence that constitutes a violation of the Human Rights. The third article of the Istanbul Convention (2011), defines violence against women as: all acts of gender-based violence that result, or may result, in physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering of a victim or several victims. Moreover, this convention "recognis[es], with grave concern, that women and girls are often exposed to serious forms of violence such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, forced marriage, crimes committed in the name of so-called "honour" and genital mutilation, which constitutes a serious

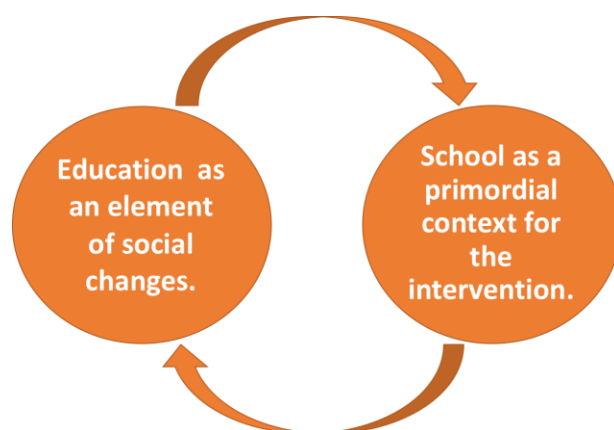
violation of the human rights of women and girls and a major obstacle to the achievement of equality between women and men” (Istanbul Convention, 2011: 6).

Considering that violence against women is based on power and the gender relations socially attributed to women to men, the Project also focuses on the deconstruction of the roles that defend the social construction of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity (Connell, 2005).

The concept of domestic violence, enshrined in the article 152° of the portuguese Criminal Code, is also relevant for the intervention of ART'THEMIS+. While the Istanbul Convention describes this concept as “all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim” (article 3°.b); the Criminal Code definition is shorted but encompassing all these forms of violence: “Who, repeatedly or not, inflicts physical or mental abuse, including corporal punishment, deprivation of liberty and sexual offenses...”.

Based on a Human Rights and Gender Equality approach, the Project also focus on other forms of structural and interpersonal violence from which children and young people are also victims, such as homophobia, lesbophobia, transphobia, racism, class inequality and peer violence.

Education, as a children’s fundamental right, is established by a process of socialization, access to cultural heritage and a process for the development of citizenship. For such reasons, education must tackle problematic social issues that stem from the structural and symbolic construction of reality and social relations and thus, work against gender and dating violence by integrating a specialised pedagogical intervention within the school.



**Image 1:** Education as an element of social transformation and school as a primordial context for the intervention.

Public schools are plural and complex context that must create spaces to educate for global citizenship, Human Rights and gender equality, and this should include actions to promote the prevention of gender-based violence and the prevention of other forms of structural violence.

Violence prevention programmes can have several different types of approaches and methodologies. The ART'THEMIS+ Project focus within the primary prevention scope. Primary prevention programmes are not directed to particular groups of young people, but are aimed for greater groups of people. The Project focuses on the topics of Domestic and Gender Violence (the social problems), but also helps children and young people to tackle these subjects by identifying the problem, discussing and reflecting about it. The aim is to keep these groups educated and informed on how to recognise potential signs of violence and to know what to do if they find themselves in such circumstances.

### **Prevention of gender violence methodology**

The project ART'THEMIS+ works within the school system by developing sessions where students learn to identify, understand and act against the complex phenomena of violence, namely to identify and challenge power, cultural, and gender differences. Participants are encouraged to take an active part in the process and take the 'lead role in social change', in order to reduce victimization and to eradicate gender and domestic violence. The Project is being implemented in Porto, Braga, Coimbra and Lisbon, covering all educational levels from kindergarten to high school, through systematic and continuous sessions.

The methodology is based on the use of artistic tools and pedagogical games to promote the reflection. The Project aims to promote the protagonism of the children and youth, since it is a *topic work project* (project methodology), that requires the involvement of all the participants. Active participation of all students is a means to achieve *significant learning* which "contributes to learning processes with significance, carrying meaning, involving children (or adults) in real problem solving or in search of unknown answers" (Vasconcelos, 2011: 9). In this Programme participants are the ones who choose which topics they want to approach. Facilitators are present in each session to ensure the sequence and consistency of the themes, but each participant should be "an 'explorer', an investigator, an active creator of knowledge in alternative of being a passive receiver of knowledge of others" (Vasconcelos, 2011: 9).



