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The Implementation of Dating Violence Prevention Programmes in Portugal and Their Effectiveness: Perspectives of Professionals

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Abstract: The aim of the present study is to learn the perspectives of professionals on the effectiveness of implementing dating violence prevention programmes in Portugal, based on their experiences. For data collection, a questionnaire survey built specifically for this purpose was used, which was completed by a total of 33 participants, 31 female and two male, with an average age of 39 years (SD = 10.10). The results indicate that the implementation of dating violence prevention programmes is generally perceived as effective, although a very limited number of participants mention the reduction of violence as a resultant gain. Limitations of a different nature are recognized, namely in terms of specificity, sustainability and the evaluation systems, which may compromise the consolidation of long-term objectives. Thus, the study presents important indications on how to redefine strategies to prevent and combat dating violence.

Keywords: dating violence; efficiency; Portugal; prevention programmes; professionals



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1. Introduction

In the last forty years, Portugal has taken very significant steps towards gender equality, and has developed increasingly robust policies and measures to prevent and combat violence, particularly regarding issues of intimacy. With the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2013, the country signed yet another strong commitment to the defence of women's rights, tying itself to a European strategy whose central objective is to design a framework for policies and measures to protect and assist victims of violence (Council of Europe 2011). More recently, in 2018, and within the scope of the National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination 2018–2030 “Portugal + Igual”, strategic axes were defined, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, with three plans of action in force, including the Action Plan for Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence.

Since the 1990s, when the first scientific studies on domestic violence began to be carried out (Lourenço et al. 1997), the country's investment in understanding what phenomenon of intimate partner violence is and how it is manifested has been notable. An attempt has been made to define strategies that effectively contribute to the reduction of the figures, although these have remained especially high over the years, both regarding adult and young victims. Violence within juvenile intimacy has thus come to be characterized by its wide scope, following the European trend (Vives-Cases et al. 2021) and is associated with different age groups and different sociocultural contexts.

Indeed, despite the recognized efforts of recent years made by successive governments and the various civil society organizations operating in the field, there is no evidence that the numbers of occurrences of dating violence are decreasing or that the legitimization of its practice is dissipating. Recent data indicate that in a national sample of almost 5000 young people with an average age of 15 years, 58% have already suffered at least one

behaviour of dating violence in their lives (Magalhães et al. 2021). Nineteen per cent of girls and 34% of boys legitimize control, and in the case of sexual violence, boys' legitimation is four times higher than that of girls (16% vs. 4%). In higher education, 53.8% of a total sample of about 4400 young people, with an average age of 22 years, have already suffered at least one act of dating violence, and 34.4% have already performed some violent act within the scope of an intimate relationship (Neves et al. 2021). The proportion of violence committed is higher among men, while the violence suffered is higher among women. Additionally, those who carry out dating violence have more conservative beliefs about social gender relations than those who do not, as well as those who suffer violence (Neves et al. 2021). This demonstrates that there is a close relationship between the way these same relationships are conceptualized and the legitimation of victimization.

Verifying the existence of these indicators requires careful analysis of the effectiveness of dating violence prevention programmes that have been implemented in order to identify the aspects that need to be improved, both in terms of content and form. Because the programmes vary in terms of their theoretical approaches, epistemological orientations, methods and evaluation systems, it is extremely important to assess which elements have proven to be efficient in terms of mitigating the behaviour of intimate partner violence. Several national and international investigations have sought to systematize the factors that seem to best guarantee the success of preventive interventions in the field of dating violence (Avery-Leaf et al. 1997; Foshee et al. 1998; Neves et al. 2020; Rey-Anacona et al. 2020). Issues such as gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age and ethnicity of victims and perpetrators (Foshee et al. 2010), as well as the duration of the sessions, their format and the techniques used, have been considered as influencing the success of programmes to prevent dating violence (Graham et al. 2021). Thus, programmes aimed at specific audiences, due to their sociodemographic characteristics and the types of violence most experienced and most perpetrated, which use a collaborative and systematic format with active techniques for student participation, considering them central to the process, are those that result best in relevant changes (Hickman et al. 2004).

