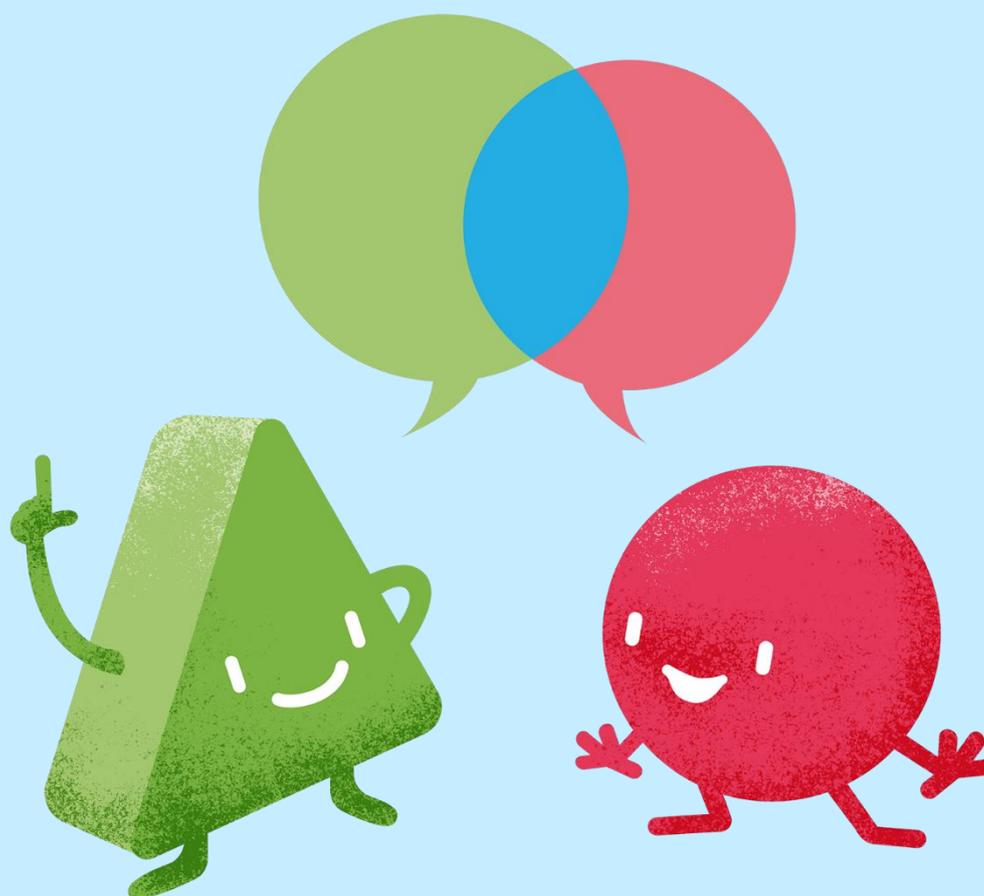


Applying Safe Behaviours:

Preventing and Responding to Peer Violence and Gender-Based Violence Amongst Vulnerable Children and Young People

Scoping Report

Geographic Scope: Albania, Bulgaria, Italy, Kosovo, Romania, and Sweden



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Applying
Safe
Behaviours

PREVENTING AND RESPONDING
TO PEER VIOLENCE



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IMPRESSUM

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INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a widespread and deeply rooted human rights violation across the EU and beyond, affecting individuals of all ages and backgrounds. It stems from **entrenched gender norms, discriminatory stereotypes, and unequal power relations** that shape behaviours and institutional practices. GBV manifests in diverse settings—within families, communities, workplaces, and digital spaces—and disproportionately affects women and girls, although boys and individuals with diverse gender identities also experience harm. Research indicates that girls are more frequently subjected to sexual and psychological violence, while boys are often exposed to physical forms of abuse (UN Women, 2021; EIGE, 2022).

According to multiple international agencies, including UNESCO, UN Women, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), and the World Health Organization (WHO), GBV is multifaceted and includes **physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence**. It can involve harassment, coercion, intimate partner violence, online abuse, and other forms of control and harm. These patterns are reinforced by persistent structural inequalities and cultural norms that sustain power imbalances (UN Women, 2021; WHO, 2021; EIGE, 2022).

Experts in the field (UNICEF, Plan International, UNFPA) emphasize that education, community engagement, and policy reform are critical to addressing the root causes of GBV. This includes challenging gender stereotypes and societal expectations related to masculinity, femininity, and gender expression that contribute to violence and discrimination (UNICEF, 2016; Plan International, 2020; UNFPA, 2019).

This Scoping Report has been developed as part of the EU co-funded project “Applying Safe Behaviours: Preventing and Responding to Peer Violence and Gender-Based Violence Amongst Vulnerable Children and Young People,” (2025-2027) which is implemented by SOS Children’s Villages and Terre des hommes in Bulgaria, Italy, Kosovo, Romania and Sweden. Through the scoping activities, we sought to understand gender-based risks for children and young people in each of the project countries, and how their experience of peer violence can differ depending on their age and gender.

The project is conceptualized through a socio-ecological model⁸ to GBV and peer on peer violence prevention and response, recognizing that violence is influenced by and impacts multiple levels of an individual’s environment—ranging from personal and interpersonal relationships to community and societal structures. Interventions are designed to activate protective factors across these levels, including capacity-building and awareness-raising for children, young people and the adults and professionals who care for and work with them, collaboration with community stakeholders, and advocacy for systemic policy change. By centring the needs and rights of affected individuals, especially children and youth, the project aims to contribute to a more integrated and sustainable response to gender-based peer on peer violence.

The aim of the report is to present the findings of the rapid scoping exercise conducted in **Bulgaria, Kosovo, Sweden, Italy, Romania and Albania**¹ related to gender-based peer on peer violence among children, young people, educational staff, and school management. The report is based on data collected through online and offline questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs) with children and youth in those countries.

Data for this study was gathered using a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative tools to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender-based peer violence across all European countries: Bulgaria, Italy, Kosovo, Romania, Albania and Sweden. A total of **658 individuals** (523 participated in the survey and 135 in the focus group discussions) participated in the research. Quantitative data was collected using online questionnaires completed by children and young people across all participating countries. In Italy, 260 children and youth responded to the survey, followed by 51 in Bulgaria, 65 in Albania, 55 in Kosovo, 46 in Romania, and 46 in Sweden, contributing to the overall sample of **523 participants**.

In addition to the surveys, qualitative data was collected through FGDs aimed at exploring children and young people's lived experiences and perceptions of gender-based violence in various social and educational settings. **A total of 14 FGDs were conducted:** four in Kosovo (two with children and youth, and two with school professionals), three in Sweden, two in Albania, two in Romania, and one each in Bulgaria and Italy. In total, 136 individuals participated in focus group discussions - 120 children and young people participated in the FGDs (25 in Albania, 24 in both Bulgaria and Kosovo, 20 in Romania, 18 in Sweden and 9 in Italy), alongside 15 school professionals in Kosovo.

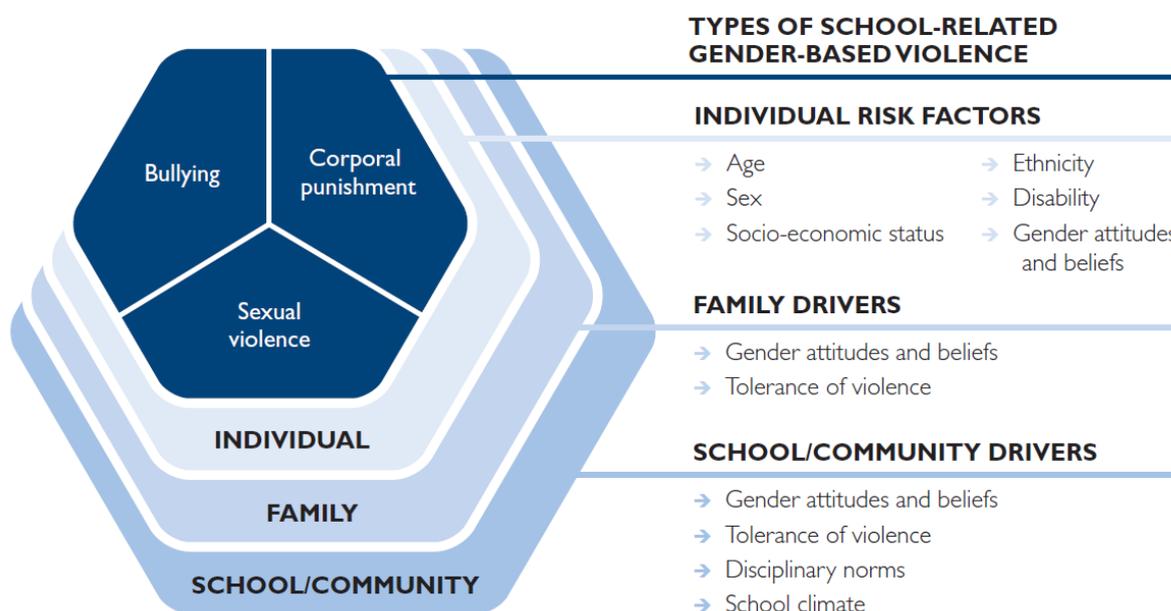
The results of the rapid assessment can be grouped into five main categories: perception of gender roles and societal expectations based on gender; perception of school climate; disciplinary practices of school staff; occurrence of violence in school environment and the ability of children, young people and staff to deal with gender-based peer violence.

¹ Although Albania is not a country participating in the Applying Safe Behaviours project, the scoping questionnaire was disseminated in Albania by Terre des hommes outside of the project activities. The data has been included in this report in order to provide a broader, more comprehensive perspective on pan-European trends among children and young people on gender norms and experiences of gender-based peer on peer violence.

METHODOLOGY

USAID's Conceptual Framework for Measuring School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) has been used and modified for the purpose of the scoping exercise in all countries involved in the project. This framework includes the three types of SRGBV, physical, sexual and psychological violence, and, furthermore, it includes a variety of risk factors and drivers at the individual, family and school/community level (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for measuring SRGBV



The wording of the conceptual framework is slightly different from what the methodological guide uses. In the above framework, bullying refers to psychological violence, corporal punishment refers to physical violence, and sexual violence wording remains the same. It was suggested to use the broader terms, physical, psychological and sexual violence as the different types of SRGBV as they include various different acts (see Figure 1) besides bullying and corporal punishment that the above framework narrows down.

With regards to the different factors and drivers, individual, family and school/community, the online survey excluded socio-economic status related questions in the individual level as the project is planned to be implemented in low socio-economic neighbourhoods in the countries. The remaining risk factors and drivers were included.

Individual-level risk factors: This level examined personal characteristics that increase children’s likelihood of becoming a victim of SRGBV. These risk factors include a child’s sex, having a disability, living in poverty, being an orphan, being married, or belonging to a minority race or ethnicity.

Family-level drivers: The second level identifies close relationships (such as within a family) that may increase children’s risk of experiencing SRGBV. These drivers include parental attitudes and beliefs regarding their awareness about violence against children and gender inequality in the family.

School-level drivers: The third level explores the settings, such as schools, in which social relationships occur, and seeks to identify characteristics of these settings that are associated with becoming victims of violence. These drivers include gender attitudes and beliefs, acceptability of intimate partner violence (IPV)/dating violence, prevalence and extent of disciplinary practices/student punishment, interpersonal relationships, and prevalence and extent of student rewards.

Based on the theoretical framework, the research team adopted a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools tailored to capture children and young people's experiences and perceptions of gender-based peer on peer violence.

Questionnaire for children and young people

The questionnaire for children and young people was disseminated both online and offline. It consisted of six parts that measured the risk factors and drivers at the individual, family and school/community level, as well as the types of physical, psychological and sexual violence target groups may have experienced. The figure below depicts the structure of the questionnaire to measure SRGBV for children and young people.

Figure 2. Structure of the questionnaire to measure SRGBV for children and young people

Structure of the online questionnaire to measure SRGBV for children and young people		
Part	Items	Risk factors, drivers
1. Background	Age, sex, disability	Individual
2. Gender attitudes and perceptions	Gender attitudes and perceptions	Individual, family
3. School climate	Inclusion and equality, school safety, discipline and fairness, student-student and student-teacher relationships	School/community
4. Physical violence	Experience with fights, corporal punishment, destroying of belongings	Type
5. Psychological violence	Experience with bullying, verbal abuse, exclusion	Type
6. Sexual violence	Experience with sexual jokes, gender-based discrimination	Type

Focus group discussions (FGDs)

To gain a deeper understanding of young peoples' experiences, behaviours, and perceptions related to gender-based peer violence, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with children and young people across all project countries. The FGDs were guided by a structured, child-friendly methodology designed to facilitate open dialogue in a safe and inclusive environment. Through a series of participatory exercises, participating children and youth were encouraged to reflect on their understanding of various forms of gender-based violence, the contexts in which it occurs, and how they or their peers respond when they witness or experience such incidents.

The discussion tools included exercises focused on identifying different types of violence—such as physical abuse, bullying, sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and discrimination—while also prompting respondents to explore underlying causes, gendered dynamics, and differences in how boys and girls are affected. Children and youth were further invited to reflect on how they would react in real-life scenarios involving violence, whether they would seek help, and whom they would turn to for support. Additionally, participants discussed their perceptions of how schools and adults respond to peer on peer violence, including the existence and effectiveness of policies, procedures, and support systems.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Questionnaire participants demographic data

The table below presents the distribution of questionnaire respondents across the six participating countries. A total of 523 individuals completed the questionnaire, with Italy contributing the largest number of responses (260), followed by Albania (65), Kosovo (55), and Bulgaria (51). Romania and Sweden each recorded 46 responses. This balanced geographic spread ensures a diverse representation of perspectives across the region, contributing to the robustness and comparability of the findings.

Figure 3. Number of questionnaire respondents by country

Country	Number of respondents
Albania	65
Bulgaria	51
Italy	260
Kosovo	55
Romania	46
Sweden	46
Total	523

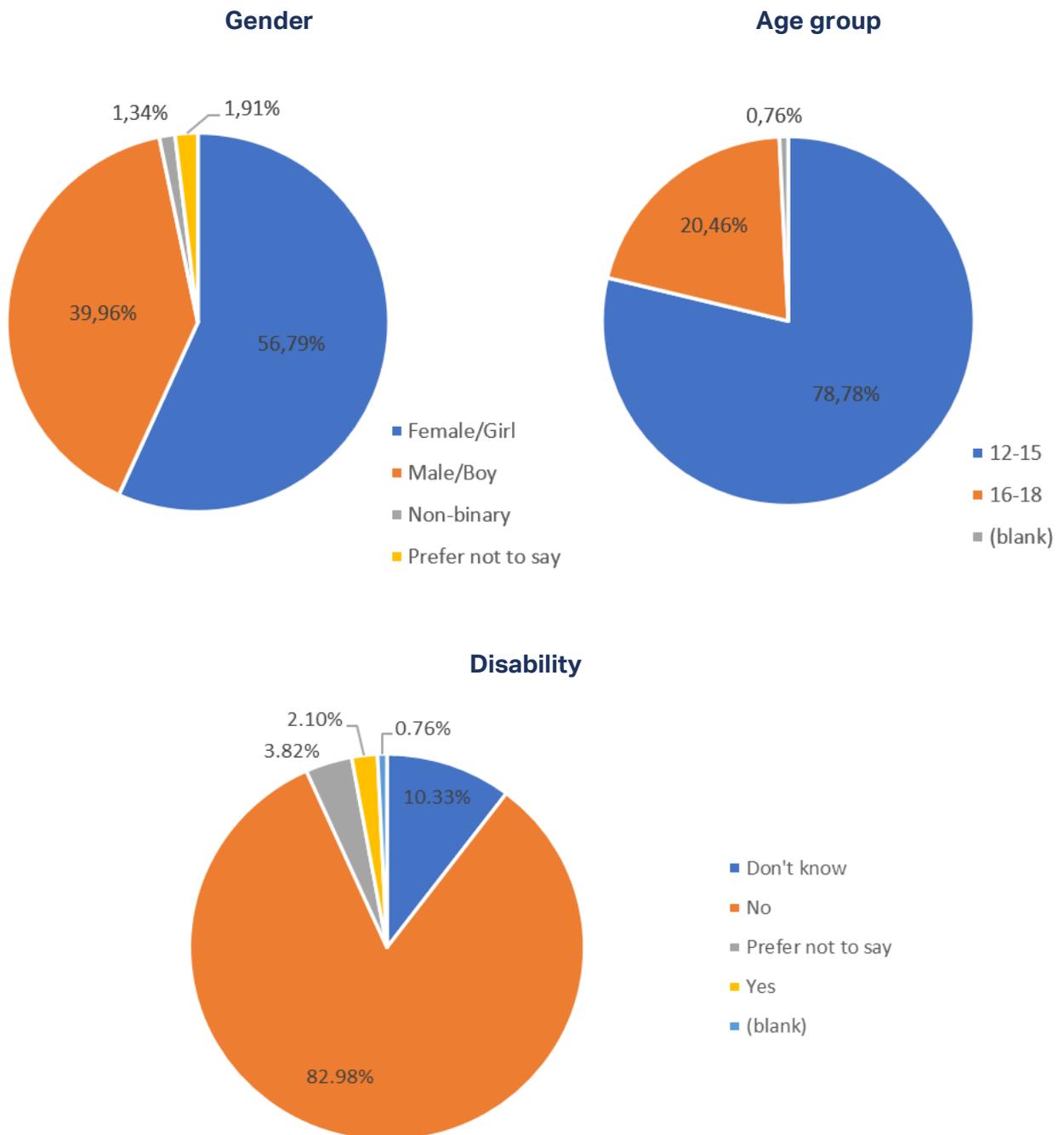
In terms of gender identity, as illustrated in the pie chart below, **56.79% of respondents identified as female/girl**, and **39.96% as male/boy**. A small proportion identified as **non-binary (1.34%)**, while 1.91% preferred not to disclose their gender. This gender balance reflects a broad range of voices, with a slightly higher participation from girls and young women. The figure below (Figure 4) provides an overview of the gender, age group, and disability distribution of the young people who participated in the survey.

