

Regional Research

ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

Country Report: Bulgaria

In partnership with: International Institute for Child Rights
and Development & Child Hub

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Executive Summary



Key conclusions

- Children like to stay at school, spend time with their friends and do interesting things when studying.
- Situations of violence are a serious part of everyday life and relationships between children, both boys and girls, at school.
- Children are inclined to tolerate some types of verbal, physical and emotional violence.
- It is very difficult for both girls and boys to discuss sexual violence; they are unable to recognize some of its manifestations and see it as belonging to the world of adults.
- Children associate some types of violence with the gender of the perpetrator: girls are linked to emotional types of violence and online aggression, and boys are strongly linked to physical violence.
- Social status, ethnicity and poverty are a source of emotional harassment amongst children.
- The main source of support for children continues to be members of their family and close friends. Children are inclined to look for support from school staff and the police.
- What discourages some children from looking for support from both parents and institutions are a) the feelings of shame associated with sexual abuse or serious physical violence b) the fear of being punished and c) previous experience of adults being unable to handle the situation.
- It is important to mention that violence related to substance abuse was not mentioned by the participants, and it is worth exploring the silence kept on this issue.
- Both children and adult participants believe that if all children follow the rules and are well disciplined, violence at school will be resolved.
- The existence of child rights and accepted common rules for conduct at school empower children to defend themselves.
- Most children use proactive strategies to resolve situations of violence by looking for help or defending each other. Children also reported that they don't know how to approach institutions or how they would be of help to them.
- Children don't believe that their voices can be heard or that they can change the situation themselves.

General recommendations

- Inform children about sexual abuse and discrimination related to gender, socio-economic and ethnic differences.
- Familiarize children with the child protection system, and the roles and support institutions and professionals offer.
- Create space for dialogue where children can learn from violent incidents and feel understood, supported and included in the decisions and activities concerning measures against violence.
- Engage children in interesting activities and sports.
- Teachers and other professionals and parents should be trained in assessment, management and joint coordination of the cases of violence.



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Introduction

It is no longer possible to ignore the significant and widespread impact violence has on children. It influences children in the short and long term, and even across generations. Despite the three decades that have passed since the international community came together to launch the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Hollis, Marcy, Amboy, and Kress (2016) found that over 1 billion, half of all children between the ages of 2–17, had experienced violence, abuse or neglect within the previous year. Violence against children happens in schools, in homes, in their communities and across systems. In South East Europe, violence against children is pervasive.

Understanding that direct and indirect experiences of violence in childhood undermines our investments in children in health, education and development, this research focuses on further understanding the social and gender norms impacting school-related (gender-based) violence (SRGBV), and the role of children in challenging these social norms.

For this research Child Hub Europe partnered with Terre des hommes and the Institute for International Child Rights and Development to address this critical issue.



Methodological Overview: Overview of multi-country study

This study was conducted in South Eastern Europe, specifically in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, and Serbia. The purpose of the research was: **To measure the social and gender norms impacting school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), and the potential role of children in challenging these social norms (RFP Child Hub).**

Guiding Questions and Contextual Lens of Analysis

2.1

The following questions guided all aspects of the study and were integrated into the study framework and the data collection instruments as relevant:

1. What do we know about the incidence and type of violence that children are facing in and around school in Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as the children that are most impacted by it?
2. What are the social and gender norms of school children, community members and school professionals related to violence against children?
3. What are the social and gender norms of school children, community members and school professionals related to gender-based violence against children?
4. What are the informal and formal mechanisms, child-led actions, community resources, values, and services that protect children from violence and promote children's well-being?
5. To what degree do children feel able to prevent or respond to violence (and GBV specifically) against themselves and their peers, and what ideas do they have for preventing and responding to violence?
6. How has children's experience of violence in and around school changed since COVID-19?

Note: due to measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was temporarily suspended until it could be resumed in accordance with national and local requirements to ensure the safety of participants and researchers. To maintain the consistency and legitimacy of the data collection, the research questions remained

the same, but additional contextual information provides clarity on data that refers to retrospective perspectives of what was occurring prior to pandemic policies and school closures, and any changes that have occurred as a result of lockdown measures. Some additional questions were added to explore the perception of the change in experiences of violence in schools and other educational experiences (including online, learning from home) that occurred as a result of COVID-19 measures.

In order to gather information on the current status and practice of violence against children, as well as on social norms, attitudes, practices and knowledge around violence against children, this study explored educational settings in addition to the full context of children's lives within which violence takes place. This study focused on:

1. Girls' and boys' experiences and life stories (in general),
2. Educational settings (including formal and informal educational settings [in person, at a distance, online], for teachers, principals and fellow students),
3. The route to educational settings (including outdoor spaces, recreational areas, business areas, roads, etc.),
4. Formal and informal support services (including social services, state care and the judicial system)
5. Cultural values, beliefs and norms that shape children and adults' social and gender norms with respect to violence against children.
6. Children in exceptionally difficult circumstances, such as children with disabilities, children living on the street, migrant children, ethnic or religious groups, etc.

2.2 Research Methods and Approach

This is a mixed methodology study with a "qualitatively driven approach" (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015). It is both inductive and deductive, as well as exploratory, drawing on participatory methods. Using a variety of research instruments with groups of children and adults (see the table below), the researchers' understanding of children's lived realities gradually deepened. Further exploration of children's lives will yield stronger indications of social norms and practices, and will enable clearer direction for future programming and policy, rather than a process that reaches larger numbers of participants with less depth.

As a participatory methodology, the focus of the instruments was to provide children and adults with a framework within which to explore the violence that is taking place in children's lives. Rather than asking closed questions, researchers created the space for children to name what they perceive as violence, explain its prevalence and its impact in their daily lives, discuss their attitudes towards violence as well as the attitudes of their peers, parents and the broader community, and the impact of these attitudes. In addition, attention was given to creating space for children to identify strategies for prevention and support services, as well as for social change.

Researchers in each project country identified the most appropriate sites based on the sampling frame.

In Bulgaria, the research team selected three schools in three different places: in the capital city, in a small town and in a village. Because of the pandemic and the pressure experienced by school staff, parents and students, as well as constantly-changing measures, the school in the capital dropped out of the research. As a result, the data presented in this report has been collected from children and adults from two schools, one in a small town and one in a village.

The sampling frame aimed to include the following:

- Children age 13–18 (approximately 30 children/site [2 groups of 10–15 children each — one boys and one girls — at approximately 4 sites])
- Adults: parents, teachers, principals, other school professionals, community and religious leaders, social service providers, community members (approximately 15 people/site)

Initially, in Bulgaria, we planned the children’s sampling to include two age groups: 16–18 years (IX–XI grade) in the capital city school, and 13–15 years (VI–VIII grade) in the two other schools. However, given the added complications associated with COVID-19 distancing protocols, the following frame was used:

- 40 children: 20 girls and 20 boys, aged 10–14 (V and VI grade)
- 19 adults: In the small town school: 6 women and 3 men, of which 5 were teachers, 3 were parents and 1 was a non-pedagogical staff member; In the village school: 6 women and 4 men, from which 6 were teachers and 4 were non-pedagogical staff members

Methods conducted with Children and Adults

Children	Adults
Tool 1: Social Mapping- Part 1	Tool 7: Vignettes
Tool 2: Vignettes	Tool 8: Focus Group
Tool 3: Participative Ranking Methodology	
Tool 4: Social Mapping-Part 2 (Optional)	
Tool 5: Social Network Mapping	
Tool 6: Focus Group	

Note, as the COVID pandemic hit during data collection, the tools were adapted to one or both of the following formats:

Method 1: In person, respecting physical distancing

Method 2: With access to a smartphone, computer with internet, or remote participation

If it is not possible to bring a small group of children together safely while physically distancing, consider the following adaptations:

Online Video-Conferencing: via group video-conferencing (E.g. Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Webex, GoToMeeting).

WhatsApp/Phone Calls: If children do not have access to online video, consider WhatsApp or voice group calls and/or individual calls to chat about maps.

Online via Zoom, JamBoard, Miro or other visual collaboration software

No internet and unable to meet in person: Co-create activity packages with children and adults that can be mailed to/dropped off (safely) at children's homes (with postage for them to send back, or a convenient drop-off location).

All efforts were made to conduct the research in person, as there are added ethical complications to conducting research with children on violence from a distance.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

Research on sensitive subjects, such as violence against children, can cause unintended harm to participants. For example, if confidentiality is breached, informed consent is not obtained, or a group of people is stigmatized. Researchers need to be careful not to raise expectations, which can lead to mistrust of outsiders and disillusionment. Researchers also need to be cautious not to increase power imbalances that may cause a particular group to be vulnerable.

Research on violence may ask children and adults, even that without direct questions on personal experience, to re-live painful and difficult experiences. As researchers working with children who may have suffered from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, there is a critical responsibility to “do no harm” in our interactions with children and youth.

