



EMPOWERING
CARE

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**Empowering girls in residential care against
violence against women**

Catalan research report



FUNDACIÓ
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INTRODUCTION

Empowering Care project aims to increase knowledge on the prevalence and characteristics of experiences of violence and abuse against girls aged 14-18 in residential care and under the legal responsibility of public authorities in the EU in order to empower them to protect and prevent themselves and their peers from violence against women. In order to reach these aims, the first activity of the project has been the development of a documentary and fieldwork research on the experiences of violence and abuse, perceptions of gender roles and intimate relationships of adolescent girls living in residential care centres in each partner country and, thus, in Catalonia.

The Catalan Research report is the result of this research activity. The report is structured in the following way: first of all, there is an overview of the legal and political framework on both Violence Against Women and children's protection and rights in Spain and Catalonia. The second chapter describes the methodology being followed to carry out the research. And, finally, the third chapter is the core of the report, as it contains the analysis of the qualitative fieldwork carried out with adolescent girls living in residential care centres and professionals working in them in Catalonia.

I. LEGAL AND POLITICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Brief overview on the Spanish and Catalan legal framework on violence against women

The first legislative initiatives on violence against women (VAW) in Spain came into light in the beginning of the 21st century: the Organic Law 11/2003, of 29 September, of Concrete Measures in Citizen Security, Domestic Violence and Social Integration of Foreigners was the first legal measure that dealt with domestic violence; the Organic Law 15/2003 of 25 November that modifies the Organic Law 10/1995, of 23 November, of the Penal Code, changed some provisions of the Penal Code for covering domestic violence crimes; and the Law 27/2003, of 31 July, regulating the Protection Order for Domestic Violence Victims, which unified all protection instruments for the victim foreseen in the legal system (penal, civil, and protection and social assistance) with the need of a unique request form.

In 2004, the Organic Law 01/2004 on Integrated protection against gender-based violence was approved. The law introduces new measures for the protection, prevention, support and recuperation of the victims of gender-based violence. It covers education, social issues, care and assistance for victims and children, civil regulations concerning the family and cohabitation, and punishment and education through the penal system. The law also lays down specific regulations relating to employment and the socio-economic sphere. The main

aim of the law is to prevent and deal with situations of gender-based violence and their consequences through an integrated approach.

This law meant an undoubtful step forward in the fight against this phenomenon in Spain. In particular, it is important to stress that with this law the term gender violence was used for the first time in a legal regulation. Until then, the unique form of VAW that was addressed in general legal regulations (like the laws mentioned earlier) was domestic violence. Thus, with this Law, the Spanish State broadens the scope of the matter by recognising that women, as a result of gender inequality, are victims of multiple forms of violence and, therefore, uses the term gender violence to capture the multidimensionality of the problem. The law refers to gender violence as any act of physical and psychological violence, including aggression to sexual freedom, threats, coercions or the arbitrary privation of freedom.

The philosophical background behind this law is that gender violence is the most brutal symbol of inequality in our society. In this sense, it is considered that gender violence is a violence perpetuated against women for the sole reason of being women and, for this reason, their offenders consider them as persons with no rights of freedom, to be respected and no capacity for deciding for themselves.

At a Catalan level, on April 2008, the Parliament of Catalonia approved the Law 05/2008, of 24th April, on the right of women to eradicate male-based violence. As stated in the legal text, the law on the right of women to eradicate sexist violence is founded on the premise that women's rights are human rights. Sexist violence is a serious breach of those rights and an obstacle for women to achieve full citizenship, independence and freedom. The objective of the law is to establish mechanisms that contribute to the eradication of sexist violence from which women suffer, and recognise and move forward in the area of guarantees concerning the basic right of women to live free from any form of this violence.

The Catalan Law establishes that sexist violence it is a violence suffered by women for the simple reason of being female, within the framework of unequal power relations between women and men. This law recognises the specific and differentiated nature of this violence as well as the need to widen the scope of women's rights so as to include needs in the social sphere. The Law uses the expression sexist violence since sexism is the concept that generally defines behaviours of domination, control and abuse of power of men over women and which has also imposed a male model still considered by part of society to be superior. Violence against women is the most serious and devastating expression of this culture, which not only destroys lives, but also impedes the exercise of rights, equality of opportunity and freedom for women.

The legal text recognises that sexist violence manifests itself in a range of abuses suffered by women. In this sense, it states that different forms of violence can be identified: physical, psychological, sexual and economic, which take place in specific spheres, in the framework of affective and sexual relationships, occurring in the spheres of couple, family, work and socio-community.

The Law 05/2008, of 24th April also defines the means to identify sexist violence and the instruments to be used by the public administration to intervene in cases of sexist violence. It

also presents the coordination mechanism of public services and resources for the attention, assistance, protection, recuperation and reparation of women who suffered or are suffering sexist violence. Moreover, the Law gathers the rights of women to be able to restore their lives. Finally, the Law foresees actions in the areas of research, training, sensitisation, prevention and detection of VAW.

2. Brief overview on the Spanish and Catalan legal frameworks on children's protection and rights

In December 1990 Spain ratified the UN Convention of the Rights of Children, adopted by the UN Assembly in 1989.

The Spanish Organic Law 1/1996, from 15th January, on the Protection of the minors, establishes a legal framework in line with the principle that minors are subjects of rights and that have the progressive capacity to exercise them.

Taking into account the territorial and administrative structure of the Spanish state, the Autonomous Communities with legislative power and competences have developed comprehensive legislation on the protection and promotion of the rights of minors. In this sense, Catalonia has developed its own legislation and political framework on the rights of children.

Already in 1985, Catalonia, being the first Autonomous Community, issued a law on the protection of minors (Law 11/1985, 13th June, on the protection of minors). In 1991 the Catalan Government approved a more specific legal text on the protection of minors: Law 37/1991, 30 December, on the protection of neglected minors. In 1995, the Government published another law, Law 8/1995, 27 July, on the attention and protection of children and adolescents. However, at that stage there were still two different laws: one for the protection and attention of children and adolescents in general, and another one dealing exclusively with neglected children and adolescence.

In 2010, the Catalan Government approved the Law 14/2010, 27th May, on the rights and opportunities of children and adolescents, aiming at having a unique norm that includes neglected or at risk children and that, at the same time, recognises children and adolescents as subjects of rights. In this sense, the Law 14/2010 brings together both regulations: on the one hand, it establishes a legal framework for children and adolescents in general in which the principles and rights of children are stated. On the other hand, it establishes regulations for the protection of children and adolescents that find themselves in a situation of risk. Moreover, this new legislation is in line with new demands and social circumstances raised during the last years in Catalonia, i.e. recognition of diversity, intensification of action against violence and maltreatment and promotion of children and adolescents' social participation.

The guiding principles of the Law 14/2010 are the following ones:

- The best interest of the child as the main principle of all public actions
- The development of personal potentialities of the children and adolescents
- The right of the children and adolescents to be listened

- Protection against violence
- Non-discrimination
- Gender perspective and functional diversity

The Title V of the Law describes the existing protection mechanisms for children and adolescents in situation of risk or neglected. The Art. 99 of the Law establishes that it is the role of the Public Administration to react and intervene when a situation of risk is detected. The Law defines situation of risk as the situation in which the development and wellbeing of the children or adolescent is limited or damaged for any personal, social or family circumstance. The Law describes several situations of risk. It is interesting to highlight that the legal text makes specific reference to the phenomenon of violence against women describing one of the situation of risk as “discriminatory practices, exerted by the parents or the guardians, against girls or young women that can lead to damage their wellbeing and their health, including the risk to suffer female genital mutilation and violence against them”.

The Law also establishes that the social services are the ones who need to evaluate the existence of a situation of risk and, if necessary, to foster the measures and resources of social and educative attention in order to diminish or eradicate the situation of risk. The Law establishes several social and educative measures to be developed in front of a situation of risk.

The Chapter III of the Title V of the Law on the protection of neglected children and adolescents establishes the mechanisms and measures to be taken by the public administration when a child is neglected. The Law defines neglected infants as those children that find themselves in a situation in which they lack essential elements for the integral development of their personality and that, for their protection, they need to be taken away from the family home.

The Law 14/2010 establishes the organisation and functioning of the care system in Catalunya. In this way, the legal text establishes the procedure to be initiated and developed in case of detection a situation of negligence. Once the public administration adopts the legal guardianship of a child or adolescent, there are several options to take care of this child or adolescent:

- Foster / family Care: it refers to the responsibility of care and education for a child outside his or her home, either within the extensive family or in an external family. It can be permanent or transitory.
- Professional care homes: it refers to specific homes ruled by professionals to take in children with special needs or groups of sisters/brothers.
- Residential care centres: it refers to children's/youth homes that intend to create an everyday life that is as home-like and caring as possible.

It is important to state that the entrance in a residential care centre is, most of the times, the last option. It means that, before arriving to the centre, other options such as living with the extensive family and foster care have been evaluated. Finally, the legal text also establishes the rights and obligations of the children and adolescents living in residential care centres.

II. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

1. The start of the research

The Empowering Care research took place in 5 residential care centres in Catalunya. In order to get in contact with the residential care centres and to have the permission to interview both the girls living there and the professionals who are working with them, SURT got in contact with DGAIA¹.

Before getting into the residential care centres, SURT and DGAIA had some meetings in which the project was presented. In those meetings, ethical issues such as confidentiality and protection of the minors as well as the selection criteria of the participants were discussed. Then, DGAIA established the first contact with the residential care centres having girls aged 14 to 18 across the country. DGAIA explained them the project, its aims and how the centre, the girls and the professionals would be involved. Then, the teams of professionals working in the centres decided whether participate or not. After a couple of weeks, 5 centres had responded positively to DGAIA and showed interest in participating to the project. Then, SURT got in contact with them and set up the type of participation and agreed on the dates to start the fieldwork.

The fieldwork took place from May to June 2013 in 5 residential care centres across Catalunya.

2. Types of residential care centres

As said, after DGAIA's contact, the centres themselves decided whether or not participate in the research. All the participating centres are female centres. 3 out of the 5 centres are horizontal centres, meaning that they have only girls from a specific age interval (from 13 to 18 years old) living. The others 2 centres were vertical; one of them has girls from 6 to 18 years old, and the other one, young women from 16 years old onwards.

Regarding the size of the centres participating in the research, the smaller one had capacity for 8 girls and the biggest one for 24.

The organisation dynamics were diverse from one centre to another. However, it is important to state that specifically three of them were thought to be a place to foster girls' autonomy. All residential care centres were secular except one that was catholic.

3. The selection of the girls

The criteria for selecting the girls to be interviewed were discussed and agreed among the partnership and written down in the European Methodological Framework. The criteria for the selection of the girls were:

¹ Direcció General d'Atenció a la Infància i l'Adolescència /General Directorate for the Attention to Childhood and Adolescence. DGAIA is the organism depending on the Department of Social Welfare and Family from the Catalan Government that promotes the welfare of child and adolescents at risk of social exclusion, with the aim of contributing to their persona development. DGAIA also protects and exerts guardianship of those children and adolescents living in a state of neglect.

- To be a minor girl from 14 to 18
- To be living in a residential care institution
- Not to be under a stressful or delicate life situation. In this sense, the professionals working in the residential care institution would accompany the selection process with the researchers
- For the girls participating in the individual interviews, to have suffered violence in their life-time

The ethical issues being taken into account were the following ones:

- Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent of the girls and their legal guardians
- Prior to giving consent, girls and guardians were informed about: the project and its scope, the voluntary nature of their participation, the possibility to leave the project at any time, and the use of data
- In interviews and focus group an atmosphere of trust and safety would be created
- The safety, rights and wellbeing of girls would always be guaranteed
- Research interviews and focus groups would be recorded. Records were confidential and anonymous

The way the girls were informed and decided to participate in the project took place as follows. In most of the cases, SURT research team had a meeting with the professionals working in the different centres. Afterwards, these professionals explained the project to the girls and offered the possibility to participate in it. Then, the girls themselves decided whether to get involved or not in the research. After this selection process, a total of 17 girls were interviewed and 10 girls (2 groups of 5 girls) participated in the focus discussion groups.

Regarding the selection of the professionals, it is important to state the following. The first idea was to carry out one discussion group with several professionals working in different residential care centres. However, due to the fact that centres were distributed along the country jointly with agenda difficulties, the research team decided to carry out individual or double interviews with several professionals working in the centres.

The selection criteria to participate in the research were:

- To be a professional working with minor girls living in residential care institutions
- To have experience working with minor girls living in residential care institutions

The ethical issues regarding their participation were the following ones:

- Participation was voluntary
- Professional could leave the project at any time
- Prior to giving consent, the professionals were informed about: the project and its scope, the voluntary nature of their participation, the use of the data and the fact that the use of the data was going to be confidential.

At the end, 6 professionals participated in the research via individual or double interviews.

4. Research techniques used

The research techniques used were the following:

Individual semi-structured interviews with the girls

The aim of the individual interviews was to gather information about personal life stories of violence of girls living in residential care institutions. The idea was not to have a rigid script, but rather to present and carry out the interview as a fluid conversation. At the beginning of the interview the girl was told that she would be the one deciding what to explain or not. In addition, the girl could decline any question she did not feel comfortable answering. In doing so, an atmosphere of trust and complicity was created.

The topics discussed in the interview were: residential care experiences, social and intimate relations and violence experiences.

Focus groups with the girls

The aim of the focus groups with minor girls was to discuss and share issues around gender roles and stereotypes as well as patterns of behaviour in intimate relationships.

There were 2 focus groups with 5 girls in each one. In the focus groups, the girls were able to use their own codes of communication, express their concerns and interact with peers who possibly have had similar experiences.

The researchers' role in the focus group was to support and facilitate the discussion by using group dynamics and asking specific questions as well as to actively conduct the discussion.

The topics of the focus group were: gender roles and stereotypes and myths of romantic love.

Individual/double semi-structured interviews with the professionals

The aim of the interviews with professionals was to gather professionals' perceptions, contributions and experience of working with girls in residential care centres.

The topics discussed in the interviews with professionals were: gender roles and perceptions (stereotypes and gender differences in the centres), violence experiences of girls in residential care (perceptions of professionals around violence, forms and spheres of violence suffered by

the girls, impacts of the violence on girls' lives, dealing with violence in residential care centres, needs and difficulties experienced by girls) and professionals' situation and needs (needs, tools when dealing with VAW and gender issues in their daily work, skills needed and difficulties encountered).

5. The fieldwork

As said before, the fieldwork lasted for a month, from May 2013 to June 2013. In general, the development of the fieldwork was very smooth. The contact with the centres was easy and the professionals working there kindly opened the doors to the research team.

The girls who participated in the research were brave young women who decided to generously share part of their lives. Most of the interviews took place in the residential care centre, except for 4 that were done in SURT premises. The fact that the research team had the opportunity to visit the centres was a really positive element since it allowed the researchers to get to know better what the girls were talking about when describing their lives in the centres.

During the fieldwork there was not any big obstacle or difficulty, besides the fact that the stories that the girls were telling were really tough. In this sense, the fieldwork was done as it was foreseen.

III ANALYSIS OF THE FIELDWORK

A. Perceptions and experiences of the girls

1. Life for girls looked after in residential care centres

The girls being looked after describe their admission to a residential care centre as a very difficult experience. In all cases except one, the assumption of their guardianship by the authorities and, therefore, admission to a residential care centre, has taken place in recent months or years (in periods ranging from three months to five years, approximately). This means that the girls clearly remember how they experienced it and can therefore talk about it.

In general, the girls associate the beginning of their lives in the residential care centre with feelings like loneliness, sadness, shame, longing or disorientation.

Well ... it was really weird ... I'd never been in one and I don't know ... If for example a new girl came in now, what would you say to her? That she'd feel really bad to start with ... but after a while things would get ... I don't know, she'd start mixing with us ... I'd tell her that to begin with it's really tough, but after a while it's not so bad ... And if she asked you why it was so bad, what would you say? Because you miss your family and the things you used to do there, like ... [...] it was pretty hard also to say goodbye to friends and that. G2, 13 years old.

How do you think this girl would feel to begin with? Nervous... and sad. She doesn't know where she is, or what she's doing, why ... G17, 18 years old.

Some of them also refer to how difficult they found it to break with their life, friends, family and school up to then, meet their new housemates and find their place in the group, besides coming to terms with the fact that the care centre was going to be their new home.

What was most difficult thing when you entered? Leaving everything behind. I had to leave school, my friends, everything G11, 14 years old.

What was the hardest thing? Meeting people. Because for some time I was alone. I didn't have anyone's support. I was alone in a house. [...] And when I came here, 15 girls in a care centre, I didn't know how to communicate ... it was tough. I was alone and then all of a sudden loads of people ... it's hard. G17, 18 years old.

Some of them, however, also say that although entering the care centre was difficult, at the same time it was a relief and they had a certain feeling of protection.

For you then, leaving home was ... a relief, I felt protected when I entered the centre. G10, 16 years old.

In any case it is important to underline that, in general, despite the initial hardness, after a period of getting to know the centre and its rules of working and their housemates and educators, all the girls have adapted to the centre where they live and now say that they are happy there and like it. After this period of adaptation, several girls even consider that the care centre is the best place for them to be and they recognize that living in a residential centre they have access to opportunities that they would barely have at home.

I say, "there's no point crying, because they all come in crying, I also cried, but it's pointless to cry because after all you've got loads of things here that you won't be able to have there. G5, 18 years old.

At the beginning it's hard, you have to realize that you've got to be in another place that's not your home, but as time goes by you realize that you're better off in the centre than at home. G7, 17 years old.

And this *is* a home. I don't say, "I'm going to the care centre", I say, "I'm going home." G5, 18 years old.

Other aspects that the girls value positively in relation to the centres where they live are support and help they receive from the professionals working there. If you bear in mind that the girls have been removed from their families due to serious cases of neglect, abandonment and/or violence, this is not surprising, as the centres are places where the authorities have to guarantee the care and protection of minors.

