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Areas for action to promote positive forms of masculinities in preventing violence against women: a concept mapping study in Spain

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Abstract

Background Violence against women (VAW) perpetrated by men is a public health problem of significant magnitude that negatively affects the whole society. Unequal gender relations produce differentiated positions in the social structure; gender roles that position men and women differently are defined and which are at the root of VAW. Framed within the European PositivMasc project, the aim of this study was to identify the areas for action to promote positive masculinities in preventing VAW in Spain, based on community stakeholders' perceptions on their importance and applicability.

Methods A concept mapping study was carried out, involving a comprehensive and systematic approach that employs both a qualitative and quantitative methodology, between September 2019 and February 2022 in Spain. The research was conducted with a diverse sample of young people, both feminist activists and non-activists, as well as various professionals in the field under study.

Results The results of this study showed that the lines of action in order of importance are: prevention through formal and informal education, general skills for the population, personal work with men, media and social campaigns, governmental and legal measures, activism and support to social organizations. In turn, the order of these lines of action according to applicability in the Spanish context was: media and social campaigns, prevention through formal and informal education, general skills for the population, support to social organizations, activism, personal work with men and governmental and legal measures. Consensus was observed among the participants of different socio-demographic profiles, both at a quantitative level in the scores obtained and at a qualitative level with the interpretations that reinforced the results.

Conclusions There is a need for a comprehensive multisectoral response involving different spaces to strengthen the scale, impact and sustainability of the efforts around anti-VAW masculinities. The evidence produced throughout this concept mapping study can contribute to inform policies to effectively prevent VAW by focusing on positive masculinities, ensuring they align with the perceptions and experiences of key community actors involved in the policy implementation process.

Keywords Spain, Concept mapping, Masculinities, Violence against women, Young people, Stakeholders, Prevention

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Background

Violence against women (VAW) perpetrated by men is a global public health problem of significant magnitude that negatively affects society as a whole. Data indicate that it is becoming more pervasive at earlier ages. At a global level, approximately 26% of ever-married/partnered adolescent girls aged between 15 and 19 have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate male partner at least once in their lifetime [1]. In Spain, the highest prevalence was found among women aged between 16 and 24, estimating that 46.4% of them have been victims of at least one kind of violence at some point in their lives [2]. VAW exposure increases the risk of severe physical and mental health problems and risky behaviours that can persist throughout women's lifetimes [3–5].

Unequal gender relations produce differentiated positions in the social structure; gender roles that position men and women differently are defined and which are at the root of VAW. Gender relations revolve around a hegemonic masculinity, which has been linked to emotional control, risk-taking, competitiveness, homophobia and VAW acceptability, among others [6]. In the specific context of Spain, several studies have been carried out as part of the European PositivMasc project [7] to explore discourses on masculinities and identify strategies to promote non-violent masculinities. In the results, young people indicate that a socially dominant discourse is practically unaltered despite years going by, where femininity is perceived as subject to the mandates of masculinity and entails meeting beauty standards for men, care work and vulnerability; while masculinity is linked to being emotionally and physically strong, secure, brave, tough and boasting about an active sex life, among others [8, 9]. Moreover, young people also explain that the dominant ways of understanding masculinity and femininity in current society interact and are elaborated in close relation to sexual orientation. The social reality they describe is driven by the male-female dichotomy, where masculinity is in opposition to femininity, under the umbrella of heteronormativity. Masculinity is understood as the power position in a system of gender relations; and heterosexuality as the socially accepted sexual orientation. Interactions among both dimensions are a mechanism to provide feedback and perpetuate the existing subordinations, violence and constraints [8].

The victimization and perpetration of violence are associated with ideas closely linked to sexism and machismo, including among younger generations [10]. Machismo and sexism reinforce male domination and female subordination, forming part of the roots causes of VAW. Along these lines, hegemonic masculinity in Spain involves a recurrent public demonstration of emotional censorship, hypersexuality, aggressiveness, or rejecting

any need for help, among other behaviors [9]. Men whose identity is built around the mandates of hegemonic masculinity are more likely to use VAW [11, 12]. In order to eradicate VAW, men should be involved in strategies to promote positive changes in gender relations towards equality. Different authors employ terms, such as caring masculinities [13], protest masculinities [14] or inclusive masculinities [15], among others, to reference forms of masculinity that challenge the gender order. However, in this study, we use the term “positive masculinities” as an umbrella to refer to non-violent, inclusive, caring, egalitarian, empathetic, responsible and healthy masculinities that constitute active practices for gender justice [7].

Giving room for positive and egalitarian expressions of masculinities, and equal gender relations in general, is integrated in the gender-transformative approach [16]. When applied to VAW prevention strategies, this approach aims to work on attitudes, behaviours and community structures to engage men and women in more equitable and non-violent relationships. Addressing hegemonic masculinities and promoting equalitarian gender relations in gender-transformative educational interventions targeted at the younger population (girls and boys) may be effective in reducing VAW risk exposure and perpetration at both an individual and a community level [17].

Although masculinities are a relevant topic at the academic and scientific levels, the incorporation of this concept into the general public discourse, as well as into Spanish national public strategies, programs, activities, or legislation in favor of gender equality, is still incipient. The explicit mention of men in Organic Law 1/2004 of Measures of Integral Protection Against Gender Violence and the State Pact against Gender-based Violence (2018–2022) is limited to legal measures towards perpetrators and psychological treatment, as well as educational interventions as potential target groups [18]. Although Organic Law 1/2004 emphasized the importance of involving men in this social problem, it was not until 2022 that the work on masculinities and the engagement of men in fighting against VAW through campaigns, training and institutional support of men's programs for the promotion of equality and feminism and specialized resources in male violence was included in the State Strategy Against Sexist Violence 2022–2025 [19].

Despite its novelty in Spanish public policies, it has to be mentioned other initiatives promoted by both, public and private organizations such as “Hombres por la Igualdad” (Men for Equality), created in 1999. This program, the first of its kind in the country, seeks to involve men in the fight against IPV and the promotion of equality by organizing educational and awareness-raising activities. Since 2006, various men's networks and groups have emerged that question traditional values of masculinity,

such as the “Interprovincial Network for Reflection on Male Models.” In addition, organizations such as the Cepaim Foundation and the Aspacia Foundation work with aggressors with an intersectional approach, while the Gizonduz program, launched in 2007, promotes positive forms of masculinity and addresses issues such as sexual harassment and violence prevention [18].