**Image 2:** Methodology of Project ART'THEMIS+.

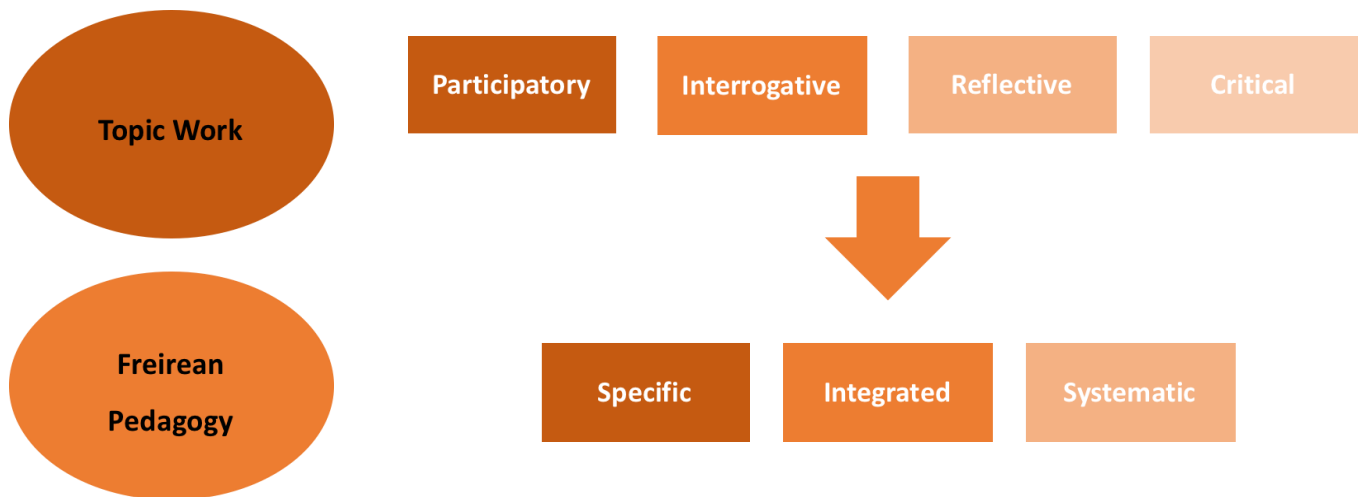
The intervention has as a starting point the representations, worldviews and experiences of the youth and, throughout the school year, students work in order to build together an artistic product of their making. At the end of the school year, students present their *artistic products* in a public seminar, where is given salience and importance to their work. By valuing their effort and reinforcing their role as active citizens, the young people might feel they are part of the fight against gender based violence and that they actually can promote healthy relationships and a better society.

This programme has been designed to be implemented with the same students for the minimum duration of three school years. In the course of an average of 15 sessions per year, there is a large range of themes that can be approached with each class/group: Human Rights, children's rights, women's rights, stereotypes and prejudice, LGBTQ+ phobia, gender based violence, dating violence, peer violence, personal and social skills, problem solving and decision making, emotional regulation and empowerment.

Art is used as a pedagogical tool that serves as an outlet for children and youth to express their creative, cognitive and reflective skills (Higenbottam, 2008). Furthermore, art is a resource for children and youth to express themselves and to discuss their experiences, while preserving their intimacy and privacy as they share their perspectives. Sessions are thought and designed to be a safe space for sharing experiences and where the ideas and perspectives of each participant are valued and taken into account in opening new paths of resistance and transformation.

The importance of using art in the field of prevention is based on social, individual and pedagogical factors. In social terms, creative work is crucial to challenge the naturalization of violence and inequality, not just gender, but also violence in general. Art provides a re-reading and a re-construction of reality, where we are allowed to believe that we will be able to build a different world without violence. Finally, in pedagogical terms, the use of artistic tools has another advantage: it can be a mediator between personal experience and more abstract ways of communicating with others, allowing the protection of the privacy, privacy of each one sharing their thoughts about experiences of violence and perspectives for their combat (Magalhães Magalhães, Teixeira, Dias, Cordeiro, Silva and Mendes, 2017).

This methodology of intervention aims to produce social changes through the research-action method in conjunction with a Freirean and Feminist philosophy and pedagogy (Magalhães, Canotilho & Brasil, 2007; Magalhães et al., 2017) as resources for a reflection on the social attribution of gender roles, artistic expressions and active tools such as dramatization, drawings, arts and crafts, cartoons, books, songs, films, poetry and educational games are used (Magalhães et al., 2007).



**Image 3:** Methodology of Project ART'THEMIS+.

The *topic work* methodology argues that participants should feel included in their own learning, placing children and youth at the center of decision-making on what, when, how and why to learn (Magalhães et al.; 2017).

In the intervention methodology of UMAR's prevention Programme, art is considered a pedagogical tool because it promotes a reflective and critical attitude about essential issues, such as cultural, social beings, as well as supporting personal and collective learning (Teixeira, 2015).

As briefly mentioned previously, at the end of the school year, participants have the opportunity to share their artistic products with other students from different parts of the country in a seminar. The collective decision of the *artistic product* is essential to our pedagogical approach, as well as the interest of children and young people, because we know that we work more willingly and commit ourselves more deeply when we do something we like and/or identify with (Magalhães et.al.; 2017). The class's decision is not only about the art product but also about the theme they will be working on throughout the school year and the theme they will present at this seminar. These *artistic products* are presented in different panels, so that youth can be simultaneously the protagonists of change, and to attend the presentations of their peers. Each panel also has experts and researchers from gender studies, education, violence, feminism and culture, who comment and dialogue with young people about the *artistic products* presented.

