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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Youngsters, graphic novels and (the limits of) empathy in gender-based violence awareness

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Abstract

Background

The article presents findings from the GENTEEL Project – Graphic Novels Against Gender Violence, which investigates graphic novels as pedagogical tools for raising students' awareness of gender-based violence (GBV) in Portugal. It draws on comics studies and critical pedagogy, and explores how a sample of 16- and 17-year-old students from two schools in Northern Portugal engaged with five Lusophone graphic novels addressing diverse manifestations of GBV, selected to represent a more inclusive, intersectional, and systemic understanding of GBV than is often portrayed in mainstream media, not framing it as isolated deviance.

Methods

Following a preliminary survey establishing participants' baseline knowledge and attitudes, students read the graphic novels individually, recording their reactions before taking part in semi-structured interviews. Interviews were coded and analysed using content and framework analysis, structured around three research questions: perceived learning, learning processes, and the ability to apply acquired knowledge to definitions and vocabulary of GBV.

Results

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

Most participants reported learning about forms of violence, victims' experiences, and perpetrators' behaviours they had not previously recognized as GBV-related. Gendered patterns emerged in our sample: girls tended to identify normalized forms of violence affecting women, while boys focused more on understanding the victims' experiences and, in some rare cases, on revising their own behaviour. Three learning modes were identified inductively: "affective resonant alignment" (learning by feeling), "rational cognitive discovery" (learning by thinking), and "learning by sharing," the first two grounded in narrative empathy and reader-response scholarship. The analysis also revealed notable blind spots, including the discursive erasure of institutional violence and of women's perpetration.

Conclusions

This arts-based form of critical pedagogy demonstrates some of the affordances and limitations of empathy as a pedagogical and political tool, arguing for a shift from experiencing GBV vicariously toward understanding the underlying logics through which it operates and being able to name/define it.

Plain-language summary

This article is about a research project that used graphic novels, vulgarly called "comic books", as tools to help teenagers from northern Portugal reflect on what is gender-based violence, how to identify it, and what can be done to help prevent it. In it, we looked at how the participating youngsters said that they had, or had not, learned something about gender-based violence by reading the graphic novels, and what they learned (and did not learn). We focused our analysis on how the victim-centered texts facilitated a series of different emotional and rational responses, most of them having to do with identification, empathy, reflexive and cognitive discoveries, and/or the lack thereof.

Empathy was crucial in order to let participants feel and emotionally understand what victims go through, but did not necessarily correspond to an actual rational understanding of, and an ability to, abstract the knowledge they acquired, and to be able to accurately define gender-based violence.

Keywords
gender-based violence, graphic novels, critical pedagogy, reader response, empathy

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Introduction

Violence and young people are linked by an uncomfortable yet crucial relationship. The incidence of violence within this group, its potentially devastating consequences for a subject in formation, and the role that youngsters might play in challenging violence at a cultural level, (if educated in that direction) together underscore the importance of engaging this demographic in specific. School emerges as a crucial space for prevention and symbolic transformations that might help us imagine a future free from violence, one in which violence is not simply repressed or punished (and thus inevitably reproduced) but challenged at its roots. School can thus be a fundamental incubator, or the biggest rival, of a culture of violence. The World Health Organization (WHO) prefers to focus on the potentials embedded in institutions devoted to the education of young people, recognizing that "not only are schools accountable in ensuring that their premises are safe and protective but they can also take an active role in engaging the community on issues related to violence" [1, p. 2].

This is particularly relevant when it comes to gender-based violence (GBV), which is to say, those forms of "harm perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, sexual orientation and/or gender identity" [2, p. 18]. GBV is an umbrella term used to gather under the same definition different, but linked, manifestations of violence that target categories already marginalized at a social and cultural level. These include women/girls (either cisgender or transgender), non-binary and other gender non-conforming subjects, and trans men/boys or cis men/boys who do not conform to the dogmas of hegemonic masculinity. In this sense, GBV is deeply linked to the implementation of symbolic dispositives of oppression in which gender divisions operate to create hierarchies and execute processes of exclusion, as Bourdieu[3] notoriously.