In general, according to several meta-analyses, including recent ones, the results of the programmes indicate that the prevention of dating violence in adolescence can reduce the risk of perpetrating emotional, physical and sexual violence and emotional and physical victimization (Russell et al. 2021). However, gains from dating violence prevention programmes seem to be more associated with acquiring knowledge and changing attitudes and less with changing behaviours (De La Rue et al. 2014, 2017; Fellmeth et al. 2013). These effects may be due to the objectives that govern the programmes, the vast majority of which are not focused on learning and skills training. The absence of a training component which includes specific training in changing behaviour seems to compromise their effectiveness (Cornelius and Resseguie 2007). In fact, students exposed to interventions of this nature exhibit attitudes of less legitimation of violence, which promotes greater awareness of the risk and, consequently, an increase in the potential for recognizing dangerous situations, but not necessarily a reduction in the risks of abusive conduct involved (Wolfe et al. 2009). Although there is a lower acceptance of rape myths and a greater adequacy of responses to conflict situations, the impact on behaviour is very limited (De La Rue et al. 2014). In cases where there is a decrease, physical violence is the only type of violence that has shown a statistically significant change (Piolanti and Foran 2022).

There are few investigations that aim to analyse the opinion of professionals who run programmes to prevent dating violence in Portugal about the effectiveness of their implementation, and thus the study presented below was carried out. In doing so, our objective was to listen to the people involved in order to determine, based on their experiences, what they consider to be the aspects that most determine the success of their intervention. Thus, the specific objectives of this mixed methods study were the following: (a) to characterize dating violence prevention programmes; (b) assess the effects produced by the programmes implemented; and (c) understand the evaluation processes carried out within the scope of the programmes analysed according to the perceptions of program implementers.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Instruments

For data collection, a questionnaire survey consisting of five sections was built from scratch, based on the consultation of national and international specialized literature: (1) informed consent; (2) sociodemographic characterization (e.g., age, gender, education level); (3) characterization of dating violence prevention programmes (e.g., Please provide information on both main and specific goals of the dating violence prevention programmes in which you have been involved); (4) characterization of the effectiveness of dating violence prevention programmes (e.g., In your opinion, what kind of risks the dating violence prevention programmes in which you have been involved might have?); and (5) observations. In total, the instrument consists of 26 items, mostly open questions.

2.2. Procedures

The study complies with all the necessary ethical requirements, and the protection of the participants' personal data was ensured. In order that it could be disseminated to both governmental and non-governmental entities that have or have had programmes for the prevention of dating violence under their responsibility, the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) was asked via email to forward the invitation to participate through its communication channels. Participants were encouraged to self-administrate the online questionnaire survey and share the link with other potential respondents. In addition, the link to access the questionnaire was shared on the social networks Facebook and LinkedIn. Data were collected between November 2020 and May 2021.

2.3. Data Processing and Analysis Techniques

While we aimed to capture qualitative and quantitative elements concerning the perceived efficacy of the implementation of dating violence prevention programmes according to participants, data were subject both to a thematic analysis and a descriptive statistical analysis. To perform the thematic analysis, the six-phase methodology developed by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) was used. Full written sentences were considered as the unit of coding. In an early stage of the process, and after reading and exploring profoundly the answers to the open questions, categorization was made by three researchers independently. Preliminary results of categories and codes were shared and discrepancies were exposed and discussed in two analysis meetings. To foster reflexivity and dialogue ([O'Connor and Joffe 2020](#)), and to optimize intercoder reliability ([Campbell et al. 2013](#)), the team adopted a consensus approach where joint decisions were reached. The process was supervised by a senior member of the research team.

Descriptive statistical analysis was made using IBM SPSS software, version 26, to describe the basic features of the data in the study.