In terms of age, the majority of respondents fall within the **12–15 age group (78.78%)**, while **20.46% are aged 16–18**. A small percentage (0.76%) did not provide an age.

Most respondents (**82.98%**) **reported not having a disability**, while **2.10% said they do**. A small percentage (3.82%) preferred not to answer, 10.33% indicated they did not know, and 0.76% left the question blank.

This demographic breakdown illustrates that the survey reached a diverse group of young people across age, gender, and ability—providing a broad and inclusive basis for further analysis.

Figure 4. Distribution of survey participants by gender, age group, and disability (N=523)



ASSESSMENT RESULTS

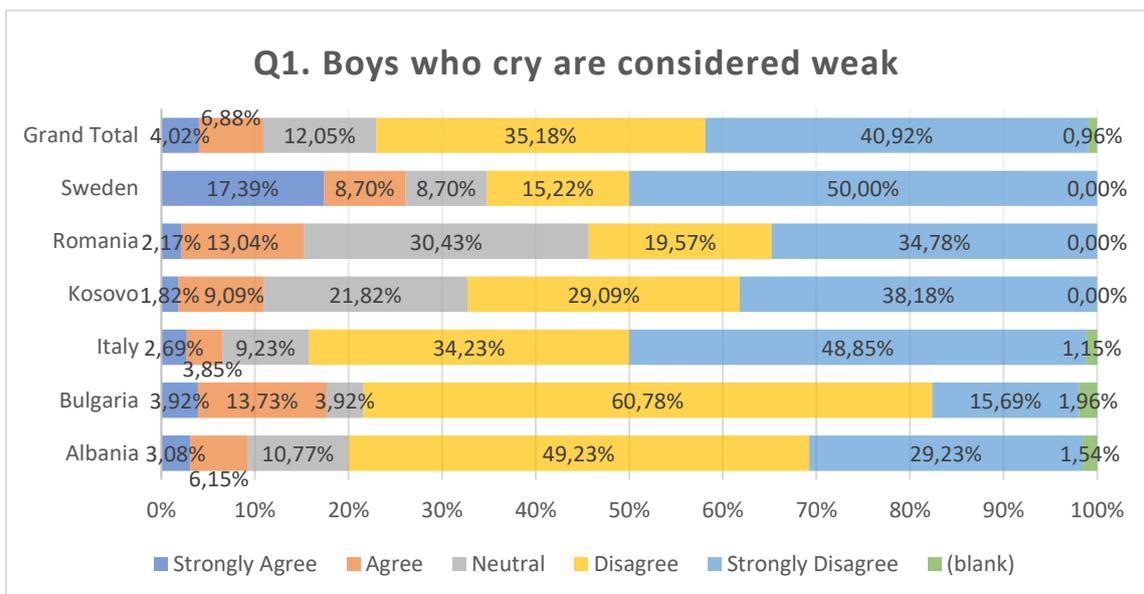
GENDER ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

To analyse participants' perceptions and attitudes based on gender, the questionnaire measured their level of agreement with a set of stereotypical statements concerning the appearance, behaviour and general needs of boys and girls, as well as certain expectations towards each gender.

Perceptions on boys

Out of the 10 statements, six were stating stereotypical things about boys/men.

Q1. Boys who cry are considered weak



The data reveals a predominantly negative perception of the statement, with 76% of respondents across all countries disagreeing (35% *disagree*, 41% *strongly disagree*), signalling a broad rejection of the belief that boys who express emotion through crying are inherently weak. However, this overarching trend conceals significant cross-country variation and points to complex cultural dynamics surrounding masculinity and emotional expression. Italy recorded the highest level of *strongly disagree* responses (49%), suggesting a clear societal shift toward rejecting traditional gender norms that associate male emotional expression with weakness. Similarly, Sweden—despite being an outlier with a notable 17% *strongly agree* response—also exhibited a high *strongly disagree* rate (50%), indicating a polarized view that may reflect ongoing debates within a society actively engaging with gender role redefinition.

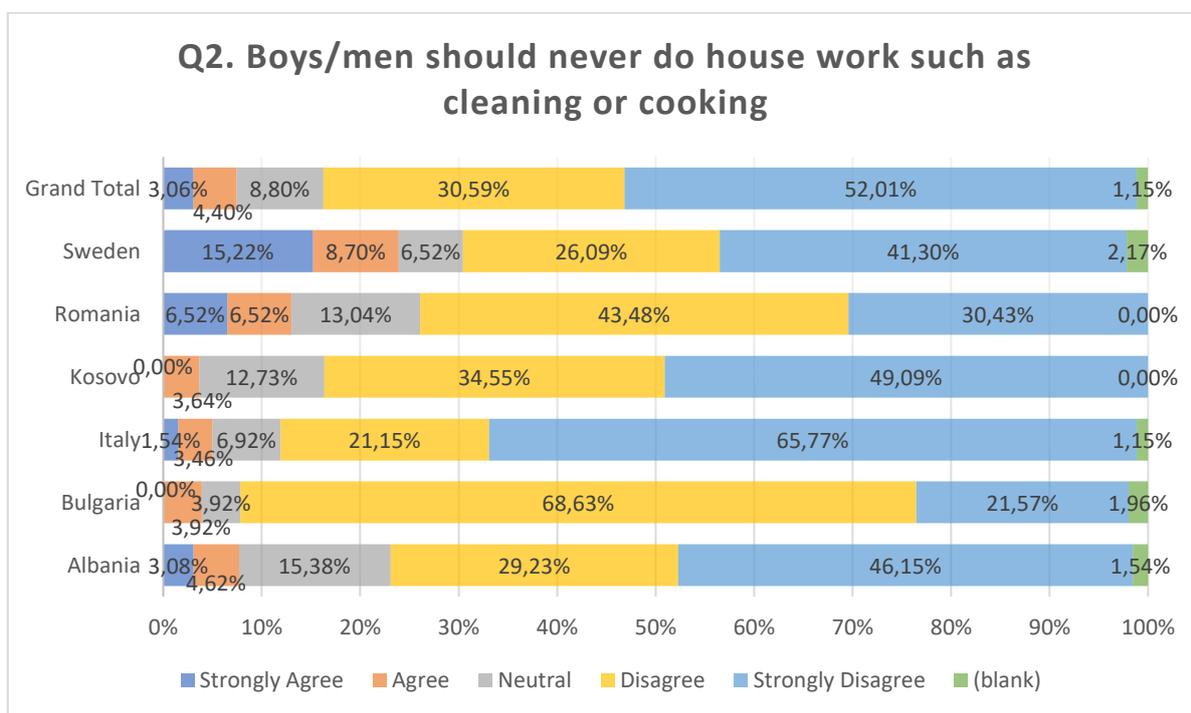
Kosovo and Romania presented more nuanced or ambivalent positions. With 22% and 30% of responses respectively marked as *neutral*, these findings may point to cultural uncertainty or transitional attitudes toward emotional vulnerability in boys. Bulgaria and Albania showed some of the highest *disagree* (61% and 49%) and *strongly disagree* (16% and 29%) scores respectively, but also had higher agreement levels compared to most other countries (18% combined in Bulgaria, 9% in Albania), possibly reflecting residual acceptance of traditional norms within these populations.

These findings suggest that traditional norms equating emotional expression in boys with weakness are increasingly challenged in the surveyed countries. While the overall rejection of the stereotype is strong, the variation across countries reveals that **attitudes are evolving unevenly**. In contexts like Kosovo and Romania, higher neutrality may point to cultural ambivalence or a transitional stage in the public perception of masculinity.

The case of Sweden warrants special attention: despite its reputation for progressive gender norms, the data suggests coexisting traditional and progressive views, possibly influenced by factors such as migration, subcultural variation, or generational divides.

These results clearly reflect that stereotypes towards boys are changing, and that young people are more accepting of them showing their emotions.

Q2. Boys/men should never do housework such as cleaning or cooking



The second item explored in this study examines entrenched gender role expectations related to domestic responsibilities. At the aggregated level, the data reveal that a strong majority reject the notion that men and boys should be exempt from domestic tasks. Across all countries, 82.6% of respondents either disagreed (30.6%) or strongly disagreed (52%) with the statement.

Only 7.5% agreed or strongly agreed, while 8.8% remained neutral, and 1.1% left the question blank.

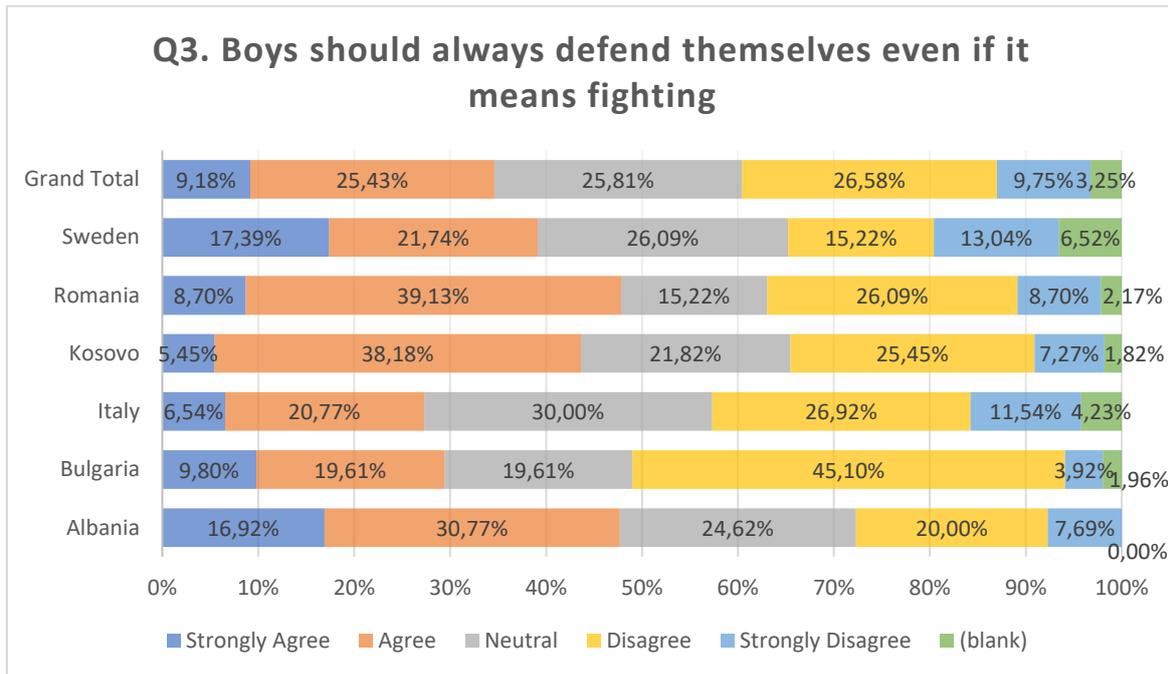
The data reveal a broad rejection of the statement, though with notable variation between Balkan countries and more developed contexts. In general, countries in the Balkans—such as Albania, Kosovo, and Bulgaria—show strong disagreement with the statement, yet their responses tend to cluster around moderate disagreement (e.g. 68.6% *disagree* in Bulgaria) rather than the more decisive *strongly disagree* responses observed elsewhere. In contrast, countries with more established gender equality norms, such as Italy and Sweden, present more polarized results. Italy recorded the highest proportion of *strongly disagree* responses (65.8%), suggesting strong cultural momentum toward gender equity in domestic roles. Sweden, however, stands out for its internal contradiction: while 41.3% strongly disagreed with the statement, a surprisingly high 15.2% strongly agreed—by far the highest among all countries surveyed. This suggests that even in progressive societies, traditional gender norms may persist in pockets or subcultures, whereas in the Balkans, rejection of such norms appears more uniform, albeit less forcefully expressed.

The statement, ***it is acceptable for a boy to act or dress more like a girl*** continues to provoke strong opinions, particularly in more traditional contexts. On average across all countries, about 40% of young people (18.4% *agree*, 19.5% *strongly agree*) showed acceptance of gender nonconforming behaviour in boys, while a similar proportion (43.4%) rejected it. The remaining responses were neutral or missing, reflecting uncertainty or social pressure.

In Albania, the rejection of this idea is very pronounced, with 60% of respondents strongly disagreeing, and an additional 21.5% disagreeing, making it one of the most conservative responses overall. Only a combined 9.2% agreed or strongly agreed, showing limited acceptance. Similarly, in Bulgaria, 74.5% of respondents rejected it, while only 9.8% expressed agreement, suggesting a prevailing discomfort with gender nonconformity.

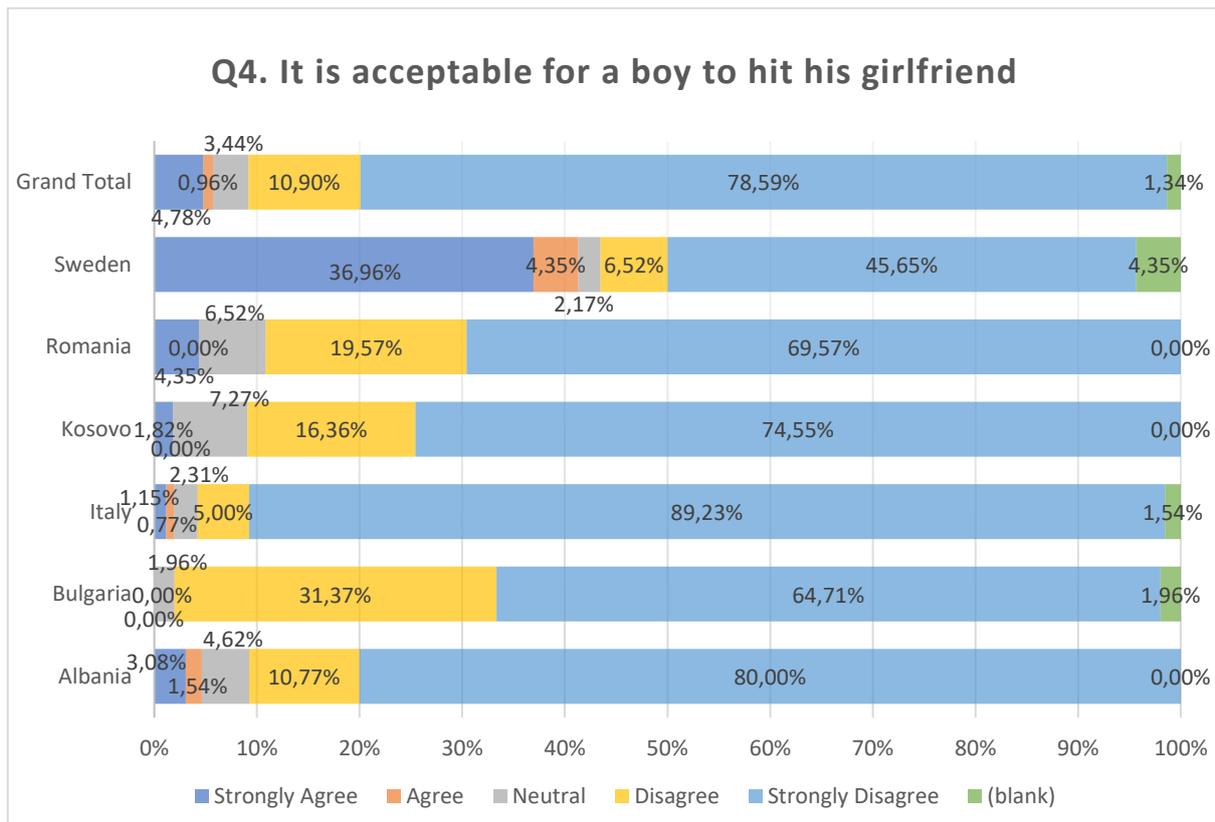
By contrast, Italy shows a remarkably different attitude: a combined 61.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (28.5% *agree* and 33.1% *strongly agree*), while only 19.2% disagreed. This marks Italy as the most inclusive country in the dataset with regard to boys expressing femininity. Kosovo also reflected strong rejection, with 67.3% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, and no respondents strongly agreeing. Neutral responses were also high (27.3%), indicating uncertainty or reluctance to express a definitive stance. In Romania, opinions were somewhat divided. While 43.5% rejected the statement (28.3% disagreed and 15.2% strongly disagreed), a notable 30.4% agreed or strongly agreed. This suggests a society in transition, with some signs of openness but persistent conservative views. Sweden, often considered progressive, showed a mixed response. While 49% of children and young people rejected the idea, 21.7% agreed or strongly agreed. A relatively high percentage (10.9%) were neutral, possibly indicating that the issue remains sensitive even in more open societies.