When designing lines of action focused on the role of masculinities in preventing VAW, it is key to include people from different standpoints and backgrounds. Not only professionals with extensive experience in the field of VAW and masculinities are essential, but also people involved in feminist activism due to their gender consciousness-raising efforts, aspirations and knowledge that can be translated into possible actions [20, 21]. In Spanish society, discursive differences have been evidenced around masculinities and VAW in young people depending on their involvement or not in feminist activism, as well as according to their sexual orientation and gender [8, 22]. Therefore, this research has considered these aspects of diversity, social complexity, context-specificities and power.

Framed within the European PositivMasc project, the aim of this study was to identify the areas for action to promote positive masculinities in preventing VAW in Spain, based on community stakeholders’ perceptions on their importance and applicability. The research was conducted with a diverse sample of young people, both feminist activists and non-activists, as well as various professionals in the field under study.

Methods

We conducted a concept mapping study, which is a comprehensive and systematic approach that employs both a qualitative and quantitative methodology [23]. The concept mapping study allowed us to explore, enunciate, identify, visualize and prioritize actions to be improved, changed or incentivized through the following sequential

phases: (1) generation of ideas in brainstorming, (2) structuring of ideas in sorting and rating and (3) interpretation of results with participants (see Fig. 1). In this sense, this approach is based on a process of co-creation, from brainstorming to the interpretation and analysis of the results. These phases were conducted from September 2019 to February 2022.

Study sample, selection criteria and recruitment

The sample included two profiles: young people (feminist activists and non-activists) and professionals (from different fields of masculinities and VAW). In our interest to capture the integrative thinking that is required to effectively evaluate strategies, the sample was not considered as a homogenous group, but a heterogeneous one. In order to achieve diversity in the sample, the four lenses in community health were considered: programmatic, relational, collective action and critical lenses, as proposed in Schneider et al. [24]. In relation to the programmatic lens, which especially focuses on the programme design and strategies, we involved people from the Spanish Ministry of Health, the Government Delegation for VAW and government centres for equality. Regarding the relational lens, which is more focused on implementing programmes and strategies, participation from federations, institutes and commissions working with different groups on VAW and masculinities was sought. For the collective action, which brings together the perspectives, priorities and actions of communities, we relied on young people actively participating in different non-profit associations that are part of the feminist activism movement. In terms of the critical lens, we sought academics specialized in positive masculinities, as well as young people not involved in the topic under study in any way as they were independent from institutional dynamics that could be present in other groups and, therefore, the dominant discourses were examined to bring to the surface the often invisible societal forces.

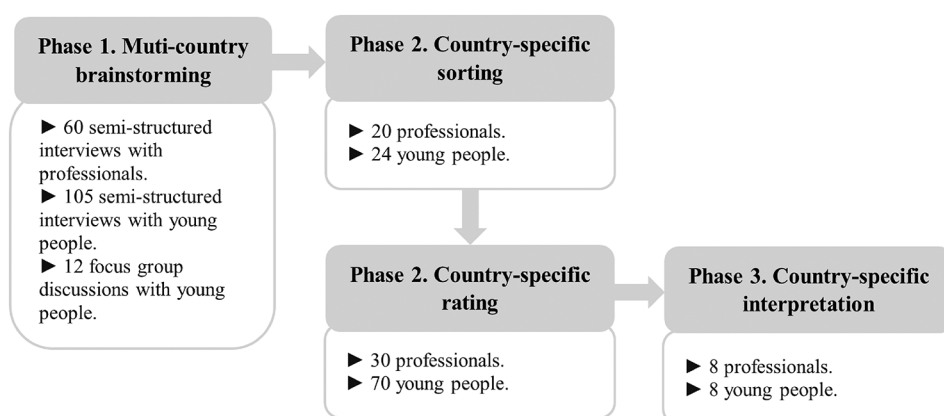


Fig. 1 Study sample and phases

The selection criteria for the young people was age (between 18 and 24 years of age), as well as their level of involvement in the object of study (active participation in non-profit feminist associations and no kind of participation). Regarding the criteria applied for the sample of professionals, these included working at a government organization, non-government organization or being self-employed, as previously mentioned in the four lenses. The ages of the professionals ranged from 26 to 72. Likewise, for both the sample of young people and professionals, sex (man and woman) and sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual) were considered to guarantee a diverse final sample.

Recruitment efforts for young people included contacting education institutions and community organizations working with young people, word of mouth, online advertising through social networks, university websites, offline advertising through flyers, etc. For this reason, the final exhibition included young people from different backgrounds and disciplines. In order to recruit professionals, the research team conducted a mapping of the professionals in the field of VAW and positive masculinities mentioned in the four lenses. An extensive contact process was carried out and snowball sampling was also used to reach out to other relevant stakeholders. The sample in Spain was mainly recruited in Alicante and Madrid.

Multi-country starting point: brainstorming

The generation of ideas began with a collaboration between Israel, Ireland, Sweden and Spain, as part of a multi-country study [25] within the framework of the European PositivMasc project [7], in order to achieve a broad and consolidated list of strategies to promote anti-VAW masculinities.

Phase 1: brainstorming

As a starting point, a multi-country brainstorming process was conducted with a sample from Israel, Ireland, Sweden and Spain (for more information see [25]). A total of 105 semi-structured interviews with young people, 60 semi-structured interviews with professionals in the field of masculinities and VAW and 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) with 88 young people were carried out (see Fig. 1). Specifically, the Spanish sample included a total of 20 interviews with young people, 20 interviews with professionals, and 4 FGDs. This first phase was developed between September 2019 and May 2020. The following focus questions were raised in the semi-structured interviews and FGDs to generate ideas on how to promote positive masculinities to prevent VAW: (1) What can be done to promote masculinities that oppose VAW among young men in your country? How so?; (2) In order to reduce VAW and promote positive and non-violent

forms of manhood among young men, we should... The fieldwork was conducted in person or by Zoom (due to the COVID-19 restrictions imposed in 2020) in the language of each country.