It's great here now, honest. You adapt OK, the educators can be a bit of a pain but they're doing it for our own good, but yeah, it's OK. They give you everything you need, you've got someone to talk to ... it's really good. G6, 13 years old.

[In the centre] they treat you well, they listen to you, they try to help you more. If you're ill they take you to the doctor when you need it. G15, 16 years old.

Moreover, according to the girls' accounts, one of the most difficult things they have to deal with during the process of adaptation to the residential centre is the need to get to know and

observe the care centre's rules. In this respect, despite the different kinds of residential centres, in all cases they are places with rules governing times, tasks and procedures. To begin with, this often surprises the girls, who need a while to take it all in and adjust.

Well, it's been a bit difficult because if you don't behave properly, well, you don't adapt to the rules here at first, because at home you could do what you wanted and all that, and now as I've been behaving well I've seen the requirements and things that I've had and so it's better if you behave. G6, 13 years old.

And yet, some of the girls, despite having adapted to the rules, think that this and the feeling of not really being free are the most negative elements. However, the girls who refer to the lack of freedom are only 13 or 14 years old and, as such, they enjoy less autonomy than the older ones.

We go for a walk in the park here, because I can't leave the park [...] I'm up to here with the tutor. Because I haven't been here for very long and she says that I can only go in the park... G2, 13 years old.

When you're as old as she is you can go out more, and if you behave you can do more things. I remember when I was smaller, I couldn't go out at night, but of course I behaved and they let me go out at night ... It's all about you giving, and they give you more. If you're one of those that ignore it and all that and you're asking me for more freedom, well girl, you don't deserve it... G5, 18 years old.

Another of the complicated aspects of life in the centre is living together with the other girls. All of them say that it's not easy to live with the others, but in general they get on OK. As we shall see later on, the majority of the girls have created intense ties of friendship with others in the centre. However, there are also cases of girls who do not mix with the others, doing more things with their boyfriends or with friends on the outside. Also, in the larger centres the girls have explicitly referred to cohabitation conflicts.

In general, what's it like living here? It's a good atmosphere... G9, 16 years old.

And living together with the other girls, is it hard in general? It depends on how you take it. For example when my sister came here she didn't like it much and didn't mix much with the little girls. *You mix more ...* Yes. *What is your recipe for being OK here?* I don't know ... don't poke your nose in other people's lives. G11, 14 years old.

In the room I sleep in, each of us has half a wardrobe. It's not big enough for me because I've got to stuff my entire life in a wardrobe this big ... it doesn't fit ... and on top of that I have to share it with another girl ... They put bolts and keys, they broke them. So it's open. Not long ago someone stole two t-shirts, two MP3s, money, bank cards ... G10, 16 years old.

Some girls also negatively value some of the organizational aspects of the centre they live in:

Almost all of us complain about this place, because for example you get 15€ spending money a month, they don't give us tampons, or foam, or moisturizing cream or anything. So with our spending money, which isn't much, we've got to buy them ... tampons are quite expensive. They don't give them to us, saying it's

because of religion ... great. They give us sanitary towels, yeah, but... G10, 16 years old.

Despite everything, and despite the diversity in terms of types, location, educational project or size of the residential care centres to which we gained access during the fieldwork in Catalonia, the girls we have interviewed are happy with the care centre they live in. Although they associate entering the centre as a tough, difficult and sad time in their lives, showing a huge capacity for adaptation, they have been able to rebuild or start to build networks of relationships in an atmosphere very different to the one they lived in before coming to the centre.

2. Relationships with friends, family and partners

With the aim of getting to know the social environment and the relationships of the girls in care, we asked the girls themselves if they could identify the most important people in their lives. The answers to this question are varied, but in the vast majority of cases the girls mention members of their family. To be precise, they mention their mother, father, grandparents, brothers and sisters. It is important to point out that, in several cases, the most important people for the girls are, precisely, those who have used some kind of violence towards them.

My grandparents are like my parents for me. I think of them as my mother and father because it was they who brought me up, took me into their house and all.
G8, 18 years old.

At the same time, some girls say that the most important people for them are relatives with whom their current relationship is virtually non-existent but who, even so, are still important in their lives.

I don't see my brothers and sisters ... but they're important. G4, 13 years old.

It is interesting to see that, although for many girls living together in the centre and getting on with the educators is not always easy, other girls claim that the most important people in their lives are, precisely, educators, directors or housemates. This fact is important because the centre is the girls' current home and the place where the authorities have to guarantee their protection and wellbeing.

Moreover, among the most important people in their lives three girls mention their boyfriend, even when the relationship is very recent. In this respect, it must be noted that the majority of the girls interviewed had a boyfriend although only in these three cases do they mention the boyfriend among the most important people for them.

My brothers and sisters ... and my boyfriend. *And how long have you been going out with your boyfriend?* Not long ... two weeks. G12, 17 years old.

We've only been [together] for a bit and [she says to her girlfriend] "what you give me is what I needed, because I haven't got anyone", and I always say to her "you fill me with lots of things". Now she's the most important one. G5, 18 years old.

Finally, it is also important to point out that some girls find it difficult to be able to identify important people in their lives, something that shows a lack of a social network and support.

Who are the most important people for you? I don't know ... G11, 14 years old.

Specifically with regard to **family ties**, the girls talk about all sorts of different situations. Thus, there are girls in regular, almost daily contact with some people in their family, like, for example, their mother or sisters. In other cases, the girls keep in contact with some relatives, but this is rather sporadic. Finally, there are girls who have no contact whatsoever with anyone in their family.

And do you have any contact with anyone else in your family? No. I don't see my father at all, I haven't got any grandparents and my mother died. There are some uncles and aunts on my mother's side who live here but I don't see them. [...] I've also got an uncle on my dad's side, but my dad didn't get on well with him and I don't see him either. G10, 16 years old.

The girls who do have contact with their families talk about different forms of contact. On one hand, some girls have face-to-face meetings with their family, either going to the family home at weekends or on holidays, or meeting somewhere halfway in between or at the centre. Where there is no physical meeting, contact with the family is on the telephone or Internet via Skype or Facebook. Moreover, some of the girls from immigrant families have transnational family relationships, although in other cases, this contact has been lost or no one wanted to keep it going for various reasons.

Although it is true that some girls keep in more or less regular contact with their family, in the great majority of cases we see that the girls' family structure is not very solid, rather scattered and broken or, even, non-existent. Bearing in mind the research target group, that is girls in care, this is not surprising as the authorities' care is precisely due to the fact that the girls have experienced some kind of neglect by their families. Moreover, this generates sadness and a feeling of loneliness among the girls.

Since you came to the centre do you see your family anymore? No ... sometimes I feel lonely because I've got no one from the family ... my sister, but lately I haven't been getting on very well with her ... at times I feel alone, like ... I don't know ... G11, 14 years old.

Bearing in mind the importance of the peer group for teenagers, which the girls taking part in the research are, they were also asked about the **friendships** they have. In this respect, some girls claim that they have a group of friends of both sexes, girlfriends especially, that they can turn to. These are from primary or secondary school or from places outside the centre where they live. Other girls, however, say that their "best friends" are some of the girls that live in the centre.

And who are your best friends? Basically the girls I live with here, because you're with them every day so you begin to like them, whether you want to or not ... and I've got three best friends. I like the others, but they're not as good friends... G6, 13 years old.

Finally, it is important to point out that some girls say they don't have a group of friends. The reasons they give to explain this are diverse. On one hand, one of the girls suffered violence at the hands of her boyfriend and one of the consequences of this was isolation and the loss of social ties. Moreover, this same girl is the mother of a little baby and says she prefers being with her daughter to being with friends. On the other hand, some girls say that the change of residence brought about by entering the centre also meant breaking virtually every social bond they had, which, in just a few cases, are kept up by telephone or internet.

Apart from your boyfriend, is there anyone else close to you? Boy or girl friends?
There was before, but there's nobody now. *Why has it changed?* I came to live in the centre and everything got lost. G12, 17 years old.

Another element taken into account in the analysis of the girls' social ties is their **relationships with partners**. As we said earlier, most of the girls interviewed currently have a boyfriend. The longest relationships ended after just short of two years and the shortest go from a few weeks to two months.

Although through the girls' stories it has been possible to identify some (although very few) healthy relationships, it is important (and worrying) to note that the vast majority of the relationships with boyfriends that the girls establish are actually rather toxic and based on emotional dependence. In the analysis of this fact we must bear in mind factors related to the backgrounds of the girls in care. Thus, on one hand it must be considered that in their families, in many cases the girls in care have experienced and, often, come to regard as normal rather unhealthy and abusive models of relationships with partners. Furthermore, due to the abandonment, mistreatment and/or emotional void that they have received from their families, many girls need to seek and establish emotional ties with someone, and this someone is often a partner with whom they establish an unequal relationship: a partner about whom they question almost nothing and accept virtually everything, even psychological, physical and sexual violence.

How do you show him that you love him? Hitting him! Or frowning at him! [...] I don't know how to do it ... he doesn't know but I do it like that ... And how does he show it to you? Caressing me ... And do you like it? Yes. And have you tried caressing him? Yes, but he goes like ... he looks at me and says, "what's up with you?" G12, 17 years old.