Q3. Boys should always defend themselves even if it means fighting



This statement elicited a notably divided response across the surveyed countries, reflecting **varying cultural norms around masculinity and the acceptability of aggression**. At the aggregate level, responses were almost evenly split: 34.61% of participants agreed (including 9.18% *strongly agree*), 34.61% disagreed (9.75% *strongly disagree*), and 25.81% remained neutral. This balance suggests **a broad societal ambivalence or transition regarding traditional masculine expectations**. Country-level analysis revealed clear regional distinctions. Albania, Kosovo, and Romania exhibited the strongest support for the statement, with combined agreement levels of 47.7%, 43.6%, and 47.8% respectively, indicating a cultural inclination toward valorising physical self-defence as a masculine norm. In contrast, Bulgaria stood out for its rejection of the idea, with nearly half (49.0%) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, suggesting a shift away from traditional gender scripts that endorse physical confrontation. Italy presented a more cautious stance, with the highest rate of neutral responses (30.0%), while Sweden demonstrated internal polarization: although 17.4% strongly agreed, 13.0% strongly disagreed, and over a quarter (26.1%) remained neutral. These results highlight the **tension between evolving and traditional views on masculinity**, with some societies clinging to established norms while others exhibit signs of transition or contestation.

Q4. It is acceptable for a boy to hit his girlfriend



The data overwhelmingly demonstrate a **strong societal rejection of the idea that violence in intimate relationships is acceptable**. Across all surveyed countries, 78.6% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, and 10.9% disagreed, resulting in an overall 89.5% rejection rate. The proportion of agreement was negligible: only 4.78% strongly agreed, and less than 1% agreed (0.96%), while 3.44% remained neutral and 1.34% left the item unanswered. These results indicate a widespread condemnation of gender-based violence, with near-universal opposition.

Country-specific results, however, reveal a noteworthy outlier: Sweden. While a majority (45.7%) strongly disagreed with the statement, 36.96% strongly agreed—the highest endorsement of violence among all countries surveyed, and a major anomaly given Sweden’s typically progressive gender norms. This divergence may reflect the presence of specific subgroups or ideological backlash, possibly tied to cultural tension, identity politics, or misunderstandings of the question’s framing.

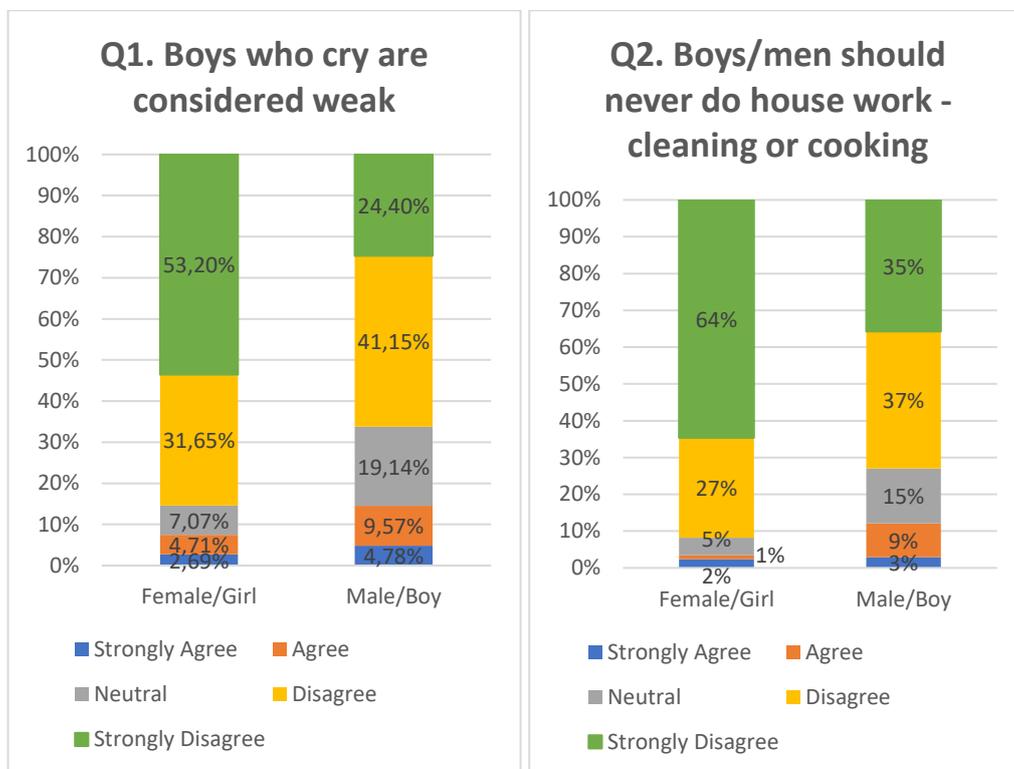
In contrast, Italy showed the strongest rejection, with 89.2% strongly disagreeing and fewer than 2% expressing any level of agreement. Bulgaria, Kosovo, and Romania also exhibited high levels of disapproval, with strong disagreement rates of 64.7%, 74.6%, and 69.6% respectively. Albania, while slightly lower than the others, still recorded an 80.0% strong disagreement rate.

Overall, the findings suggest a widespread cultural consensus across these European contexts that violence in romantic relationships is unacceptable. However, the unusually high rate of strong

agreement in Sweden warrants closer examination, as it could indicate cultural polarization or the influence of specific social or political dynamics within the sample.

Gender perspectives

Now let's see these statements through a gender lens: The survey data reveals distinct patterns in how young people of different gender identities relate to traditional gender norms—both in terms of emotional expression and expectations around domestic responsibilities. Taken together, the findings from the two statements—“Boys who cry are considered weak” and “Boys/men should never do housework such as cleaning or cooking”—offer a layered understanding of the shifting yet persistent stereotypes faced by boys and men.



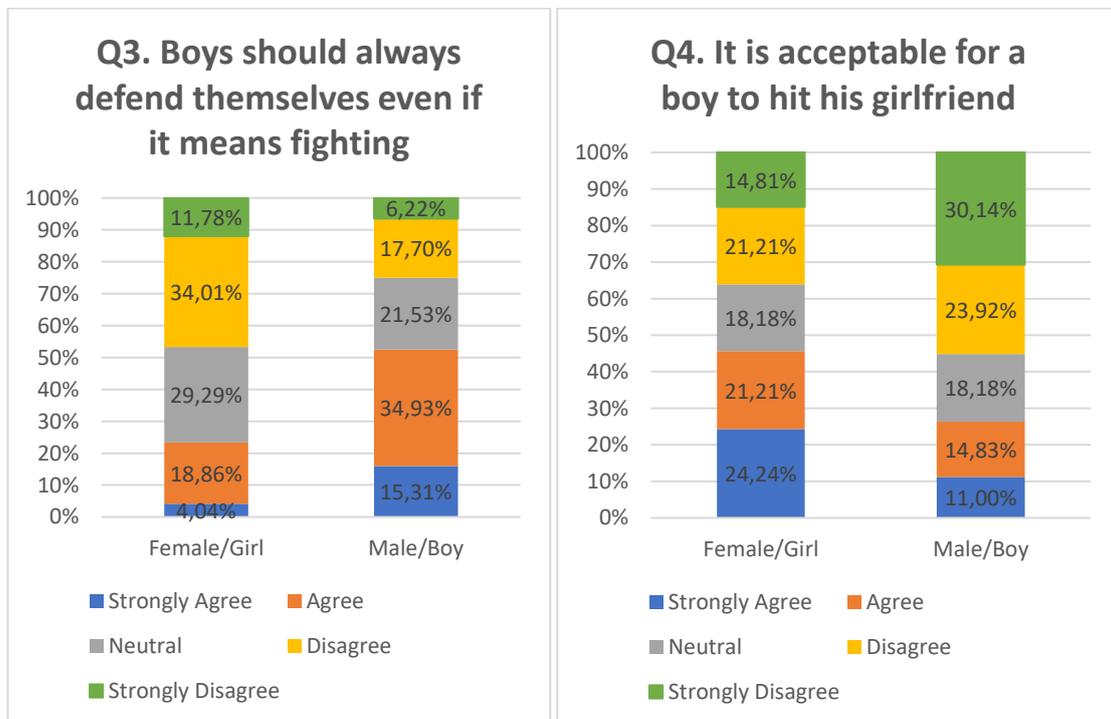
Across all gender identities, there is broad rejection of the idea that crying is a sign of weakness in boys, though the intensity of this rejection varies. Among female respondents, nearly 85% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea, showing strong opposition to emotional suppression. Male respondents also rejected the stereotype, though to a lesser degree, with about 65.5% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Importantly, male respondents showed a significantly higher rate of agreement and neutrality than girls, suggesting that traditional masculinity norms still hold some influence among boys.

A similar pattern emerges in relation to household roles. The vast majority of females (nearly 64%) strongly disagreed with the statement that men should not do housework, and another 27% disagreed, leaving very little support for this stereotype. Boys again showed more divided opinions. While 36.84% disagreed and 35.41% strongly disagreed (combined 72.25% rejection),

9.09% of boys agreed and 14.83% remained neutral. This suggests that while most boys no longer endorse this traditional view, a notable minority either accept it or are uncertain.

Across both statements, female respondents consistently show the strongest rejection of traditional gender norms, whether related to emotional expression or domestic roles. **Male respondents appear to be in a transitional space**, moving away from rigid stereotypes but with a larger proportion still holding on to traditional views or expressing uncertainty.

These findings suggest a broader trend among young people toward challenging outdated gender norms, particularly those that constrain boys’ emotional lives or reinforce unequal domestic responsibilities. At the same time, the data reveals that progress is uneven and that gendered expectations continue to shape beliefs and behaviours—especially among male children and youth. This underscores the need for educational programs that address gender equality holistically, supporting both boys and girls to break free from restrictive stereotypes and promoting inclusive environments for all identities.



The gender-based analysis of the statements “Boys should always defend themselves even if it means fighting” and “It is acceptable for a boy to hit his girlfriend” reveals significant contrasts in perceptions between male and female respondents.

For Q3, over 50% of boys agreed that boys should always defend themselves through fighting, compared to only 23% of girls. In contrast, nearly 46% of girls disagreed with this statement, indicating a stronger rejection of violent self-defence among female respondents. This reflects the **persistence of traditional gender norms around male toughness and female caution toward violence.**

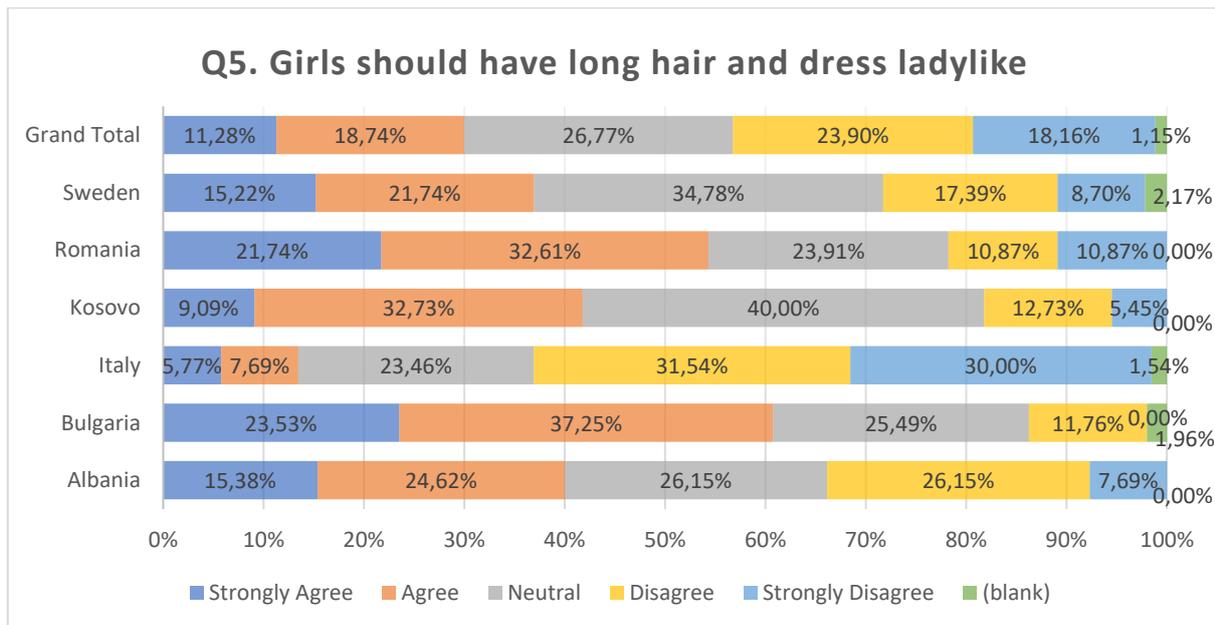
For Q4, which addresses intimate partner violence, the results were unexpectedly reversed. Girls were more likely than boys to agree that it is acceptable for a boy to hit his girlfriend (45% vs. 26%). Boys showed a higher rejection rate, with 54% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, compared to 36% of girls. This may suggest internalized gender norms among girls or a normalization of violence in relationships.

Together, these findings highlight the complex and sometimes contradictory views young people hold about gender and violence. There is a clear need to challenge both **toxic masculinity** that encourages fighting and **internalized acceptance of abuse** among girls. Education programs should aim to build **healthy relationship norms**, teach **non-violent conflict resolution**, and promote **gender equality**, particularly in how power and violence are discussed and addressed in youth settings.

Perceptions on girls

Out of the 10 statements, four were stereotypical statements solely considering girls.

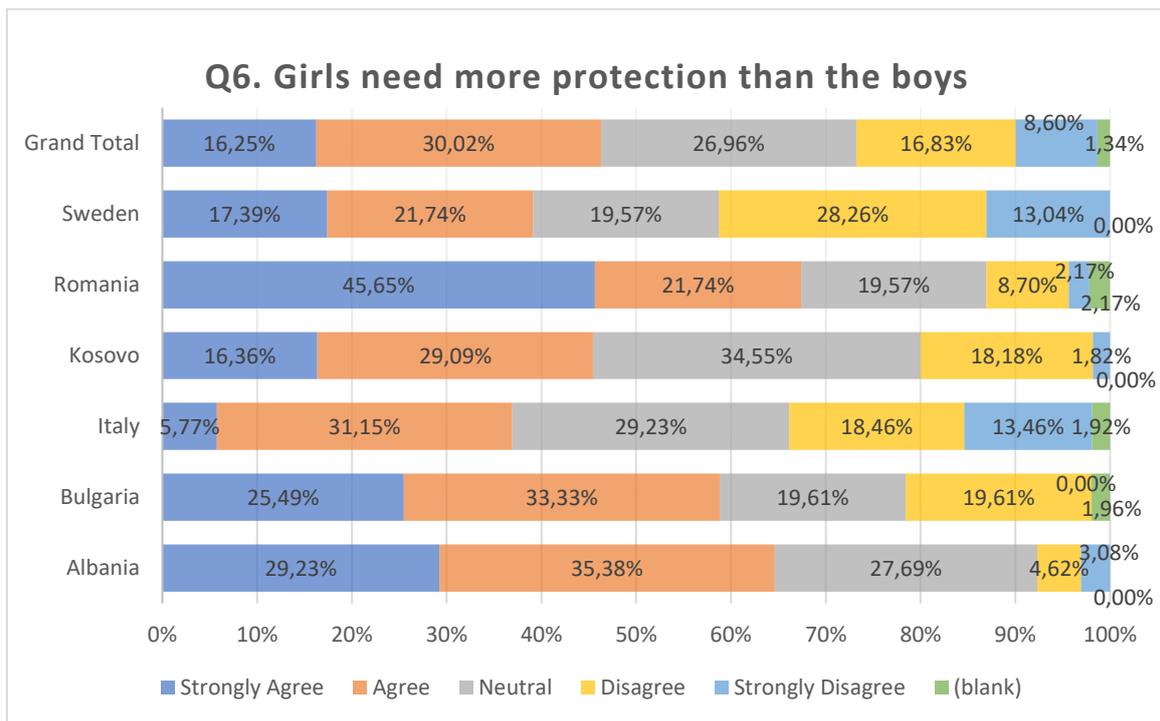
Q5. Girls should have long hair and dress ladylike



The data reveals a mix of traditional and evolving views on femininity across the six surveyed countries. Overall, 30% agreed with the statement (18.3% *strongly agree*, 18.7% *agree*), while 42% either disagreed or strongly disagreed (23.9% *disagree*, 18.2% *strongly disagree*). 26.8% remained neutral, indicating considerable uncertainty or social transition on this issue. Support for traditional gender norms was highest in Bulgaria (60.8%), followed by Romania (54.4%) and Kosovo (41.8%), where expectations around feminine appearance remain prevalent. Albania showed a more evenly split opinion, with 40% agreeing and 33.8% disagreeing, alongside a high neutral rate (26.2%).

In contrast, Italy had the strongest rejection, with 61.5% disagreeing (31.5% *disagree*, 30% *strongly disagree*) and just 13.5% agreeing. Sweden again showed more mixed results: 36.9% agreed, while 26.1% disagreed, and 34.8% stayed neutral, reflecting a society in transition or divided on traditional gender expectations. These results suggest that **traditional views on femininity remain influential**, particularly in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, while Western contexts like Italy show stronger rejection. The high neutrality in multiple countries signals ongoing negotiation and evolving perspectives around gender expression.