In Portugal, as elsewhere, education has already been recognized as the privileged area of intervention to combat GBV, with artistic and art exposure practices being identified as pivotal to promote awareness on phenomena such as intimate partner and sexual violence, among a population that is widely affected by misconceptions and ignorance on the phenomenon.[4]

This study explores comics and graphic novels as an instrument that provides pedagogical paths towards widening teenagers' knowledge(s) on the wide phenomenon of GBV and its causes. A multimodal narrative form in which images and text cooperate to create meaning,[5] comics have recently been identified by feminist and transfeminist scholarship as a privileged site for activism and awareness-raising campaigns on gender-related discriminations and abuses [6, pp. 6–10]. They have also been studied as a medium to be employed at an educational level, improving literacies and shedding light among students on historical, natural, and social phenomena, e.g.[7,8]. Drawing on these two subareas of comics studies, this article presents the results of a research project that analysed the reactions of a sample of secondary students from the Northern region of Portugal to the proposed reading of a set of five graphic novels on the topic of GBV. Its specific objective is to understand how engaging with graphic novels can facilitate young people's engagement with the concept, implications, and dynamics of gender-based violence.

Research consistently shows that epistemic violence[9] is a core element of how normative and hegemonic social representations of GBV often operate. This creates a discursive space where the discussion turns to what 'really' is violence, and/or what 'really' is gender and, lastly, what criteria are required for something to be 'gender-based'.

To more accurately map out what we mean, in this article, with GBV, and to better explicate part of our methodological decisions, we start off by first situating ourselves in relation to the concepts of 'violence' and 'gender'.

From that exploration, we then draw a more in-depth understanding of the currently-used definition of GBV in the context of the Council of Europe, cited above, by Pandea et al.[2]

Having fully established the concept of GBV, we review the literature that shows how various types of initiatives have been used in school contexts to push back against GBV, especially those that involve the critical usage of media resources and representations. From there, we review the literature pertaining specifically to graphic novels, attending to their specific affordances when it comes to the potential for the promotion of critical skills and attitudinal change.

We then present the methods and results, and discuss them in relation to the literature. We conclude then by reflecting on the role, and limitations, of empathy and of other affective responses, as well as on arts-based approaches to combatting GBV.

On definitions of "violence" and "gender"

Violence

In contemporary parlance, 'violence' tends to carry with it a negative connotation. This means that, pragmatically, the word is used as a marker of how a given action operates in a given context, as the product of an intersubjective, intersectional, and systemically-framed, asymmetrical *relationship* between social actors (of whatever dimension), which intends and/or succeeds in maintaining, reinforcing or absolutizing that asymmetry, and which is *perceived* as *illegitimate* by someone.[10]

The asymmetry, or even the possible effects of that asymmetry, are necessary but not *sufficient* for something to be considered violence by anyone. At the centre is *legitimacy*, and who holds the normative and symbolic capital to facilitate the naturalization of some action as either legitimate or not. Famed examples include behaviours of control in intimate relationships being seen as 'proof' of love and dedication; or the existence of practices that result in the death of women as justification for interventions that uphold white-supremacist colonialism.[11,12]

Therefore, neither the exercise of power, nor the wielding of authority can, in themselves, suffice to understand what violence *can be*. Furthermore, such an approach would seem to (unduly) presuppose that only specific and highly-visible actions could ever be considered violence — it is here important to recall the separation that authors like Foucault[13] or Arendt[14] do between power and violence, seeing the latter as the failure of the former.

To counter this, we draw on Altini's[15] reading of Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmidtt around the differences, and similarities, between *potentia* and *potestas*. Altini explains how these two dimensions of power — the capacity or potential to do something, and the mobilization of resources of whatever kind to enact certain actions — are, especially in the context of modernity, deeply connected. That is to say, the *possibility* that power can be exercised in a given way (e.g., the threat of violence) is already, in itself, a manifestation of power which has, or can have, concrete effects and therefore operate as fully-realized *potestas*.

Since not all forms of using power are necessarily violent, then harm needs to attach to the target, for it to be violence. This encompasses both physical and non-physical violence, actualized or threatened violence, and also interpersonal and institutional/systemic violence. Since the maintenance of asymmetries *of power* is already constitutive of the first part of the definition, disempowerment — here understood as loss of autonomy and agency in the world — is the harm that attaches to the subject who is targeted by violence.