The research teams of the four countries conducted an inductive analysis, based on the ideas provided by the participants. A careful synthesis of the ideas was made, rewording them into clear statements in order to express the participant's ideas. The result was 41 strategies in total (for more information see [25]). However, in analyzing the specificity of the results in Spain, we decided to eliminate one strategy from the list ("Provide or expand rehabilitation programmes for men who perpetrate VAW, such as anger management treatment") as the idea did not emerge in the fieldwork in Spain and, therefore, it was not applied to our context.

Country-specific focus: sorting, rating and interpretation

Once the list of strategies resulting from the PositivMasc multi-country study [25] was obtained, the following phases were undertaken at the local level in Spain (see Fig. 1). This study refers to the sorting, rating and interpretation phases that were carried out with a sample from Spain to assess the list of strategies in this specific context and, therefore, obtain country-specific knowledge. The Spanish brainstorming sample was invited to participate in these phases.

Phase 2: sorting and rating

We transferred the list of 40 strategies to the Groupwisdom software (The Concept System®) where the sorting and rating phases were conducted online between July 2020 and December 2021. Table 1 demonstrates the information on sex, sexual orientation and type of relation with the topic of the study. Regarding the rating phase, as well as using the same participants as the sorting phase, more participants were invited to take part in order to reach a sufficient quantity of quantitative data to be able to identify priorities and compare the average among the different profiles. However, two participants did not indicate their sex, therefore they were not included when analyzing the differences according to sex. They were included, nonetheless, when analyzing the differences with other variables. Participants were sent a link to the programme, alongside a video with instructions on how to complete the sorting and rating activities individually, as well as contact details in the event of having any doubts.

On the one hand, in the sorting phase, the participants individually classified and ordered the list of 40 strategies into groups according to the themes that made sense to them and they gave each group a descriptive title. On the other hand, in the rating phase, each strategy was given points according to: (1) the importance in promoting

Table 1 Socio-demographic profile of the sample in the sorting, rating and interpretation phases

		SORTING		RATING		INTERPRETATION	
		Heterosexual	LGB	Heterosexual	LGB	Heterosexual	LGB
PROFESSIONALS	Woman	6	5	7	7	2	2
	Man	7	2	11	5	2	2
YOUNG PEOPLE	Activist woman	3	4	6	7	1	1
	Activist man	2	2	4	4	0	1
	Unreported sex, activist	0	0	0	1	0	0
	Non-activist woman	2	3	10	10	1	1
	Non-activist man	5	3	19	8	2	1
	Unreported sex, non-activist	0	0	0	1	0	0
TOTAL		44		100		16	

Source: Own elaboration

positive masculinities in preventing VAW; and (2) applicability when implementing them in the socio-demographic context of Spain. Each strategy was awarded points from 1 (not important at all/very hard to apply) to 6 (very important/very easy to apply) using a Likert scale.

A hierarchical cluster analysis and a multidimensional scaling analysis were developed with the collected data in the Groupwisdon software. A series of visual maps (cluster maps, pattern match maps and go-zone maps) were generated to identify thematic clusters, agreements and disagreements, and areas of consensus for action [23]. Cluster maps solutions ranging from two to twelve were evaluated by the research team, and later with the participants in the interpretation phase, with concept accuracy and coherence.

Phase 3: Interpretation in a participatory group session

The interpretation phase worked on the results obtained in the sorting and rating phases with the participants. Therefore, a space was generated where they could be interpreted, debated, improved and validated in a participatory group manner. The participatory sessions were organized at the University of Alicante in February 2022. As this session was held in Alicante, participants who were interviewed in this city for the brainstorming phase (and participated in the following phases) were recontacted via email. From the people contacted, only one professional was not available to attend. A total of 16 people attended (8 young people and 8 professionals).

This session was facilitated by the authors of this manuscript. It began by reviewing the statements and the clusters. The 16 participants were then divided into groups of 4 (1 with young people, 1 with professionals and 2 combining both profiles) and they jointly examined the appropriateness of the clusters generated by the analysis (cluster map) and established whether the items within each cluster were coherent, whether the clusters could be combined or divided or whether the titles were suitable. They later shared their opinions and debates emerged. Finally, different maps were exposed as a result of this

analysis (pattern match and go-zone maps) that were used to collect the interpretation of some of the obtained results.

This study was conducted in compliance with the international ethical principles applicable to research on humans (latest revision of the Declaration of Helsinki). Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the University of Alicante (reference number UA-2019-04–15) to carry out this study. Participation was voluntary and the participants were able to withdraw from the study. Written informed consent was obtained prior to enrolment with information about the study aims, participant's rights, confidentiality protection, how the study was to be developed and how to contact the main researcher. Confidentiality was protected at all times according to the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (2016/679).

Results

The results of this concept mapping study in Spain combine quantitative and qualitative data from the individual phases (sorting and rating) and the group phase (interpretation). The participants in the last phase (interpretation) proposed improvements for the sorting results and agreed to the rating results, therefore their assessment coincided. The results of the sorting and rating phases are described below, complemented by those of the interpretation phase, to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the sorting of areas for action and the importance and applicability ratings to identify priorities.

Sorting of areas for action

The final list of 40 strategies resulting from the brainstorming phase was sorted into a final cluster solution of 7 thematic areas of action to promote positive forms of masculinities in preventing VAW in Spain (see Table 2): “1. Personal work with men”, “2. Activism”, “3. General skills for the population”, “4. Prevention through formal and informal education”, “5. Governmental and legal measures”, “6. Media and social campaigns”, and