Q6. Girls need more protection than the boys



The survey responses reveal moderate overall agreement with the idea that girls require more protection than boys, though perspectives vary significantly across countries. Combined, 46.3% of respondents agreed with the statement (16.3% *strongly agree*, 30.0% *agree*), while 25.4% disagreed (16.8% *disagree*, 8.6% *strongly disagree*). Roughly 27% remained neutral, highlighting a degree of uncertainty or ambivalence around the issue.

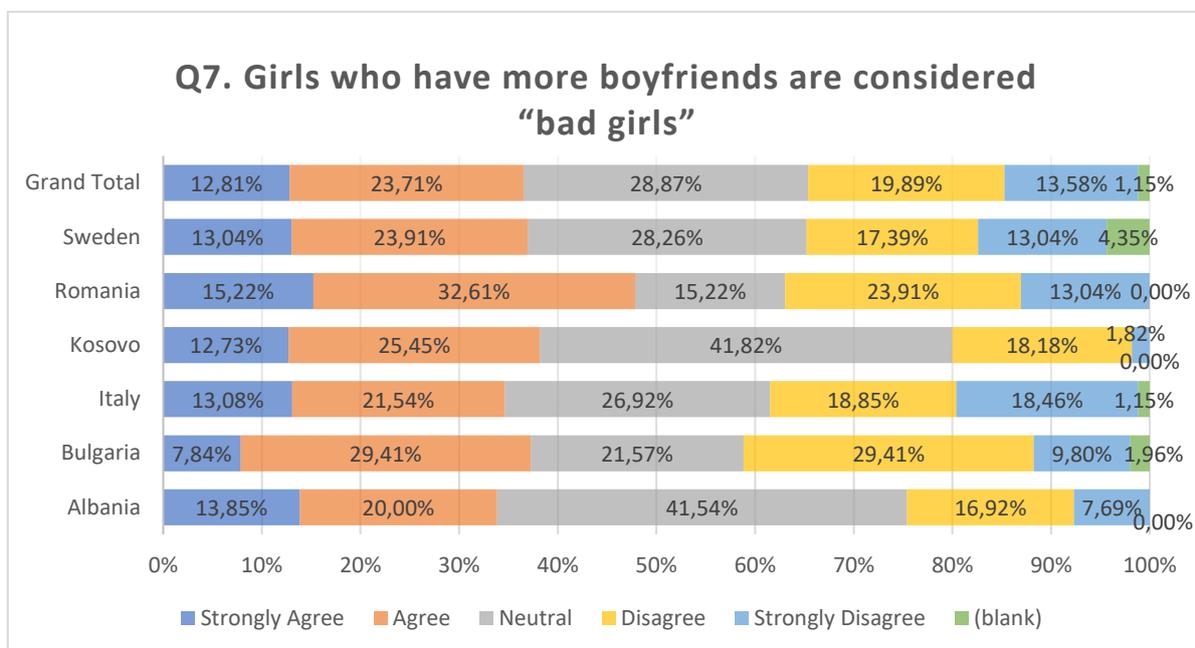
Support for this protective view of girls is strongest in Romania, where nearly 68% agreed (with almost half strongly agreeing). Albania and Bulgaria also show high agreement, both above 60%, with relatively low disagreement, indicating that traditional, protective attitudes toward girls remain deeply embedded in these societies.

Kosovo presents a more transitional pattern: about 45% agree, but a large proportion (nearly 35%) were neutral, and around 20% disagreed, suggesting that views may be shifting or contested within the population.

Italy and Sweden, in contrast, show the least support for the statement. In Italy, agreement (36.9%) is nearly matched by disagreement (31.9%), with a sizable neutral group (29.2%). Sweden stands

out as the most critical: over 41% disagreed, including 13% who strongly disagreed, while only 39% agreed. This reflects a more gender-equal perspective, where the idea that girls need more protection is increasingly rejected.

Q7. Girls who have more boyfriends are considered “bad girls”



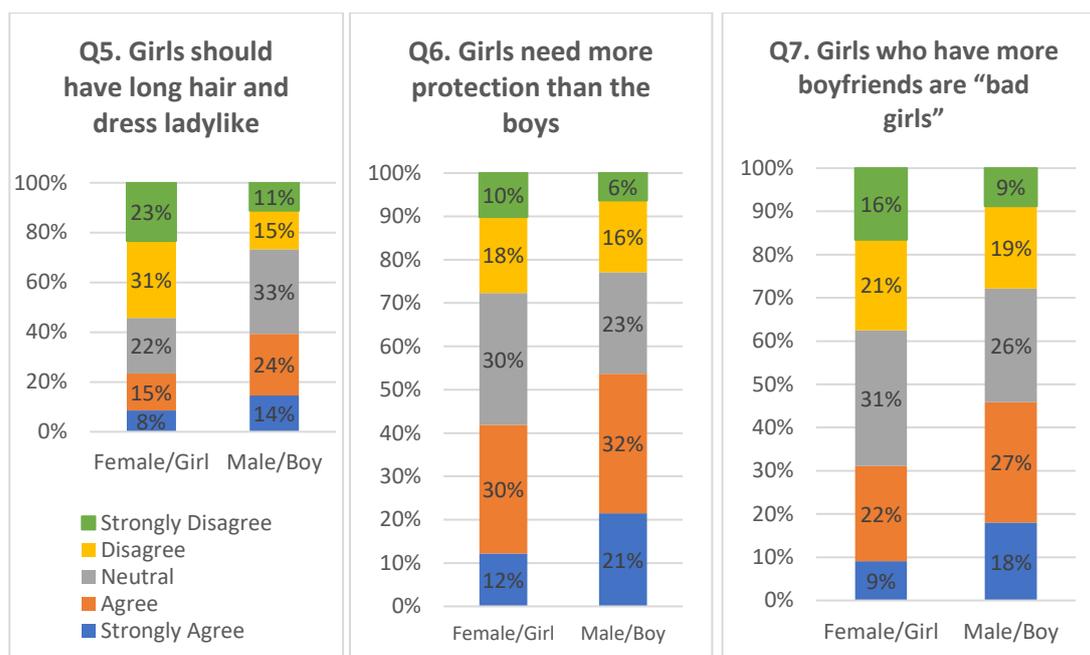
The question “Girls who have more boyfriends are considered ‘bad girls’” generated mixed reactions among respondents across the surveyed countries, reflecting a range of views on gender norms and social expectations.

In Romania, nearly half of the young people expressed agreement, with 15.22% strongly agreeing and 32.61% agreeing, totalling almost 48%. Similarly, in Kosovo, 38% of respondents agreed (12.73% *strongly agree*, 25.45% *agree*), while 41.82% remained neutral. In Albania, a similar trend was observed, with 33.85% agreeing and a relatively high neutrality rate (41.54%).

In contrast, Bulgaria showed a more divided view: 37.25% of respondents agreed, but an equal 39.21% disagreed, indicating a society in transition between traditional and progressive gender norms. Italy and Sweden presented more balanced views as well, with approximately 34% agreement and significant portions of the young people disagreeing or remaining neutral.

Interestingly, Kosovo had the lowest rate of strong disagreement (1.82%), suggesting lower resistance to the traditional view among children and youth there. On the other hand, Italy and Romania had higher levels of disagreement (18.85% and 23.91%, respectively), with 18.46% of Italian respondents strongly disagreeing—suggesting a polarized view on the topic.

These results illustrate that **expectations towards girls' romantic behaviour remain shaped by traditional gender norms in many contexts**. However, the high percentage of neutral responses—especially in Albania, Kosovo, and Sweden—may suggest that opinions are shifting, particularly among younger populations.



The statement “Girls should have long hair and dress ladylike” elicited markedly different responses between female and male respondents, highlighting gendered perceptions of femininity and appearance norms. Female respondents largely rejected the notion, with over 53% either disagreeing (30.64%) or strongly disagreeing (23.23%). Only 23.23% expressed agreement (8.42% *strongly agree*, 14.81% *agree*), and 22.22% remained neutral. This distribution suggests that many girls challenge traditional expectations regarding their appearance and resist conforming to stereotypical notions of femininity.

In contrast, male respondents showed greater adherence to traditional gender expectations. A combined 38.75% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (14.35% *strongly agree*, 24.40% *agree*), compared to just 26.31% who disagreed or strongly disagreed. A significant portion (33.49%) of boys also responded neutrally, possibly reflecting uncertainty or social conditioning around these gender norms.

Overall, while **the idea that girls need more protection than boys remains relatively widespread**—particularly among boys—the data also reflect a growing recognition, especially among girls, that such assumptions can be limiting and reinforce unequal treatment. Among male respondents, more than half (53%) agreed with the statement (21% *strongly agree*, 32% *agree*), suggesting that many boys still perceive girls as inherently more vulnerable and in need of safeguarding. In contrast, female respondents were slightly less likely to agree, though still a majority (12% *strongly agree*, 30% *agree*, totalling 42%). Notably, a larger proportion of girls remained neutral (30%) compared to boys (23%), possibly indicating internal conflict between traditional expectations and evolving views on gender equality. Interestingly, female respondents were also more likely to disagree or strongly disagree (28%) than their male peers (22%), indicating a stronger pushback against the narrative of female fragility.

The final gender-related question “Girls who have more boyfriends are considered ‘bad girls’”—offers one of the clearest insights into the persistence of moral double standards applied to girls’

romantic behaviour. The data indicates that male respondents are more likely to hold this view, with 45% either strongly agreeing (18%) or agreeing (27%) with the statement. In comparison, 31% of female respondents shared this opinion (9% *strongly agree*, 22% *agree*). Notably, a larger proportion of girls expressed disagreement (21% *disagree*, 16% *strongly disagree*, totalling 37%) than boys (28% combined). This divergence suggests that girls are both more frequently the target of this stigma and more likely to reject it. The neutrality levels are also noteworthy: 31% of girls and 26% of boys chose a neutral response. These high rates of neutrality may reflect hesitation to openly challenge entrenched social norms or uncertainty around what is considered acceptable in different cultural or peer contexts.

Together, these illustrate a **gendered double standard in the expectations placed on girls**, particularly around romantic autonomy, appearance, and protection. While male respondents were more inclined to agree that girls should behave or appear in a “ladylike” manner and that girls with multiple boyfriends are “bad,” they were also more likely to agree that girls require greater protection. These perspectives collectively reinforce a restrictive and moralizing view of femininity, where girls’ behaviour is closely scrutinized and judged, especially by their male peers.

In contrast, **girls showed greater resistance to these traditional views**, with higher levels of disagreement across most questions. However, the prevalence of neutral responses across genders suggests that many young people are navigating a shifting cultural landscape, where traditional gender norms are being challenged but have not yet fully lost their influence.

CONCLUSION

Evolving perceptions and gender norms

Across all the countries surveyed, the data points to a gradual but significant shift in young people’s attitudes toward gender roles, particularly those affecting boys. There is **growing acceptance** of boys expressing emotions and participating in household tasks, reflecting evolving societal norms, especially in urban and progressive settings. While physical violence among peers is now perceived as not as widespread as before, psychological violence remains prevalent, and boys are still associated with physical strength and defensive aggression. This suggests that while traditional masculine norms are weakening, they continue to shape expectations around male behaviour in more nuanced ways.

In contrast, **traditional gender stereotypes toward girls remain more deeply rooted**—particularly in Eastern and Southeastern European countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania. Many young people continue to link girls’ autonomy, especially in relationships, with negative moral judgments and reinforce expectations around modesty and the need for protection. While countries like Italy and Sweden show signs of shifting these views, deeply ingrained double standards persist.

This pattern is reinforced by responses to questions about girls’ appearance and behaviour. A substantial proportion of respondents—especially boys—agreed with the idea that girls should look “ladylike” and have long hair, highlighting persistent gendered beauty norms. Similarly, the belief that girls need more protection than boys remains widespread, particularly among male

respondents. These attitudes reflect ongoing perceptions of girls as more vulnerable, reinforcing paternalistic views that limit their autonomy. Most tellingly, the notion that girls who have multiple boyfriends are “bad girls” still resonates with a significant portion of respondents, especially boys, suggesting that girls’ romantic and sexual choices are still morally policed by peers.

Notably, **gender nonconformity reveals stark differences in acceptance**: masculine behaviour in girls is more tolerated than femininity in boys, exposing a lingering cultural bias that aligns strength with masculinity and weakness with femininity. This imbalance contributes to the stigmatization of boys who do not conform to traditional male norms and reflects broader societal discomfort with challenging dominant gender binaries.

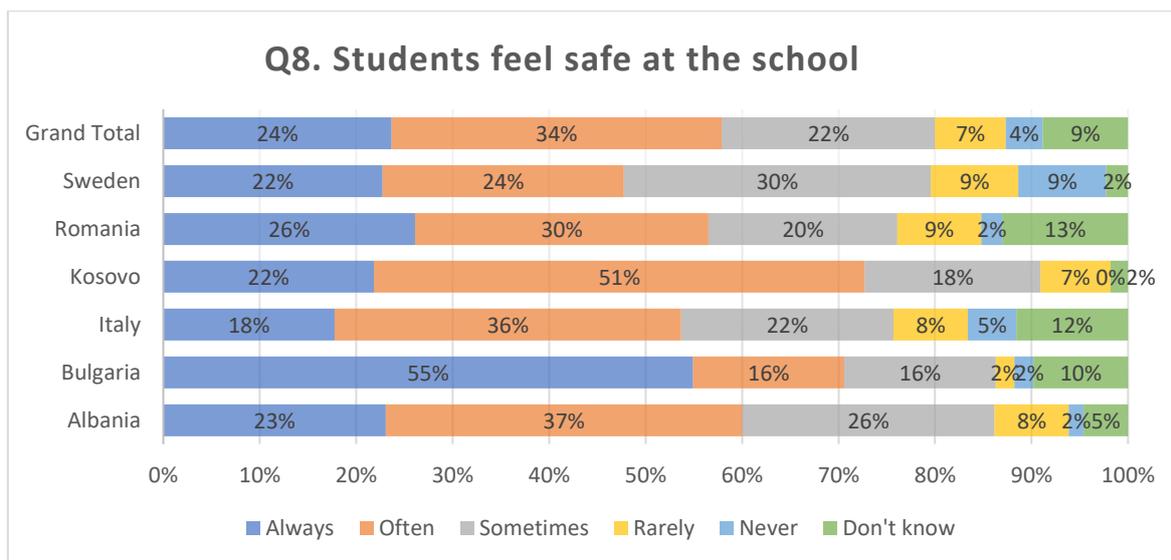
Across many questions, high levels of neutrality—particularly among female respondents—suggest a transitional period, where long-held beliefs are being questioned but not yet fully dismantled. While youth across Europe are increasingly challenging harmful gender norms, the pace of change is uneven. Western countries like Sweden exhibit more progressive but occasionally contradictory views, while Southern and Balkan countries reflect steadier but more moderate shifts.

These findings emphasize the need for continued investment in **gender-transformative education that addresses both overt stereotypes and subtler cultural biases**. Efforts must prioritize **inclusive, context-sensitive, and participatory approaches** that empower all young people to critically reflect on gender roles, promote respectful relationships, and support environments rooted in equality and acceptance.

OVERALL VIOLENCE ENVIRONMENT

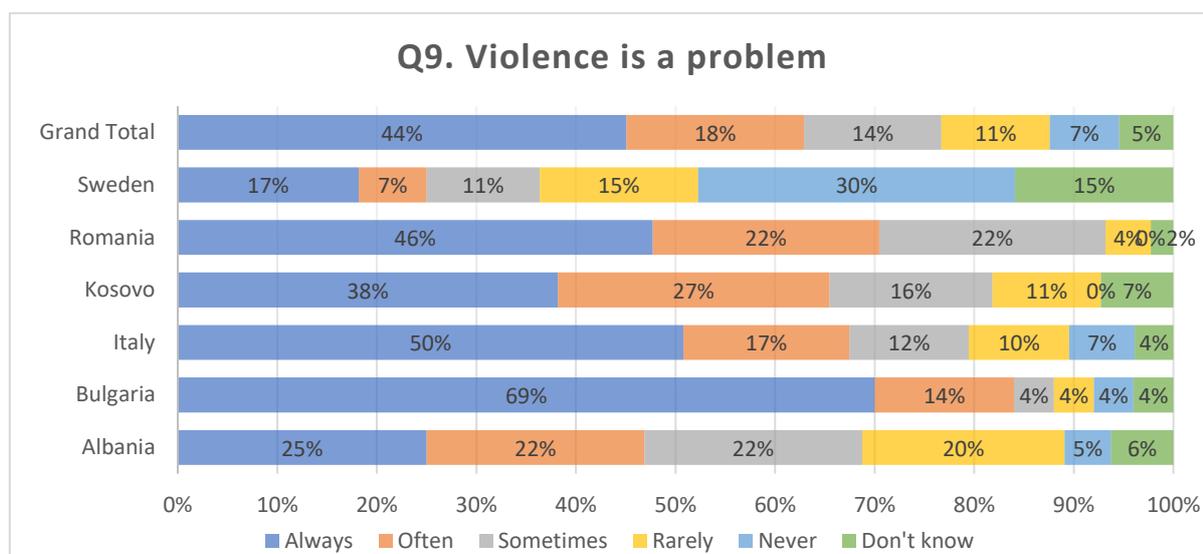
To analyse participants' reaction to the school environment, the questionnaire measured with a set of statements, how often participants experience a given scenario concerning their safety, behaviour and relationships between students with each other and with their teachers.