In this pedagogical philosophy, the ART'THEMIS+ team considers that the most important is the participation of all children and youth in the construction of something collective and feeling valued in their experiences, tastes, ideas and learning.

The final seminars, with the *artistic products*, highlight the protagonism of children and youth in the co-construction of a more egalitarian and less violent society.

## Results and Evaluation of Project ART THEMIS+

The Project aims to stimulate individual and collective reflection and to provide the opportunity for joint intervention by the participants and facilitators in the search for solutions and modes of action. To achieve this purpose, and understand the motivations and perceptions about the Project, the team opted for an evaluation that is ongoing and understood as a learning moment, achieved through participation, dialogue, exposition and argumentation of all participants (Dias, 2015). To a better understanding of the Project's evolution, the evaluation relies in a combined approach of qualitative and quantitative methods.

The participant's knowledge, as well as the conceptual and the discursive's changes are evaluated at the beginning and at the end of the intervention, through a pre and post intervention questionnaire. The quantitative results are, then, done based on the difference between both pre and post questionnaires. In 2016, the quantitative data showed an increase of 13% regarding the alteration of the participant's perceptions and concepts about the themes.

Additionally, the qualitative part of the evaluation is done throughout the school year, as follows: at the end of each session, with the students and teachers; throughout the year, with students, teachers and school board; and at the end of the school year, with students and teachers.

At the end of each session, students and teachers are invited to share their thoughts and feelings about that day's activities and questioned if they would like to explore that topic further or talk about something that happened to the class or they believe it's important. At the end of the academic year, evaluation forms are given to students so they can assess the Project regarding the following topics: what they learned with the project, what they liked, what they didn't like and what they would change in the project. This feedback is of crucial importance in order to adjust the intervention for each class and guaranteeing the Project's sustainability.

Below are some examples of the qualitative comments made by the youth participants of the project:

"It meant respect for me, I took what I learned from the project and made me see the world with new eyes."

"It helped me realize many things and that I should not judge someone for their sexual orientation."

"I learned that girls and boys have the same rights."

"It helps people to be less prejudiced and sexist."

"I think it was an excellent project that allows all young people to learn more about social problems from bullying to prejudice and prejudice to dating violence."

"I learned that what I was doing to my colleagues was wrong and that I must accept and respect people as they are."

This evaluation not only presupposes interaction with the students, but also with the teachers that accompanied the classes, due to their knowledge and influence on the students' academic life. Therefore, periodically,

the facilitators hold meetings with the groups' teachers to get some feedback on the intervention. The meetings are important to reflect about the positive and negative aspects of the intervention and how to converge the topics tackled by the Project onto each teacher's subject. At the end of the school year, teachers are also asked to fill out a qualitative evaluation form inquiring about the relevance of the Project and their motivations to proceed with it. In addition, facilitators meet with the school board, where they focus on reviewing the intervention and planning the following school year.

When looking at the teachers' feedback, it becomes clear that teachers recognise the advantages of benefiting from ART'THEMIS+. Here are some examples of what they had to say:

"I noticed a change in the students' attitudes and behaviors, becoming more motivated for learning and social problems, wanting to change their attitudes and prejudices, for a better exercise of their citizenship." (7th grade teacher)

"As a class director, I only see the advantages of participating in such projects for the following reasons: Sometimes students are more comfortable dealing with certain issues with people outside their social / family / schools. The project allowed students to get in touch with specialist and outside-school techniques, broadening their knowledge." (8th grade teacher)

According to their evaluation, students' personal and social formation is important for the development of their citizenship. Regarding the topics covered in the sessions, teachers assert their importance and believe they should be further explored. Moreover, they mentioned that the work done with the classes can and should be deepened, since it can bring significant changes in the attitudes, values and behavior of young people and children.

## **Conclusion**

UMAR's prevention of gender violence programme is a pioneer in the portuguese school systems and has been providing, for over a decade, specialized intervention from a multidisciplinary team coordinated by highly trained pedagogical and educational supervisor, and facilitated by professionals who are specialists in arts, psychology, sociology, law and criminal sciences. Its innovation stems from its above mentioned methodology, for it includes the articulation within the school, not by providing punctual and short term informative sessions, but by systematically working with children and young people.

The pedagogical methodology focuses on the relationship between the facilitators and the participants, by making a clear separation from the role of a teacher, in order to grant the leadership and autonomy to students. Within the freirean model a dialogical action takes place, that starts with the students' representations and moves towards a common knowledge about violence and how to act, and collaboratively build alternative paths by their own means of expression - artistic expressions. By valuing their work and reinforcing their role as active citizens, we are fighting the mechanisms of gender violence and promoting healthy relationships.

Another important aspect to consider is the benefit and results the Project would achieve when implemented for a minimum period of 3 consecutive school years, ideally to the same groups and students. Finally, the Project addresses the topic of violence before it occurs, and promotes the involvement and participation of the students. It is precisely through the encouragement of children and young people to take a lead role in social change' that victimization is reduced, and solid steps are taken to eradicate gender and domestic violence.

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