Drawing on Fischel,[16] we here connect autonomy and access with another double concept often associated with violence: freedom. We draw too on Breanne Fahs'[17] distinction between freedom *from* and freedom *to*. If autonomy is freedom from the (violent) constraints placed on us by an external party, access is the ability (*potentia*) to access and interact with the world (*potestas*) without undue (violent) limitations purposefully placed there — to the gain of those persons and/or institutions enacting them.

Violence would then be those forms of actions, potentials for action (or inaction), structures and systems that would result in (an attempt to) lessen (ed) autonomy and access (i.e., positive and negative freedom) in such a way that it results in a less just and equitable societal structure.

This allows us to analyse *how* violence is deployed in specific contexts, without predetermining or preassigning specific roles to certain social positions. Therefore, we can ask who (putatively) is enacting (or has the capacity to enact) the violence, upon whom, by resorting to which strategies, how those strategies connect directly to harms of autonomy and/or access, under which conditions and contexts are those (potential) enactments possible and/or legitimized, who legitimizes them under which conditions, and whether there is a process of hegemonizing/naturalizing that violence happening.

Having established this baseline definition of violence, we now move to consider the concept of 'gender', both as a locus and a rationale for the strategic mobilization of violence encapsulated in the concept of "gender-based violence".

Gender

There is a decades-long discussion on how to best conceptualize "gender", and it is outside of the scope of this paper to provide a revision of that highly-complex history (for that, please see the work by Maria do Mar Pereira[18]).

However, drawing on the work of Sari van Anders,[19] we consider a tripartite system — gender, sex and, as an overarching category, gender/sex. Because there is no gender without embodiment, but also because there are no bodies that exist outside of lived-in cultures and human societies, van Anders argues that, most of the time, we are actually studying an

amalgamation of embodied and sociocultural dimensions that does not, and cannot, have any clear, rigid boundary. In that sense, "Gender/sex refers to phenomena, features, and whole people where gender and sex intertwine, both could be relevant, and/or the two cannot be disentangled easily or at all, as with whole women, men, and gender/sex-diverse people and many aspects tied to them" [19, p. 7].

However, it should be noted that gender is a category often attributed to more than just people; while things like boats or cars certainly do have materiality, they also certainly do not have sex. This requires us to have a definition of gender that, while not opposed to van Anders' proposal of gender/sex, has conceptual space to help us understand how is it that inanimate objects are normatively seen as being genderable.

To that end, we, in parallel, resort here to the definition by Maria do Mar Pereira, who states that gender

> "designates the set of meanings and valuations associated, in a certain time, and in a certain social and geographical space, with the categories "feminine" and "masculine", and the processes, discourses and structures through which differentiations and hierarchies, involving people and things, are (re) produced and negotiated, — continuously but also variably -, based on those categories" [18, p. 35][1].

While somewhat complex, this definition helps highlight several aspects that are fundamental for this research, namely: 1) that gender is not an *object* (conceptual or otherwise), but rather a *process* (thereby, inherently dynamic and temporal); 2) that it *produces*, rather than identifies, differences; 3) that it is not a 'flat' taxonomic system, but a hierarchical structuring and (de) valuing of what it produces; 4) that, as a process, it cannot be binary, but that it nonetheless relies on the disavowal of anything outside a binary naming system; 5) that categories (*qua* 'empty' mental boxes that are occupied by different signifiers in different times and spaces) of femininity and masculinity are not inherently bound to any given bodily or material configuration, but applied *to* certain bodies and certain material configurations, and/or not others; 6) that all of the above is power (*qua* hegemony, but also *qua* resistance) at work.

While coming from apparently very disparate fields, both authors converge on a *performative* understanding of gender (or gender/sex), drawing inspiration from Butler's work. Gender is the *producer* of certain realities (e.g., the supposed sexual binary, the lesbian and gay violence against bisexual/pansexual people, etc), but also the *product* of the everyday interactions and embodied experiences that we have, since no one fully exists outside the gender system.