Q8. Students feel safe at the school



The statement “students feel safe at school” received varied responses across countries, reflecting different levels of perceived safety among young people. Overall, the majority of respondents reported feeling safe either always or often, with a combined total of 58% across all countries (24% *always*, 34% *often*). However, the degree of perceived safety differed by context. In Bulgaria, young people reported the highest sense of safety, with 71% stating they feel safe *always* (55%) or *often* (16%). Kosovo also demonstrated high levels of perceived safety, with 73% of respondents selecting *always* (22%) or *often* (51%). Albania followed closely, where 60% of respondents reported feeling safe either *always* (23%) or *often* (37%). In Romania, 56% of respondents expressed feeling safe *always* or *often*, while in Italy, the figure was slightly lower at 54%.

Q9. Violence is a problem



Across all six countries, 62% of respondents agreed that **violence is a problem** in their school—either *always* (44%) or *often* (18%). However, responses varied significantly by country. Bulgaria² had the highest concern, with 69% of young people stating that violence is always a problem, suggesting widespread recognition of the issue. Similarly, Italy (67%), Romania (68%), and Kosovo (65%) reported high levels of concern, with majorities saying violence is always or often present in schools.

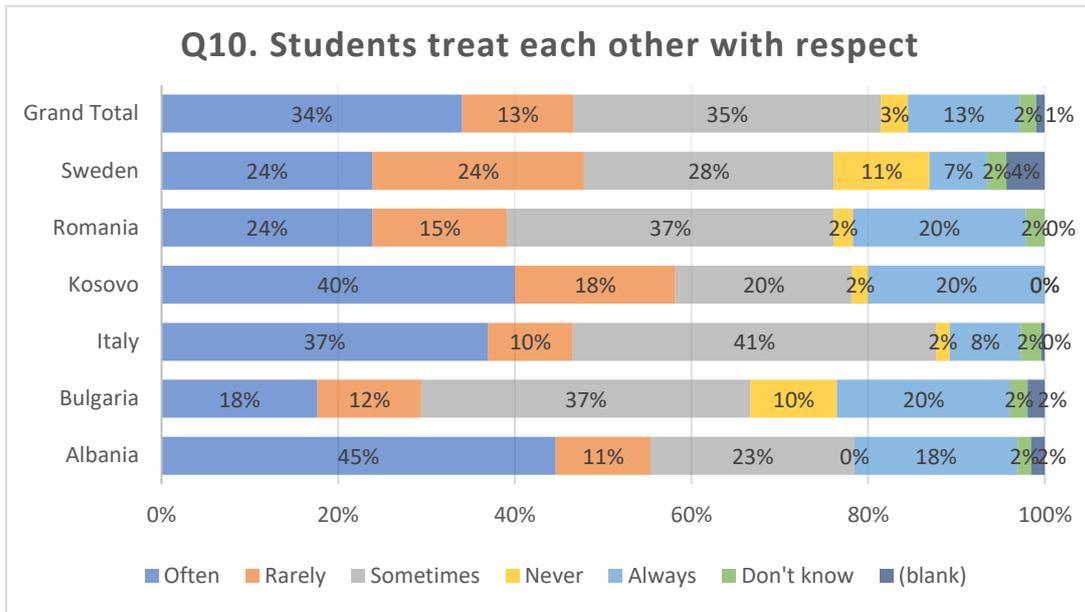
In contrast, Sweden had the lowest reported concern, with only 24% stating that violence is always or often a problem. Notably, 30% of Swedish respondents said violence is never a problem—the highest rate across all countries—and 15% selected don't know, indicating uncertainty or a different interpretation of the concept.

Albania presented a more balanced perspective, with 47% agreeing that violence is a problem either always or often, while others described it as sometimes or rarely occurring.

The data highlights how perceptions of school violence vary not only in intensity but possibly in interpretation—whether young people are reflecting on personal experience or the broader school environment.

² In Bulgaria, 71% of respondents reported that they feel safe at school *always* or *often*, suggesting a generally positive perception of their own safety. However, when asked whether violence is a problem at school, approximately half of the respondents indicated that it is. At first glance, these responses may appear contradictory. However, the discrepancy likely stems from the differing focus of the two questions. The first question asks respondents to reflect on their *personal sense of safety*, while the second invites them to consider the *overall environment* and the experiences of others. It is possible that young people feel personally safe at school but still recognise that violence affects their peers or occurs within the broader school context. This distinction between inward-focused and outward-focused perceptions highlights the complexity of how young people interpret and report on safety and violence in their environments.

Q10. Students treat each other with respect



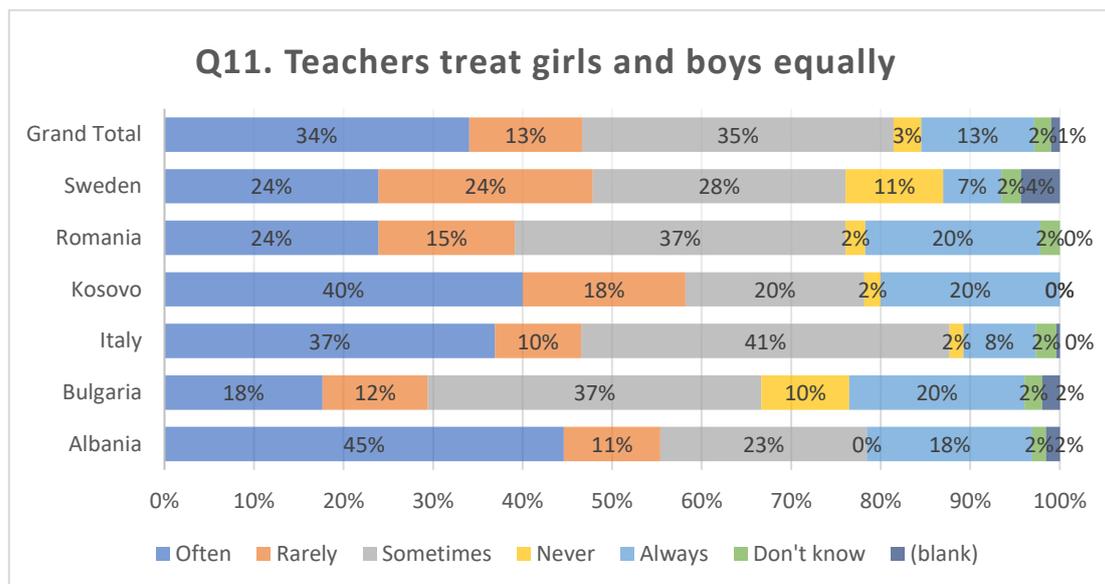
Regarding the statement “Students treat each other with respect”, on average, only 13% said that respect between children and youth is always present, while 34% said it occurs *often* and 35% said *sometimes*. This suggests that respectful behaviour is inconsistently experienced across school environments.

Albania stands out with the most positive perception: 45% of respondents reported that peers treat each other with respect *often*, and 18% said *always*, with no individuals selecting *never*. Similarly, Kosovo showed relatively strong results, with 40% reporting *often* and 20% *always*.

In contrast, Sweden had the highest rate of *never* responses (11%) and a combined *rarely* and *never* score of 35%, suggesting that a significant number of students perceive a lack of respect among peers. Italy also revealed a more critical view, with only 8% selecting *always* and 41% saying *sometimes*, reflecting uncertainty or inconsistency in respectful behaviour.

Overall, these results indicate that while some students experience respectful peer interactions regularly, for many, such behaviour is irregular or unreliable within their school environment.

Q11. Teachers treat girls and boys equally



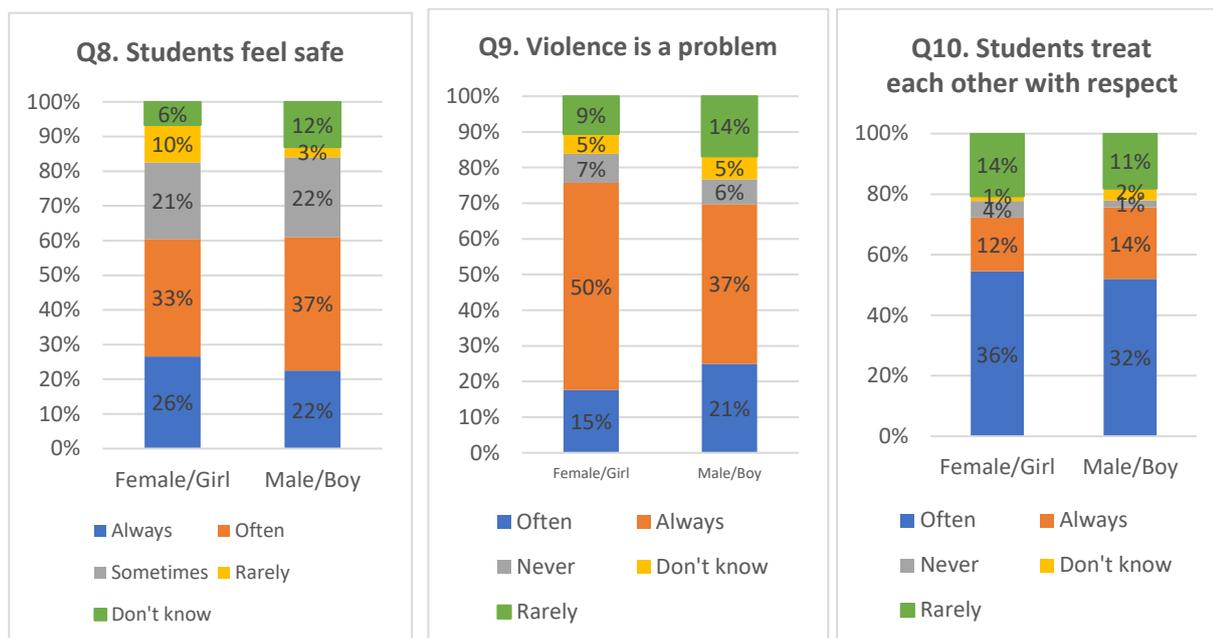
Young people’s responses across the six countries show moderate confidence in teachers’ gender equality, but with significant national differences and signs of inconsistency. On average, 47% of respondents said teachers treat girls and boys equally *always* (13%) or *often* (34%). However, 35% of young people responded *sometimes*, indicating that many perceive equality as inconsistent in practice. A smaller share said it happens rarely, and 3% reported never experiencing equal treatment by teachers.

Albania showed the most positive perception, with 63% of young people reporting that teachers treat boys and girls equally *always* or *often*, and 0% selecting *never*. Kosovo followed closely, with 60% choosing *always* (20%) or *often* (40%). By contrast, Sweden presented a more critical perspective. Only 31% of respondents said equality happens *always* or *often*, while 24% said it occurs *rarely* and 11% said *never*—the highest *never* rate among all countries.

Italy and Romania also revealed concerns. In Italy, while 37% said it happens often, 41% selected *sometimes*, and only 8% said *always*. In Romania, 37% also chose *sometimes*, suggesting that even when outright inequality is not reported, students frequently observe a lack of consistency in teachers’ treatment of girls and boys.

Bulgaria had a split view: 20% *always*, 18% *often*, and 37% *sometimes*. Notably, 10% of Bulgarian respondents reported that teachers never treat girls and boys equally—an indication of more serious concerns around gender bias in the classroom.

Gender perspectives



In terms of gender differences, regarding feeling safe, the data show that the majority of both girls and boys report feeling safe at school either *always* or *often* (58.25% of girls and 58.37% of boys), indicating a generally positive perception of safety. However, there are notable differences in other categories: a higher percentage of girls (10.44%) report *rarely* feeling safe compared to boys (2.87%), while more boys (12.44%) than girls (6.40%) responded with *don't know*.

The responses to the question of whether students treat each other with respect reveal a generally positive perception, with some gender-based nuances. Among girls, 36% reported that respectful behaviour among young people occur often, and 12% said it always happens. For boys, the figures are similar: 32% answered *often* and 14% *always*. However, differences emerge at the extremes. Girls were more likely than boys to say that young people never treat each other with respect (4% vs. 1%), which could point to greater sensitivity to interpersonal conflict or exclusion. On the other hand, slightly more boys than girls believe that respect is always present (14% vs. 12%).

The perception of gender equality in how teachers treat students differs notably between girls and boys. Among girls, 34% said that teachers always treat girls and boys equally, and 28% said this happens *often*. In contrast, only 22% of boys believed this happens *always* and 19% said *often*. Notably, boys were more likely to say that equal treatment never occurs (14% compared to 5% of girls) and were also more likely to respond with *rarely* (20% versus 9%). Additionally, 4% of boys said they don't know, while no girls selected that option.

This data suggests that although overall safety perception is similar, **girls may be slightly more likely to experience unsafe situations**, whereas boys may be less likely to reflect critically or be aware of safety-related concerns. Also, **girls tend to be more attuned to underreporting** or possibly more observant of when violence goes unaddressed. Additionally, **girls perceive violence as a more persistent and visible issue**, whereas boys may experience or interpret it as

more situational or sporadic. The difference may also reflect gendered experiences of violence—where **girls could be more sensitive to or affected by subtle and persistent forms** such as psychological or verbal abuse. Likewise, **girls appear more critical or perhaps more observant of instances where respect is lacking**. The results suggest that **girls tend to perceive teacher behaviour as more balanced and fair**, while boys may feel comparatively disadvantaged or perceive bias in how teachers engage with students across genders.

CONCLUSION

Violence and the school environment

The data collected across the six countries reveals a complex and nuanced picture of school environments. While many students report feeling safe at school—particularly in countries like in Bulgaria and Kosovo, where a significant number also acknowledge that violence remains a common problem. For instance, over 60% of respondents across all countries agreed that violence is *always* or *often* an issue, with the highest concern reported in Bulgaria (69%) and Italy (67%).

At the same time, perceptions of student behaviour indicate that respect among peers is not always guaranteed. Although some students, especially in Albania and Kosovo, reported that their peers treat each other with respect frequently, responses from countries like Sweden and Italy suggest that **respectful behaviour is inconsistent or lacking**.

The results also show varied views on gender equality in teacher behaviour. While students in Albania and Kosovo expressed stronger agreement that teachers treat girls and boys equally, students in Sweden and Italy were more divided, with some reporting that equal treatment occurs only sometimes or rarely.

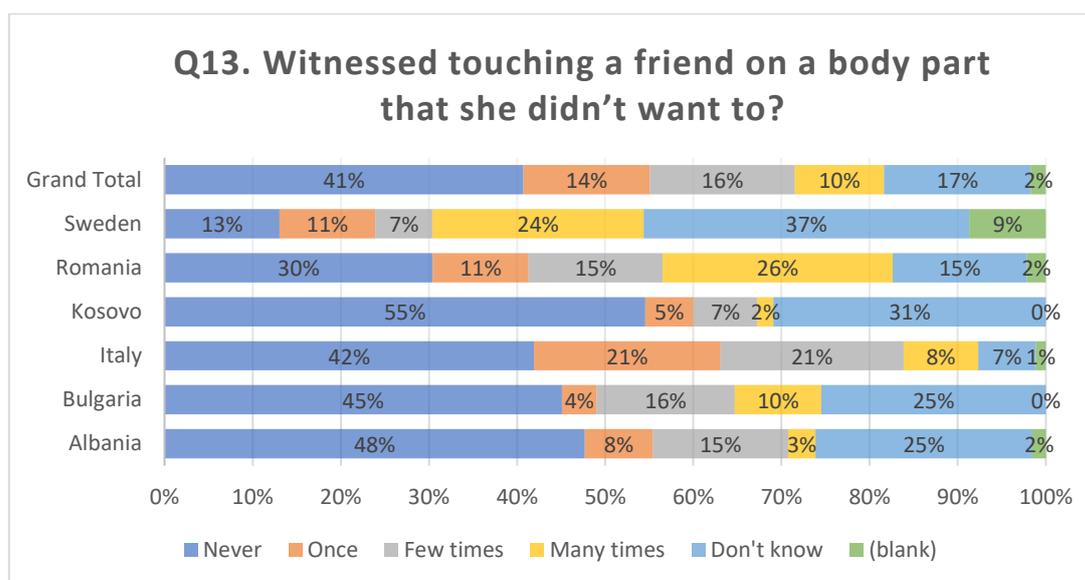
Together, these findings suggest that while schools may be perceived as generally safe spaces by many students, violence, unequal treatment, and inconsistent peer relationships are still prevalent issues in certain contexts. Maintaining and strengthening a safe, respectful, and inclusive school environment requires continued attention. This includes fostering open communication, ensuring reliable reporting systems, and promoting gender-sensitive and respectful behaviour among research participants. These areas remain critical for school communities, educators, and policymakers aiming to support the well-being and protection of all students.

TYPES OF VIOLENCE

The results of the questionnaire and the FGDs indicated that various forms of violence are present in and around the school in all countries.

Sexual violence

Q13. Witnessed touching a friend on a body part that she didn't want to



Participants were asked whether they had ever witnessed someone touching a friend on a body part that she didn't want to be touched—a form of non-consensual contact that reflects broader patterns of gender-based violence. The responses provide insight into how common such behaviour is within peer environments, and how young people interpret and report these experiences.

Across the full sample, 41% of respondents reported *never* witnessing such behaviour, while 14% said they had seen it *once*, 16% *a few times*, and 10% *many times*. Additionally, 17% responded *don't know*, and 2% left the question blank. This means that **at least 40% of participants indicated they had witnessed such behaviour at least once**, highlighting a substantial level of exposure to non-consensual touching among young people. At the country level, Romania reported the highest rate of repeated exposure, with more than half of participants witnessing this at least once - 26% stating they had witnessed such behaviour *many times*, and another 15% *a few times*. Only 30% reported never seeing such incidents, while 15% selected *don't know* and 2% left the question blank.