Researchers were trained on how to watch for signs of children expressing distress (both verbal and non-verbal). Researchers ensured that the environment within the activities remained respectful and supportive, and took time to speak with children who may have needed extra support outside of the activity. The name and contact details of a support worker, as well as emergency numbers and local reporting protocol, were listed on a flip-chart paper at all times, enabling children to reach out on their own for additional support. Where a flipchart was not practical, handouts were made to give to the young people prior to the session beginning. When a researcher saw that a young person required support, the researcher was able to discuss this with the young person and call the support person to request a personal visit to the community. The researcher was available to follow-up with both the child and the support worker using appropriate child safeguarding protocol as per the Tdh Child Safeguarding Policy and national legislation.

Please also see Appendix B for Ethical Research Protocols, including further ethical guidelines, recommendations and practices for working with children, informed consent and limited confidentiality procedures and considerations.

Country-Level Methodology

Research Team

3.1

The research team consisted of 1 research expert and 2 field researchers. The research expert was trained by the international research team in the common methodologies. The role of the research expert was to train the field researchers in the predefined methodology; to organize the connections with the Ministry of Education; to help with the participants' sampling and the development and implementation of the ethical procedures, as well as the additional guidelines of ethical online research; and to prepare the final data analysis and report.

The two field researchers (one male and one female) were selected to work in the two schools. Both come from the local areas of research, but are not directly connected to the researched schools and places. Both are familiar with the school environment and have experience working with children (one is a former school psychologist and is currently a school principal, and the other is a social worker and supervisor of child care services). They were trained in the general methodology and tools.

At the beginning of the project and during the pandemic, the three members of the research team had meetings to adapt the tools to the specifics of the schools and the local environment, as well as to the social measures during the pandemics.

Site Selection

3.2

As previously mentioned, initially the research team looked for diversity in the selected sites: one school in the capital city included children from a higher age group, 16–18 years (IX–XI grade); and two other schools, in a small town and a village, where the children were in a lower age group, between 13–15 years (VI–VIII grade).

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic situation impacted the site and age groups we selected. Bulgaria was one of the first countries in the EU to introduce lockdown rules. Children finished the 2020 school year in June in distant learning mode. The Ministry of Education cancelled all additional activities for students. We renewed our efforts from the beginning of the new school year (15 September 2020), but in person classes were again restricted, and the emotional situation in schools was

worse than in spring. Parents and teachers took different and confronting positions about the presence of children schools. Almost each week, different decisions were taken as the number of infections rose, including within the Ministry of Education system. At the end of October 2020, we received a final agreement from the Ministry of Education, allowing us to approach schools and perform research online.

As the research team was not allowed to work directly with students, the work was carried out through the school psychologists, who collaborated with the research team to: select children; present the research aims to children, staff and parents; collect informed consent forms; provide an appropriate place for the focus groups according to the pandemic requirements; and who supported the digital connection of the participants. In a time of huge insecurity, they were a source of trust for the researchers, as well as the participants and school management.

The school in the capital dropped out of the research. The children had been selected, but the lockdown measures changed the day the girls were supposed to meet; parents stopped their children from coming to the modules; there were many ill teachers and an overall crisis in the management of the situation.

3.3 Participants

The following individuals were included as participants:

- Children age 10–14 (20 children/site [2 groups of 10 children, one boys' and one girls' group, at 2 sites])
- Adults, including: 3 parents, 11 teachers, 5 non pedagogical staff member; 12 women and 7 men (19 adults: 9 adults in the small town school and 10 adults in the village school).

Locations:

- Researchers worked with children and adults in two locations. These locations were selected based on:
 - Different economic conditions and availability of supporting resources in the town and the village.
 - The presence of Roma minority in the village.
 - Difference in the context, as the village people know each other compared to the general anonymity in the town.
 - Supposed cultural differences in the gender and violence related norms and attitudes.
- At each location, the research teams strived to work with the three groups (two groups of ten children, and one group of nine or ten adults for each activity over the course of three days).

Given the nature of the research, children aged 10–14 were selected as they

represent an age group that has reached a developmental stage that can understand the complexities of violence and the systems that influence it. Given the gendered nature of experiences of violence, the participants also needed to include a nearly equal number of genders. Children on the gender-spectrum had the opportunity to choose to participate in the group they most closely identify with.

Group size was determined by engaging the largest number of participants without compromising the depth of the research for a small team of researchers (2 people). At each research site, the researchers worked with 2 separate gender-specific groups of children and 1 separate group of adults, for a maximum total of 20 children from each site (equal numbers of girls and boys), and a maximum number of 19 adults from each site (ideally, equal numbers of men and women). This means a maximum of 40 children and 19 adults.

Whenever possible, sensitivity to the gender of the group was matched with the gender of the researchers.

Sampling

3.4

The target population was children aged 10–14 years old in 2 schools in Bulgaria. Choosing the appropriate school was limited by numerous pragmatic and sampling constraints. The research is exploratory in nature and the sampling strategy will draw on convenience sampling, allowing researchers to choose schools that are accessible to them and the opportunity for schools to identify children who meet the criteria for inclusion in the study. Therefore, the schools were identified via convenience and purposive sampling, in order to select specific populations representing a diverse range of children in a diverse range of settings. This was set collaboratively by national researchers, but may include schools representing urban or rural contexts, or schools with a higher percentage of indigenous, migrant, or various ethnic groups, low income families. Schools could also be chosen on the basis of perceived high rates of violence, especially concerning gender-based issues.

What is important to note is that we worked closely with schools and the Ministry of Education to ensure that we could conduct the research with the same children and adults over the course of the research; the same group of children moved through all the research tools identified, allowing researchers and participants to deepen their understanding as each tool progressed.

Sampling Children

We contacted local partners and secondary schools in advance to inform them of the research. Based on the sampling frame provided above, researchers identified schools and invited them to participate.

Each school included 2 groups of 10 children. Groups were 10 boys and 10 girls, aged 10–14, who were purposively selected by the school administration, with the

big help of school psychologists, and invited to participate in the research.

Sampling Adults

For adults, including mothers, fathers, teachers and non-pedagogical staff members, 1 mixed-gender group of 9 and another of 10 people was respectively conducted at each research site. The pandemic situation made the selection of adults more difficult. Additional efforts were made by the school administration to explain the aims of the study and to individually approach larger numbers of adults.

Data Analysis

Because of the pandemic situation, the data collection process was prolonged, resulting in less time for data analysis. The research team held several online meetings to discuss and understand the data collected.

In order to clarify some data or to collect additional information, several telephone and online individual interviews were conducted.

3.5 Ethical Issues

Please also see Appendix B for more details on the Ethical Protocol.

Special note during COVID-19: As the local context changed rapidly for both children and researchers during COVID-19, for example, government restrictions on physical distancing were suddenly relaxed or reinforced, it was clear that ethical protocols needed to be examined regularly (at each point of change).

The requirement to work online with the participants posed many questions in terms of research ethics specific for the online environment. The research team created additional ethical norms and procedures related to online research, the Online Research Ethical Guide for working with children and adults remotely.

Several ethical issues had to be regulated:

- As the pandemic situation caused much uncertainty and fear in the population, it was important that participants were not pushed to participate, even if this meant not having enough participants. It also could have compromised the findings.
- In order to develop more trust amongst the participants, we relied on the well-recognized and trusted school psychologists, at both schools, to present the study's aims and methodology to students, parents and school staff.
- The school psychologists helped us collect the informed consent forms from the children, their parents and the adult participants as we were not allowed to visit the school area or work with the students there due to COVID-19 measures.

Each of the two school psychologists personally clarified the conditions of participating in the research. At the beginning of each online session with children and adults the main ethical rules and verbal confirmation of their participation was made by the researchers. For example, each participant had to raise his or her hand as a sign of agreement with the rules.

- For this study, we agreed that one researcher would take notes rather than record the conversation, for the sake of maintaining the trust of the participants when discussing difficult topics. The participants were informed that making secret recordings from their side was totally forbidden, and could be punished by law.
 - At the beginning of the focus groups, researchers informed the participants of their responsibility to ensure privacy in their physical environment so that confidentiality could be maintained (i.e. no other household members or co-workers could overhear the sessions).
 - To ensure that participants felt free to share their opinions, and to guarantee clear and effective communication, researchers introduced the following digital communication rules:
 - For the duration of the session, all participants must switch on their cameras and switch off their microphones unless called on by the researcher; if someone wants to say something, they must raise their hand or write in the chat;
 - For the duration of the session, mobile phones were switched off or used only in case of emergency.
 - If someone had to leave the session early, they had to inform the researcher and participants before leaving, or write it in the chat.
 - Researchers organized the focus group work to correspond with the specific needs and capacities of the participants, in order to sustain their physical and mental health and well-being:
 - shorter sessions with more breaks (for instance, 30 min sessions with 5-10 min breaks);
 - participants were informed that they could ask individually or as a group for a break at any time.
 - As the focus groups with children were conducted after their classes, they were very tired, and sessions were shorter, with many breaks. Some of the interactive tasks were shortened, cut or adapted to the digital space.
 - Accessibility to the study: with the support of parents and teachers, the researchers had to ensure that each child that participated in the study was provided with everything needed to be present and participate fully:
 - If the child had difficulty participating in the chosen digital format, the researchers had to consider other opportunities for the child to participate in the study.
- In several cases, researchers individually interviewed children after the FG modules as the child was busy with other activity.
- All necessary technical requirements (working internet, phones or computers, basic operating skills) had to be ensured for all children to participate in comfort. The same rules of accessibility were relevant for adult participants.