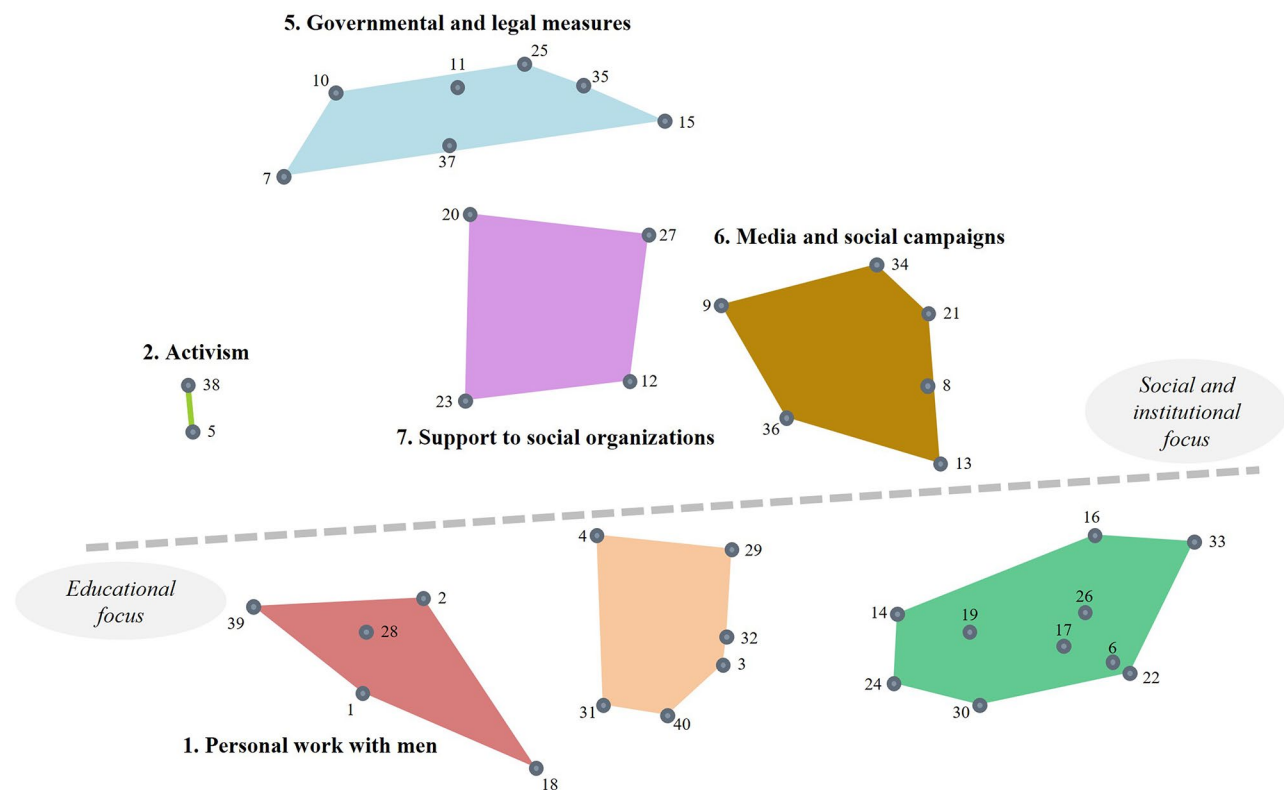
Table 2 Clusters, statements and average ratings

CLUSTER SOLUTION		STATEMENTS	AVERAGE RATINGS	
			Importance	Applicability
Cluster 1. Personal work with men			4.95	3.67
1	Develop men's skills to help them reject peer pressure and macho norms.		5.13	3.28
2	Help men identify and recognize that they have the qualities and abilities to contribute in preventing violence against women.		4.90	3.86
28	Promote men's empathy towards women experiencing violence, including understanding its effects on their lives.		4.78	3.69
39	Provide a non-judgmental space for men to reflect on how their behaviors can foster violence against women.		4.50	3.70
18	Develop men's and boys' skills to recognize, manage and express feelings in a non-violent way.		5.44	3.82
Cluster 2. Activism			4.21	3.85
5	Provide men who reject violence against women with a wider public platform to speak out.		3.58	3.87
38	Establish a wide activist movement that opposes violence against women and rejects violent forms of manhood.		4.84	3.83
Cluster 3. General skills for the population			5.06	4.02
3	Promote positive, non-violent and respectful forms of parenting in parents' groups during antenatal /post-natal care.		5.19	4.28
4	Use personal stories of women who have experienced different forms of violence as an educational tool.		4.51	4.64
29	Promote understanding among men and women on how different groups of women experience violence differently, based on class, race, ethnicity and citizenship status.		5.08	4.03
31	Educate men on how gender roles and violence against women can harm their own health, happiness, and wellbeing.		4.90	3.97
32	Develop women's and men's skills on how to recognize and actively prevent and stop violence against women.		5.36	3.77
40	Educate men to recognize how their upbringing, society, and life-experiences influence their attitudes, values and behaviors towards violence against women.		5.29	3.41
Cluster 4. Prevention through formal and informal education			5.17	4.17
6	Educate parents, children and young people on the negative impacts of using pornography.		4.99	4.01
14	Educate about positive and nonviolent forms of manhood and prevention of violence against women in sports organizations and clubs.		4.87	4.04
16	Support teachers to question their own prejudices on gender norms and violence against women.		5.06	4.43
17	Educate young people to recognize and reject gender stereotypes in the media and popular culture.		5.17	4.19
19	Provide education on what healthy, positive and non-violent forms of being a man looks like.		5.17	4.21
22	Implement mandatory sex education and sexual consent education in schools, universities and community programmes.		5.54	3.86
24	Educate men and women of how non-violent, trustworthy, and respectful romantic relationships look like.		5.25	4.24
26	Implement after school activities where students discuss norms around gender and violence.		4.56	4.31
30	Raise boys to respect women, reject violence against women and oppose unequal gender norms.		5.57	4.69
33	Ensure that age-appropriate compulsory education about gender stereotypes and equality and violence against women is integrated across the school curriculum, starting at a young age.		5.48	3.70
Cluster 5. Governmental and legal measures			4.56	3.36
7	Promote restrictive access for pornography only for adults.		3.77	2.40
10	Have longer sentences for people who commit acts of violence against women.		3.94	3.13
11	Change the way the criminal justice system treats rape cases to understand the specific difficulties faced by rape victims, and to be more attentive towards their experiences.		5.41	2.77
15	Appoint more women in the process of policy decision-making regarding violence against women.		5.24	4.29
25	Establish special units of police trained to identify and prevent violence against women.		4.72	3.66
35	Establish a central government unit to improve coordination between different organizations, services and programmes working towards non-violent forms of manhood.		4.38	3.39
37	Promote governmental support for men taking paternity leave and undertaking caregiving tasks/roles.		4.42	3.87
Cluster 6. Media and social campaigns			4.58	4.36
8	Educate about prevention of violence against women in work places.		4.65	4.16
13	Present male role models who reject violence against women to children and young people in families and communities and to give lectures, classes and programmes.		4.61	4.76
21	Promote age-relevant and relatable mass media representations of positive and non-violent forms of manhood.		4.89	4.10
34	Recruit high profile public figures (actors, football players, film makers) to promote gender equality, and non-violent forms of manhood, that reject violence against women.		4.18	4.65