Sweden had the lowest *never* rate (13%), suggesting high exposure or awareness. 24% reported *many times*, 7% *a few times*, and 11% *once*. Notably, Sweden also had the highest rate of *don't*

know (37%) and blank responses (9%), pointing to possible uncertainty or discomfort in interpreting or disclosing such incidents.

In Kosovo, the majority (55%) reported never witnessing such behaviour—the highest among all countries. Only 2% said *many times*, and 7% *a few times*. However, a significant 31% responded *don't know*, possibly indicating hesitation or a lack of clarity on what constitutes inappropriate behaviour.

Italy showed a more even distribution: 42% said *never*, while 21% had seen it *once*, 21% *a few times*, and 8% *many times*. The low *don't know* rate (7%) and 1% blank suggest more certainty or awareness in interpreting such situations. Bulgaria reflected moderate exposure: 10% said *many times*, 16% *a few times*, and 4% *once*. 45% had never witnessed it, and 25% selected *don't know*, indicating a significant portion of young people might lack clarity or feel uncertain. While, in Albania, 48% said they had never witnessed such behaviour, while 3% reported *many times*, 15% *a few times*, and 8% *once*. 25% responded *don't know*, and 2% left the answer blank.

Across all countries, the relatively high rates of *don't know* responses (17% overall) suggest a **need for clearer education and awareness around consent, boundaries, and how to recognize inappropriate behaviour**. While a large portion of young people have not observed such acts, the significant share who have—and the uncertainty expressed by many—reinforces the importance of promoting gender-sensitive education and empowering youth to speak up, recognize, and report harmful behaviour.

These findings highlight not only the widespread nature of non-consensual touching among peers but also gaps in awareness or clarity among young people about recognizing and categorizing such behaviours. The relatively high number of *don't know* and blank responses across several countries indicates a need for deeper education on bodily autonomy, consent, and appropriate peer interactions.

The data underscores the critical importance of implementing gender-sensitive, youth-informed education and prevention strategies in schools. Strengthening young people's ability to identify, understand, and safely report inappropriate touching is essential—not only for individual protection but also for fostering an environment where young people are equipped to be active, informed bystanders who can recognize and challenge gender-based violence.

Over 60% of respondents stated that children their age are exposed to sexual abusive behaviours, with at least one third of participants in Sweden and Bulgaria reporting having witnessed peers receiving SMSs or video messages with **sexual jokes or love proposals that they didn't want**. They list numerous forms of sexual violence: inappropriate sexual language, showing or posting nude photos of others, inappropriate touching, inappropriate gestures, making fun of someone because of their sexual orientation, which may happen to them or their peers in the school.

Sexual violence, while reported as less frequent than other types, emerged across all countries as a deeply concerning form of abuse—often misunderstood, minimized, or left unaddressed. In focus groups, children shared that inappropriate touching, coercion for sexual content, and non-consensual sharing of images were all occurring, though often mislabelled simply as "bullying" or seen as jokes. A young person in Romania said she viewed "*posting inappropriate videos and photos on the internet without someone's consent*" as bullying, while a boy described

"inappropriately touching a girl" the same way—revealing a lack of awareness around the severity and nature of sexual violence. Furthermore, the blurred understanding is also reflected in a worrying tendency to shift blame onto victims, noting that *"sexual harassment is not seen as a form of violence—she dresses like that so it's okay to talk to her like that."* Such normalization of harmful behaviours underscores the urgent need for systemic, age-appropriate education on consent, boundaries, and respect.

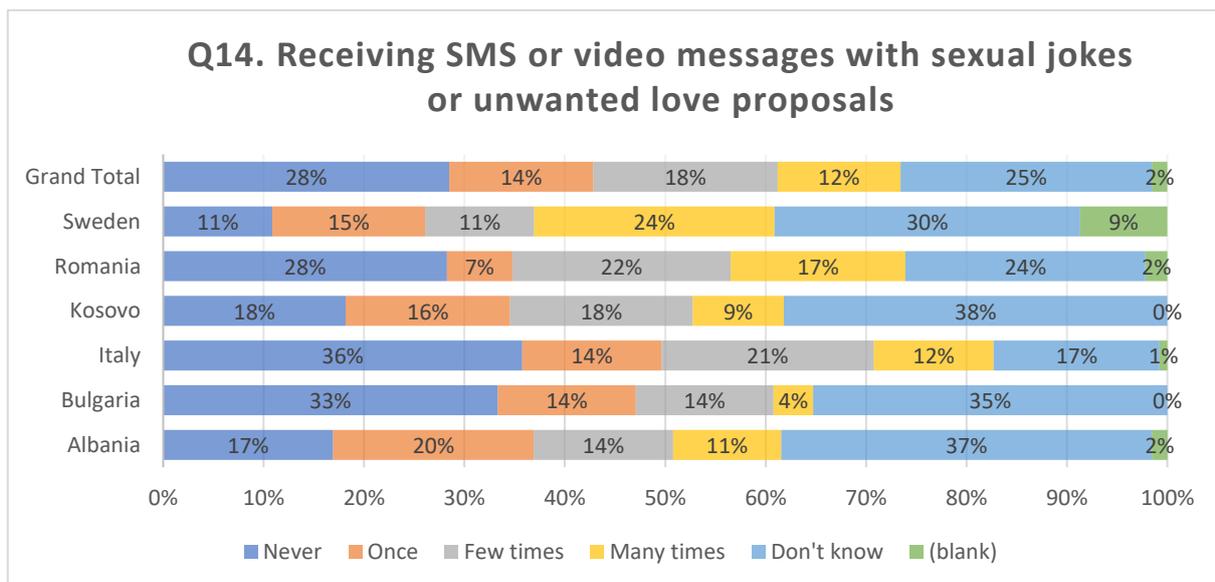
Girls are overwhelmingly more likely to be targets of sexual harassment, both in person and online. They reported being pressured for nude photos or sexual favours and facing retaliation if they refused. As one 17-year-old girl in Bulgaria described, *"Sexual harassment is also present online—when you are asked for a nude photo and you refuse, and you receive threats of rape and beatings... It's so normalised I don't even pay attention to it anymore."* Boys, on the other hand, may reinforce or enable this culture, sometimes without recognizing the harm. Peer dynamics often reward sexist jokes or coercion as expressions of dominance.

Interestingly, young people acknowledged that sexual violence is **not gender-exclusive**. Boys reported being touched inappropriately at parties or manipulated when intoxicated, although these situations are often laughed off or not discussed openly. Nonetheless, most children agreed that girls experience more frequent and more damaging sexualized behaviours.

In Sweden and other contexts, sexual violence often overlaps with other forms of abuse—particularly digital. Girls are frequently targeted with unwanted sexual messages or pressured to share explicit photos, which are then used to shame or control them. Boys, too, are sometimes exposed to these dynamics, though typically within peer groups that emphasize power or status.

Cyberbullying

Q14. Receiving SMS or video messages with sexual jokes or unwanted love proposals



Participants were asked if they had ever received SMS or video messages containing sexual jokes or unwanted love proposals—forms of digital sexual harassment. The data offers insight into how common such experiences are among young people across countries. Across all countries, 44% of respondents reported receiving such messages at least once (14% *once*, 18% *a few times*, and 12% *many times*). In contrast, 28% said *never*, 25% selected *don't know*, and 2% left the question blank. These findings show that nearly half of the youth surveyed have experienced some form of unwanted or inappropriate digital communication.

Sweden had the highest rate of repeated exposure, with 50% saying they had received such messages *at least once*, including 24% *many times*. It also had the lowest *never* rate (11%), and the highest blank response rate (9%), pointing to both high exposure and possible discomfort in disclosure. Romania followed closely, with 46% reporting at least one incident (17% *many times*, 22% *a few times*, 7% *once*), and 24% saying *don't know*. This indicates a significant level of digital harassment and some uncertainty in how to interpret such experiences.

In Kosovo, 43% reported receiving such messages at least once, though 38% selected *don't know*, suggesting hesitancy or lack of clarity around what constitutes inappropriate digital behaviour. Italy also showed a high rate of exposure: 47% reported at least one occurrence, with a relatively low *don't know* rate (17%)—pointing to better recognition of such behaviour among Italian respondents. Albania had 45% report at least one incident, while 37% said *don't know*, indicating both high exposure and uncertainty. Bulgaria showed a lower total exposure (32%), but still had 35% respond *don't know*, suggesting possible under-recognition or reluctance to report.

These findings reveal a **concerning level of exposure to digital sexual harassment** among young people, with significant shares of respondents either experiencing or unsure about experiencing such acts. The high *don't know* rates across countries highlight the need for **stronger digital literacy and gender-based violence prevention**, including clearer education on consent, boundaries, and respectful online behaviour. While during the FGDs, cyberbullying emerged as one of the most widespread and insidious forms of violence affecting children and adolescents across all participating countries. Unlike traditional forms of bullying, online harassment is relentless—it reaches children in the privacy of their homes, continues around the clock, and often involves both peers and strangers. As one young participant from the Applying Safe Behaviour's International Young Expert Group (IYEG) expressed, "*Online violence is worse – it can reach you anytime, even at home with parents.*" This constant exposure leaves many young people feeling unsafe and helpless, with limited ways to escape or recover.

In many focus groups, young people described how cyberbullying includes the sharing of private photos, videos, or conversations without consent. A striking example came from Milan, where a video of a girl was circulated widely among peers at her swimming school. Whether the incident was ever reported was unclear to the young people, highlighting a broader pattern where many victims remain silent. "*Cyberbullying is seen as normal, so young people often don't report it,*" another IYEG participant added, pointing to the normalization of digital abuse in youth culture.

Across countries, both girls and boys are affected, but the types of targeting differ. Girls are more often exposed to sexualized harassment, including the unsolicited sharing of intimate images, crude jokes, and degrading comments about their appearance or behaviour. Boys, meanwhile, may face threats, group bullying, or videos shared to publicly shame them after physical

altercations. In Sweden, the young people noted, *"For boys, it's mostly threats or sharing humiliating videos when someone gets beaten... [they're] spread among people they know and others they don't."*

Children from Kosovo emphasized how bullying often starts online—through platforms like TikTok or Snapchat—and then escalates into physical violence at school. Social media, they said, fosters a culture of dominance and control, where young people boast about humiliating others to boost their own status. *"'I beat up my friend' or 'I made the girl do that' – those phrases are part of building a tough image online,"* one child explained during a discussion in Nashec.

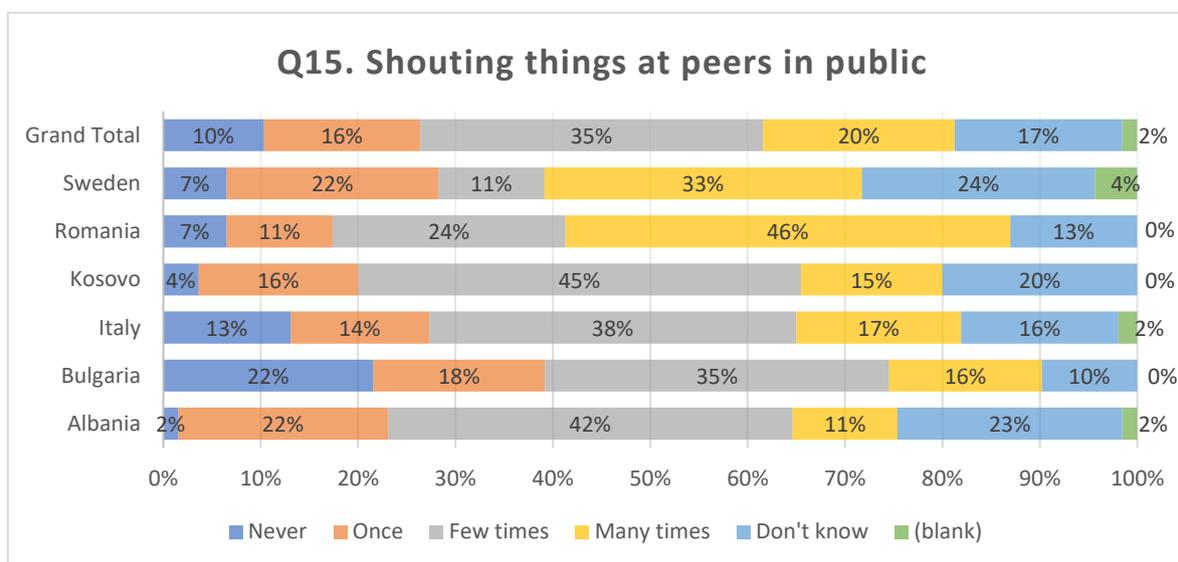
In Bulgaria, one teenage girl recounted a particularly disturbing incident: *"It has happened many times that they cut your face—sort of Photoshop you—and threaten you again. Even if you don't have a photo like that, they can do it and still threaten you or take advantage of you."* This manipulation of digital content not only damages reputations but can lead to blackmail and long-term psychological harm.

Despite the pervasive nature of online abuse, **school staff and educators often feel ill-equipped to intervene.** In many cases, cyberbullying remains hidden, occurring outside of school hours or in private digital spaces. However, the emotional impact inevitably spills into the classroom, creating fear, isolation, and distrust among young people. In some contexts, like Romania, cyberbullying was reported less frequently, but the general consensus across the region is that it is an underreported and deeply damaging form of violence.

There is a growing recognition that **cyberbullying cannot be treated as a separate issue from school-based violence.** Instead, it must be integrated into broader strategies for safe learning environments—addressing digital literacy, consent, peer influence, and bystander behaviour. As the digital world continues to blur the lines between public and private life, tackling online violence must become a central focus in efforts to protect and empower young people.

Verbal violence

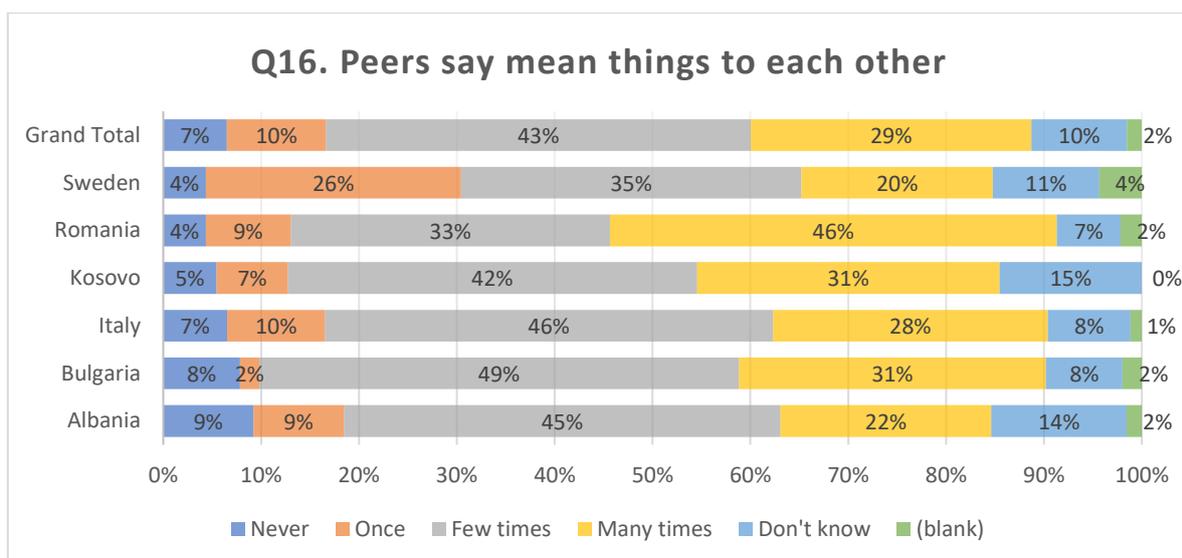
Respondents reported psychological violence is the most common type of violence they have witnessed in their areas. Especially **verbal violence** in the forms of **insults, swearing, teasing, embarrassing and humiliating** each other.



Across all countries, a significant **71% of respondents reported witnessing** peers shouting at others at least once: including 16% who said it happened *once*, 35% *a few times*, and 20% *many times*. This suggests that verbal aggression is a common feature of peer interactions across the school environments surveyed. In contrast, only 10% said they had *never* witnessed such behaviour. The remaining 19% either selected *don't know* or left the question blank, which may reflect uncertainty, normalization, or discomfort in labelling shouting as harmful.

Romania (81%), Kosovo (76%), Italy (71%), and Albania (75%) had the highest rates of young people reporting exposure to shouting. Notably, Romania leads in frequent exposure, with 46% saying it happens *many times*. Sweden also showed high exposure (66%) but had the highest rate of uncertainty with 33% answering *don't know* or leaving the question blank.

The consistently low *never* responses across most countries confirm that verbal peer aggression is widespread and visible. The high number of young people who reported observing it repeatedly suggests that shouting is not just an isolated event, but a systemic issue in school culture. This reinforces findings from the focus groups, where children described verbal abuse as **happening “everywhere”** and often dismissed or normalized it, especially when framed as jokes or teasing among friends. Together, these insights underline the **urgency of addressing verbal violence as a systemic issue** in school culture and underscore the need for educational interventions that help young people recognize, report, and prevent psychological harm among peers.