This also helps us understand that these two poles (femininity and masculinity) do not operate symmetrically. When posited as idealized, masculinity and femininity result in what van Anders and Son[20] call "precarious manhood" and "naturalized womanhood". According to them, the first "ensures that manhood is seen as accessible and worth fighting for, but experienced as hard to reach" [20, p. 4], whereas the second "sees women as an existence that arises by default, without effort, and organically" such that "the factors related to women's bodies, biology, and reproductive processes (real or imagined!) can often override other factors" [20, p. 5]. This clarifies how the positive valuation of masculinity (as manhood) means that hegemonic masculinity is a construct which no one can truly lay claim to, but that it is a supposedly worthy goal for many (even, to a point, for cisgender women); contrariwise, femininity (as womanhood) is an almost-prison, from which there is little chance to escape (for instance, when trans-exclusionary women's groups treat transgender men as being 'actually' women).

Furthermore, because gender — as a process — is power at play, it follows that it *can* be a site of violence. In fact, inasmuch as gender is an articulation of *hierarchies* and valuation between two supposedly contrary-but-complementary poles, it can be argued that gender (as it exists here-and-now) has an *inherently* violent functioning. The violence of gender does not only affect those who are systemically more easily associated with femininity, but also affects those who are seen as having the obligation to pursue masculinity but do not and/or are not 'enough' at it. As bell hooks[21] pointed out, young (cisgender) boys are often the first — biographically — victims of patriarchal violence, due to the emotional mutilation intended to turn them into 'real men'.

It is worth noting that hegemonic masculinity[22–24] is built through subordination of alterity in a way that normative forms of femininity are not — in that sense, harms to the autonomy and access of those 'below' are constitutive of the idealized form of masculinity.

[1]All translations of non-English material was done by the authors.

However, if the normative, reigning, gender system is constitutively violent, isn't 'gender-based violence' tautological? To make this distinction, we need a final element that will allow us to distinguish between a systemic characteristic of how gender performatively operates, and the operations of power that are geared towards the production of violence.

Gender-*based* violence

To better understand the juncture at which our notions of violence and gender coalesce into gender-based violence, we return yet again to power, through a Foucauldian perspective. According to him,

> "power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective. [...] [T]he rationality of power is characterized by tactics that are often quite explicit at the restricted level where they are inscribed [...] which, becoming connected to one another, attracting and propagating one another, but finding their base of support and their condition elsewhere, end by forming comprehensive systems" [13, p. 98].

In other words, while certain actions that are violent *and* are related to gender might not, in their precise context, be articulated as being *about* gender, they coalesce into "comprehensive systems" which have gender — or rather, the reproduction of a specific gender hierarchy and asymmetry in the relationship between masculinity and femininity — as the overarching "aims and objectives" [13, p. 98] that sit nonetheless outside the will of any particular individual or institution.

In that sense, gender is the symbolic category that organizes the interpretative framework underpinning a series of actions or potentials that result in the unjust reinforcement of lost autonomy and access for whoever is the furthest away from hegemonic masculinity and/or "naturalized womanhood".[20] This is, so to speak, the long-form way of saying "-based": for a form of violence to be gender-based violence, it means that gender both forms, and is formed, as the "*base* of support" [13, p. 98], our italics that is structuring of, and structured by, the actions thereby described.

We would like to now return to the definition used by the Council of Europe,[2] where harm pertains to loss of autonomy and access, which makes it violent. Because it is a social category, it is not actually attached to someone's gender identity (hence, "factual or perceived"); nor does it neatly attach to a single understanding of what gender 'is' (hence all the different declinations). Still, gender is the driving element of what (potential) acts sit behind the harms, the lens through which such actions can better be understood.

Nonetheless, there are two elements which we would like to foreground in relation to this definition. And while those two elements can be seen as partially critical of this definition, we also acknowledge that official definitions often have to respond to criteria beyond academic precision — such as the fact that, for instance, anti-gender discrimination legislation has been historically easier to get approved as compared to anti-sexual orientation discrimination legislation.

That, in fact, is the first issue that we raise in relation to this definition. While we agree with scholars like Judith Butler,[25] Adrienne Rich,[26] or Paul B. Preciado,[27] who understand LGBQ-phobia[2] to be part of the gender/sex system of discrimination (even if from very different perspectives!), and impossible to fully detach from it, it is equally true that a direct and total conflation between gender violence and LGBQ-phobic violence risks erasing some of the specificities of either. Simultaneously, by folding LGBQ-phobic violence inside of gender violence, it can lead to a devaluing of how both interact.