Lastly, it is important to note that the gender socialization that the girls have been exposed to also conditions their perception and experiences of love as well as the model of partner relationships that they establish. So, the dynamics of these unhealthy relationships described by the girls reproduce, to a large extent, some of the myths of (patriarchal) romantic love like, for example, jealousy as something virtually inevitable and as a show of love, or the need to share absolutely everything with the partner as an obligation and also as a sign of love.

Do you think jealousy can be a demonstration of love? A little. Sometimes. When? I don't know. For a guy to tell me something and get a bit jealous is OK. That kind of means I matter to him. G13, 15 years old.

[Jealousy] isn't violence, but [it means] that he loves you and that he doesn't want you to be with others. This is the problem that boys have. *Do you think it's only the boys?* No, no, girls too, because I'm very jealous. *And do you think that's good?* No, but it's an instinct we have. G6, 13 years old.

It's also important to note that some girls find it very difficult to deal with situations of jealousy and misunderstandings that, in some cases, may lead to situations of violence.

Do you trust him? No. *Are you afraid of him going off with someone else?* A bit. If he leaves, it doesn't matter, I'll kill him and that's that. *What would you do?* Hit both of them. *Before talking to him?* Talking? What for? I'll cut his tongue out. G13, 15 years old.

The girls also describe situations of control by their partner that go from control of the way they dress to control of their use of the social networks. The following girl gives examples of these dynamics of control:

[Various situations of control/violence are put forward] *Your boyfriend controls your mobile and Facebook.* [And the girl replies] Facebook. *What does he do to control you?* He's got my password. *Why has he got it?* Because he asked me for it. *What would have happened if you hadn't given it to him?* I don't want him to get paranoid and I gave it to him. *Your boyfriend stops you wearing a miniskirt or a low neckline.* Yes, it's true, he doesn't let me. [...] *What does he say to you?* That I shouldn't wear that. *So, imagine that one day you're wearing a miniskirt, what does he say?* That I should go up to the flat and take it off. [...] *And why do you think he says that?* Because he doesn't want anyone to see my legs. *And would you like to wear a miniskirt?* Yes. For example, he doesn't allow me short dresses. Long ones, yes. *And before you were with him did you wear this kind of clothing?* Yes. G15, 16 years old.

Although some of these quotes illustrate unequal and abusive relationships, one of the girls interviewed has been involved in a serious case of male violence. She herself talks about it in the following words:

What was the relationship like? Ugh, very bad. I was with him for almost a year when I got pregnant, and when I was four months pregnant or so he hit me. Of course, I had reported him loads of times and he had restraining orders, but even so I stayed with him. Then one day they told me that I had to decide ... because if I stayed with him I was putting my daughter, who is also in care, at risk and I said: "no, my daughter comes first before a man", that's really obvious. And so, it's really hard, you know ... But he's not bothered about my daughter or anything, he doesn't call ... or if he *does* call it's to insult, to bother me. He says she's not his ... I ignore him. He came over one day and I said "It's over," and that was that. G8, 18 years old.

To better understand the girls' relationships a bit better, and how they imagine love, during the interview the girls were asked what they would be capable of doing for love and how they show their boyfriends that they love them. The girls' replies are varied and go from demonstrations of love through ordinary words or actions, to actions that have even put the

minor's physical and legal integrity in danger, like for example, running away from the care centre.

How do you show him you love him? Well, I tell him. And how does he show you? He helps me, he gives me advice and all that. G15, 16 years old.

Apart from shaving your head, what else would you be capable of doing for love? Run away. What happened? I left, bye! I was on the run for three weeks. G12, 17 years old.

What would you be capable of doing for love? Well, running away from the centre and all. Because I, when I was in the maternity hospital [...] he said, "come on, come with me, we'll run away and nothing will happen", and I got my gear and went with him. I was pregnant. I was away for two months. And of course, hiding all day. I was actually risking them taking [her daughter] away from me for being with him. G8, 18 years old.

As was mentioned earlier, to understand the fact that the vast majority of the girls are involved in unhealthy relationships, it is necessary to analyse their backgrounds and experiences. Their family relationships have been and are still complicated and, in many cases, violent. As a result, the huge lack of affection, the absence of family support and/or the abuse suffered by the girls have a direct impact not only on their emotional state but also on the kind of affective relationships they are able to establish. It is obvious that there are girls in care who, either because of their resilience or the therapeutic recovery work done with them, are able to break this pattern and establish healthy relationships, but unfortunately the great majority of the girls in care reproduce this relationship model. This, then, makes clear the need to work specifically and more exhaustively on promoting equal partner relationships and the prevention of male violence.

Despite the prevalence and persistence of relationships based on dependence and control, it is interesting to note that some of the girls interviewed (some with a partner and others without) are able to identify some elements that may constitute alarm signals. That is, forms of conduct or situations of risk that may suppose excessive control by the other person and even lead to situations of violence. In this respect, the girls are able to identify certain harmful elements and see the consequences that they may have in the future.

I don't think it's fair that if you are my boyfriend you tell me that I can't talk to whoever [...] If he tells me this now, what will happen in a few years old time? I look at everything with the future in mind. G9, 16 years old.

Other girls visualize the kind of relationship they want and in these descriptions models of healthy and equal relationships are sketched.

Above all I want our relationship to be based on trust, I can tell him things and he can tell me. [...] I always think, "the first time disrespects me, it's over". Why, what makes you think he won't do it again? G7, 17 years old.

So, although the predominant model for a relationship that the girls have, in reality and in their imaginations, corresponds to sexist patterns and dynamics of control and even violence,

some girls are able to visualize and project themselves in relationships based on respect and equality.

3. Perceptions of gender stereotypes and roles

To get to know what the girls are thinking about in relation to gender perceptions and roles, besides the individual interviews two discussion groups were held, with seven or eight girls in each one, which made it possible to obtain information about how the girls in care see aspects like gender differences and inequalities, partner relationships and certain myths about romantic love.

In the case of the discussion groups, in order to work on the differences and inequalities between boys and girls, the latter were asked to imagine the future of a newborn baby boy and girl. In answer to this proposal, the girls began an interesting discussion on what each of the babies would be like and what future they would have.

One of the first things to mention about their words is the fact that, whereas for the description and characterization of the boy's character and personality the participants use mostly positive adjectives, when they describe the girl's they use mainly negative ones. In this respect, they say that boys are easier, less problematic and that, on the other hand, girls are more complicated.

This idea reappears when they talk about the sex they would like their children to have. In this context, some girls say that if they could choose they would prefer to have a boy instead of a girl.

Why do you prefer boys, what differences are there?

Because if I have a boy first he can protect the girl more when she grows up.

I like girls more, but they're more complicated.

We girls are naughty, we get annoyed more ... when they're little boys are sort of nobler, I don't know ...

Girls are usually more capricious. Group 2

As can be seen, all the descriptions of girls are negative, whereas when they describe boys they use positive adjectives. So, the girls' view of little girls is that they create problems and are much more complex and difficult than little boys. On the other hand, the girls share a collective imagined view in which little boys are, naturally and unquestionably, nobler and more rational people.

Still in relation to the use of positive elements to describe boys and negative ones to describe girls, it is interesting to note that, in one of the groups, the first word used to define what the girl would be like as an adult was "whore". When they were asked to describe a little more what they meant, the girls said that she would be a girl who would be "getting off with boys all day", that "she would be a capricious girl" and "vain". The imagined ideas activated are worrying from a gender point of view. Namely, the expectations the young women project

reproduce a system of patriarchal values and put women in a highly sexualized and devalued social position.

At the same time, as was shown in an earlier quote, the girls reproduce a clear gender stereotype when they associate boys with the role of protector and girls with the need to be protected. This same idea emerged once again during the discussion, when one of the girls in the group said:

Parents are always afraid that something might happen to girls in the street, at night. A man knows how to defend himself. A woman is weaker, if three guys come to hurt her, what can the girl do? On the other hand the guy can fight or something ... Group 2

These words reproduce the stereotype of a woman, *naturally* weak and incapable of looking after herself, and a man, *naturally* protective, capable of facing up to any danger and defending and protecting women.

When the girls define the character the little girl will have when she grows up, one can also identify the reproduction of some sexist stereotypes. In this respect, the girls state that women are more passionate and they let themselves be carried away by their feelings, that they are more sensitive and they show it more. On the other hand, they believe that boys, although they can be sensitive too, don't show it and are colder.

Do you think girls are more sensitive than boys?

No, we girls demonstrate it and the boys, to act tough, don't show it, but in actual fact they are. [...] Girls always think with the heart, boys don't ...

Boys think with what's between their legs. Group 1

At the same time, the girls conceptualize similar attitudes in boys and girls differently. So, the fact that a boy has or establishes sexual relations with several girls is given connotations and a discourse very different to the one given to the girl who does the same. The conversation reproduced below illustrates this to perfection:

What happens if a boy or a girl sleeps around?

They say that this is frowned on in a man but it's even worse for a woman, if she goes sleeping around with everyone and the man does too but ... although it's actually the same, but we're women and it's regarded differently ... like she doesn't make herself respected, she doesn't value herself. But it makes me mad, because we're equal, we're not different, we are a different sex but we're equal. It's just that in a woman it's regarded as nastier, more vulgar ... and that changes things.