While in relation to the question "**Do peers say mean things to each other or call each other with names that they don't like?**", across all countries, a striking 82% of respondents reported witnessing peers saying mean things or using unwanted names at least once (10% who said it happened *once*, 43% *a few times*, and 29% *many times*). This clearly suggests that **verbal name-calling is a widespread** and recurring form of peer aggression across the school environments surveyed. In contrast, only 7% of respondents said they had never witnessed such behaviour. The remaining 12% either selected *don't know* or left the question blank, indicating possible confusion about what constitutes verbal bullying, discomfort in reporting, or the normalization of such behaviour within peer culture.

Romania had the highest reported rate of frequent exposure, with 46% of respondents stating that name-calling happens *many times*. Similarly, Bulgaria (80%), Italy (84%), and Kosovo (80%) also reported high overall exposure, with the vast majority of respondents having witnessed this behaviour repeatedly. In Albania, 76% of respondents reported at least one instance of name-calling, and in Sweden, 81% reported the same—with 26% saying it happened once, suggesting more isolated but still significant occurrences. Sweden also recorded one of the highest uncertainty levels, with 15% of respondents selecting *don't know* or leaving the answer blank.

The consistently low *never* responses across all countries—ranging from just 4% to 9%—confirm that verbal aggression and name-calling are common, visible, and likely normalized in many school settings. The high percentage of respondents reporting repeated exposure points to a systemic issue that requires targeted attention, particularly in building young people's capacity to recognize verbal harm, promoting respectful peer communication, and reinforcing inclusive school cultures.

Focus group participants consistently identified **psychological and verbal violence as the most common forms of violence they encounter**, confirming what the quantitative survey data also suggests. In all participating countries, respondents consistently identified verbal violence as the most widespread and damaging form of abuse, often overshadowing physical aggression. It frequently targets girls and marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ young people, and is deeply rooted in harmful gender norms, stereotypes, and social hierarchies. This verbal abuse includes insults, teasing, threats, name-calling, and the spread of degrading or humiliating comments—

frequently targeting a young person's appearance, gender identity, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. A young person in Romania explained, *"Verbal bullying happens every day. People make fun of how you look, how you speak, or even what you wear. It's like being on a stage where everyone is watching and judging you."* Similarly, Swedish young people described the circulation of *"humiliating videos"* as a common form of harassment that spreads quickly and widely online, intensifying the emotional harm. As a young person in the Applying Safe Behaviours project's International Young Expert Group (IYEG) mentioned *"Toxic masculinity is becoming normalised – a boyfriend telling you what to wear is seen as love."*

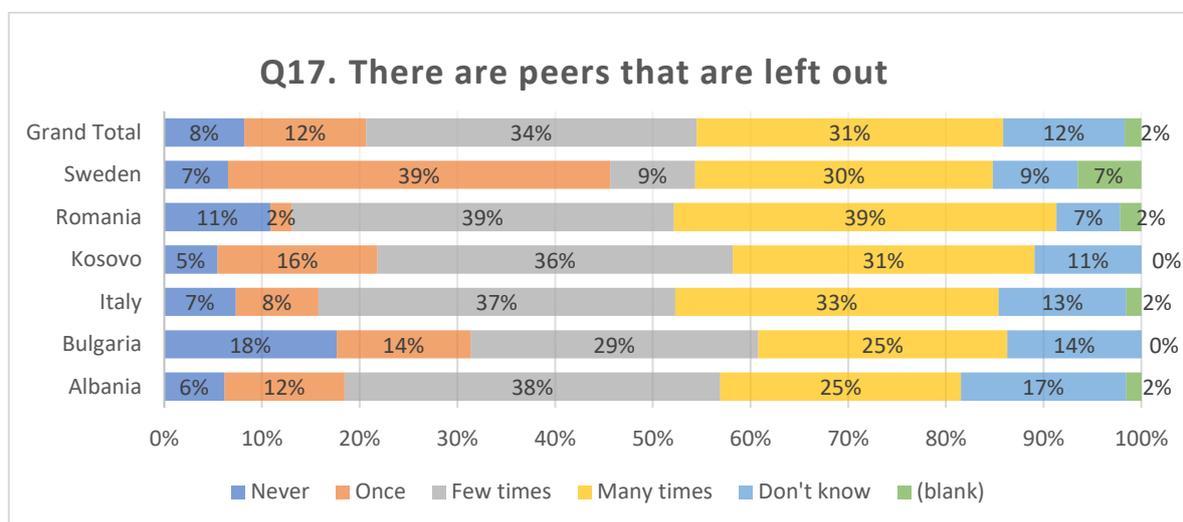
Girls are often subjected to repeated insults based on their **appearance, clothing, or perceived sexual behaviour**. As one participant from Bulgaria noted, *"Everything that relates to clothes could turn into an insult for girls. Refusal to have sex makes boys treat girls badly."* This form of verbal violence often escalates into public shaming, where girls are humiliated in front of peers, especially through social media platforms.

Ethnic-based insults are also common. Children frequently mentioned that those perceived as "different," including ethnic minorities or youth with diverse sexual identities, are routinely mocked and excluded. In Kosovo, one adolescent shared, *"Girls are mocked for their looks, controlled in relationships, asked for unwanted photos,"* illustrating the intersection between verbal abuse and sexual harassment. Homophobic and sexist slurs—such as calling someone "gay" as a joke, or a girl a "slut" for rejecting a boy—are normalized in many peer groups. As one IYEG member emphasized, *"Using intellect to shame someone is explained as a joke, but it's an attack on dignity."*

Overall, while schools have made progress in reducing physical violence, especially with increased security, **verbal, emotional, and gender-based violence remain deeply rooted and insufficiently addressed**. As one young person from Albania summed up, *"They can stop the fights, but they can't stop the words."* Addressing these challenges requires a **holistic, coordinated response** involving young people, educators, families, and the broader community to create truly safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environments.

Discrimination and exclusion

The data from the question “Do you think there are children/youths in your area that are left out from group of friends, games, or activities?” indicates that exclusion and marginalisation are widely perceived among children and young people across all six countries surveyed.



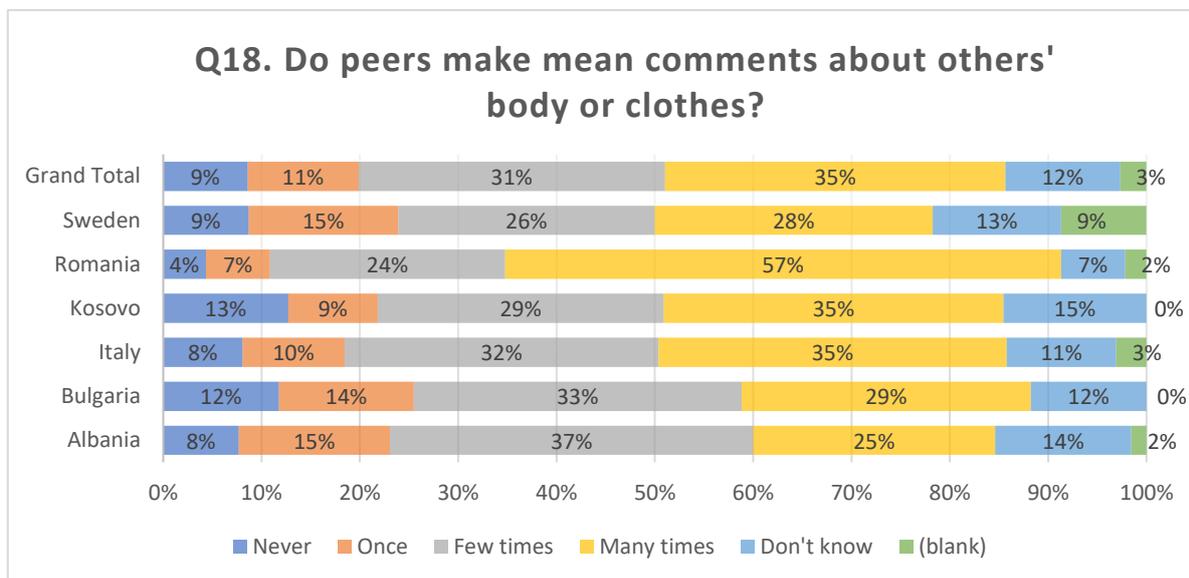
Across the total sample, 65% of respondents reported that this happens at least once (including 12% *once*, 34% *a few times*, and 31% *many times*) highlighting that social exclusion is a frequent and visible issue in peer environments. At the country level, Romania showed the highest perceived prevalence of exclusion, with 78% of young people saying it happens either *a few times* or *many times*, and a particularly high share (39%) selecting *many times*. Similarly, Italy (70%) and Kosovo (67%) reported high levels of observed exclusion, confirming that marginalisation is a widely acknowledged phenomenon in these settings.

Albania also showed strong recognition of the issue, with 63% reporting at least occasional exclusion. However, it had the highest rate of *don't know* responses (17%), suggesting that some respondents may be uncertain about what counts as exclusion or may hesitate to label such dynamics directly. Bulgaria, while slightly lower, still reported 54% witnessing exclusion at least a *few times*, pointing to the broad reach of this problem across settings.

Sweden presented a somewhat different profile, with a high number of respondents (39%) reporting having seen exclusion *once* and 30% saying *many times*, but only 9% choosing a *few times*. This polarized pattern may reflect either strong sensitivity to isolated incidents or a binary perception of peer exclusion as either rare or pervasive. Notably, Sweden also had the highest blank response rate (7%), further indicating potential uncertainty or discomfort in interpreting the question.

Overall, the low number of *never* responses across countries (just 8% total) reinforces the view that peer exclusion is a commonly witnessed and recognized part of young people's social experiences. These findings highlight the importance of addressing social inclusion more

explicitly in school and youth programming—ensuring all children are supported to participate fully and equitably in peer activities.



The data from the question **"Do peers make mean comments about others' body or clothes?"** reveals that appearance-based verbal bullying is a widespread issue across all surveyed countries. On average, two-thirds (66%) of respondents reported witnessing or experiencing such comments either *many times* (35%) or *a few times* (31%).

Romania stands out with the highest prevalence, where 81% of young people indicated these incidents happen frequently—57% said *Many times* and 24% *A few times*. Italy and Kosovo follow closely, with 67% and 64% respectively reporting regular exposure to this behaviour. Bulgaria and Albania show similarly high levels, with about 62% in each country acknowledging repeated incidents. In Sweden, the figures are somewhat lower but still significant, with 54% saying this happens either *many times* or *a few times*.

The share of respondents who said this *never* happens remains low across all countries, ranging from just 4% in Romania to 13% in Kosovo, with a total average of only 9%.

The overall findings reveal that **social exclusion among youth is a consistent concern across countries**, and its frequent occurrence—paired with the relatively low rate of respondents saying it *never* happens (only 8% across all countries)—emphasizes the need for greater attention to inclusion and belonging in peer relationships. Also appearance-related teasing and verbal harassment are common across different contexts, highlighting an urgent need to address body-shaming and appearance-based discrimination as part of school-wide violence prevention strategies. This is especially important considering that such forms of marginalisation often occur subtly and can be normalized or overlooked within school culture.

Discrimination and social exclusion were identified across all countries in the study as significant and ongoing forms of psychological violence. During focus group discussions, participants frequently described experiences of exclusion based on sexual orientation, ethnicity, economic

background, and disability. Among these, non-heterosexual youth and Roma children were perceived as being particularly vulnerable to verbal harassment, bullying, and isolation. Across countries, survey data also confirms that masculinity in girls is more accepted than femininity in boys, reinforcing the notion that strength and dominance remain culturally associated with masculinity. These gendered expectations contribute to the stigmatization of boys who do not conform, exposing them to ridicule and exclusion. Meanwhile, girls who deviate from stereotypical feminine roles may still be judged but are more likely to be tolerated.

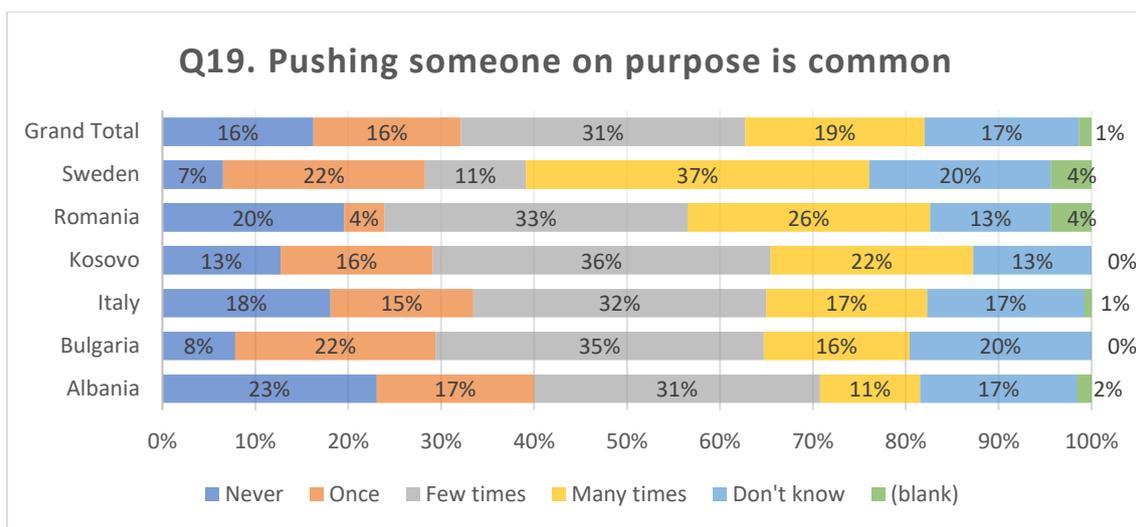
Sexual orientation remains a sensitive and often misunderstood issue among peers. Some young people viewed gender non-conforming behaviour—especially boys who act or dress in more feminine ways—as provocative. This perception often fuels bullying and aggression and is linked to broader cultural discomfort with behaviours that fall outside traditional gender norms. The idea that such behaviours "provoke" violence reflects a tendency to shift blame onto the victims, rather than challenging harmful attitudes or actions.

While **marginalisation** was not always explicitly named by participants, several examples pointed to exclusion based on disability, poverty, and ethnic background, particularly in Kosovo, Romania and Bulgaria. For instance, Roma children were described as sometimes withdrawing from group activities out of frustration or a sense of not belonging. This highlights a broader pattern where social and cultural differences are not accommodated, contributing to isolation, even if peers are not directly excluding them. Participants also discussed how seemingly minor behaviours—like mocking framed as jokes—can **become harmful** when repeated. These interactions may appear playful on the surface but often carry deeper messages of exclusion and rejection. In many cases, **victims go along with the joke** to maintain social belonging, while still feeling hurt or targeted.

Ultimately, the forms of violence described point to a strong push for conformity. Insults, bullying, and exclusion are frequently based on **perceived difference**, and serve to reinforce narrow definitions of what is considered acceptable or "normal." This desire for sameness marginalizes those who are seen as "other" and creates environments where psychological violence becomes embedded in everyday interactions.

Physical violence

The data from the question “Do you think pushing someone on purpose is common in your area?” highlights that these **physical forms of aggression**—specifically intentional pushing—are perceived as fairly common across the six surveyed countries. On average, half of the respondents (50%) reported witnessing or experiencing such incidents *a few times* (31%) or *many times* (19%).



Albania stands out with the highest share of respondents who believe pushing is *never* an issue (23%), followed by Romania (20%) and Italy (18%), suggesting a perception of lower prevalence in these contexts. Nevertheless, all countries report a significant number of young people who perceive pushing to occur at least occasionally. Kosovo (58%) and Romania (59%) report the highest frequency of such behaviour, with over a fifth of respondents in each country saying it happens *many times*. Sweden also reports a high rate of occurrence, with 48% noting it happens either *many times* or *a few times*. Bulgaria follows closely with 51%, though it also has one of the highest shares of respondents (20%) who said they *don't know*.

The relatively high *don't know* responses (17% overall) across countries—particularly in Sweden, Bulgaria, and Albania—could point to uncertainty about what qualifies as intentional physical aggression or a lack of awareness due to such behaviours being normalized.

During focus groups, respondents stated that **physical violence is also present in all countries – more than half of the respondents heard or witnessed** manifestations of physical violence as someone hitting another peer with a hand or any type of object. In many focus group discussions, children emphasized that “*fights happen most often*”, particularly in school settings such as classrooms, hallways, and during breaks. Boys are consistently identified as more likely to engage in physical confrontations, with girls also occasionally involved, particularly in situations stemming from online conflicts or social tension. “*Violence happens often over small issues, mostly among boys*,” noted one participant from Milan.

In Kosovo, children described how **physical altercations often originate online** and escalate into in-person fights. One participant admitted, "*I beat up my friend*" as part of a culture of peer dominance, where asserting control or saving face can quickly lead to violence. These acts, often carried out in full view of others, contribute to a school climate where physical aggression is normalized. In Sweden, boys were reported to fight more frequently, sometimes even carrying weapons, while girls were more often involved in psychological and emotional conflicts that occasionally spilled into physical ones, such as hair-pulling during disputes.

Destruction of property—while not always classified by young people as a type of violence—is frequently mentioned as a precursor to more serious aggression. In Romania, young people explained that breaking someone's phone, for example, "*can escalate into a bigger conflict.*" Such acts are often interpreted as deliberate provocations or disrespect, triggering retaliatory violence. Children and youth also identified the damaging of personal belongings as a common occurrence, though one that rarely surprises either peers or teachers.