In this study, the main communication platforms were Messenger and Viber, as they were the most accessible to all participants.

- The Bulgarian research team also made an agreement with the Ministry of Education, the principals of the included schools and with the participants, that the names of the places, schools and participants would not be mentioned in the official and publicly announced data.
- The research team had preliminary conversations with the school psychologists. They supported the process of recruiting student volunteers and connecting with their parents to sign informed consent forms. The school psychologists also introduced children to the aims of the study, its importance and the way the researchers would work with them. The timetable for the modules were negotiated with the children and their parents. As the focus groups were conducted after classes, the modules were shortened. The Ministry of Education order stipulated that all after school activities with students had to be organized online. Therefore, focus groups took place in the room of the school psychologist, with small groups of children, according to the pandemic requirements. This meant that school computers and internet were available for the study. Specific opportunities were created for those children who agreed to participate, but were uncomfortable staying with a group. Specific rules and ethics guidelines were developed to inform and prepare children for online focus group sessions. The school psychologist was also available to inform children, and teach and support them with managing technical issues.
- To ensure a secure space for the participants, children used the school psychologists' room for the online focus group sessions at both sites. The school psychologists agreed to be available during the focus groups — to organize the place, help with technical requirements and to ensure privacy. At the beginning of each session, researchers asked children if they feel comfortable, and reminded them that they could inform researchers or the school psychologist of any discomfort. Children said that they feel comfortable there as it is familiar place for them. At the same time, conducting long-distance conversations and the lack of interactive moments in joint work hindered the research – some children were tired, but stayed engaged and didn't leave early. Participants had complete freedom; they could signal and leave the study space at any time, which created peace in the work area and confidence that the rights of students related to personal space and providing information at their request would be fully guaranteed and respected.
- The school psychologists at both sites were available if participants demonstrated emotional needs during the study. During the last module, children were given some local resources to contact in case of violence, like a national hotline and local organisations working with child victims of violence. Children were encouraged to speak with their parents or someone in the school system that they trust.

Research Tools: Adaptations and Reflections on their Implementation

3.6

There were several adaptations that the research team made in relation to the research tools. The first was the decision to work with children, to check their understanding of the meaning of violence and the different types of violence. The researchers made a short introduction on this topic. The presumption was that children in the country may not be fully aware of the forms of violence and it may be difficult for them to recognize and speak about, for example, emotional or digital violence. This approach helped and was informative for some of the children.

As a result of the pandemic and distancing requirements, some of the interactive modules were conducted as discussions, using examples from the researchers' own experience of children's relations in school.

Because of the children's general insecurity and fatigue, we shortened the sessions and added more breaks (with the adults as well), and carried out additional online interviews with some to clarify certain positions or situations that had been shared in the group. We stayed flexible and followed the children's capacity to concentrate when working online, but overall, children expressed feeling tired.

In terms of sexual violence, both girls and boys were ashamed and very reluctant to speak about sexual violence. They spoke of it only in relation to adults. A case of an imaginary child helped them state their position on sexual violence, and allowed researchers to explore students' attitudes towards this issue, as well as their sources of trust.

Despite the changes made in certain modules, the researchers maintained the general aims of listening to children's positions and creating an atmosphere of appreciation, calmness and curiosity when exploring such difficult issues.

Limitations

3.7

The first limitation appeared during the selection of sites and schools. The issue of violence in schools is a very sensitive topic that could affect the image of the schools involved in the research. As the aim of this study is not to assess the school, but to make a general map of violence-related issues, attitudes and cultural specifics, we decided that the names of the sites and schools should remain anonymous so they can't be publicly recognized.

The COVID-19 situation created additional difficulties in finding an appropriate sample of children to include in this study. We had one group of girls in the capital who wanted to participate in the study and were prepared to start the first module on the date that strict COVID-19 measures were announced. Their parents decided they shouldn't participate in in-person or additional online activities. This, along with many staff members becoming ill, this school dropped out of the project.

As previously mentioned, the field researchers were very flexible with the time frame of the modules, and shortened their work with the students. The online discussions made it more difficult for the team to collect the necessary information. They had to react to the immediate needs of the children, to mobilize the internal figure of trust for the children (the school psychologists), and to develop additional ethical rules and measures to ensure secure and positive spaces for the participants.

Due to the pandemic it was more difficult to include participants from the local municipalities and community stakeholders. Hence, the scope of our adult sample is limited to professionals from the school staff and parents.



Violence Against Children in Schools in Bulgaria

The research and statistics provided during the last five years show that despite a legislative base, a system of child protection and the measures and initiatives taken, school violence remains a serious problem in Bulgaria, with an increase in the number of registered cases.

More than half of Bulgarian students aged 13 to 15 have been victims of harassment or violence in and around school, according to a UNICEF study, and the problem is more serious among other age groups. The study shows that the country ranks among the top 10 of the 43 countries surveyed worldwide that are affected by harassment and violence in schools. There were 8,000 cases of violence and harassment in schools between 2016 and 2017, and every second child between 13 and 15 years of age reported having been harassed or abused in or around school. According to the study, this violence can be verbal, psychological, or in the form of harassment or cyberbullying. The observations and data demonstrate that there is insufficient knowledge of all these types and forms of violence.

A study of the health and behaviour of school-aged children conducted by the Institute for Population and Human Studies, in cooperation with UNICEF, has found that:

- Discomfort with and alienation from school, low grades and bullying are driving factors for risky behaviour for adolescents.
- Over one-third of all pupils shared that they were victims of violence or bullying, of physical and verbal aggression at school, at least once during the past year.

Ministry of Education and Sciences statistics:

- Over 8,000 cases of bullying and violence have been recorded in schools in 2016 and 2017 combined;
- Of these, 4,500 were cases involving physical and verbal aggression at school, which makes, on average, 30 such incidents per day.
- In 2017, over 80% of all schools in Bulgaria reported at least one incident of violence against a child.
- Online bullying has increased significantly in recent years, and some of these cases occur between pupils from the same school.
- Online bullying constituted 38% of all cases of violence in schools in 2016, which is a huge leap from 25% in 2010.

5.1 Incidence, Type and Perpetrators of Violence Against Children

5.1.1 General experience of the place and the school

The small town and village are seen as relatively secure places where everyone knows each other, and there are no outsiders who could pose a threat to them. The girls from the small town defined the school, park, and city centre as safe places they like to go to in the daytime, but they are not allowed to go there at night.

School is one of the children's favourite places. They meet their friends there and take part in many interesting meetings and activities. The village children said there are not many places for entertainment and leisure, so they prefer to be at school: "where it is interesting and fun". (12-year-old girl)

"Every day we are busy with something. The teachers take us for walks, excursions, we also have a very nice gym and we can play sports freely." (11-year-old boy)

"At school, I like math classes the most. I'm good at it." (11-year-old boy)

5.1.2. Types and incidence of violence at school

Physical violence was defined as the main type of violence between children by both boys and teachers. According to the children, it appears in various forms: hitting, pushing, pinching, etc.

"I hate to be teased. It's low and I don't like it. I complain to the teacher, but some children don't stop and this happens almost every day." (10-year-old boy)

Participants also distinguish between different forms of physical violence depending on their gender: boys hit and push, girls pull and push.

Verbal violence is also very frequent. Ridicule often manifests itself in the relationship between children, and they recognize it. Ridicule is usually based on material items, or economic or ethnic background: lack of good mobile phones, clothes, appearance, living conditions, origin of children. Participants said that wealthier children are more likely to make fun of poorer children for not having money for breakfast or other things at school.

"They make fun of a boy because his shoes are torn and he fights, and because he has lice. I don't make fun of him. If I have more food, I give it to him." (12-year-old boy)

"Sometimes boys make fun of younger children. It's nasty." (10-year-old girl)

Children mentioned digital violence involving the use of harsh remarks, insulting words and photos that offend someone. They also viewed photos and comments about mockery of someone on social media. It was defined as more common in the relationships between girls. Exclusion from play was also mentioned as a case of violence.

Most of the children involved did not mention sexual abuse. Sexual violence is not well recognized by them. They are afraid to discuss it and are reluctant to think that it could happen to them. They connected such incidents with the world of adults, movies and television news.

According to the adult participants, sexual violence is not explicit, but appears as “teasing”, which they think children do not take so seriously.

5.1.3. Territories of violence at school

School is defined as a relatively safe area as teachers exercise control there. But the school yard and outside, especially next to a nearby food shop, are unprotected places where a child may be in danger. Violence at school is associated with places such as toilets, corridors and sometimes the gym, where children can be rude to each other during games. The school bus is a place where children insult, shout at and knock into one another.

“The bus is very noisy in the afternoon and everyone is fighting.” (12-year-old boy)

According to children, the most secure place in school is the classroom during classes, because the teacher is always present and will protect students in case of a conflict.