The most notable results are presented below, together with the respective discussion.

3. Results and Discussion

Thirty-three Portuguese professionals participated in the present study, 93.9% female and 6.1% male, aged between 19 and 63 years ($M = 39$, $SD = 10.10$). The following inclusion criteria were established: (a) ≥ 18 years of age; (b) ≥ 1 year of professional experience in the field of dating violence in Portugal; and (c) direct involvement in the implementation of programmes aiming to prevent dating violence. With different levels of experiences in the implementation of programmes to prevent dating violence in Portugal, including archipelago, almost 60% of those surveyed have a master's degree, 24.2% a bachelor's degree, 12.1% a doctoral degree and 6.1% have completed secondary education. The large majority come from the area of social sciences and humanities (69.7%) and are employed (90.9%). About 80% said they had specific training in domestic violence and 54.6% reported having taken the course to qualify as a victim support technician (VST). Fifty-five per cent of professionals work in civil society organizations, with more than half of the sample working as technicians there.

Based on the analysis of the responses to the questionnaire survey, it was possible to characterize the programmes to prevent dating violence in its various dimensions in the light of the perspectives of professionals (Cf. Table 1).

Table 1. Characterization of dating violence prevention programmes.

Contents	Characterization of dating violence Human rights Gender equality
Target groups	Students Teachers Operational assistants
Nature	Primary prevention Secondary prevention Tertiary prevention
Techniques	Expository method Role playing Interactive games
Duration	One-off
Regime	Face-to-face
Responsible for implementation	Professional teams
Evaluation system	Internal External
Results	Understanding Identification Awareness
Sustainability	Disclosure
Suggestions for improvement	Extension of the duration Goals and techniques Precocity Specialization

Those surveyed work predominantly in non-governmental organizations. More than 60% of them identified as the most recurrent contents of the dating violence prevention programmes they develop or have developed, especially in a school context, those related to characterization of dating violence and its framing from a human rights and gender equality perspective. The percentage of the participants that indicated that the programmes follow a theoretical gender perspective was 87.8%. Almost all the sample (93.9%) highlighted the fact that the contents of the prevention programmes adopted the guidelines of the national plans to prevent and combat domestic violence, with 72.7% also being aligned with international directives. From the above, it appears that the entities are greatly concerned with promoting the programmes around the promotion of knowledge among the target audiences, informed by elements from specialized scientific literature and reference documents of national and international scope. The adoption of a conceptual gender mould in most prevention programmes indicates a historical-social framework of dating violence. This denotes a clear awareness of the cultural issues that shape it, in line with what has been defined in different documents of reference, such as the National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination 2018–2030 “Portugal + Igual”, or the Istanbul Convention. As research has concluded, interventions focused on promoting gender equality reveal very positive results in terms of reducing violence and substance abuse, increasing condom use, decreasing transactional sex and improving communication within couples (Miller et al. 2020).

However, this framework, even though it engendered an approach centred on the specifics of gender associated with the perpetration of dating violence, finds no support either in the way the contents are presented, nor in the way in which the groups that are

exposed to them are constituted. In fact, in about 94% of the situations, the intervention was directed to boys and girls simultaneously, with no distinction in the approach carried out, although 87.8% of the professionals reported having considered the characteristics of the participants, particularly their age. As some studies have shown, although the prevalence of dating violence is very similar in terms of gender, since it tends to be reciprocal (Richards et al. 2016), the motivations and dynamics of perpetration and the associated consequences seem to be different (Varlioglu and Hayes 2022). Thus, the theoretical basis that underlies the prevention programmes analysed does not in fact seem to be reflected in their implementation, which appears to be a contradiction.