Table 2 (continued)

CLUSTER SOLUTION	STATEMENTS	AVERAGE RATINGS	
		Importance	Applicability
9	Promote continuous, fresh, and relevant male-led campaigns designed to prevent and reject violence against women and promote gender equality.	3.99	4.40
36	Raise public awareness about the problem and extent of violence against women, and the public responsibility in preventing it.	5.18	4.11
Cluster 7. Support to social organizations		4.17	3.74
12	Promote forms of manhood that reject violence against women in religious institutions, meetings, and congregations.	4.62	2.90
23	Support and train youth groups, youth movements, student unions, gaming clubs, and different associations to promote a culture of gender equality and reject violent forms of manhood.	4.79	4.25
27	Establish an award and quality ratings for organizations and educational institutions that engage men for their work in preventing and tackling violence against women.	2.79	4.12
20	Provide on-going financial security to activists and organizations which promote non-violent forms of manhood in preventing violence against women.	4.50	3.67

Source: Own elaboration

**Fig. 2** Cluster map of areas for action to promote positive forms of masculinities in preventing VAW. Source: Own elaboration

“7. Support to social organizations”. These results incorporate the suggested improvements from the interpretation phase which included: modifications to the titles of clusters 6 and 7, move statement 18 of cluster 3 to 1 and move statement 20 from cluster 5 to 7. Regarding the other matters, the participants agreed with the ideas that were represented.

These areas for action were represented as shown in the cluster map in Fig. 2 and divided into two domains: “Social and institutional focus” and “Educational focus”.

The four clusters (no. 2, 5, 6, and 7) in the domain “Social and institutional focus” included straightforward actions to modify the judicial system, to strengthen social and governmental organizations, as well as to improve different public platforms to promote change in society. The three clusters (no. 1, 3, and 4) in the domain “Educational focus” included formal and informal gender equality educational actions targeted at developing skills, abilities and understandings about gender norms and VAW.

The “Activism” cluster stands out due to being far from the other clusters and being smaller in size, as it only includes 2 strategies (items 5 and 38). The participants reported in the interpretation session that the uniqueness of this cluster could be due to the fact that activism is considered to originate and be promoted by means of strategies proposed in other clusters. Among other examples, they mentioned *“if we work in education, this could promote that they believe they are activists”* (Young girl).

Importance and applicability ratings to identify priorities

In line with the action priorities, Table 2 offers an overview of the average ratings according to importance and applicability of each of the clusters and strategies. In the interpretation phase, the professionals and young people agreed on the order of priorities. Therefore, they provided qualitative information and arguments that explained the quantitative results obtained.

The clusters “Prevention through formal and informal education” (5.17) and “General skills for the population” (5.06) were considered the most important in promoting anti-VAW positive masculinities. This is also in accordance with what was explained in the interpretation phase, where formal and informal education were outlined as the root of culture that favours violent masculinities against women. Thus, the participants highlighted that it is essential to start here in order to generate change.

“Education is the centre of preventing gender-based violence, it is where all masculinities originate from, where all the later problems come from. So, if you educate from the root, it is more important than carrying out other measures” (Young non-activist boy).

On the other hand, “Support to social organizations” (4.17) and “Activism” (4.21) were rated with the lowest level of importance. In this sense, the participants in the interpretation phase indicated that it is paramount to focus on proposals that directly act and impact the private scope, in critical self-reviews of gender relations, leaving those in the public and organizational scope for the end.

“In the end, positive masculinity is reached better through more personal work, by seeing how you can improve, understand why it is a good thing to improve and that does not mean any kind of attack towards your masculinity, and this is not reached from social and institutional strategies” (Young activist boy).

The ratings on applicability in the socio-demographic context of Spain were overall lower than those of importance. The clusters with the highest rating on applicability were “Media and social campaigns” (4.36) and “Prevention through formal and informal education” (4.17). Regarding the former, the participants explained in the interpretation session that as there have been prior campaigns on the prevention of gender-based violence in different public media by the Spanish government, this area is therefore observed as the most possible one to be applied in this context. On the other hand, the second cluster involves different kinds of gender equality education strategies and in different social scopes: schools, family, the media and popular culture, partner relationships, community programmes, etc. The professionals explained that this cluster can be more applicable as it can implicate gender equality educational actions in the different scopes of the social structure.

“All the results are telling us that it is clear that this is a structural problem, a social structure problem, so to work on the structure and building another kind of society, the base in the end is education. Education represents the social structure” (Professional woman).

The lowest rated clusters in applicability were “Governmental and legal measures” (3.36) and “Personal work with men” (3.67). Despite the young people and professionals proposing governmental and legal measures, they agreed in the interpretation session that they are unrealistic temporary patches and without long-term continuity. They showed a *“clear hopelessness”* (Professional man) in terms of the ability to generate changes in the face of political instability in the Spanish system.

“We are used to four-year temporary government policies that do not address the problem at the root of it” (Professional woman).

“Real governmental and legal measures need time. While the new law is proposed, voted, generated, drafted, comes into force... it is very difficult. We are part of a highly fractioned political framework and all those gender-based violence measures and those related to masculinity represent the red lines between the left- and right-wing parties. When one takes a step forward, the first thing the other one does it take a step back. Applicability is low because, although a step forward can be taken, that step is not definitive, but at any moment it could disappear” (Young non-activist girl).

Working on skills, qualities and personal issues with men was pointed out as having low applicability for several

reasons. In their interpretation, they outlined the fact that focusing on men can be difficult as their privileges in gender relations come into play. In turn, they indicated that it could not be too motivating due to the diverse reinforcing factors of “toxic masculinity” (Young activist girl). Furthermore, they mentioned that the benefits of involving men in gender-based violence prevention is not clear and, for this reason, they can feel that it is something that does not involve them or they may even feel attacked.

“Many men do not want to [work on skills, qualities and personal issues] because they do not feel comfortable. They are used to certain behaviours, so the fact that they have to think and change it... some people are not interested in that, but because they are not sure on the benefits of it” (Young activist girl).