5.1.4. Perpetrators of violence at school

Some of the girls pointed out that bigger boys engage in violent behaviour, especially towards the younger ones. Situations of violence between girls arise over potential romantic interests.

“They are constantly teasing us and it’s a downright horror.” (13-year-old girl)

“Big boys are dangerous, they hit me just for nothing.” (10-year-old boy)

“Teachers quarrel with the big boys, but they don’t stop. When they run down the corridors, they hit you, and then they say it’s unintentional. I know it’s on purpose.” (10-year-old boy)

“They write nonsense and then fight over some boys. I know this from my sister.” (10-year-old girl)

For some girls, boys who easily get angry or who get involved in conflict situations are also dangerous. The bystanders usually watch and laugh.

“Everyone knows X ... And they deliberately tease him to see what will happen and make fun of this.” (13-year-old girl)

"In each class there is someone who always fights, and teachers can do nothing."
(14-year-old boy)

Children identify their teacher's shouting as a type of violence: *"The teachers are not bad, but sometimes they shout a lot."* (13-year-old boy)

5.1.5. Sources of violence at school

The sources of violence identified by the participants are:

- Romantic relationships between girls and boys.
- Socio-economic and ethnic differences.
- Families where there are no clear rules.
- Poverty and lack of a stable job in the family.
- Institutions not working together or being ineffective.
- Illiteracy and low educational performance.
- Strong identification with your own gender through aggressive devaluation of the representatives of the other.

"There are a lot of children at school, everyone is different and so some you like, others you don't. Whoever they don't like, they start harassing." (12-year-old girl)

"When we fight over something stupid, then we don't talk for months." (13-year-old girl)

5.2 Social and Gender Norms Around Violence Against Children, including Gender-Based Violence in Bulgaria

There are certain beliefs and norms related to the relationships in the community concerning gender differences, safety and violence:

- Most parents don't worry about their children going to and from school alone; they consider their town or village generally safe
- For some children, light teasing, pushing, pinching, etc. is considered normal and an opportunity to have fun
- It is not acceptable for boys to cry
- It is easier for boys to deal with violence
- Boys are more commonly abusers, but girls can be more violent.
- Children see complaining to teachers as a sign of weakness, and such children, especially boys, are made fun of by their classmates
- Some boys say girls are "slimy" and "complain for no reason"
- Children imagine "abusers" as older people, and see children as smaller and

defenceless by comparison. This, however, means they neglect some forms of violence between themselves

- The victim is likened to a weak and frail person, or child, who needs protection, help and support. Some children are ready to support them
- Some girls think that some children who behave violently are “unhappy”
- Some children prefer to remain silent about cases of sexual violence rather than deal with teachers or parents
- Teachers’ feel that they are held accountable for children’s behaviour; they believe that if a violent situation is identified, society and more competent institutions will blame the teachers

“We are always blamed for everything. If something happens, we will still be accused of not doing our job by parents and bosses.” (Teacher)

“We don’t have much support from the children’s parents. They have completely abdicated. They have transferred all the responsibility to the school.” (Teacher)

Protection from Violence and Promotion of Well-being

5.3

5.3.1. Sources of protection

Children listed their main sources of protection from violence. This list ranks protectors from the most to the least frequently mentioned and used by the child participants:

- Mother
- Parents
- Older sibling
- Friend
- Teachers, principal, school psychologist, school guards
- School-based mechanism for combating and counteracting school bullying
- Child rights
- Institutions: police, Child Protection Department, court
- A few children mentioned that they would resolve their problems alone

Children reported that their parents have taught them how to protect themselves from violence on the street, and some take some measures in this regard. At the same time, as it was never concretely explained to the children, they are unclear about the sources of such danger.

“My mother tells me not to talk with strangers on the street when I’m alone, because they can be dangerous. It is not clear who can do what to you.” (11-year-old boy)

"My mother won't let me go out in the dark." (12-year-old girl)

"If I'm with my brother, I can go out until about nine o'clock, but only with him." (13-year-old girl)

"My mother doesn't let me go out with big boys and girls." (12-year-old girl)

"I have to go home from school right away because I have to help at home." (12-year-old girl)

"My father takes us to school in the morning because it's dark now." (10-year-old girl)

More specifically, mothers ensure good relationships with the school environment.

"If I have any problems, I tell my mother and she deals with the teachers. My father doesn't go to school." (13-year-old girl)

"My mom always warns me that I should be good and not hang out with anyone at school, and tell her when someone teases me so I wouldn't have problems." (10-year-old boy)

Older brothers or sisters were also mentioned as a source of protection, especially for the younger children in the group.

Friends are important and reliable. The route to school is more secure when you go with your friends, and it's fun too. Some children said that in cases of serious violence, they would first call a friend, and after that, they would rely on adults. The participants could not specify exactly how they would be helped by their friends, but said that the conversation would be enough "to make it easier for a person" (14-year-old boy).

"My friends wouldn't do anything dirty to me." (14-year-old boy)

"I don't say anything to my mother, I only share with my friends." (13-year-old girl)

"I have a girlfriend who is older than me and she advises me on various things." (12-year-old girl)

Teachers have been recognized as a main source of protection in and around school.

"However, there are teachers with us on the school bus and they do not allow beatings or anything else between the children, because that is the rule." (14-year-old boy)

"My class teacher understands me very well and I can always go to her for help. She has helped me before. Once other boys were going to deal with me, she went and talked to them." (13-year-old boy)

"If a child from school is injured, for example, beaten, all teachers will call the bully in the teacher's room and quarrel with him." (12-year-old boy)

"I don't know who to turn to. Probably to a teacher. The lady in mathematics respects me a lot." (12-year-old girl)

"When we are at school, the teachers watch to see if anything is happening in the corridors and call the principal." (Student)

"If I see someone being beaten every day, of course I will look for the teachers or the school psychologist." (13-year-old girl)

"Our psychological counsellor is very good and I go to her when the big ones tease me. She scolds them." (10-year-old boy)

According to the adults, school is a safe place because teachers are in control. When they have information about deteriorating relations in the family, they monitor the situation, and in case of a change in the child's behaviour, they are ready to take action. Nevertheless, some children and teachers do not think that the measures taken are effective, or that teachers are prepared to provide adequate assistance. They would rather refer to institutions.

"We are well connected. As soon as we notice something, we react. We have teachers on duty in the corridors, in the children's buses. We do not allow beatings or quarrels between students." (School professional)

"There are punishments for those who fight, but they are not afraid. Teachers will quarrel and that's it." (12-year-old boy)

Children are basically informed about the main institutions that could support them in case of violence, but some don't believe they would get help there, and worry that they would be accused of doing something wrong. Furthermore, while children recognize the institutions, they do not know their functions or how exactly they can help in a situation of violence. They recognize the role of the police, for example, and respect their role in society. The boys from the small village were not familiar with protection institutions other than the police, whom they say help deal with theft, crime or robbery. They say that if the police intervened in a situation of violence towards children, they would be worried, but believe that the police would help the child.

Child protection rights are something that children could refer to as an argument against violence towards them, but they do not know exactly how these are enforced and by whom.

"Children have rights - no one should hit them." (14-year-old boy)

"When you call the police, they would catch the criminal and help you." (10-year-old boy)

5.3.2. Protection Expected by Children

Children see protection as a quick, immediate and effective action by adults to end an act of violence.

"If someone is beaten, teachers must intervene immediately." (10-year-old girl)

"If a child suffers from violence, she must be helped so that she does not suffer." (10-year-old girl)

The existence of clear procedures helps children react in cases of violence at school. The children gave an example in which a child is beaten on the school yard and the guards immediately inform the teacher on duty. That teacher then informs the principal, who resolves the conflict. The steps in providing support were clearly outlined.

5.3.3. Factors preventing children from looking for protection

For some children, the more severe the violent incident, the more reluctant they are to ask for help from adults. They are afraid of being punished by their parents or by professionals from the school and other institutions. Some children don't trust the police and find their support ineffective: "Sometimes the police come when someone does something bigger, but it rarely happens." (13-year-old girl); "I don't think any police officer will help me. I will worry!" (12-year-old girl).

Older children think that they can defend themselves and that they do not need support.

"If I have a problem, I can solve it myself." (14-year-old boy)

"I don't know who to look for, I'll take care of myself. My father says that if I want to succeed in life, I have to take care of myself." (14-year-old boy)

The children said that they do not know specific organizations that will protect children from violent situations. They are not familiar with the mechanism for providing protection to children who have been abused.

5.4 Children's Agency and their Responses to Violence

There is a broad range of ways in which children mention they respond or would respond to violence. These can be summarized in five general strategies for resolving situations of violence at school: seeking help, resolving the conflict alone, protecting the other child, staying silent, and avoiding potentially dangerous situations. The first three strategies are proactive as children authorize themselves to take certain actions. The last two demonstrate strong feelings of shame and fear of the perpetrators or adults' response, which hinders the child from acting.

5.4.1. Seeking help

The main strategy these children use in cases of violence is actively seeking help. They usually turn to relatives — especially their mothers — and friends for help, and only in extreme cases, to the police.