Besides that conflation, this definition also does not make evident the inherently systemic aspect of gender-based violence. This risks downplaying the seriousness, as well as the political implications, of gender-based violence. As Karen Boyle argues, – and as many other authors have also made clear[28–34], words are politically and epistemically important, and they operate in ways that make it harder, or easier, to foreground certain aspects of our reality. Therefore, a proper evaluation of the impact of a singular act (i.e., as an instantiation of *potestas*) cannot be dissociated from the impact that has in reaffirming the *potentia* of, not only that person or organization, but of the patriarchal system as a whole.

Considering the above, this project sought to place graphic novels — and the discussions surrounding them — as one element, among many, that might be mobilized to serve as a facilitator for thinking through the concept of gender-based violence. We now turn to how our understanding of gender-based violence is aligned with how the research team conceptualized of what is involved in reading, discussing and, ultimately, engaging with representations of that very violence.

[2]The "T", and others, are purposefully omitted, since we are addressing only the concept of sexual orientation.

Critical pedagogies, critical literacies and (multimodal) carnal resonances

Critical reading, embodied knowledges and comics-based pedagogies

This research follows a long tradition of theorizing, and implementing, educational practices that centre on the notion of criticality, and critical thinking, which (partially) overlaps with critical literacies. According to Serpa and Santos,[35] and drawing on their extensive reading of various pivotal authors, we understand here critical literacy as a series of practices and attitudes that focus on "(1) criticizing the existing social order, translated into the ideology of the present and its institutions of maintenance of that society; and (2) fostering awareness and the need for change in social power relationships" [35, p. 20].

This means that critical thinking and literacies are not neutral, nor do they attempt to perform positivism's "God Trick"[36] of assuming that knowledge formation sits outside of power relations.

While it is outside the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive genealogy of critical pedagogy/literacy see,[37] we would like to draw attention to the relevance of emancipatory and Marxist thinking in the formulation of the objectives of critical literacies/pedagogies. The Frankfurt School, in particular, has served as another salient nexus through which we can understand how and why critical literacies are foundationally anti-hegemonic.

It is also through the Frankfurt School's engagement with Freudian thinking and theorizing — not to mention Paulo Freire's own political activity as the Minister of Education — that we can see how pedagogy and literacy are (despite the latter term), necessarily embodied processes.

Vasquez et al.[37] argue that critical literacy is "a way of being and doing" — in other terms, an etopoiesis.[38–40] The prime orientation of that etopoiesis is, we would argue, striving for the creation of more liveable lives, lives that are not reduced or reducible to a state of bare life.[41] Here, too, then, we find at the core a concern with power and violence, with their functioning, limits, abuses, and forms of legitimacy.

This means that criticality is the ever-incomplete project of interpretation, not as an exercise of hermeneutical purity or efficacy in search of a 'truer' meaning, but as an everyday experience of reflecting on the infusion of power in all things, inseparable from the meaning they seem to have to us, and how that meaning is partially shaped by the limits of knowability in a given time and space, for a given person and/or group.

Therefore, and as Yoon et al.[42] make clear, critical pedagogies and literacies are intersubjective, reliant on the relations established between multiple understandings of sameness and alterity. According to them, "critical global literacies focus on a transformative process through developing the concept of interconnectedness (e.g., self in relation to others), not investigating the world as a separate entity" [42, p. 2].

A direct consequence is that, despite the name, any message, any medium, any form of meaningful expression (which, certainly, includes non-human forms of expression[43]) can be critiqued, can be critically understood as part of an ongoing process of creating more liveable lives *for all.*

Besides the almost self-evident fact that images, like sounds, textures, and more, can and do have their own grammar and structure — through which meaning is made — this also means that a critical interpreting is also, necessarily, a multimodal act; that the *doing* of critique is multimodal itself, regardless of *what* is being critiqued. Besides the linguistic, conceptual, externalizable element of, for example, semiotic engagement with a given image or text, all coming-to-knowledge is *embodied*, and so always contains an element of an aesthetic stance, as Louise Rosenblatt cit. in[44] called it.