Similarities and disparities among different socio-demographic profiles

In order to explore possible similarities and disparities among the participants in the ratings as previously mentioned, according to socio-demographic profiles, different pattern match maps were created with the average clusters importance and applicability ratings. In particular, comparisons were made according to their relation to the topic of study (professionals, young activists and young non-activists), sex (man, woman) and sexual orientation (heterosexuals homosexuals and bisexuals). Each pattern match contains Pearson product-moment

correlations. The results demonstrate that the participants with different socio-demographic profiles scored the different areas for action similarly, as all of them had $r > 0.90$ (see Supplementary Material). The only exception was in the applicability between professionals and young non-activists ($r = 0.73$) (see Fig. 3). The “Personal work with men” cluster is especially highlighted, where young non-activists positioned it as the 5th most applicable and the professionals as the least applicable of them all.

The go-zone of priorities

Finally, a go-zone map was obtained (see Fig. 4) where the 40 strategies are placed in one of the four quadrants based on how they were scored from 1 to 6 in importance and applicability. The items found in the green quadrant were those actions considered highly applicable and highly important, representing a clear and priority focus of action. The Pearson product-moment correlation is low ($r = 0.10$), which means that participants who rated statements as very important did not necessarily rate them as very applicable for the Spanish context.

Strategies with the highest ratings for both importance and applicability (items 15, 16 and 30) referred to meliorating informal and formal gender equality education and policy decision-making (see Table 3). This is in line with what a professional woman explained during the interpretation session.

“If we do a general reading of the results, we can find three target points. One is early childhood education, which obviously, thinking of building a more

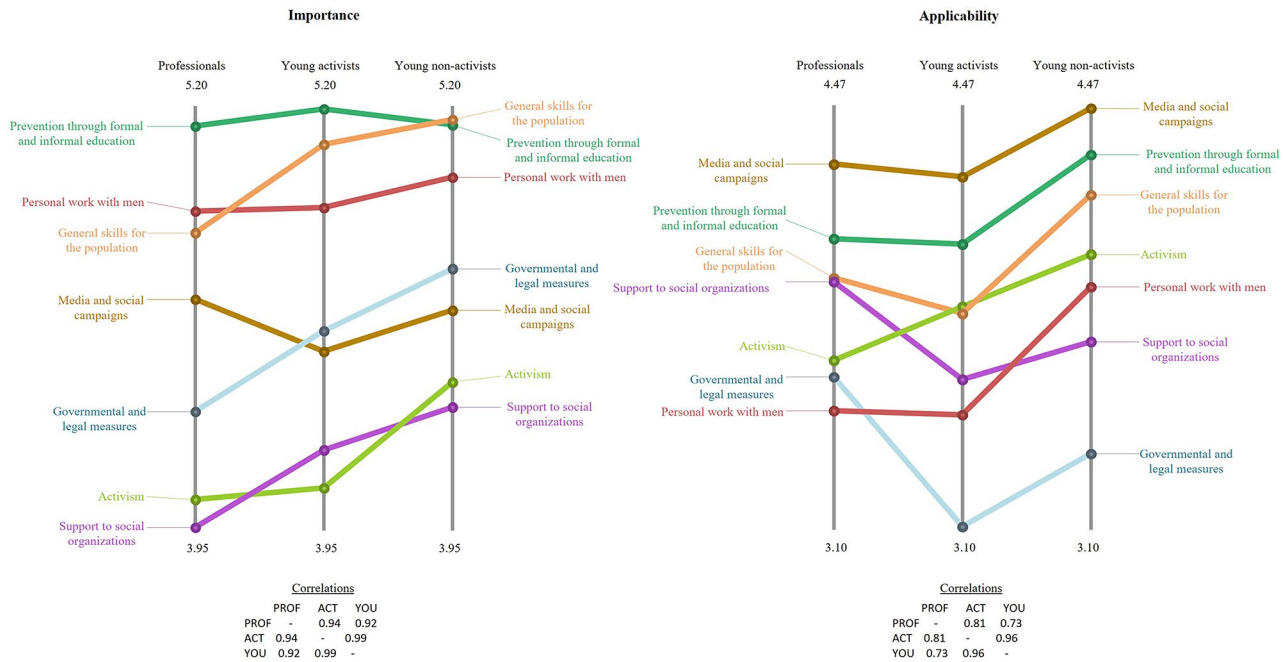


Fig. 3 Pattern match comparison of average cluster importance and applicability ratings according to participant's relation to the topic. Source: Own elaboration