"Let the mother come to school and talk to the teachers." (12-year-old boy)

"I don't like to complain, then children make fun of me, but I have an older brother and when someone teases me, I go and tell him. He comes and argues. He protects me. I tell the class teacher too, but she doesn't take action. My mother told me if someone teased me to call my brother." (Student)

"Her mother has enough worries. Why put an extra strain on the parents? She will try to talk to a girlfriend of hers who will give her advice." (13-year-old girl)

"It's better to tell the teachers. They know better what to do. They will find a way to help him." (10-year-old girl)

"I will not tolerate [sexual violence], I will go to the police and complain" (14-year-old girl)

This strategy shows the capacity of the child to actively engage the resources in the surrounding environment in order to resolve the problem. Yet, it may also demonstrate a lack of self-confidence and authority, as some children expressed that they do not think that they can do anything to change the situation in the community where they live. Rather, they trust adults and hold them responsible to control children's behaviour, and thereby ensure a safe environment for them. They recognize that problems exist in the school, but they are not ready to make proposals for change.

5.4.2. Resolving the conflict alone

Children shared that in some cases, which they did not consider very serious, they managed to resolve their conflicts alone. To do so, they used constructive as well as aggressive and violent means to resolve the problem. From the one side, some children shared that they tried to maintain respect and engage in a dialogue with the other. On the other side, some children described situations where they engaged in reciprocal aggressive acts: "If someone hits me, I would retaliate. I don't want to fight, but if someone touches me, I will retaliate." (12-year-old boy)

5.4.3. Protecting other children

Children frequently take on the role of defender of smaller children or close friends in cases of violence. Some girls think that older students may be more self-sufficient, while younger children are more at risk: "What can a little one do, cry the most?" (11-year-old girl)

They believe that primary school children do not have the skills to protect themselves in risky situations: "Anyone can lie to them, insult them, hit them, but they also get hooked." (12-year-old girl)

During the discussion, participants stated that they would like to help younger children because "they are defenceless" (11-year-old girl); "I have a brother in first grade and every day I go to ask him if anyone is teasing him." (12-year-old girl)

5.4.4. Staying silent

Some girls shared that they would feel ashamed to talk about or ask for help in a case of sexual violence; that instead, they would prefer to stay silent. They also considered that no one would believe them.

"I'd rather run away from home." (13-year-old girl)

"Can children complain? Well, they can, but hardly anyone would pay much attention to them, because they are small and no one believes them." (14-year-old boy)

The main argument children use to explain their reluctance in opposing some situations of violence is a fear that such behaviour would increase the violence.

"If he tells someone, they will beat him again." (10-year-old boy)

"Tell who? Our friends are as big as us. How could they help us with this?" (11-year-old boy)

"If the teachers are informed, they will help, but someone has to tell them." (12-year-old boy)

"Children have to defend each other and then they will be able to overcome it, but everyone is afraid of being beaten tomorrow." (12-year-old boy)

Some children mentioned cases of teachers being violent, which may explain their distrust in teachers.

When discussing concrete cases of violence, the adult participants said that it would be difficult for children to report or signal being in a risky situation that endangers their mental and physical health because they would be afraid.

"If a teacher doesn't notice that something is happening, the children will have a hard time sharing. They do not have the culture to talk and share. The only thing they know is to shout and fight." (Teacher)

Such a statement reveals a lot about this teacher, and why children wouldn't want to inform some teachers about such incidents.

5.4.5. Avoiding potentially dangerous situations

Children also mentioned that during the breaks they stay in groups in the classroom and talk to friends in order to avoid conflicts outside.

"I prefer to stay in my room and paint. I don't hang out with anyone." (10-year-old girl)

"I have a friend and I talk to her in the break. She is from another class, but now they do not allow us to get together because of the Corona virus." (11-year-old girl)

Discussion

- School is an important place for children, and they like to spend time there with their friends, doing interesting things.
- Physical and emotional violence are part of children's everyday life at school. They face it constantly.
- The economic differences between children are a main source of violence.
- Sexual abuse is a difficult topic for both boys and girls to talk about, and they are not critical of some behaviours related to it which are present in their relationships.
- There are some prejudices related to gender and social roles that hinder children from recognizing certain types of violent behaviours, or standing up to it and looking for support from adults.
- Children trust their families and close friends the most in terms of people who can protect them from violence.
- Children are aware that they have rights and they know that there are certain institutions to protect them from violence, yet they are not well informed on how to use this support or how to approach them for help.
- The fear of punishment from parents, teachers and other professionals is a major factor preventing children from reporting or looking for help in cases of ongoing and severe violence.
- Children need structure/clear rules followed by all of the participants in the school environment, but they also need to feel that they can trust the adults who could understand and emotionally support them.
- The adult focus groups showed that school staff and parents are not prepared to respond in an appropriate way to situations of violence as they lack knowledge about the dynamics of the relationships of violence, and the role that adults could play in their prevention and resolution.
- The impression created by the data from this study, from both child and adult participants, suggests that efforts must be made towards increasing children's capacities to recognize, understand, tolerate and know things in relation to violence, as well as the need for children to become more disciplined. Such expectations were not stated for the adults that care for them: parents, teachers and professionals. This type of thinking is dangerous in that it leaves room for more systemic problems affecting the relationships of violence at school to go unnoticed.

Key Recommendations

7.1 Recommendations from the children

Children offered two main recommendations on how situations of violence at school could be managed. The first is related to the capacity of teachers to provide safety structures for students (like rules, discipline and active intervention), and to understand them better and create relationships of trust and support. The second requires adults to create more opportunities and space for children at school and other places to engage in fun, positive activities.

- Children think that teachers should better understand a child's situation, not just punish them.
"The teacher should call the mother and find out what's going on." (13-year-old boy)
- Engaging children in different, interesting activities will decrease the violence. Children have asked for more spaces where they can play and have fun together. They said that currently there is no separate place for them to gather in town, and this has to be changed.

"If there are places in the neighbourhood that are only for children, I may visit them, but I don't know if my mother would let me go." (10-year-old boy)

"Different things could be organized at school that are interesting for the children: we can go out, play games, have more sports equipment in the yard." (13-year-old girl)

7.2 Recommendations from the adult participants

According to the majority of participating adults, children need to receive additional information and develop individual skills to deal with risky or violent situations. This would ensure that they can help themselves, and receive adequate protection and support. But they should also learn when to share with adults if there is a problem.

"If children are better prepared on the topic of violence prevention, they would easily recognize what is happening around them and will react faster so that we can take action." (Pedagogical advisor)

Adult participants discussed the opportunity for children to be taught to easily and clearly identify and recognize the institutions involved in working for their defence. They suggested this could be done by conducting interviews, introducing specialists from services in the community or at school, visiting social services, increasing children's social skills, and overall, by helping them to acquire the skills to seek help on their own in case of need.

Recommendations from the research team

7.3

- Develop modules to work interactively with children on the topics of socio-economic and ethnic differences; emotional and sexual relationships and sexual violence; social roles and prejudice related to the gender.
- Provide children with more concrete information on how they can defend their rights; how they can approach different professionals and institutions in cases of violence, and what kind of support they can receive from them. They need more knowledge and experience with the procedures and ways the protection system works in relation to different types of violence. The children's fears of connecting with institutions and adults should be worked through.
- Parents, school and social protection professionals should be aware of the level of fear and shame that children experience when becoming a victim of violence, and consider how to connect with children and develop more trust.
- Schools have to create more constructive and cooperative partnerships with interested parents, and together they should develop certain policies related to the issues of violence at school.
- Rules of conduct and knowledge about their rights empower children to defend those rights, but there is also a need to create spaces for open dialogue about the relationships and emotions that children experience in school.
- Work with the children to enhance their confidence in situations of violence, and empower them by including them as decision makers, and engage them in discussions and activities against violence at school.
- Teachers and school staff as a whole must improve their capacity to understand the psycho-social dynamics of situations of violence, how they affect all children included in these situations, and the appropriate responses that professionals and the school, as a system, can offer. Specific emphasis has to be put on preventative measures and strategies, as well as on the systemic coordination of child protection institutions, with the inclusion of the parents and the children themselves.

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<https://www.novinite.com/articles/193198/More+than+Half+of+the+Students+in+Bulgaria+Aged+between+13+and+15+-+Victim+of+Harassment+or+Violence>



Appendices

Appendix A: Key Definitions

Violence Against Children: “All forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse.” (UNCRC, Art 19)

Sexual violence: An umbrella term used to refer to all forms of sexual victimization of adult women, men and children, including different forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation. “Any sexual act or attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person, regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.” (Kewkes, Sen, Garcia-Moreno, 2002, p.149)

Child sexual abuse: “Engaging in sexual activities with a child who, according to the relevant provisions of national law, has not reached the legal age for sexual activities (this does not apply to consensual sexual activities between minors), and engaging in sexual activities with a child where use is made of coercion, force or threats; or abuse is made of a recognised position of trust, authority or influence over the child.” (UNICEF, 2017, p.6)

Types of Violence Against Children (Adapted from Dawes, Bray, & Van Der Merwe, 2007)

Particular types of violence against children are elaborated below:

Physical Violence: Intentionally inflicting injury or death on a child.