The guys say to each other, "you're a ladies' man", but between girls ...

Yeah, a boy who gets off with lots of girls is a big man, if it's a girl she's a whore ...
Group 2

Despite the heavy presence of sexist stereotypes that reproduce and reinforce a highly patriarchal social picture, some girls question certain ideas and claim that it is unfair that boys and girls are treated and brought up differently:

And do you think that parents bring up boys and girls in the same way?

Boys are usually given more freedom, I don't know ... it's not the same when a boy or a girl says, "I've got a boy/girlfriend", with a girl they worry more.

There are parents who treat them the same, if one doesn't go out, the other doesn't go out. [...] This is the best there is, nothing like because you're a man you get back at 3 and your sister comes home at 11... it's a bit like the brother is superior. Then it's normal for the woman to be submissive, if they bring her up like that the girl's going to be submissive all her life. And then it's normal that she keeps quiet and the husband does what he damn well likes in their house. Group 2

It is interesting to see that the girls are able to identify how the upbringing and the patterns of socialization that are adopted throughout childhood and adolescence can have (and indeed do have) an impact on future attitudes and actions. In this respect, although in some cases the girls show a certain tendency to accept as normal and natural certain attitudes that are different between boys and girls, in other cases they are clear that it is a case of socially constructed and learnt differences.

At the same time, although the girls constantly reproduce sexist stereotypes, they can also identify unfair and discriminatory situations, referring both to aspects like the division of work and participation in social and sporting activities along gender lines:

What would happen if someone wants to play football and she asks the boys?

Wow, they get mad!

They're going to tell you that you can't play because you're a girl.

All my life I've seen, for example in physical education, that when you have to play some game, the boys don't pass the ball to the girls and it has to be the teacher saying "the girls are playing too".

Boys always think that when we want to do a sport that they do, they always think "she's either a tomboy and she likes sport and men's things, or she's the typical type who just does it to attract attention to herself and wants to be with the guys". That's what they think of us.

And what do you think of all this?

It's not fair, because there are girls who can play football very well too. Group 2

This same idea is reproduced in the words of this other girl:

I think we're all equal and we can do the same things. So men say that women have to stay at home and clean, for example. The husband says to his wife that she has to stay home, she's the one who has to clean and all that, and the woman also tells him it's not fair that she has to do it, and that he can also stay at home. [...] So ... so the wife would be right, that the men would be the same as the women ... even though they wouldn't know how to look after a baby or change its nappy, but everything can be taught and learnt. D1, 14 years old.

It can be claimed, then, that the girls are able to identify situations that are prejudicial to them, and which put them in a position of inequality. This point is important to bear in mind for future work that may be done with this group.

Reproducing or questioning myths of romantic love

Below we present the information obtained in the discussions with the girls about romantic love. The objective of the group discussion and the interviews was to be able to talk about and discuss love and see if the girls were reproducing or questioning social myths to do with patriarchal romantic love: a model of love based on emotional dependence, exclusiveness, pain and suffering, jealousy as a show of love and the idealization of happiness depending on the belief that a person can only be happy if they have a partner.

Throughout the discussion with the girls different situations were presented that reproduce certain myths of romantic love such as exclusiveness or jealousy as a sign of love, among others. The girls were asked to give their opinion about them. Below we present some of the replies that were obtained.

In relation to the myth of romantic love, “jealousy as a show of love”, the girls’ response is pretty unanimous. They show a certain acceptance of jealousy in affective relationships as normal and natural. Many of them claim that jealousy is inevitable in couples’ relationships and that, indeed, the fact that their partner is jealous is a sign of love. Some of the girls put it like this:

If you love someone, it’s normal that you want to have him or her with you and if he’s with another you get jealous. Group 2

[With jealousy] they show you that they love you. Group 2

A sign that he loves you. D1, 14 years old.

If a guy says something to me and he gets a bit jealous, that’s fine. This kind of shows that I mean something to him. G13, 15 years old.

On the other hand, there are some girls who, although they understand that jealousy is virtually inherent in personal relationships, doubt that it is necessarily positive. Some of them think that certain attitudes that are generated as a consequence of jealousy can be negative and suppose an obsessive control over the other person.

Is jealousy a sign of love? It depends on the kind of jealousy, because there are people who go crazy and are very possessive. *What is obsessive, crazy jealousy?* That he wants to know where you’re going and who with, who you’re meeting and what time you come back ... Group 2

Another of the myths put to the girls was that of the better half. The great majority of the girls are opposed to this idea. Virtually all of them think that not everyone has a better half, that love is not always fantastic and that there is no single person perfect for everyone.

Nothing lasts forever, I might be with someone and we might have been together for years and I might want to explore something new, you get tired of the same thing, it might not be what you were expecting ... and you start meeting new people and you might ... so I say, nothing is forever, everything in this life comes to an end. Group 2

Although they claim almost unanimously that a single perfect person for everyone does not exist and, therefore, they question this myth of romantic love quite categorically, there is not as much unanimity about the statement: “The ideal state of a man or a woman is to be with a partner, otherwise, there is always something missing”. On one hand, some girls say that yes, this idea is right and that they agree with the sentence completely.

If you haven't got a boyfriend you feel fucking shit and if you've got a boyfriend you're the happiest girl in the world, and that's that! Group 1

I agree completely because having a boyfriend brings happiness. Group 1

On the other hand there are girls who say that happiness does not depend only on the fact of having a partner and that you can indeed be happy even if you haven't got one.

You may be with someone and then you leave them and you want to be alone for a while to reflect and perhaps you realize that it's better on your own than in bad company. Group 2

The next issue that was put to the girls was whether love necessarily implies suffering. Practically unanimously, the girls reply yes, love goes hand in hand with suffering and they even say there is no love without suffering. The girls say that the situations that generate suffering are quarrels between partners, the fact of being in love with someone who does not return it or the relationship ending. Moreover, many girls link suffering with jealousy:

I spend the day suffering, for fuck's sake. I get really pissed off when a woman goes near my boyfriend. If it's not one it's another. I'm really jealous and I'm fucking pissed off about it. Group 1

In response to the statement “If they are truly in love, the couple's sex is always fantastic”, some girls agree totally and say:

If you're in love and you have sex, you don't just have sex, you make love, and you feel loved. You enjoy it. Group 1

However, the majority of the girls say that the equation is not as simple as that and that being in love does not automatically mean that the sex is perfect. Therefore, some girls say that you can be in love but not be sexually compatible. Moreover, there are girls who believe there might be no love, but on the other hand the sex is just as good.

You may be with a guy, you don't love him but he attracts you a lot and the sex works very well, but you don't love him. Group 2

Along these same lines, the girls distinguish between two separate situations. On one hand they talk about sexual relations that take place within a relationship in which there is love and,

on the other, sex that may take place without there necessarily being love. One of the girls puts it like this:

I think they are different feelings ... being with someone or being with a person you really love. If you do it with a guy you really like, it is pleasure and desire, but if you do it with a guy you love, it's pleasure, it's love and all that. Group 2

Another situation put to the girls was the fact of your partner knowing at all times where you were and what you were doing. Here the replies were varied. Some say that it's fine for your boyfriend to know what you are doing and where you are, but without applying pressure or getting on your nerves:

It is good for him to know where we are, what we're doing, but all the time it's too much. You have to have your space and he also needs his. It's respect, isn't it? But that doesn't mean that he can't call you. Group 1

There are also occasions when I need my own time, I need to think, go out with my girl friend, spend more time with her. At times he gets me down. G3, 17 years old.

Others say that the fact of your boyfriend knowing what you're doing and where you are at all times is basically control, a control that is understood as negative and harmful.

Your boyfriend, no matter how much you're in love with him, doesn't have to know everything all the time. Group 2

[If he knew what I do and where I go at all times] he would be a controller. No one controls me, not even my father! Group 2

Finally the discussion groups were given the following situation: "If you're in love you can't feel attracted to other people. If that happens to you, it means you don't actually love your boyfriend so much". In answer to this statement, the girls' replies are also varied. On one hand, some girls say that the statement is true and that if you are in love you can't feel attracted to other men, reproducing in this way the myths of exclusiveness.

I believe that if you're in love with the other person, and you love him a lot, you can't think about other people. Group2

On the other hand, other girls say that the statement is not true and that you can be in love with your partner and feel attracted to others.

Although you're in love, if you see a really sexy guy, well he's sexy. If you say he's sexy that doesn't mean you're not in love. Group1

In general, we see that although the majority of the girls do reproduce some of the myths of romantic love especially in subjects related to jealousy and control as a show of love, many others have a discourse that questions these myths. Nevertheless, it would have to be proven that the discourse is actually consistent with their daily relationships. According to the results of this research, most of the girls who have a boyfriend are in rather unhealthy dependent relationships in which the myths of romantic love are the order of the day. However, more

exhaustive research is needed into this reality to make it possible to have better knowledge of the characteristics and dynamics of the emotional and sexual relationships of the girls in care.

4. Violence and girls in care

How is violence understood?