Children across regions also identified specific locations where physical violence is more likely to occur. Most commonly, these include **less supervised areas** such as restrooms, locker rooms, corridors, and playgrounds. Violence outside school, in neighbourhoods, near shops, or even at home, was also reported. A young person in Sweden explained that violence typically involves peers: "*It happens both in school and outside of school, but the individuals usually know each other. It's more common that they know each other than that the violence comes from strangers.*"

Interestingly, while no clear gendered pattern emerged from most discussions, the visibility and public nature of violence among boys made their experiences more noticeable. Girls, on the other hand, were reported to face more covert forms of aggression, such as sexualized verbal abuse or online harassment, though they, too, are sometimes involved in physical altercations, especially when provoked through digital platforms.

CAUSES BEHIND VIOLENT BEHAVIOUR

Various factors were identified as triggers for violent behaviour among young people in schools through the FGDs. These causes identified across all focus groups and surveys are diverse, complex, and deeply interconnected, rooted in a web of individual, family, school, and societal dynamics. While many children and adolescents reported witnessing violence on a near-daily basis, their explanations for why it happens were layered and often reflected their own lived realities and social environments.

Individual and psychological triggers

One of the most consistently mentioned causes of violent behaviour was emotional instability. Young people, particularly those experiencing frustration, anger, or low self-esteem, were described as more likely to lash out physically or verbally. In both Romania and Sweden, participants pointed to a lack of emotional regulation, low tolerance for frustration, and impulsivity as significant drivers of aggression. Some young people also described using violence as a way of **coping with personal stress or emotional turmoil**, especially when other support mechanisms were absent. As a young person in Sweden noted, *"Sometimes it's just the only way they know how to express themselves when something's wrong at home."*

A **lack of empathy** was also frequently cited as a root cause. When children do not understand or care about the impact of their actions on others, violence becomes easier to justify. Relatedly, peer dynamics play a powerful role: children spoke about how friends can escalate situations by encouraging aggressive behaviour—"hyping each other up"—especially in group settings where the need to appear strong, brave, or dominant becomes amplified.

Family and home environment

Many participants underscored that violence often begins at home. Children exposed to aggressive parenting styles, family conflict, or emotional neglect are more likely to reproduce these behaviours in school or social settings. This connection was especially pronounced in Bulgaria and Kosovo, where children themselves explicitly stated that *"family is where violence starts."* Young people also mentioned **parental absence**, especially in cases where parents work abroad, as a contributing factor, creating a lack of supervision and emotional support.

In Romania, the disconnection between home and school was another issue. When children face contradictory expectations or values in these two environments, confusion and frustration can lead to behavioural problems. Also the academic pressure without adequate emotional support was identified as a stressor that may result in violence, particularly when children feel unseen or unsupported.

Social and cultural influences

Peer relationships and the wider social context were found to be significant. Violence was often tied to **social hierarchies**—who is popular, who fits in, and who doesn't. Children noted that bullying or aggression can be a way to gain or maintain social status, especially in group settings. In some cases, this was likened to gang-like behaviour, where loyalty to a group supersedes empathy or fairness.

Cultural stereotypes and media influence also emerged as potent factors. In Romania, for instance, a controversial public figure known for misogynistic content was cited by young people as a source of justification for sexist remarks and violence toward girls. This highlights how public narratives—especially those amplified by platforms like TikTok—can influence the normalization of harmful behaviour.

Gender norms and differences

Gender expectations were also deeply intertwined with violence. Boys were more likely to engage in physical violence, often to assert masculinity or dominance. Girls, meanwhile, experienced more verbal abuse, social exclusion, and online harassment—frequently of a sexualized nature. In Bulgaria, young people described how boys' "ego" and the need to appear tough were triggers for fights, while girls were seen as more sensitive and emotionally reactive, particularly to insults or gossip.

Moreover, societal norms around masculinity and femininity were still strongly reinforced in many settings. In some communities, girls were judged more harshly for having multiple romantic partners, while boys were encouraged to "defend themselves" through fighting. Although some stereotypes were challenged, many harmful ideas about gender roles still persisted and influenced interpersonal dynamics.

Discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization

Discrimination based on ethnicity, social status, or disability was a widespread concern. Roma children, in particular, were repeatedly mentioned as targets of exclusion and derogatory remarks. In some cases, this led to self-isolation, where children removed themselves from social settings due to repeated rejection. A pattern of subtle exclusion, such as mocking framed as jokes, was also common and often normalized, though it had deeply hurtful effects.

Children with disabilities, those from poor families, or with unfashionable clothes were also more vulnerable to ridicule or exclusion. LGBTQ+ youth often felt unsafe to disclose their identities, fearing bullying or violence. In Sweden, one participant explained, *"Girls with immigrant backgrounds or disabilities are most at risk, especially online."*

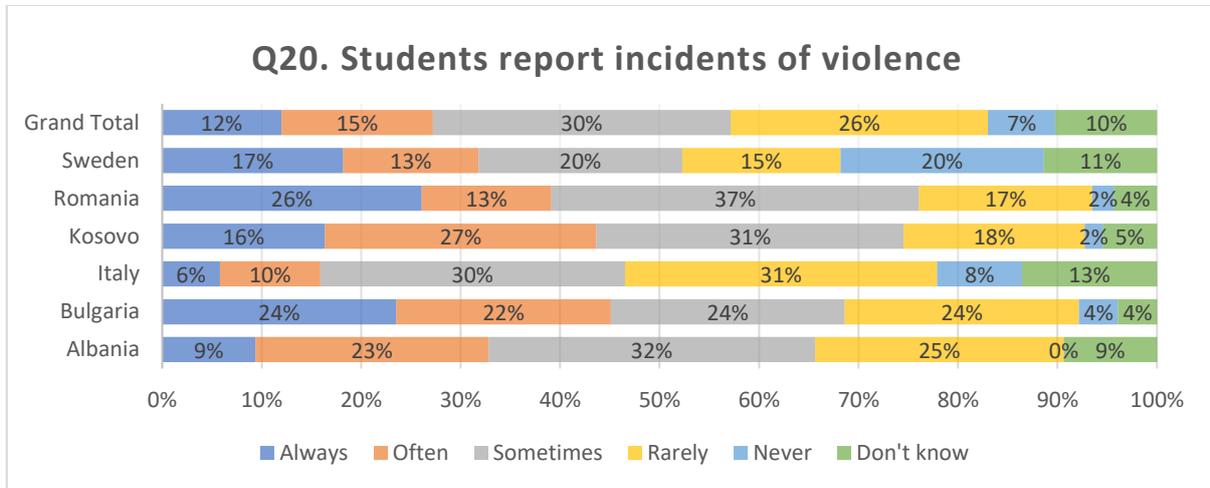
Institutional and structural factors

While individual and social causes were most visible to respondents, structural issues within schools were also raised. Research participants pointed to the absence of trusted adults, such as psychologists or pedagogical advisors, and a lack of real consequences for aggressors. Some children expressed frustration that violence perpetrators were not properly dealt with—suggesting harsh punishments, even expulsion or transfer to correctional institutions. At the same time, others stressed the need for emotional support and rehabilitation rather than just punishment.

A **lack of conflict resolution education** also came up repeatedly. Many children admitted they didn't know how to de-escalate situations, and without adult guidance, minor disagreements could spiral quickly into violence. As one Swedish group concluded, *"We just don't know what else to do sometimes—no one teaches us how to handle things calmly."*

BYSTANDER EFFECT

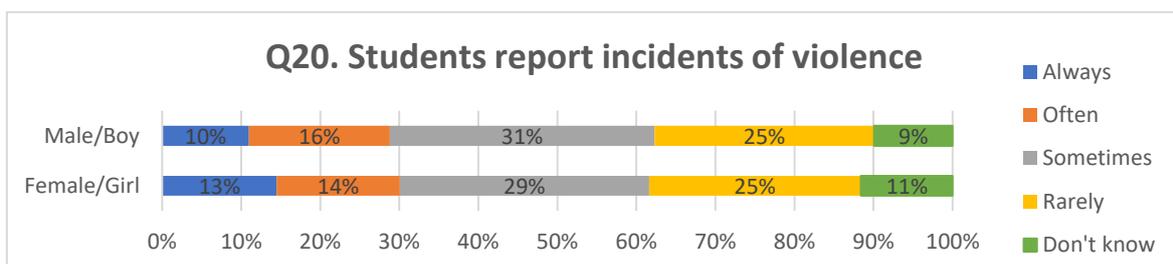
Q9. Reporting incidents of violence



The statement **“Students report incidents of violence”** elicited mixed responses from participants across all surveyed countries. Overall, only a minority of respondents indicated that incidents of violence are reported frequently, with just 12% saying this always happens and 15% stating it occurs *often*. In contrast, 30% believe that violence is sometimes reported, and another 26% said it is reported rarely. Romania stands out with the highest proportion of respondents indicating that violence is always reported (26%) and the highest combined rate of always and sometimes (63%). However, 17% still believe that violence is rarely reported, suggesting a certain inconsistency in respondents’ experiences or perceptions. Similarly, Bulgaria shows a relatively balanced distribution, with 24% reporting that violence is always reported, 22% *often*, and 24% each for *sometimes* and *rarely*, indicating a perception of inconsistent reporting practices.

In Kosovo, 43% of respondents stated that violence is reported either *always* (16%) or *often* (27%), with another 31% saying *sometimes*. Only 2% reported that violence is never reported. This may indicate a more proactive reporting culture compared to other countries.

On the other end of the spectrum, Italy shows the lowest rate of *always* responses (6%) and one of the highest rates of *rarely* (31%) and *don’t know* (13%). Similarly, Sweden presents a concerning profile: only 17% of respondents said violence is always reported, while 20% said it is never reported — the highest *never* rate among all countries. An additional 11% selected *don’t know*, further highlighting a lack of clarity or confidence in school-level reporting mechanisms.



When it comes to gender perspectives, girls and boys are equally likely to admit that violence is always or often reported, with 58.25% of girls and 58.37% of boys stating so. However, boys show a higher rate of uncertainty, with 12.44% responding *don't know* versus 6.40% of girls. Girls are also more likely to think that incidents are *rarely* reported (10.44%) compared to boys (2.87%). Furthermore, the focus groups discussions with children across multiple countries reveal a complex and often contradictory pattern when it comes to how young people respond as bystanders to violence or harmful behaviour. A recurring theme is the **tension between a moral inclination to intervene and the perceived social or personal risks of doing so**. Many participants admitted that their response would depend heavily on the context, who the victim is, and their own relationship to those involved.

For instance, when asked how they would respond if a peer was being mocked for their appearance, many admitted they might laugh along—especially if they didn't like the person or if the mockery seemed "harmless." However, others shared examples of stepping in when the teasing became excessive. As one participant from Milan explained, *"I told my friend to stop when he kept teasing the same person. But it's much harder when it's a group—you feel outnumbered."*

Fear of retaliation was a strong deterrent, particularly when violence occurred in public or group settings. In Prishtina, one boy shared that he would only intervene in a fight *"if I liked the person or if they were my friend"*, while another admitted that *"if it's older or dangerous kids, I'd probably leave or call someone else."* In Sweden, a participant said plainly, *"You don't know what the person being hit did—maybe they deserved it. Better not to get involved."*

Reporting incidents to adults—such as teachers or police—was rarely a first reaction. Young people across regions expressed a clear lack of trust in schools to take meaningful action, and many feared being labelled a "snitch." In one Romanian focus group, participants were split: some said they would go to a headmaster or parent if they were threatened, while others believed that *"you have to fight back to prove who's stronger."* This mindset was particularly common among boys, who described a culture where backing down is equated with weakness.

When it came to **sexual pressure or requests for intimate photos**, responses varied by gender and personal experience. Girls often said they would immediately block the person and talk to a friend. Yet many admitted that it becomes more complicated if they liked or trusted the person asking. As one girl in Sweden said, *"You start thinking maybe it's okay... especially if you're in love. That's when things go wrong."* Boys were generally less certain of how to respond, sometimes watching without intervening—*"out of curiosity,"* as one admitted—though most agreed they wouldn't send such images themselves due to fear of them being shared.

Importantly, several young people showed strong awareness of the **emotional impact of exclusion and peer rejection**. In Nashec, one child said, *"Everyone should be part of the team—how you look or act shouldn't matter."* However, others acknowledged that group dynamics, especially in sports, often revolve around strength and dominance. Peer pressure was frequently cited as a reason for not standing up for someone being excluded or mistreated.

Despite these contradictions, many participants did express **a desire for more courage and kindness** in their peer groups. Some said they wished more people would step in when they saw bullying or abuse—particularly girls, who voiced a hope that others would check in on them or say

something if they witnessed hurtful behaviour. Yet even this hope was tinged with realism. As one Swedish participant put it, *“You hope someone says stop—but you also hope you’re strong enough to do it yourself.”*

Overall, the findings highlight not only the complexity of the bystander effect among adolescents but also the **urgent need for school-based interventions** that address peer norms, build social courage, and offer safe and trusted avenues for reporting. Without these, many young people will continue to navigate violence and abuse in silence or with passive acceptance.

SUMMARY

The research conducted across six countries—Albania, Bulgaria, Italy, Kosovo, Romania, and Sweden—reveals a deeply complex landscape of peer dynamics, gender norms, and violence in schools and around the local communities where children and youth interact. The findings illustrate a deeply **embedded culture of violence and inequality** in many peer environments, particularly when it comes to psychological and gender-based harm. While some progress is evident—especially in attitudes toward boys—traditional norms and power dynamics still govern much of young people’s social lives.

While many respondents feel safe in school settings, violence remains widespread, with psychological, sexual, digital, and exclusionary forms of harm being more common than overt physical aggression. There is a major gap between physical safety and emotional well-being: children and youth may feel safe from physical harm, but are routinely exposed to verbal abuse, exclusion, and digital harassment. Girls, gender-nonconforming youth, and ethnic minorities face heightened risks, often in ways that are overlooked or minimized.

Gender norms are gradually shifting, particularly in attitudes toward boys expressing emotions or performing domestic roles. However, **stereotypes** around girls’ morality, appearance, and behaviour remain more entrenched—especially in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Boys continue to be associated with physical strength, and femininity in boys is less tolerated than masculinity in girls, pointing to enduring double standards.

Across the board, **psychological and verbal violence**—including insults, name-calling, shouting, and humiliation—emerged as the **most frequent and normalized form of harm**. Sexual violence, including unwanted touching and digital harassment, is widely underrecognized, often mislabelled as “jokes” or “bullying,” and rarely reported. Girls are disproportionately affected, especially in digital spaces where coercion and shaming are common. **Cyberbullying** is currently a major concern, with young people noting it often escalates offline and remains largely invisible to adults.

Social exclusion is also prominent. Marginalization based on appearance, disability, ethnicity, or economic status is frequently reported. Roma children and LGBTQ+ youth are particularly vulnerable. Appearance-based bullying, including body-shaming and insults about clothing, is alarmingly normalized, especially for girls.

The **underreporting** of violence remains a major challenge. Most young people do not trust that adults will act, fear being labelled as “snitches,” or believe that reporting won’t change anything. The **bystander effect is evident**: many young people weigh the risks of intervening, often remaining silent due to fear, social pressure, or perceived futility. The lack of consistent and trusted reporting mechanisms, coupled with unclear consequences for aggressors, further entrenches silence and inaction. Meanwhile, the normalization of harmful behaviours—framed as jokes, teasing, or part of group culture—makes it harder for young people to name and challenge abuse.

Finally, the causes of violence are layered—ranging from emotional instability and peer pressure to family dynamics, social inequalities, and structural weaknesses in school systems. A lack of trusted adults, poor conflict resolution skills, and harmful online content all contribute to the

persistence of aggressive behaviour. Additionally, what emerges from this research is the urgent need for systemic, sustained, and child/youth-centred interventions. Change is underway, but it is uneven, slow, and vulnerable to reversal without active reinforcement through policy, education, and community engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Integrate gender-transformative education** into school curricula to challenge harmful stereotypes, promote respectful relationships, and foster critical reflection on gender norms. Focus on both overt discrimination and subtler biases, with context-sensitive approaches that engage all students.
2. **Address psychological and digital violence** as central components of school violence prevention strategies. Prioritize verbal abuse, cyberbullying, and body-shaming through targeted interventions that build empathy, digital literacy, and skills for respectful communication.
3. **Strengthen a positive anti-GBV environments** by promoting safety, inclusion, and peer respect. Improve supervision in high-risk areas, model positive behaviour through staff, and create spaces where all young people feel valued, regardless of gender, background, or identity.
4. **Develop child/youth-centred reporting mechanisms** that are anonymous, accessible, and trusted. Ensure consistent, timely responses to violence, and train school staff to handle disclosures with care, using trauma-informed and restorative approaches.
5. **Invest in support structures** (school staff, parents, etc.) by ensuring access to psychologists, counsellors, and trained pedagogical staff in schools and other environments where children and youth are. Include social-emotional learning in education to build children/youth' conflict resolution, self-regulation, and coping skills.
6. **Empower children/youth to lead change** through peer-led initiatives, mentoring, and youth-led campaigns that challenge toxic norms and promote inclusion. Position young people as active agents in shaping safer, more respectful peer cultures.
7. **Embed equity and anti-discrimination** across all environments where children/youth are, especially focusing on school policies and best and proven practices. Actively address exclusion linked to ethnicity, gender identity, disability, or economic background by training staff, adapting teaching materials, and ensuring representation and fairness in daily school life.