Emotional Violence: Exposing a child to or inflicting psychological or emotional harm on a child.

Sexual Violence: Sexual activities, with or without the child’s consent, where the perpetrator is older or in a position of authority. (This may also involve force or trickery.)

Neglect: Lack of care provided by caregivers, usually over a longer period of time that results in physical or psychological harm to a child.

Exploitation: Broader term usually referring to the use of a child for another person’s gains, that has a negative impact on the child, such as harmful child labour, early marriage, child trafficking, child prostitution or pornography, etc.

Categories of Violence Against Children CRIN (n.d.)

Physical and Psychological Violence

- Abduction
- Bullying
- Death Penalty
- Domestic Violence
- Extra-judicial Execution
- Gang Violence
- Harmful Traditional Practices
- Honour Killings
- Infanticide
- Judicial use of Physical Punishment
- Kidnapping
- Physical Abuse
- Physical Punishment
- Psychological Abuse
- Psychological Punishment
- State Violence
- Torture and Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment



Neglect:

- Abandonment
- Dangerous, Harmful or Hazardous Work
- Deprivation
- State Neglect

Exploitation:

- Pornography
- Sex Tourism
- Sexual Exploitation
- Slavery
- Trafficking
- Violence at Work

Child: The Convention defines a “child” as a person below the age of 18, unless relevant laws recognize an earlier age of majority.

Child Protection: UNICEF’s definition of child protection is the “strengthening of country environments, capacities and responses to prevent and protect children from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and the effects of conflict.” (UNICEF, 2008)

Child Participation: “Participation is the term used to encapsulate activities that ensure a child’s right to participate in matters that affect them are adhered to. This draws on the concept that ‘children are not merely passive recipients, entitled to adult protective care’. Rather, they are subjects of rights who are entitled to be involved, in accordance with their evolving capacities, in decisions that affect them, and are entitled to exercise growing responsibility for decisions they are competent to make for themselves.” (Lansdowne & O’Kane, 2014, p. 3)

Child Well-being: “Child well-being is a dynamic, subjective and objective state of physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual and social health in which children:

- are safe from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence.
- meet their basic needs, including survival and development.
- are connected to and cared for by primary caregivers.
- have the opportunity for supportive relationships with relatives, peers, teachers, community members and society at large; and
- have the opportunity and elements required to exercise their agency based on their emerging capacities.” (ACPHA, 2019, p.10) Please see Appendix F: Tdh Conceptual Framework on Well-being Pillars.

Child Safeguarding: “The responsibility that organisations have to make sure their staff, operations, and programmes do no harm to children, that is that they do not expose children to the risk of harm and abuse, and that any concerns the organisation has about children’s safety within the communities in which they work, are reported.” (Keeping Children Safe, 2014, p.3)

Social Norms: “The full range of these definitions includes a constellation of social rules ranging from mere etiquette to the most fundamental moral duties [13, 14, 37, 38]. In their simplest definition, social norms are the informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable, appropriate, and obligatory actions in a given group or society.” (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018)

Gender Norms: A simple definition suggests, “gender norms are the social rules and expectations that keep the gender system intact.” (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019, p.4) However, a more nuanced and complex definition suggests that “gender norms are social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society. They are embedded in formal and informal institutions, nested in the mind, and produced and reproduced through social interaction. They play a role in shaping women and men’s (often unequal) access to resources and freedoms, thus affecting their voice, power and sense of self.” (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019, pp.9–10)

Appendix B: Ethical Protocols

In addition to the information contained in [section 2.3](#), the following ethical protocols were considered.

Research on sensitive subjects, such as violence against children, can cause unintended harm to participants. For example, if confidentiality is breached, informed consent is not obtained, or a group of people is stigmatized. Researchers need to be careful not to raise expectations, which can lead to mistrust of outsiders and disillusionment. Researchers also need to be cautious not to increase power imbalances that may cause a particular group to be vulnerable.

Given the timing of the research with the COVID-19 pandemic, protocols will be more stringent for online interactions. It is strongly recommended that remote violence against children (VAC) data collection does not take place with children while lockdown measures are in place (Bhatia, Peterman & Guedes 2020). Where it is deemed appropriate for research to continue, adaptations will take into consideration the kinds of questions being asked and the level of privacy afforded participants in the setting where they are joining. Given the potential for heightened levels of violence experienced by children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in keeping with recommendations by UNICEF–IRC 2020, no direct questions will be asked about participants' experiences of violence, but rather their understanding of violence occurring in their communities.

Research on violence may ask children and adults, even without direct questions concerning personal experience, to re-live painful and difficult experiences. As researchers working with children who may have suffered from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, there is a critical responsibility to “do no harm” in our interactions with children and youth.

Researchers will be trained to watch for signs of children expressing distress (both verbal and non-verbal). Researchers will ensure that the environment within the activities remains respectful and supportive, and will take time to speak with children who may need extra support outside of the activity, from a safe distance. The name and contact details of a support worker, as well as emergency numbers and local reporting protocol, will be listed on a flipchart at all times, enabling children to reach out on their own for additional support (for example, the psychosocial service of the school and Child Protection Unity in Albania). Where a flipchart is not practical, handouts will be made to give to young people before each session. Should a researcher see that a young person requires support, the researcher will discuss this with the young person and call the support person to request a personal visit to the community. The researcher will follow-up with both the child and the support worker using appropriate child safeguarding protocol, as per the Tdh Child Safeguarding Policy and national legislation.

When working with participants, researchers will pay close attention to the following ethical guidelines, recommendations and practices:

Confidentiality:

- Inform children that you will be collecting quotes and stories, but no names will be attached, only gender, age and community.
- Ensure that you obtain children's written permission as well as the written permission of their parents or caregivers. In some cases, permission might need to be gained from the Ministry of Education in each country. Please see Appendix A for a sample Consent Form.
- Ensure that you obtain the written permission of adults as well. Please see Appendix B.
- Remember, informed consent is an ongoing process. Participants should be regularly reminded of their options. No child should be made to feel that they must participate.
- If you plan to use a recording device, be sure to inform children of this and obtain their consent. Explain how the recordings will be used and what will happen to the recordings at the end of the project.

If attending virtually, request that participants have a place that offers some privacy, and where this is not possible, that they share who else is in the room and when with the group (as noted below).

Voluntary informed Assent/Consent Conversations

Special note during COVID-19: As the local context may change rapidly during COVID-19 for both children and project staff (for example, if governmental restrictions on physical distancing are suddenly relaxed), it is recommended to regularly address voluntary informed consent (at each point of change). It is useful to think of consent as an ongoing conversation that you have with children (and their parents/carers). You can document consent by asking children/parents to sign consent forms, and you can digitally record their verbal consent if physical distancing is required, or if children and/or their parents/carers have low levels of literacy. Signed consent forms or recordings of consent should be kept securely. It may be useful to use a "script" or checklist when having a consent conversation to ensure that you do not forget anything.

Make sure participants are comfortable and fully informed:

- Select a suitable location where children feel comfortable and at ease.
- Be open and honest with children.
- Explain the entire process, including how the tools could affect young participants.
- Don't raise expectations. Be clear about what can and cannot be achieved through the research.
- Privacy and confidentiality are extremely important, but cannot be guaranteed due to the involvement of the group of participants in the research. Make sure that limited confidentiality is clearly communicated before the start.
- Let children know that they can always ask questions: No question is a bad question.

Know yourself:

- Learn about and be reflective of your lived experiences, biases, assumptions, and trigger points.
- Be comfortable with the uncomfortable. Change can often include feelings of discomfort and confusion. Recognize and pause during these moments.
- Be emotionally present and available to engage with children and listen effectively.
- Communicate genuinely and honestly.

Develop an understanding of the local culture, context and understanding of children and youth:

- Understand the local culture and context you are working in.
- Remember child protection factors differ across gender, age, race, culture, socio-economic status, ability, and other factors.
- Learn about local power dynamics as they may undermine genuine participation.
- Be open to learning. Inquire and ask questions to seek understanding.

Build relationships:

- Build relationships with organizations, communities, families, children and youth.
- Learn from and with children, youth, families and communities.
- Work in partnership, not opposition. Exercise humility.

Be prepared:

- Remember that children may be resilient in one area of their lives but not in others due to their social-ecological framework.
- Remember that talking about one's experiences can be harmful in some contexts.
- Make sure to identify someone to provide follow-up support for those who may need help or want to have a more in-depth conversation.

Be inclusive:

- Be inclusive and involve the most vulnerable populations.
- Remember that most victimized children and youth do not receive services.

Support the group:

- Be flexible and adaptable. Situations and circumstances change, and sometimes things do not work out as planned.
- Hold people accountable. Do not be afraid to hold people accountable for their actions. Be firm but respectful and create an opportunity outside the group to talk through any issues.

Build from strengths and bolster resilience:

- Build from the strengths in people (e.g., positive behaviours, coping techniques), cultures and systems.
- Build capacity. Nurture innate self-healing and protection capacities.
- Recognize people's agency and capacity. See people as experts and survivors and not as victims.