With the aim of learning how the girls in care understand the phenomenon of violence, they were asked to define it. Most of the girls refer to begin with to physical violence, this being the most easily identifiable for them. As the following quotes illustrate, when defining the term violence, many of them resort either to synonyms (like mistreatment) or to examples of violent actions (hitting):

Well, violence with mistreatment, in a couple the man beats the woman, that's violence. D1, 14 years old.

Mistreatment. Physical, hitting and I don't know... G4, 13 years old.

Although in general, the girls do not link their definitions of violence to the specific sphere in which it may occur (like the family or the partner, for example), it is true that in a couple of cases, the girls do associate and assimilate violence with male violence.

It is important to point out that many girls, apart from mentioning physical violence, also include in their definition references to psychological violence. In doing so, they combine both the references to specific acts of violence, and more generic and transverse definitions of the phenomenon like, for example, injuring or hurting someone, the lack of respect for your wishes and/or freedom:

What is violence for you? Any kind of action, verbal or physical, that offends a person or hurts them in some way. Because hitting and insulting are the same thing. It's mistreatment all the same. G10, 16 years old.

Well, it's a lot of things, you know? Sometimes physically, psychologically ... it's that: psychologically and physically. For example in my case, for me psychological hurts me more than physical. It's harder for me, you know? Because I've already got over this, I'm all right ... but my head, what? It's fucked. So physical damage can be cured ... but in the head ... it's hard ... G17, 18 years old.

Violence is also when you have to do things against your will, when someone gropes you, they insult you or they put you down, because no one has the right to disrespect you and I don't know ... G8, 18 years old.

As we see from some earlier quotes, in their own definition many girls include references to the impact that violence has on them, especially in the emotional sphere.

Lastly, a few girls refer explicitly or implicitly to sexual violence. It should be said, however, that in some cases the girls only incorporate sexual violence in their definitions after having talked about the subject and, even, having shared their own experiences of violence and sexual abuse. The fact that sexual violence does not come up directly may reveal the fact that

sexual violence is still taboo, both for girls in care and for society in general, and that there are still many difficulties when mentioning it by name and talking about it openly.

In order to be able to go in depth into the conceptions and identification by the girls of the phenomenon of violence, we presented a series of phrases that describe violent situations of varying seriousness (physical, sexual and psychological violence in the partnership, family, and social or community spheres) with the aim of discussing them with each girl. One of the first results of the conversations with the girls is how reluctant many of them are to define actions clearly discriminatory towards women as violence. In this respect, above all with regard to partners, many of the situations put forward, which are a violation of individual freedom, wishes and autonomy (for example, the prohibition of wearing a certain item of clothing or jealousy when talking to other young people) are not acknowledged as violence by the girls, but as “control”, “lack of trust”, “way of being” or “sexism”. However, several girls do recognize that if these discriminations take place, they can easily end up in a violent relationship; thus, some girls do recognize the spiral of violence and express it like this:

If you start with that, saying, “you can’t do that, you can’t do that” you end up spoiling her life. You start with a silly little thing, “oh why are you wearing that?” and you end up not letting her do anything. G6, 13 years old.

However, as was seen in the second section of this chapter, the majority of the girls interviewed are in an abusive relationship, so that although they can abstractly identify unequal situations as discriminatory and possibly leading to future violent situations, in practice they usually accept these practices as an intrinsic part of relationships with partners, including theirs.

Experiences of violence

Unfortunately, the girls in care are victims and survivors of all types of violence over the long-term. So, the girls interviewed have suffered physical, psychological and sexual violence. In several cases the girls have suffered more than one kind of violence, either because they were perpetrated together and inseparably by the same aggressor, or because they have suffered violence from different people throughout their lives. In most cases, the violence has been suffered in the family, from fathers, stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers or from their mothers, too.

Can you remember a violent situation you’ve been in? Yes ... lots. What kinds? All sorts. If I came here to the centre it was because of that. I’m one of those who’ve experienced it at first hand ... I don’t know, that my mother came home one day and next thing she was hitting me, she grabbed me and threw me and knocked me out, you know? G4, 13 years old.

I’m here [in the centre] because my stepfather abused me. He took my virginity when I was 12 and he carried on and on and on ... he lied every year so that I wouldn’t report him, every year he made up a new story. G9, 16 years old.

A lot of contempt, she was always showing me up in front of people ... I always said to her “if you didn’t want to have a daughter, why did you give birth to her?” G5, 18 years old.

Girls’ experiences have also been recorded in the partnership sphere, mostly consisting of slight violence or “micro-sexism” but with one serious case of male violence shown below:

He also attacked me psychologically ... [...] They also tell you that you’re worthless, that you’re useless, that without them you’re nothing, that on top of it he’s putting up with you ... yes , yes, also. [...] For example I sometimes stayed over to sleep with him, when my tummy was big [she was pregnant], and I didn’t want to do it because it hurt, because ... and at times you had to do it because he wanted to. And if you didn’t do it he said, “what’s going on, are you fucking around and you don’t want me to notice and that’s why you don’t want to?” So you say “no, look, I’ll show you” to show him. [...] First he pushes you, then he hits you, then he grabs your hair, then he spits on you ...G8, 18 years old.

Finally, we also have an example of violence at school or social sphere. It is a clear case of bullying. This experience of violence, as the girl describes it, makes clear the intersection of several factors of inequality:

At school I was marginalized and ... I was bullied. For me those five years were awful. I started in sixth grade at a school for rich kids, because it was private, and they were all posh kids ... of course, I was the only black girl there and they started in on me ... it was a bit strange ... and they started spitting at me on the floor, then writing on the blackboards, with your face, or drawing you on a piece of paper and passing it around and the whole class is laughing at you and you don’t know why, and stuff like that. Even ... ugh, I’m beginning to remember and ... I swear, I don’t know why but this is worse for me than my stepfather raping me. It’s worse for me because it gets to me more, because it’s the fact that ... it makes me mad you know? [She starts crying] ... it’s not just me, there are more people going through the same thing, you know? And they don’t deserve it, they’re people. No matter how rich you are, no matter how white you are, no matter how much money your parents have got, you have ... you have no right to treat someone else like that, because she’s black, because her parents are poor. Because you, no matter how rich you are, don’t realize what that person is suffering ... why are you going to make her suffer more? G9, 16 years old.

The fact that the violence was committed against girl children and girls under 18 and, normally, within the family (which is a private sphere), means that most of the cases have been long-lasting experiences of violence (lasting several years). This has had different severe impacts on the girls. On one hand, most of the girls have experienced situations of great defencelessness, loneliness, fear and powerlessness for long periods of time. On the other hand, as many girls have experienced mistreatment from a very early age, they have been accepted the violence as a normal and habitual form of relationship and communication in the family, without identifying it as such until they got older. In this respect, different girls say that they have always suffered violence, but that for them it was something normal until they grew up and began going to friends’ houses, where they realized that in other families violence was not the usual way of family interaction.

I don't know ... we also saw this [violence by the father against them and their mother] from an early age and we thought it was normal ... that it was ... then we began meeting other people, we would go to friend's houses and we saw that this didn't happen ... [...] it was like normal, our way of life. G11, 14 years old.

In fact, it is important to stress that the family is a very important agent of socialization and, therefore, the fact of being born and growing up in a violent family environment may have had an impact on the normalization of the situation of violence that they suffered and, in a few cases, that they may be suffering now or in the future. In this respect, some girls associate the use of violence with the fact of having suffered it previously. In some ways, there are girls that say that suffering and normalizing violence can lead to its use.

My father had to leave home and they issued a restraining order against him. And we stayed with my mother, but my mother mistreated us too. [...] My mother had also been mistreated by her parents ... and well, my grandfather began raping her and that when she was a little girl ... I think she got used to that way of life and ... I don't know ... G11, 14 years old.

I think that any person who beats a women or another person, they do it because it was also done to them previously, and I think they see it as something habitual ... I don't know, it would never occur to me to mistreat anybody if they hadn't done it to me. G7, 17 years old.

In relation to their own experiences of violence and the feelings and reactions that they had, the girls claim that the violence made them feel completely disorientated, not knowing where to go or who to ask for help.

It's complicated thinking that, for example, a person in your family can actually do things to you that ... that never occur to you ... the day it happens you don't know what to do, you don't know how to tell other people to help you. At times you think, it's just once and that's it ... but as time goes by you realize that it really hurts you, but you don't ... you don't know how to say it to others so that they can help you. G7, 17 years old.

In fact many of the girls interviewed had never told anyone of the experience of violence until something set off the activation of the social services safety protocols, the intervention of the General Directorate for the Attention to Childhood and Adolescence (DGAIA) and, finally, their admission to the centre. In other cases, the girls turned to female friends or relatives. It is important to note that in some cases in which the girls asked the family for help, the response they got was the denial of the facts and the lack of support. The girls find this element very painful and it disconcerts them.

Both parts hurt me, the fact that they were hurting me but it was even more painful that my father never believed it ... or, trying to tell your own father that a relative of yours ... [...] and that he doesn't attach any importance to it or he says "he can't be doing that to you", it's complicated, you know? It's hard, you know? G7, 17 years old.