Susanna Paasonen,[45] drawing on Teresa de Lauretis and Linda Williams, noted that "encounters with cultural images are simultaneously somatic and semiotic" [45, p. 255]. To address the embodied dimension of this encounter, Paasonen talks about carnal resonance and dissonance, which "are matters of materiality — how and which bodies resonate and what kinds of materializations these resonances involve" [45, p. 255]. This takes the aesthetic dimension further by considering it, not just as an effect with an external cause, but rather as a dynamic and bidirectional process, which "attaches people, images and media technologies together, draws them apart, grabs our attention, resonates with our somatic archives" [45, p. 262].

Seen through this perspective, critical literacies gain further layers, as the way power operates can be queried in relation to different voices (not only vis-a-vis their presence and/or absence, but also the *modes* of representation[46]), but equally in relation to which bodies are/feel (not) moved by which representations and which voices, how and why. This does not require a potentially ableist and technodeterminist hierarchy of experiences, whereby the 'visual' would be inherently

more impactful, truthful, universal, self-evident, or transformative — or the textual would be more objective, rational, abstract or (in)comprehensible. Instead, it allows for, in the context of this project, participants to engage with their own reactions to different graphic novels as a *form* of knowledge in itself, just as it allows us to critically discern how different embodied experiences of reading can be connected to those bodies' situatedness (as gender/sexed bodies, as racialized bodies, as dis/abled bodies, etc.), as well as their somatic contact with the materials provided by the research team.

Recent but thriving scholarship from the expanding field of Comics Studies has started investigating the implementation of comics and graphic novels as tools able to sustain the efforts towards an always critical pedagogy in light of medium-specific characteristics that, not by coincidence, include particular predispositions to affective and embodied creation and readership. Comics are a medium whose history is deeply entangled with that of censorship, as demonstrated by old and recent vicissitudes such as the notorious creation of the Comics Code Authority in the United States in 1954, whose bans on potentially dangerous comics books was unevenly applied until 2011 see,[47] or contemporary bans that prevent teachers in various schools of the United States from using specific graphic narratives, mostly about gender-related issues.[48] Moreover, comics have long been considered a "bastard", to use Thierry Groensteen's[49] phrasing, cultural form. Excluded from the realms of the artistic, as well as from that of the literary, Groensteen identifies, in a series of features and tendencies, not only their "bastard" multimodal nature, but also their association with childhood and adolescence reading practices, in their reliance on the use of caricature and in their employment of multiple and tiny images [49, p. 23]. It was not until very recently, with the introduction of a postmodern aesthetics,[50] that comic books have started being considered dignified artistic objects deserving of critical attention.

Among the factors that contributed to the recognition of comics as an art or, some would say, literary form,[51] the graphic novel was crucial. This format was introduced during the 1980s, and continues to fuel discussions in comics studies about how it should be defined.

Continuing the debate on what a graphic novel is does not match the objectives of this article. For this reason, we provide only a strategic description of the format. We draw here on the broad definition sketched out by Baetens and Frey,[52] according to which the graphic novel rejects prolonged seriality, privileges the book format, has bookshops as distribution circles, tend to be written for and read by adults, and experiments with mostly non-fictional genres (such as the autobiography, biography and graphic journalism).

As scholars have noticed, the graphic novel facilitated the emergence of women and queer creators, who had always populated the comics industry but were subjected to high degrees of invisibilization. This was due, in part, to the openness towards auto/biographical accounts that the new format guarantees.[53]

The graphic novel's capacity to massively engage with the genre of the auto/biography also resulted in the production of critical enterprises progressively more attentive to the embodied and affective dimensions of creating and reading graphic narratives. An example is Elisabeth El Refaie's[54] idea that in autobiographical comics the self is necessarily created and perceived as embodied, given the dominance of the visual dimension that forces authors to provide an always corporeal representation of themselves [54, pp. 49–92].

Another, is the theory that the reliance of the comics medium on the technique of drawing is already interpretable as an embodied practice, following the conceptualization of the drawn line as an indexical sign that carries the creator's bodily and emotional reactions.[55]

This is not a medium-specific feature that leaves receivers unaffected. On the contrary, as Esther Szép[56] pointed out, comics provoke "bodily sensations in readers that influence the experience and performance of reading, and that brings the reader closer to a different, renewed understanding of vulnerability" [56, p. 137]. It is worth noticing how this trait is particularly relevant when it comes to the representation of GBV, a phenomenon that requires a constant effort to acknowledge, understand, and seek to prevent, others' (re) exposure to pain and trauma.

