

Implementing a Gender Transformative Programme in Portuguese schools: Study Findings



IPPF EN is one of the International Planned Parenthood Federation's six regional networks and it works in around 40 countries across Europe and Central Asia. We advocate for a world in which love and sexuality are recognised both as natural and precious aspects of life, and as fundamental human rights. We strive for societies where misogyny and sexism have ceased to exist, and gender or sexuality are no longer a source of inequality or stigma. Comprehensive sexuality and relationship education is a crucial tool for protecting and empowering young people and building the more gender-equal world that we envision.

The context

In 2023, we started a multi-year project with our Member Association in Portugal, APF - Associação Para o Planeamento da Família, aimed at integrating a gender transformative sexuality education programme into the curriculum of the regular Portuguese Citizenship and Development subject in schools. [The programme was based on the Erasmus-supported Safe from Sexual and Gender-Based Violence \(SfSGBV\) toolkit](#) developed by our youth network YSAFE and their pan-European youth partners. APF trained a group of teachers and identified several schools in Porto that agreed to implement some modules in their half year Citizenship and Development teaching plan. Classes were carried out from October 2023 to May 2024.

In turn, we contracted the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto to evaluate the effectiveness of this updated programme to combat negative gender stereotypes and reduce gender-based violence among adolescents.

The main goal of the study was to assess the acceptability, feasibility, and preliminary efficacy of the SfSGBV programme in improving (a) students' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours regarding the promotion of gender equality and prevention of SGBV (Sexual and Gender - Based Violence); (b) school climate regarding gender equality and SGBV; and (c) teachers' level of comfort in teaching subjects related to gender equality and SGBV.

The methodology and the sample

A cluster randomised controlled trial with two parallel randomised groups (Experimental Group – EG – receiving SfSGBV programme vs Waiting List Control group – WLC) was implemented in a school-based, teacher-delivered format as part of the Portuguese Citizenship and Development curriculum. The data was collected from October 2023 to June 2024.

In the pre-test phase, surveys were conducted with 286 students, as well as interviews with 8 elements of school staff, 4 school administrators, and 17 guardians. In the post-test phase, surveys were conducted with 274 students, 5 focus groups with a total of 32 students, and interviews with 8 school staff, 6 teachers, and 5 guardians. Moderate to strong level of adherence to the participation in the study were observed, although high dropout rates were verified in some schools. There is a limited insight into the motives that could explain the dropout rates, as they may reflect students' absence from school or lack of informed consent on the day of data collection. Thus, it is not possible to distinguish effective dropouts from those related to contextual factors.

Limitations

These were the challenges that impacted the study implementation:

- Long waiting periods for approval from some of the schools enrolled in the study
- Difficulties in accessing the contacts of guardians
- Significant lack of teachers' adherence to the tools for measuring program implementation fidelity and tracking student attendance
- Significant delay in data collection following the intervention in the Experimental Group.

All of this resulted in continuous modifications and adaptations to the original methodology, sample, and timeline.

Findings

Acceptability

Despite the challenges associated with the implementation of the study, the findings suggest that overall the programme had good acceptability among participants. Students had positive perceptions of the programme activities, describing them as useful, comprehensive, and empowering in relation to SGBV topics. Teachers also viewed the programme favourably, characterising it as well-structured, organised, and relevant to contemporary societal issues, indicating a high level of acceptance of the proposed activities within the topic.

STATEMENT FROM A TEACHER:

“Then I had two other situations; one student came to me to talk about her [sexual] orientation, and I thought it was fantastic because really... On top of that, she was a girl who I didn't think would ever open up to me, but she came to talk to me. And then, on the day we did the domestic violence [activity], I had a student who was extremely shy in one of the classes and who, in the end, came up to me to tell me that he'd been through a similar story, not as the protagonist, but as a friend (...)”

STATEMENT FROM STUDENTS:

“Some topics I didn't [previously] even know existed and were different, I just lumped everything together”

“[The programme] helped not the only ones who suffer [survived violence] (...) and that also helped [them] more and more to seek support and talk about it”.

Effect

There were no notable differences between pre- and post-test outcomes for knowledge and attitudes on sexuality, relationships and for SGBV prevention, that could be attributed to the implementation of the programme. This was not an unexpected finding as the students' overall baseline scores at pre-test were already at a very desirable level, and, therefore, no statistically significant differences were expected among groups or after the programme implementation. However, students perceived an increase in their own knowledge and reported having consolidated previous ideas and thoughts about the topics discussed within the programme. In addition, interviews with teachers and school staff revealed that the programme has created a positive change in students' behaviour and attitudes regarding the topics of SGBV.

STATEMENT FROM TEACHERS:

“And in general, I think it's had a positive impact, although it could be much more so if it were more widespread if all the students were covered. And not just students. Students, teachers, staff, everyone. Because let's not forget that the school is a whole. It's a machine that's more or less well-oiled, but there are a lot of heads at work, and it would also be worthwhile, perhaps, for us to talk about these kinds of issues in a very concrete, very direct way, with all the people who work at the school.”

“One of them was in one of the last two sessions, which had to do with the issue of consent. To consent or not to consent. (...) the kids were very, very interested. Right from the start, because it's something they don't think about, so I made them, or we effectively made them think about the situation. And I think it had an impact on them.

School climate and feasibility of integrating the programme in current curriculum

Both students and teachers consistently expressed a need for more time to achieve a deeper exploration of certain topics and to be able to discuss opinions and experiences. Teachers' attempts to overcome this constraint resulted in several adaptations to the programme, which also raises concerns regarding programme's consistency and implementation fidelity.

Concerning teachers' level of comfort in teaching subjects related to gender equality and SGBV, the findings of the study indicated that all groups of students agreed that not all teachers felt comfortable addressing these topics.

Although the interviews and focus groups report positive behavioural and attitudinal changes among students in participating classes regarding these topics, students mentioned that these benefits did not spill over to the broader school community. At same time, the focus groups with non-teaching school staff emphasised their interest in participating in future gender transformative education initiatives in Portugal.

Violence within intimate relationships was the most mentioned form of SGBV and, although schools have protocols for handling SGBV incidents, both students and teachers found them to be ineffective. Another dimension that the findings revealed was that participants agreed that schools do not have enough resources to cope with SGBV effectively.

Additionally, homophobia/transphobia was also identified as one of the most prevalent types of violence in schools, which was further supported by explicit and implicit homophobic, transphobic, and misogynist discourses from some participating school staff who were not involved in the implementation of the programme. These results are in line with the students' pre-test results, indicating the school as the primary context where they felt discriminated against.

Guardians/Parents suggested that the programme should be implemented earlier, offered more regularly, and focused on fostering students' critical thinking skills. They also expressed a desire for greater involvement from schools, particularly in these types of programs.

Recommendations for education policymakers

Start implementation of education programmes that tackle the root causes of gender inequality at an earlier stage.

Promote the implementation of gender transformative education programmes at the national level to ensure consistency and support across all schools.

Allocate more time for the implementation of gender transformative programmes to maximize its effectiveness in promoting prosocial behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes among students.

Include the entire school community in gender transformative education programmes, namely guardians and non-teaching staff to create a supportive and inclusive environment.

Create and better publicise student support structures, such as student support offices, mentorship programmes, and wellness clubs to ensure students are aware of the available resources.

Reinforce the commitment of school leaderships with the promotion of safe and inclusive school environments.

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