I tell my mother one day that he's touched my bum, and my mother, what does she do? Instead of listening to me and taking notice, she quickly gets angry and goes

with my stepfather [...] So I tell her and she ignores me, what's that? Since then I've never trusted her. On top of that I saw that she was an alcoholic ... or rather, she is. [...] I never trusted her again... G17, 18 years old.

Indeed, as the majority of the girls experienced the violence in a state of defencelessness, fear and disorientation, when they are asked what kind of help or support could be useful for other girls in the same situation they refer to the lack of information about what you can do and where to go, but they insist on the importance of talking and putting an end to the violent situation, even leaving home.

Sincerely, she should be brave enough to do what she has to do. If she sees that she has to leave, she has to leave. She should be brave. It's what I always say, her parents have lived life already, you have to live it and they're nobody to stop you living it. And she should do it before it's too late. Don't wait to see the limit, because when you reach the limit afterwards the consequences are so huge that it's hard to relieve them, you know? It's like that. [...] I didn't know either sincerely ... there is no information about the centres ... there's no information. G5, 18 years old.

The thing is don't stay silent, I know that there are times when it is better not to say anything, but you don't have to put up with everything in this life, you know? At times it is better to speak out. And if being able to talk to somebody can help you, it's better to do it. If you don't open your mouth, no one will speak and you'll have to carry on putting up with it ... G7, 17 years old.

Impact of the violence

Suffering severe experiences of long-lasting violence at such delicate stages, during childhood or adolescence, and in most cases perpetuated by members of their own family, has harmed the girls immensely: above all, emotionally, in their way of relating to others and in their social relationships (especially with men, with the family and with adults in general).

The impact of the violence suffered last a long time and, even years after the aggressions and the abuse the girls' lives are still marked by these events. The experiences of violence generate a great deal of pain and feelings of guilt, shame, sadness, lack of self-confidence, disorientation and the feeling of injustice that are still today very much present in these girls' everyday lives.

Sadness, you need to cut yourself off. You aren't ... you know you say, "I'm just going out for a walk", no, you want to wait more. Cut off. I was like that when I came in here. It was more ... I didn't go out at all. Just the opposite, they made me go out. I didn't go out. It was very much "I want to be alone". You haven't got any confidence, you know? [...]. Or when they raise their voice to you, you expect the worst...G5, 18 years old.

Very sad. There was a time when I wanted to kill myself, because I couldn't take any more. All the bad things you can imagine were happening to me then [...]. I'm ashamed that this happened to me. [...] I don't know how I explained it ... because ... I can see now that's it's rape, before it was like ... I had to do that. [...] They've

done my head in so much that I felt that I was the guilty one, not them. And now I've seen I'm not the guilty one ... but too late ... I don't know. G17, 18 years old.

I found it really hard to start having relationships with men again. Trusting and ... trusting other people ... when you meet the person and that he might do that, which makes you think that someone you don't know at all could... G7, 17 years old.

However, despite the emotionally fragile state that some of the girls interviewed may still be in, it is important to stress that most of them have developed strategies of resilience that have enabled them to survive and become stronger. In this respect, their words denote pain but strength, great maturity for their age and the desire to leave it all behind them.

Positive? Well, yes, it does actually make you stronger. It makes you stronger, in fact when you open your eyes you feel more like fighting for what you want. And it also gives you the privilege of being able to understand and help other people that may be in that situation and need to know that they can get advice and all that ... G8, 18 years old.

I've acquired a characteristic, and now I'm stronger, I feel I am stronger. [...] With what has happened to me, I've learned to be stronger and not crumble if things happen. This has happened to me and it's now ... something worse that could happen to me? I don't know, well, my whole family dying ... I can't think of anything else that could make me suffer more. G9, 16 years old.

The only good thing I think I have taken from this, because you can't take anything good out of this, is that I see there are lots of girls that complain about their parents, and they have quite a good life ... and I think that I've had a much worse life ... and they shouldn't be complaining because they've got the lot. G10, 16 years old.

Attitudes towards violence

Another of the elements tackled in the interviews has been that of their attitude towards violence, in order to find out whether the girls, after having experienced violence throughout their lives, consider that violence can be, on some occasions, justified. There are basically two kinds of attitudes to this issue. On one hand, there is a group of girls who have internalized the fact that violence may be a response to inappropriate attitudes:

Sometimes, yes ... sometimes, she won't learn until you hit her ... based on punishments ... you hit her once and she'll learn. D1, 14 years old.

If he hits me it's because he's right ... if he doesn't, he's not ... [...] No, if you've done something wrong, he would be right, if you haven't, he wouldn't. G3, 17 years old.

And, on the other hand, there is a larger group of girls that thinks that violence can never be justified.

No, never. Not for any reasons. Violence was the last resort. You always have to talk before acting, or think before acting. G6, 13 years old.

In the case of gender abuse it's not justified. It might happen because men are very sexist or jealous or possessive and the woman is not to blame for him being that way. G10, 16 years old.

At the same time, we also wanted to know if the girls themselves are or have ever been violent. Some girls acknowledge that they have occasionally been violent, although some say that the violence was in response to previous violent actions.

It's the bad habit that I used to have, every time they said something I would start punching the wall [...] I'm very calm but when I get mad ... I begin insulting, I begin hitting G3, 17 years old.

Yes, yes, if I get really mad I shout at them, even though I don't mean to I'll shout at the person I love most in the world just the same. *And afterwards what happens if you realize?* I go and apologize to them. G6, 13 years old.

In any case, some girls who acknowledge that they have been violent also see that it's bad and should be avoided:

Yes, you should never resort to violence. You always have to talk and if you see that you are nervous or something, you leave or go out for a breath of fresh air, but not violence. G6, 13 years old.

B. Perceptions and experiences of the professionals

1. The girls seen by professionals

One of the first things pointed out by the professionals is that the girls under residential care are very diverse and that it is impossible to define a unique profile. Each one has her own story and experiences and thus, it is not possible to generalise and set up a closed list of characteristics to define girls living in residential care institutions.

However, professionals also ensure that it is true that all girls living in care institutions have gone through terrible stories of violence and that most of them have been neglected by their parents. Due to these experiences and the fact that they cannot live with their family anymore, most of the girls have problems to create trustful relations with peers and mostly with adults. Moreover, the fact of having suffered violence has an impact at an emotional level which, consequently, has an impact on girls' attitude and behaviour.

Some of the professionals highlight the fact that there has been a change of the profile of the girls living in the centres. During the last years, professionals ensure that they are finding more cases of both sexual abused girls and girls with mental health problems.

With relation to the expectations of the girls regarding their future after leaving the centre

(when they turn 18), most of the professionals say that it is something complicated that generates a lot of stress to the girls. Professionals ensure that in order to be able to think about the future, first of all there is a need to put some order in their past; in other words, there is a need for them to assimilate all that happened to them, understand their present and work for the future. Professionals agree that, in general, for girls it is complicated to imagine their future. Most of them feel insecure and have low life expectations. However, some other professionals ensure that some of the girls know perfectly what they want: a “normal” life, to have their own family, their own house and their job.

In order to achieve this objective, in most of the centres there is an intensive work towards girls’ personal autonomy. Professionals highlight the fact that it is really important to prepare girls to live in the “real world”. Some of the professionals state that it is very important to prepare girls “to be alone” and, thus, to have enough tools and resources to live an independent and autonomous life.

Regarding the differences that may exist between boys and girls living in residential care institutions, most of the professionals ensure that there are really few. Some of them agree that boys express their emotions in a physical way, with contact and movement. Girls, by contrast, express their feelings talking about them and, thus, using the words. That might be due to a gendered socialisation process through which boys and girls learn differently how to express their feelings and emotions.

2. Perceptions of professionals on girls’ experiences of violence

When asking for the prevalence of the experiences of violence among girls living in residential care centres, most of the professionals ensure that from 70% to 90% of the girls living in centres have suffered some kind of violence (physical, psychological and/or sexual) during their lifetime. In most of the cases, violence has been exerted by a family member. Professionals ensure that, in some cases, girls normalise the violence being suffered. They have not seen or experienced other forms of relation and communication and, thus, they assume that violence is normal and acceptable. However, in the centres, there is an intense work to denaturalise violence and demonstrate that there are alternative ways of relating to others.

When talking about the impact that violence has on the girls’ life, professionals express that the consequences of having suffered violence are devastating for girls. In most of the cases, girls have low self-esteem and feel shameful, guilty and somehow responsible for the violence suffered and for the fact of being in the centre.

Another aspect discussed with professionals was if and how the girls share and verbalise their stories of violence. Most of the professionals agree that it is quite difficult for the girls to explain their stories (in some cases because they have not had the time to process and understand it and in some others because they are somehow ashamed of what happened). Professionals ensure that in some cases girls explain their story almost accidentally or spontaneously, when it is not foreseen to happen. In this way, sometimes, when girls are

talking about something else they may share her story. Moreover, all professionals agree that it is necessary to create a strong bond between the girls and the professionals in order to ensure a trustful atmosphere that allows the girls to share their experiences. Some professionals state that some girls do not explain their stories by talking, but express their feelings and emotions in their daily attitude and behaviour.