In light of graphic novels' propensity to open spaces for, always already embodied, encounters with the other (an other that might coincide, in the case of GBV, with others who either experienced or employed violence), and to do that through a medium that necessarily carries, even in its present manifestations, an echo of its dissident history, studies have already explored comics' salience in the area of critical pedagogies.

Examples in the field of gender-related conscientization include the examination of graphic novels' potential for stimulating GBV awareness in the English literature classroom[57] and the analysis of comics as critical educational tools to foster reflection on the dynamics of the patriarchal order.[58] Both studies clarify that comics are equipped with facets

that make possible a highly engaged, though always controllable and personalizable (unlike cinema, for example), type of reading experience fostered by a tendency to embed a multimodal complexity that invokes critical distance in order to be untangled [58, p. 1089].

This is the line of studies that this article, which departs from the idea that consciously seeking to *change* structural inequalities is fundamental for critical literacies and pedagogies, seeks to follow.

Schools' disciplinary potential against gender-based violence

While many of the authors cited so far[59–61] are critical of the school system as it exists in contemporary liberal democracies, — not least of all, Paulo Freire himself — it bears noting that normative spaces, like schools, can be, and often are, spaces of resistance.

However, results are, at best, mixed, when taken in aggregate. While it is outside the scope of this article to provide a detailed review of the many studies done on different types of interventions in schools — especially considering some of them are highly-specific, like interventions focused specifically on sexual violence, or dating violence — it is nonetheless important to note that there is a great deal of concern with evaluating the impacts of these initiatives, especially in order to find out what about them made them work, and how that success is defined.

The literature[62] defines five levels of prevention intervention — from primordial to quaternary — depending on who the target audience is/are, and at what stage of the process of victimization/aggression the intervention is seeking to have an impact. Our work is, as many others are, situated at the primary level, dealing mostly with awareness-raising and seeking to intervene in ways that might help prevent, or diminish, future instances of potential violence.

Among the different typologies of intervention schemes, we can find initiatives, like Dialogic Literary Gatherings [63, p. 584], where "students engage in a collective interpretation of a classic literary text previously read", guided through trainers that help them engage with that work of literature in a way that allows for the foregrounding of gendered issues and potential sites of violence.

However, this is one method among the many that use arts as conversation-starters, or as activities which allow youngsters to engage actively with concepts that might seem, to some, vague or technical, and thus "engage with complex topics in tangible ways while fostering a sense of collective belonging" [62, p. 15].

The reported success of various interventions that have taken place in many countries is often limited by the duration of the studies, and of the one-off implementation of the initiatives. Overall, holistic community-based initiatives, especially those that allow for youngsters to express themselves and to become agents of change, seem to be particularly well-received and have various positive outcomes.

Nonetheless, it is important to note several caveats. First, studies that looked at interventions targeting sexual violence and sexual health promotion in specific seemed to be successful in changing knowledge and attitudes, but not so when it comes to *behaviours* related to the incidence of sexual violence. Likewise, studies looking at more longitudinal effects are also ambivalent, as some show a degree of results, but others do not.[62] This is corroborated by the work done by dos Santos et al..[64]

Besides the above, it is also important to bear in mind that a statistically meaningful impact is not the same as a *large* impact — some of the results from a research synthesis[65] show that some of the effects measured in some studies are as low as a (perpetration) decrease of 0.4% in sexual harassment, and a (perpetration) decrease of 1% in sexual assault.

Unsurprisingly, this means that, as media scholars have noted repeatedly,[66–68] measuring effects is often difficult, assuming that changes in beliefs or attitudes map to changes in behaviours is unfeasible, and that systemic, community embeddedness, is fundamental to changes in both attitudes and behaviours. After all, as evidence abundantly demonstrates across many fields of study and topics, pressure from peers (in which the positive reinforcement and recognition, by peers, of a deed well done, is included) is paramount in changing behaviours on a systemic level.[69]

Lastly, the literature also shows that different countries and contexts have an impact on which programs work best, and how.[62] In this regard, Portugal has very specific challenges, given its recent history — the country was under a long-lasting right-wing, conservative and religious, dictatorship for about half a century, up until 1974. Because of that, Portugal's literacy rate is below the European and American average; the country's PISA score for Reading

comprehension is only barely above the OECD average (from the 2022 data available[3]). Similar to other countries that are more deeply religious, and who have had recent historical experiences of dictatorships, Portugal has structural issues when it comes to accessing information about gender, sexuality, and other topics related to intimate citizenship,[70] especially in school settings.[71–77] Although it was one of the first countries to legalize monogamous marriage between people of the same assigned at birth sex, it was also the first country in the world to not have marriage also provide parenting rights,[78–82] and it was only at the end of 2019 that the law requiring women to wait twice as long as men before being authorized to remarry after a divorce was amended. This is still part of the cultural matrix inside which the participants of our study grew up.