Follow-up:

- Follow-up with participants afterwards to make sure they are doing okay. For example, you might want to check in with them at the end of the session.
- Leave participants the phone number of someone they can talk to, and with information on how to access helpful resources.
- Remember, if you hear about violence or abuse, you have a responsibility to connect that young person with a support person, and to report it the appropriate organization following local protocol.

Informed Consent (Adapted from Columbia Group for Children in Adversity [2011])

Participation in research must be voluntary, and people must be free to decline or end participation without any negative consequences. The decision to participate should be informed by an understanding of the purpose of the research, how and what information will be collected, how the information will be used, and potential risks and benefits to participants. When participants are children, informed consent must be obtained from the children themselves and from their parents or guardians.

Obtaining informed consent is inherently difficult for many reasons, such as the power imbalance between researchers and participants, the pervasive expectations that participation will bring material improvements now or at a later point in time, and the prevailing norms of hospitality, among others. Obtaining written consent may not be feasible because of low literacy levels and/or prospective participants' fears that written documents will be used against them. Because of this, it is important to treat informed consent as an ongoing process rather than a one-off action.

Specific steps to ensure informed consent:

- Use a child-friendly approach in explaining to children the purpose of the research, what and how information will be used, and their right to say "No" without negative consequences.
- If the participant is a child under the age of 18, obtain the informed consent of both the child and his or her parent or caretaker.

- Tailor the approach to obtaining informed consent to local circumstances. Where appropriate, use the forms provided in the Appendices and request signatures to indicate voluntary and informed consent.
- The process of obtaining informed consent must be implemented for each individual participant.
- Avoid the subtle coercion that can occur. For example, if a parent tells a child “you should participate” or if a village leader says, “we should welcome the researchers and answer their questions”, explain informed consent to the person in power and ask them to explain to others that they are free not to participate, and that there will be no disadvantages or penalties for people who decide not to participate.
- Manage expectations by explaining in simple, clear language that no material benefits will come from participating in the research. Add, however, that the information collected will be fed back to communities and countries, which may find the information useful in taking stock of and improving community-based mechanisms of child protection.
- Explain that, should someone begin to participate and decide that they are not comfortable, they can always leave the research without any penalty.

Limited Confidentiality (Adapted from Columbia Group for Children in Adversity [2011])

Research participants will be informed that the information they provide is confidential, unless they share anything that puts themselves or others at risk. If there is an incident, suspicion, or disclosure of current violence or abuse, the researcher will work with the child or adult to follow up and explore appropriate services of support using the Tdh Child Safeguarding Policy, Research Ethics Protocol of the local University research partner, and the legal protocol in the country. The researchers will not publicly share any personal information such as names that could be used to identify specific individuals or sources of information. Where identity information is collected, it will be maintained in a separate, locked file, and will be made available only to people who have a legitimate need to know. Pseudonyms will be used when data is being quoted. Specific steps to ensure confidentiality include:

- Conduct discussions in a private setting. When conducting interviews with young people, ensure that there is always a minimum of three people present (either two children or two adults) and if not, there is a third person within vision for child safeguarding purposes. If there are departures from privacy, make sure all participants know who else is present and listening or observing, and get their informed consent to continue.
- Keep any records of names and other identifying information in a safe, locked place that is not open for public access.

- Do not leave confidential files open on a desk or computer. Always close them and put them out of public access, even if you leave your desk only for a minute or two.
- Use general descriptors (e.g., 13-year-old girl) rather than a specific name or other identifying information in writing up your data and reports.
- Share information from your field notes, including identifiers, with members of the research team, but not with people outside the research team.
- Hold information about specific cases of abuse, exploitation, violence and neglect in strict confidence, sharing information only with the Lead National Researcher or the UNICEF Focal Point.

Please note: It is important to be clear with participants, that they should only share information in the activities that they want the group to know; you cannot guarantee that other participants will keep the information they hear confidential, though you will strongly encourage it. Participants are welcome to speak with you after the activity in private, should they want to share additional information.

Remote adaptations: Restrictions in meeting children face-to-face due to the COVID-19 pandemic means that online interactions and participatory activities via devices, such as smartphones and computers, are likely to increase. This increases risks to children that are specific to the online environment, such as increasing the likelihood that family members will be present, through to more significant risks like the dissemination of false information, exposure to violent extremist messaging, or surveillance and censorship. For the former, transparency and good communication allows participants to be clear on the level of privacy they are able to maintain within their physical environment (as noted above). For the latter, digital applications, platforms and services need to be safe, secure and should not result in inappropriate or unethical capture and/or use of data on children. Safeguarding considerations for online communication and interaction fall into three key areas:

Safe behaviour online

- Guidelines are developed for users of digital platforms and products. These explain expectations regarding posting, speaking, commenting on the site or platform, and establish consequences for misuse.
- Build relational safety by having regular “safety” check-ins with children at the beginning or end of virtual sessions, where a key worker listens carefully and responds sensitively to the child.
- All websites, phone lines and platforms where children are commenting or sharing information, photos and stories are moderated by staff to maximise safety and privacy and minimise risks. Where concerns of harm or abuse are identified, reporting procedures are followed.
- Procedures for reporting and responding to harm or abuse exist for each digital platform or product. These take into account local laws, cultural norms and the availability of protection services.

The Canadian Women's Foundation developed the following hand signals for people who want to safely disclose violence in the home while on a video-call.



Ethical access to and use of children's data

- Children using digital platforms must be given the opportunity to agree to a specified use of their personal data. This consent should not be assumed based on their consent for other activities (e.g., for their photo to be used in media activities).
- Active consent must be captured in a way so that consent is not the default option.
- A written agreement is in place to control and authorise the release of information on children (data, images) to partner organisations, the Internet, the public domain or any third party. Consent conversations with children (see above) should include an assessment of the need/benefit of sharing information that is balanced against potential risks, before consent is given by children for use of their data.

Responding online to disclosures and allegations of child abuse during COVID-19

If a case of abuse is reported or disclosed when physical distancing restrictions are in place the following issues will need to be addressed for responding online:

- Seek the views of the child victim/survivor (where it is possible to establish safe, direct contact) on their situation that will inform a risk assessment for responding to the report of abuse. It may be useful to connect to child helplines to identify services that might support the child victim/survivor.
- Conducting remote interviews, focus groups and other participative activities (e.g., via Zoom or WhatsApp): Outline the process in advance to participants. Make sure they can safely participate online and are able to use the software.

- Ensure privacy and manage confidentiality: participants should use a computer that is private or isolated, make use of headphones and limit the use of identifying information (i.e., agree to refer to Mr. Smith as Mr. X). Check there is no one else in the room or nearby and record interviews if possible.



Appendix C: Country-Level Consent Forms

Informed Consent Form – Children

ИНФОРМИРАНО СЪГЛАСИЕ

Ние сме изследователи към Ноу-хау център за алтернативни грижи за деца – Нов български университет.

В партньорство с Министерство на образованието изпълняваме международно „Регионално изследване на насилието срещу деца в Югоизточна Европа“. Проучването е организирано от Child Protection Hub for South East Europe в сътрудничество с Международния институт за правата и развитието на детето. То включва Албания, Босна и Херцеговина, България, Косово, Молдова, Румъния, Сърбия, и Хърватия. Целта на изследването е да се съберат данни за преобладаващите норми и нагласи към насилието над деца в региона, специфичните типове насилие, рисковите пространства на насилие в училищната и извънучилищна среда, промените в проявите на насилие, предизвикани от пандемията и потенциалната роля на децата да се противопоставят на социални норми и поведения, свързани с насилието над деца. Основната задача е да се чуе гледната точка на децата.

Ако се съгласите да участвате в това проучване и бъдете поканени, ще може да си кажете мнението като участвате в дискусия и игрови занимания в група от свои съученици.

Анонимността и тайната на споделената информация са гарантирани. Никой няма да бъде назован по име в крайния доклад, няма да бъде разкрито нищо лично. Участието Ви в това проучване е абсолютно доброволно. По време на проучването имате право да не отговаряте на въпроси, на които не желаете да отговаряте. Ако решите, може да напуснете по всяко време срещата и това няма да повлияе по никакъв начин на отношението на учителския екип към Вас.

Вашето мнение и опит са много важни за нас!

Моля, отбележете:

- ☐ 1. Прочетох и ми беше обяснено информираното съгласие, имам възможност да задавам въпроси и ми беше отговорено.
- ☐ 2. Разбирам, че участието ми не е задължително и че мога да го прекратя по всяко време, без да посочвам причина.
- ☐ 3. Разбирам, че взетите бележки могат да бъдат използвани от членовете на изследователския екип за анализа и доклада.
- ☐ 4. Съгласен/съгласна съм да взема участие в проучването.

(Име на участника)

Подпис

Дата

(Име на изследователя)

Подпис

Дата

Informed Consent Form – Parents

ИНФОРМИРАНО СЪГЛАСИЕ ЗА РОДИТЕЛ ИЛИ НАСТОЙНИК

Ноу-хау Център за алтернативни грижи за деца, Нов български университет работи в тясна връзка с Министерство на образованието и науката в рамките на различни задачи и инициативи свързани с повишаване на качеството на образованието и подобряване на училищната среда.