Gender neutrality in the context of preventing intimate partner violence hinders the emancipatory potential of the programmes, as it homogenizes a phenomenon that is specific. This can be especially problematic for the perpetration of sexual violence for example, which disproportionately affects young women involved in dating relationships (Miller 2018). On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that when programmes are developed with a universal logic or focus on primary prevention, young boys report being little involved and being, in some situations, the object of bullying or harassment by their peers. (Banyard et al. 2019). Additionally, violence prevention programmes often fail to consider intimate relationships other than heterosexual ones, ignoring data that support that youth from sexual minorities are at greater risk of being victimized in this context (Basile et al. 2020).

In 87.9% of cases, and contrary to what has been highlighted in studies on the effectiveness of preventing dating violence, the programmes use the expository method as their preferred method, followed by role playing techniques and interactive games in a much less significant proportion. As in other countries, the programmes do not focus on non-formal methodologies, nor on activities that emphasize the role of peers, families or the community in preventing violence (e.g., media) (Gavin and Kruis 2022; McNaughton Reyes et al. 2021).

On the other hand, in most programmes, the target audience consisted of students, followed by teachers and operational assistants. According to Jewkes et al. (2015), dating violence prevention programmes must be systemic and multi-oriented, in order to sustain true gender transformation. In this sense, the intervention should focus on multiple risk factors and favour an ecological approach, involving individuals, peers, family and community. When we focus on changing the norms of the community in which we are going to intervene, the potential for reducing violence tends to be greater. However, in the programmes that were analysed in our study, this was not the case, as mentioned above.

There is a tendency for the programmes to be implemented through individual sessions, emphasizing a perspective of raising awareness. The format that is most used is face-to-face, which raises the question that during the confinements caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, dating violence prevention programmes were suspended and, therefore, this work has been interrupted. It will be necessary to determine the real effects of this interruption in the medium and long term.

More than 60% of the sample referred to the fact that the programmes had been implemented following a previous one and 57.5% mentioned that, in the construction of new programmes, indicators of effectiveness of others already carried out were considered. Seventy-five per cent of the professionals reported that the programmes in which they were involved were built after carrying out a needs diagnosis, which may explain the argument used by them that the contents were adapted to the characteristics of the participants.

As for the nature of the programmes, 90.9% are of primary prevention and are oriented to target audiences without prior identification of a history of victimization or perpetration of violence. In more than 75% of the programmes implemented, the responsibility for the dynamization of activities is or was in charge of teams of professionals from different disciplinary areas.

In 63.6% of the cases, the evaluation system is or was provided by these teams, and in 60.6% of the situations there is no or there was no external plan to evaluate the effectiveness. Only 27.3% have been or are part of an external consulting process. The added value of external evaluation and consultancy is well known, highlighting its benefits in understanding, exploring and building added values, which may contribute to future improvements (Viana 2016).

Concerning the results achieved following the implementation of the programmes, more than 50% of the professionals consider that there has been an increase in the understanding and identification of the phenomenon, which will have contributed to a greater awareness of its risks. About 64% rated prevention programmes as effective, although only three people pointed to a reduction in dating violence as an outcome. Indeed, and in line with what has been highlighted in studies on the effectiveness of programmes (e.g., Hickman et al. 2004), the gains stand out regarding the acquisition of knowledge, which is not reflected in an effective change of behaviours. Thus, the success of the programmes can be interpreted as relative, since their main purpose, namely the reduction of dating violence, is not achieved, according to the perspectives of participants. This can be explained by several factors, such as the fact that the programmes are indistinctly aimed at boys and girls, and they favour the expository method to the detriment of others that encourage active participation and skills training. They are predominantly conducted with students and do not include an ecological aspect of action to be developed individually and on a one-off basis under financed projects whose duration is limited in time, and in a logic of awareness, rather than education. The non-continuity of programmes is recognized by professionals as a constraint to their effectiveness, as is the fact that they begin to be implemented at a late stage of development. The data show, for example, that in follow-up studies, the gains obtained tend to dissipate (e.g., Gardner and Boellaard 2007), which denotes the importance of the intervention being continued. About 45 per cent of the sample pointed out extending the programmes as a suggestion for improvement, recognizing that their duration is insufficient; 24.2% considered that they should be optimized in terms of objectives and techniques; 21.2% argued the need for the intervention to begin at earlier ages; and 12.1% identified the specialization of professionals as a factor to be increased. Only 9% referred to strengthening systems for evaluating the programmes' effectiveness.