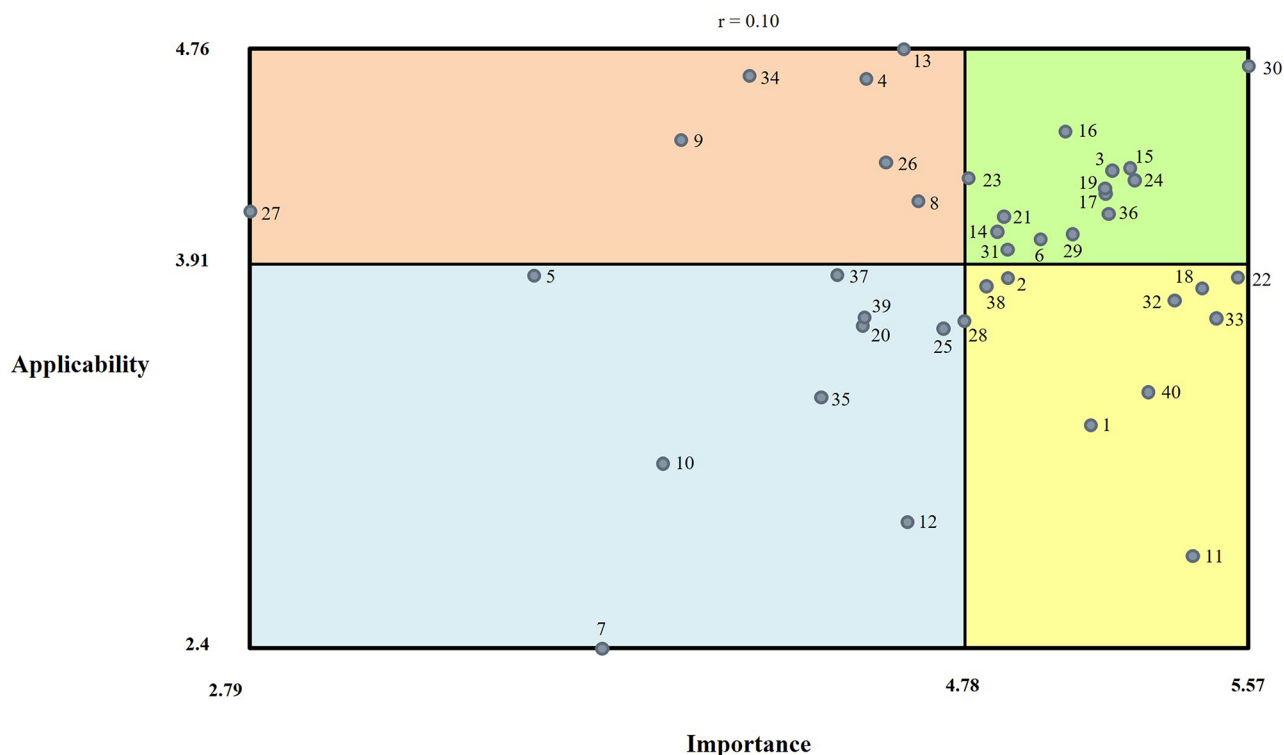


Fig. 4 Go-zone map to promote positive masculinities in preventing VAW. Source: Own elaboration

Table 3 Summary of the most and least important and applicable strategies

The most 3 important and applicable strategies	The least 3 important and applicable strategies
30. Raise boys to respect women, reject violence against women and oppose unequal gender norms.	7. Promote restrictive access for pornography only for adults.
16. Support teachers to question their own prejudices on gender norms and violence against women.	10. Have longer sentences for people who commit acts of violence against women.
15. Appoint more women in the process of policy decision-making regarding violence against women.	5. Provide men who reject violence against women with a wider public platform to speak out.

Source: Own elaboration

egalitarian society, ultimately has to be a long-term objective. Another is the focus on teachers, because in the end they are people of reference for those boys and girls who we intend to educate and it is good that the idea of questioning their own prejudices appears. Here we have a hint of the importance of that personal work that all this implies. And finally, item 15 points to how important it is to see the active part of women in all of this, because women seem to be passive subjects on whom violence can be exercised or who can be saved from violence. Women have lots to say on all of this and women also need to be heard when designing policies or proposals or include them in the process” (Professional woman).

The strategies with the lowest ratings for importance and applicability (items 5, 7 and 10) involve changes in pornography, the legal system and activism (see Table 3). Throughout the interpretation session, the participants mentioned that the proposal of item 10 is not considered a solution at the root of the problem. As for item 7, the young people outlined that controlling access to pornography on the internet is very difficult. Regarding item 5, they explained that activism faces two problems in particular: firstly, the rise in online social networks has meant that the nature of the movement and social transformation of activism has faded and, secondly, there is a generalized concept that activism is negative.

“Right now there are ways you can feel like an activist, even if you are not, such as on Twitter, Instagram, etc. So, as we have other tools nowadays that make you feel like an activist, whether you are one or not, all of that fades away (...) Nowadays activism is seen as something negative, it represents something negative, something extreme, the purpose is not seen, but it is considered as something to attract attention” (Professional woman).

Discussion

This concept mapping study has enabled to gather diverse areas for action to promote positive masculinities in preventing VAW and to create visual maps which represent

the participant's ideas in an efficient and practical way. The results of this study display that the lines of action that could be implemented according to order of importance are: prevention through formal and informal education, general skills for the population, personal work with men, media and social campaigns, governmental and legal measures, activism and support to social organizations. Furthermore, the order of said lines of action according to applicability in the Spanish context is: media and social campaigns, prevention through formal and informal education, general skills for the population, support to social organizations, activism, personal work with men and governmental and legal measures. Despite the fact that previous studies in Spain [8, 22] have identified different discourses on masculinities and VAW among young people according to the relation with the topic of study, sex and sexual orientation, this study has demonstrated that there has been a considerable consensus in the areas for action, both at a quantitative level in the scores obtained, and at a qualitative level with the interpretations that reinforced these results. In general, the participants interpreted that there is a need to implement community-based strategies where the entire population (families, teachers, public figures.), including men and women, should participate in order to transform gender power relations that permeate the aforementioned strategic spheres.

In coherence with the definition of the gender-transformative approach itself [16], our participants assembled diverse areas for action sought to transform gender roles and promote more gender-equitable relationships, mostly targeted at men and boys, but also including women and girls. These proposals encompass different levels of gender relations (interpersonal, institutional and social) and interventions (mass media, associations, activism, policies, personal skills, formal and informal education). The promotion of positive masculinities in preventing VAW is pictured as a social innovation that needs a multisectoral strategic response [26, 27]. Our results highlighted an agenda of proposals that involve different sectors and social actors in order to promote skills, change attitudes, improve knowledge and reinforce the willingness to develop social change.

Our participants outlined that gender equality education is the main driving force for social change, where the strategies considered as most important and more applicable are concentrated. Said strategies involve work around masculinities and VAW across different formal (schools, high schools, universities) and informal (sports teams, clubs) settings. In both settings, not only should students benefit from a gender equality syllabus, but also teachers and community-based workers to guarantee that they are well-trained facilitators. Parent training interventions were also considered to be powerful measures

to promote masculinities in order to reduce VAW, which are already established in several countries. An example is the global MenCare campaign to promote more respectful and egalitarian relationships with mothers and children [28]. The Lights4Violence project in Spain has shown that educational strategies focused on equality helped to reduce sexism and machismo in certain groups of young people [29]. As mentioned by Tarde [30] in the field of social innovation, in this case, it is understood that the actors involved in formal and informal education have a central role in the processes of adoption and imitation of new forms of egalitarian masculinity. In fact, there is a growing body of evidence showing that educational interventions with a gender-transformative approach has proved to be effective in changing attitudes to traditional norms around masculinity and violence, as well as laying the groundwork for reducing the perpetration of VAW [14, 26, 28, 31]. As in other contexts, the participants in this study in Spain explained in their interpretations that socialization in male dominance and women's submissiveness occurs very early, therefore gender equality educational measures that involve the population from early adolescence onwards are encouraged [32–35].