Concerning the possibility that girls share their stories with the rest of the girls, almost all professionals agree that it is quite difficult that it happens. They say that a great majority of the girls fear and do not trust the others. They fear that they will be judged or wounded and, as a defensive mechanism, they prefer not talking about their past.

Regarding love and sexual relations that the girls establish with (in most of the cases) boys, professionals show a great degree of concern; they claim that in most of the cases girls get involved in not healthy, not equal and not respectful relationships. Instead, their love and sexual relationships are based on control, jealousy and even violent dynamics. They outline that, in most of the cases, girls get involved in these types of relations (even if they are perfectly aware that they are not positive for them) due to a lack of (family) emotional support and love. In front of this reality, professionals are worried and insist on the need to work on this issue and carry out violence prevention activities.

3. Needs and difficulties of the professionals

When asking about the main needs and difficulties that professionals encounter in their daily work, all of them agree that what they really need is time: time to be able to work better with the girls and time for the girls to decide their future. Most of the professionals agree that they need to work against the clock since when the girls turn 18 they need to leave the centre. It is true that there are some exceptional situations in which girls can stay longer in the centre or be transferred in after-care homes. However, as said, those are exceptional cases and most of the time girls need to leave the centres without being really prepared to live a life on their own, by themselves.

Some professionals express that sometimes they feel helplessness and that it is not easy to work with the girls. Some other professionals ensure that it is extremely necessary to have a clear and well defined professional role.

Professionals ensure that coordination among different resources is essential to improve the attention and the work with the girls. Moreover, they also highlight that it is really important to have external supervision. That refers to the provision of support for the professional practice of workers through a qualified and experienced professional in the field. External supervision is a valuable resource for everyone who intervenes with people.

Most of the professionals ensure that they love their jobs and that, even though it is a very challenging and demanding one, they take these challenges as opportunities to not stop learning and improving their day to day work with the girls.

FINAL REMARKS

The aim of this section is to point out, in a summarised way, some of the most highlighted results obtained in the fieldwork carried on in Catalonia within the framework of the project Empowering Care.

First of all, related to the experiences of the girls living in residential care institutions, it is important to note that all of them describe their entrance to the center as a very difficult experience. Overall, the girls relate the beginning of their life in the center with feelings such as loneliness, sadness, shame, longing of disorientation.

In this respect, one of the aspects that the girls most negatively value is how difficult it was to break with their life, friendships, family and the school and to start a new live in the centre, i.e. meeting their new housemates and to get used to the live in the center. Other aspects negatively valued are the feeling of lack of freedom and autonomy, and the difficulties of the cohabitation with other girls.

Despite the great difficulties experimented during the first period in the centre, the majority of the girls, after a period of adaptation (that varies in each case), value positively their experience in the centre. Some of them identify the center as a place of protection. And the majority of them value very positively the support and the help provided by the professionals who work in the center.

Concerning to the social relationships, specifically family ties, the girls' narrative show a huge diversity of situations. Some of them have daily contact with their family members, whereas in some other cases the family tie is really weak or even nonexistent. In general, girls have non solid family structures.

Regarding friendship, girls' experiences also showed a great diversity of situations. Few girls explain they have a group of friends with who they count on, whereas others say that the entrance to the center meant to lose any friendship tie.

Finally, concerning intimate relationships, the main conclusion that can be extracted from the fieldwork is that the majority of the girls who are involved in an intimate relationship reproduce unhealthy dynamics, based on dependence and control. Moreover, they systematically reproduce romantic love myths. When analysing these dynamics, it is essential to keep in mind factors related to the girls' background. In this sense, it should be taken in to account that, in many cases, girls come from families where unhealthy and abusive relationship patterns where normalised. Moreover, due to the abuse and/or the emotional and affective vacuum experienced, many girls seek to establish affective ties with somebody. In most of the cases, this "somebody" becomes a partner with whom they establish an unhealthy relationship. Moreover, in most of the cases girls accept everything and question nothing, even psychological, physical or sexual aggressions.

Despite the prevalence and persistence of relationships based on dependence and control, it is interesting to note that some of the girls interviewed (some with a partner and others without) are able to identify some elements that may constitute alarm signs. In this respect, they are capable to indentify certain harmful elements and see the consequences that they may have in the future.

One of the objectives of the research was to know the girls' imaginary in relation to the gender perceptions and gender roles. From the conversations with the girls it can be confirmed that in their discourses they reproduce sexist stereotypes that situate women in a strongly sexualised and devaluated social position. However, despite the important presence of sexist stereotypes that reproduce and reinforce a strongly patriarchal social imaginary, it is interesting to point out that many girls put into question, for instance, the fact that boys and girls receive a distinguished and unequal education.

In relation to girls' perceptions about love and partnership relationships, it is important to point out the following. The majority of the girls reproduce discourses about love that normalise love patterns based on patriarchal-romantic love myths in which, for example, jealousy and control are understood as shows of love.

Regarding violence, which is one of the central topics of the research, it is interesting to point out that when it is asked to girls what violence is for them, they mainly refer to physical violence, which is the most easily identifiable for them. When defining the term violence, most of the girls use either synonyms or concrete examples of violent acts. It is important to point out that many girls, apart from mentioning physical violence, also include in their definition references to psychological violence. In doing so, they combine both references to specific acts of violence, and more generic and transversal definitions of the phenomenon like, for example, injuring or hurting someone, the lack of respect for your wishes and/or freedom.

Lastly, a few girls refer explicitly or implicitly to sexual violence. It should be said, however, that in some cases the girls only incorporate sexual violence in their definitions after having talked about the subject and, even, having shared their own experiences of violence and sexual abuse. The fact that sexual violence does not come up directly may reveal the fact that sexual violence is still taboo, both for girls in care and for society in general, and that there are still many difficulties when mentioning it by name and talking about it openly.

Concerning girls' own experiences of violence, it is important to point out that all the girls are victims and survivors of all types of violence, i.e. physical, psychological or sexual. In the majority of the cases violence had taken place during long periods of time and was exerted by a member of the family.

The fact that the violence was committed against girl children and girls under 18 and, normally, within the family (which is a private sphere), means that most of the cases have been lost-lasting experiences of violence (lasting several years). This has had different severe impacts on the girls. On one hand, most of the girls have experienced situations of great defenselessness, loneliness, fear and powerlessness for long periods of time. On the other

hand, as many girls have experienced mistreatment from a very early age, they have been accepting the violence as a normal and habitual form of relationship and communication in the family, without indentifying it as such until they got older.

The fact of suffering sever experiences of violence in such a fragile age like the childhood of the adolescence, long-term or, like in the most of the cases by persons from the same family, has had very negative and important impacts on the girls: especially, emotionally, in the form of interacting and the social relationships (especially with men, with the family and other adult persons). The experiences of violence generates much pain as well as feelings like guilt, shame, sadness, lack of self-confidence, disorientation and injustice, which are very present in the girls' daily life.

Despite the emotional fragile state that some of the interviewed girls may still be in, it is important to stress that most of them has developed strategies of resilience have enabled them to survive and become stronger.

Another of the elements tackled in the interviews has been that of their attitudes towards violence, in order to find out whether the girls, after having experienced violence throughout their lives, consider that violence can be, on some occasions, justified. There are basically two kinds to this issue. On one hand, there is a group of girls who have internalized the fact that violence may be a response to inappropriate attitudes. And, on the other hand, there is a larger group of girls that thinks that violence can never be justified.

In the framework of the research the perceptions of the professionals working in the care centers were also taken. They say that it exists a great diversity among the girls and it is impossible to define a unique profile. However, professionals also ensure that it is true that all girls living in care institutions have gone through terrible stories of violence and that most of them have been neglected by their parents. Due to these experiences and the fact that they cannot live with their family anymore, most of the girls have problems to create trustful relations with peers and mostly with adults. Moreover, the fact of having suffered violence has an impact at an emotional level which, consequently, has an impact on girls' attitudes and behavior.

One of the issues that worry the professionals is the future of the girls when they abandon the centers (when they become 18). It is something complicated that generates a lot of stress to the girls. In order to reduce the stress in the presence of a unsure future, in most of the centers there is an intensive work towards girls' personal autonomy.

According to the girls' experiences of violence, the professionals point out that between 70% and 90% of the girls' in care have suffered some kind of violence (physical, psychological and/or sexual) during their lifetime, and most of the girls have normalized the violence, conceptualizing it as something acceptable. However, the professionals ensure that in the centers there is an intensive work to denaturalize violence and demonstrate that there are alternative ways of relating to others. Finally, professionals point out that most of the girls have difficulties to verbalize their experiences of violence. Moreover, all professionals agree

that it is necessary to create a strong bond between the girls and the professionals in order to ensure a trustful atmosphere that allows the girls to share their experiences.

Finally, according to the needs of the professionals, all of them agree that what they really need is time to be able to work better with the girls. Furthermore, some professionals express that sometimes they feel helplessness and that it is not easy to work with the girls. They agree that it is important to have an external supervision. Lately, they also ensure that coordination among different resources is essential to improve the attention and the work with the girls.