It should be noted that 45% of the people surveyed said that dating violence prevention programmes are risk-free. Although the results of the programmes are quite encouraging in terms of increasing knowledge about the phenomenon, these programmes, as well as others, are not innocuous, and may have effects contrary to those expected, namely increasing the vulnerability of victims (Foshee et al. 2004).

More than 70% of the people surveyed said that the programmes in which they are or were involved have produced or will produce promotional materials and 50% multimedia content. Around 52% mentioned that the programmes will be made available in public repositories and 54.5% indicated that they intend to return the results to the target groups. Only 48.4% expressed an intention to produce scientific outputs from the results.

4. Conclusions

The aim of the present study was to learn the perspectives of professionals on the effectiveness of implementing dating violence prevention programmes in Portugal, based on their experiences. It was considered that, by listening to those on the ground, privileged information could be collected on what can best contribute to the reduction of violence that affects young people in Portugal and, thus, feed public policies that enhance the prevention and fight against domestic violence.

Based on the results achieved, it is possible to advance some conclusions, many of them previously identified in international reference studies. The first is related to the fact that dating violence prevention programmes are not effectively fulfilling their intended function, although professionals consider them, for the most part, to be effective. In fact, the perspectives presented by professionals, which refer to the non-reduction of

dating violence practices after the implementation of these programmes, is consistent with statistical indicators and empirical evidence, which suggests that neither the objective of prevention, nor the fight against dating violence are being affected. An equally worrying aspect lies in the fact that, despite students seem to have increased their knowledge of what dating violence is and how it manifests itself, their attitudes continue to be linked to its legitimation.

As already suggested in other studies, the ineffectiveness of dating violence prevention programmes may have to do with their non-specificity in terms of gender, the inadequacy of the methods used, the absence of an ecological basis for action and with the absence of a vision based on their continuity and sustainability. The conditions of economic instability in which many NGOs find themselves, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic situation and combined with the fact that project financing is on a term basis, weaken their ability to invest in other types of programmes, necessarily more aligned with current needs. Despite the benefits of face-to-face intervention models being widely documented, given the current economic and social circumstances, but also the technological potential of young people and the proliferation of abusive behaviour in cyber-media, the implementation of dating violence prevention programmes using digital means, even if mediated by people, could be a solution to consider (e.g., [Murta et al. 2020](#)).

A second conclusion has to do with the fact that the very notion of effectiveness seems to be subjective, depending on who produces it. As this research shows, external evaluation and consultancy are less the norm and more the exception, which may explain some of the bias around what constitutes effective results for the teams responsible for implementing the programmes. Conducting qualitative studies that could complement the perspectives of professionals on the effectiveness of dating violence prevention programmes could contribute to a better understanding of the factors that may be determining the non-fulfilment of their main objective, that is, the effective reduction of the violence committed and suffered.

A third conclusion is related to the need to review the dating violence prevention strategy, defining empirically and scientifically supported objectives, methods, procedures and evaluation systems.

The fourth, and last, conclusion of this study points to the need for dating violence to be conceptualized in a more global way, not referring the responsibility for its prevention and combat only to school and educational contexts, but involving the entire community where young people move around and in which they are involved (e.g., sporting contexts, media).

The study presented here has some limitations, mainly due to the reduced number of responses obtained. From this point of view, it is not possible to say that the results reflect the reality of dating violence prevention programmes in Portugal, since the sample is not representative of the universe. In any case, there are no elements to assess the extent of this universe, which would be essential to characterize the course that has been laid in the country at this level.

On the other hand, the fact that the data were collected in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic made access to the entities difficult and hindered the motivation of professionals to respond to the questionnaire survey.

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