In an effort to transform the current reality, “media and social campaigns” were considered to be a highly applicable area for action due to their ability to generate mobilization and the scope amongst the population. The high applicability perception could be due to the wide range of institutional campaigns against gender-based violence in Spain [36], as explained in the interpretation session. For years, different online and offline campaigns have been promoted by institutions, such as the Government of Spain, NGOs, trade unions, town halls, etc. to build awareness among citizens. However, it was not until 2022 that the Ministry of Equality of the Government of Spain included masculinity in one of its campaigns, encouraging men to experience it in a more committed, open and healthy way. The title of this campaign in Spanish was “El hombre blandengue” [37] which translates as “The wimp man”.

Promoting egalitarian masculinities to prevent gender-based violence is an emerging issue in VAW policies in Spain, as it happens in different contexts inside and outside the European Union [15]. Civil society organizations that have pioneered this line of work, particularly those formed by men's associations for equality, have not always been free from criticism. They have often been relegated to secondary recognition, reflecting what Kimmel [38] described as the necessity for feminism to prioritize the perspectives, positions, and experiences of women. Therefore, this could be the reason as the why our participants incorporated “Support to social organizations” in masculinity topics as a line of action but, in turn, they

considered it as one of the least important compared to the rest.

What we can add to the aforementioned is the difficulty of making men aware of the inequalities that are configured around the male androcentric position in society [38–40]. The participants in the interpretation session already mentioned that overcoming the resistance to change implies going through a process of deconstruction, active listening, loss of privileges and both individual and collective self-criticism that not everyone is willing to do. Although there are more and more groups of men in the process of transformation, masculine dissent does not mobilize many. Activist men in favour of egalitarian masculinities continue to be a minority [41, 42]. Furthermore, in Spain the commodification of activism around masculinities is a complex issue. For example, the work on the “new masculinities” is sometimes considered as fashionable and sometimes linked to the coach, where masculinities are reconfigured without necessarily getting rid of the privileges of hegemonic masculinity [39]. This complexity of involving men in real and committed work around anti-VAW masculinities is reflected in the low importance that participants of different profiles gave to the “Activism” cluster.

The results of this study confirm that carrying out measures that promote a critical analysis of men's privileges, from which they are able to take responsibility for them and surrender them, is crucial to prevent VAW [8]. However, as our participants interpreted and expressed, it is not easy to put into practice, rating the thematic cluster “Personal work with men” as not very applicable. Men have to place themselves in a “productive discomfort” [43] that translates into an exercise of disempowerment and commitment, removing an entire system of domination and losing privileges. Involving men in problematizing their own positions sometimes generates aggressive narratives [35, 41, 42, 44, 45]. Therefore, we can still observe a need for men to self-criticize their own debts in taking care of people, housework or bringing up children, among others [44–46] and for them to be aware that this hegemonic masculinity model does not only have negative consequences for women, girls and boys, but also for those who reproduce the mandates (mental health problems, emotionally empty relationships, risky behaviours...) [44].

Nonetheless, the applicability of the “Governmental and legal measures” were questioned, also achieving one of the lowest scores. Our participants, in line with what is underlined by the literature [28], expressed that government initiatives have often been event-driven and not sustainable over time. Research have highlighted the complex and unequal reactions that are generated among men in national and international legal and political efforts to promote gender equality [47, 48]. Although

there are responses that support and defend this, sometimes these measures are observed with apprehension, resistance and as an attack towards men's rights. This is also added to the Spanish political scene, in which right-wing parties have mobilized an anti-feminist discourse based on the rejection of “gender ideology” [49–51] that makes them unstable. The survey by the Spanish Center for Sociological Research in 2024 shows that 44.1% of men are “strongly” or “fairly in agreement” with the statement that “efforts to promote women's equality have gone so far that men are now being discriminated against” [52]. This movement by the opposition, fuelled by the return to power of the right wing in European politics [53], means a masculinist backlash especially developed in digital settings, commonly known as the *manosphere*, where misogynist discourses are mobilized [54].

The results of this study should be understood taking into account the following limitations. Despite making special emphasis on achieving a diverse sample, this study was unable to delve into factors such as racial, religious or ethnic differences that may moderate the community's perceptions. On the other hand, there is a chance that a part of the resulting areas for action were biased towards the areas for work by the activist participants and professionals. However, including young people not involved in the topic of study, whether professionally or regarding activism, could compensate said possible biases. Finally, the list of strategies that the participants in Spain used came from a multi-country study with participants also from Sweden, Ireland and Israel. However, this could be considered to being a strength, as we used a consistent and broad list that was later reviewed to guarantee that all the strategies were coherent with what emerged from the fieldwork in Spain.

Conclusions

In conclusion, our results provide knowledge about the key areas for action and priorities for community health on what can be accomplished to promote positive masculinities to prevent VAW involving, not only but particularly, men. In particular, information that guides personal work with men, activism, formal and informal gender equality education, governmental and legal measures, media and social campaigns, and social organizations is provided. It is clear that there is a need for a comprehensive multisectoral response involving different spaces to strengthen the scale, impact and sustainability of the efforts around anti-VAW masculinities. Coordination among said multisectoral responses will be key in order to work on different ecological levels, with different targets, and transform relationships, norms and mechanisms that sustain gender inequality and violence. The evidence produced throughout this concept mapping study are valuable for informing new policies aimed

at promoting positive masculinities in the prevention of VAW, ensuring they align with the perceptions and experiences of key community actors involved in the policy implementation process. While this does not guarantee success and the resulting policies will require formal evaluation, it can be considered a prerequisite for good practices, as it fosters a sense of ownership among participants and makes the policies more meaningful to them.

Abbreviations

VAW Violence Against Women

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-025-02385-7>.

Supplementary Material 1

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Author contributions

ACT: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing - original draft. BSB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing - review & editing. DLC: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing - review & editing. CVC: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology; Project administration, Resources, Writing - review & editing.

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Data availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due the fact that they involve sensitive information of the participants that may compromise their individual privacy but access to additional information may be possible under request to the project principal investigator (contact: carmen.vives@ua.es).

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the University of Alicante (reference number UA-2019-04–15) to carry out this study. Participation was voluntary and the participants were able to withdraw from the study. Written informed consent was obtained prior to enrolment with information about the study aims, participant's rights, confidentiality protection, how the study was to be developed and how to contact the main researcher. Confidentiality was protected at all times according to the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (2016/679).

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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