Ноу-хау център за алтернативни грижи за деца, Нов български университет участва в провеждането на международно „Регионално изследване на насилието срещу деца в Югоизточна Европа“. Проучването е организирано от Child Protection Hub for South East Europe в сътрудничество с Международния институт за правата и развитието на детето. То включва Албания, Босна и Херцеговина, България, Косово, Молдова, Румъния, Сърбия, и Хърватия.

Целта на изследването е да се съберат данни за преобладаващите норми и нагласи към насилието над деца в региона, специфичните типове насилие, рисковите пространства на насилие в училищната и извънучилищна среда, промените в проявите на насилие, предизвикани от пандемията и потенциалната роля на децата да се противопоставят на социални норми и поведения, свързани с насилието над деца. Основната задача е да се чуе гледната точка на децата. Резултатите от това проучване ще послужат като отправна точка за следващи регионални политики и практики по превенция на насилието и активното включване на децата в този процес.

В проучването са включени деца и младежи между 12 и 18 годишна възраст, училищни преподаватели, училищно ръководство и друг училищен персонал, родители и членове на общността. Във всяко от включените училища ще бъдат проведени 3 фокусни групи – по една фокусна група с момичета и с момчета и една сборна фокусна група с възрастни. Във фокусните групи ще бъдат използвани интерактивни, проективни и артистични методи на работа, организирани в няколко модула.

Ноу-хау център за алтернативни грижи за деца съблюдава всички международни етични стандарти за научни изследвания и работа с деца. Екипът от изследователи е подбран от специалисти, които познават и са част от образователната система и имат дългогодишен опит от проучвания и работа с деца. Изследователите са преминали през международно обучение в рамките на това изследване за прилагане на модулите за работа във фокусните групи.

Анонимността и тайната на споделената информация са гарантирани. Никой няма да бъде назован по име в крайния доклад, няма да бъде разкрито нищо лично. Участващият ученик може да напусне по всяко време срещата и това няма да повлияе по никакъв начин на отношението към него. Участието на учениците е абсолютно доброволно. Те имат право да не отговарят на въпроси, на които не желаят да отговорят.

Пандемичната обстановка също е отчетена от екипа изследователи и те ще следват стриктно всички изисквания за поведение в училищна и обучителна среда при работата си с деца и възрастни по време на проучването.

Проучването е планирано да се реализира в групи на живо, но при влошаване на ситуацията, екипът е подготвен и за работа в електронен формат.

Лице за контакт от Ноу-Хау Център за алтернативни грижи за деца, НБУ е д-р Антоанета Матеева, Телефон: 0898 XXXXXX, Ел. адрес: mateeva.antoaneta@gmail.com

Мнението на всеки ученик е много важно за нас!

Моля, отбележете:

- ☐ Прочетох и ми беше обяснено информираното съгласие, имам възможност да задавам въпроси и ми беше отговорено.
- ☐ Разбирам, че участието не е задължително и ученикът може да го прекрати по всяко време, без да посочва причина.
- ☐ Разбирам, че взетите бележки могат да бъдат използвани от членовете на изследователския екип за анализа и доклада.
- ☐ Съгласен/съгласна съм моето дете да вземе участие в проучването.

(Име на родителя/настойника)

Подпис

Дата

(Име на детето)

(Име на изследователя)

Подпис

Дата

Informed Consent Form – Adults

Международен проект
„Регионално изследване на насилието срещу деца в Югоизточна Европа“

Населено място:

Училище:

ФОКУС ГРУПА С ВЪЗРАСТНИ

Водещ:

Дата: 2020г.

С настоящия подпис декларирам, че съм запознат с целите, методите, положителните и негативните аспекти на участието ми и с етичните правила на провежданата фокус група и участвам в нея доброволно:

№	Име и фамилия на участника	Роля в образователната система /директор, учител, родител, педагогически съветник, други/	Подпис на участника

Подпис на водещия:

Appendix D: Royal Roads University Consent Form

Child Informed Consent

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S CONSENT LETTER

WELCOME TO THE DISCUSSION ON VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

We would like to lead play and art based activities about children and young people's safety and wellbeing in schools.

WHO AM I?

My name is [INSERT YOUTH FRIENDLY SENTENCE ABOUT RESEARCHER LEADING]

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS PROJECT?

We want to find out what makes children and young people feel safe in schools, and what type of violence is occurring that makes them feel sad and/or bad. We also want to hear your ideas for how violence and abuse could be prevented and responded too.

WHAT DOES BEING IN THIS RESEARCH INVOLVE?

If you decide to take part in this study, there are some different things we will ask you to join in. You will have the opportunity to decide if you do or do not want to participate. I will ask you and your peers to join in on participatory research activities that will take you 1.25 days. We will have refreshments and meals during the day.

HOW MUCH TIME WILL THE ACTIVITY TAKE?

Our engaging activities will take 1.25 days. We will work with adults in your life to make sure they take place after school hours or on the weekend to not disrupt your studies. We will ask you what hours work best for you.

ARE THERE GOOD THINGS AND BAD THINGS ABOUT BEING PART OF THE PROJECT?

What we learn in this project from you and your peers will be used to support future programs and policies for children and young people. In any experience there may be pieces you do not enjoy. If there are you do not have to join in.

IF I SAY YES TO BEING IN THE PROJECT DO I HAVE TO ANSWER ALL THE QUESTIONS?

If I ask you questions that you do not want to answer, then please tell us you do not want to answer those questions or simply abstain. If we ask you to do things you do not want to do, then tell us that you do not want to do them. You can say no and choose not to participate at any time.

WHO WILL KNOW I WAS PART OF THIS ACTIVITY?

The things you say and any information we write about you will not have your name with it, so no one will know they are your answers or the things that you did. The researchers will not let anyone other than themselves see your answers or any

other information about you. Your teachers, parents, community members will never see the answers you gave or the information we wrote about you. Your peers who are in the same activity will hear what you say but they will be asked to keep confidence. For your safety we will not include your name in any research reports.

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

NO! You do not have to be in the activity. No one will get angry or upset with you if you don't want to do this. And remember, if you decide to be in the project and later if you change your mind, then you can tell us you do not want to be in the study anymore.

QUESTIONS?

You can ask questions at any time. You can ask now or you can ask later. You can talk to me or you can talk to someone else at any time during the study. You can reach me at [insert local phone numbers where applicable] or by email at [INSERT RESEARCHERS EMAIL]. If you want to speak to someone else involved in the project, you can also contact [INSERT TERRES DES HOMMES DETAILS]

Look forward to learning from you!

Best,

[INSERT RESEARCHERS NAME]

CHILD AND YOUTH CONSENT FORM

- ☐ I understand what the activity is about
- ☐ I know what my part will be in the activity and I know how long it will take
- ☐ I have had the chance to ask questions about the activity
- ☐ I know that I can say I do not want to participate at any time and stop taking part
- ☐ I agree to having photos taken of the things I make in the research and taken and my voice recorded (no photos of my face will be taken)
- ☐ I agree to being a part of this project

If you want to be a part of this project, please print and sign your name below and ask your parent or guardian to print and sign their name below too. You can still be a part of this study if you do not want your photo taken, voice recorded, or video taken.

Your name, printed: _____

Date: _____

Your signature: _____

Date: _____

Your parent or guardian's name: _____

Your parent or guardian's signature: _____

Your parent or guardian's phone number: _____

Your parent or guardian's email: _____

Informed Consent Form- Adults

Purpose of the project: This project aims to

Researcher: My name is BLANK and I am [INSERT TWO SENTENCES FOR EACH RESEARCHER]

For any questions or concerns you can contact me and/or a member of my team at: INSERT EMAILS

Benefits of being a part of this project: What we learn in this project from you and your peers will be used to. We will provide refreshments.

Procedure: Participation will include engaging in BLANK activities over one day. All foreseeable risks and discomforts: The study will ask questions involving violence in and around schools for children and young people in your community. Some questions may cause some discomfort if you by chance reflect upon an unpleasant memory. If you feel uncomfortable at any point in time you may choose not to answer a research question, and/or discontinue your participation temporarily or permanently. You can also choose to request that all your previous answers are not used in the project. If you are triggered and/or want, follow up support we will provide contact information for support services and follow up with you to find support.

Confidentiality: Your confidentiality will be maintained and your name will not be referred to in this research project if you do not want it to be. If you have any concerns after your participation, you can request to review the notes from our discussions. Your participation is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. If you share anything that puts yourself or others at harm, we will need to work together to follow up to find supports and report the situation.

Length of time involved: You are asked to contribute 0.5 day for the activities.

Recording and Transcription: Our discussion will be recorded and written out.

Agreement: Please sign this form for your consent.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date



Regional Research
**ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS IN
SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE**

Country Report: Bulgaria

In partnership with: International Institute for Child Rights
and Development & Child Hub

Researcher: Ivana Zecevic and Nela Marinkovic
Date: February 2021