Methods

This paper presents results that are part of a wider research project, called GENTEEL Project — Graphic Novels Against Gender Violence (https://doi.org/10.54499/2023.14621.PEX), whose main objective is to experiment with graphic novels as texts to be recommended or used to stimulate awareness of gender-based discrimination and violence in secondary schools. The whole of the project has received approval from the Internal Review Board *Comissão de Ética para a Investigação nas Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade do Minho* (translated, Ethics Committee for Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities, of Minho University), under the approval number CEICSH 001/2025. The approval encompasses the collection and classification of Lusophone graphical novels, of surveys used to collect preliminary data from students, the companion reading sheets where participants were asked to write out what they felt and what caught their attention, as well as the semi-structured interview script used by the team, and the audio recording (and posterior transcription) of the interviews, as well as the focus group script, recording and transcription of the focus groups with the teachers that participated in facilitating our connection to the students. Individual participation in the project was voluntary, and did not have any connection to any evaluation procedures that the students might have had. Since the students participating were minors, we sought out explicit written consent from both them and their carers. To participate, they and their carers had to manifest their consent by signing an informed consent form, after being given a leaflet where information about the project, the context for collecting and using the data, and the ways by which they could end their participation was explained, alongside with our data safeguarding strategy and pseudonymization protocol. Following a consultation with the research team, the teachers assigned to implement the project in each school conducted a preliminary lesson aimed at providing students with an introduction to the comics medium and language.

After a first phase dedicated to the mapping of graphic novels on the topic of GBV[83,84] produced in the Lusophone context (namely, Portugal and Brazil), a set of five graphic novels was selected to be used in the empirical stage of the project. That part aimed at collecting data on students' reading responses and evaluating the degree of awareness and knowledge on GBV-related dynamics and manifestations that the contact with the graphic novels introduced.

The works were selected according to two main criteria. First, that the set would represent GBV from an inclusive and intersectional perspective, which resulted in the choice of works set in different cultural and social contexts, representing different forms of gendered discrimination and victims' typologies as well as with different authorial identity positionings (cis and trans authors). Second, the selection aimed at including graphic novels that look at GBV as a systemic and pervasive phenomenon embedded in patriarchal culture, thereby avoiding portraying GBV as the result of individual acts of deviance.

The selected graphic novels were:

1. *Manda msg qd chegares*, by anonymous author RGB, published in Portugal by Iguana in 2025, a graphic autofictional account of episodes of sexual harassment and violence that subjects who are perceived as feminine suffer in the public space.

2. *Boy dodói*, published in Brazil by Bebel Books in 2023 and edited by Bebel Abreu, Helô D'Angelo and Carol Ito, who invited other feminine and gender non-conforming comics authors to illustrate true stories of toxic masculinity previously gathered through a social media call.

3. *Em ti me vejo*, by Regiane Braz and Marília Marz, published in Brazil in 2023, a graphic memoir telling the author's story of subjugation to and liberation from the cultural violence of beauty standards.

[3] https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/reading-performance-pisa.html&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1785510383648767&usg=AOvVaw0DEl50r6ib0VVMlsTi_sg6

4. *Filosofia do mamilo*, by Kael Vitorelo, which was published in Brazil in 2024 and tells the autobiographical story of institutional abuse suffered by the non-binary protagonist following their decision to undergo an elective mastectomy.

5. *Juízo*, published in Brazil in 2024 by Amanda Miranda, which exploits the horror genre and uses a cover story (that of the extraction of a wisdom tooth) to talk about voluntary termination of pregnancy and the lack of access to reproductive rights in the Latin American country.

The second phase of the project started with the selection of two classes and 20 participants ranging between 16 and 17 years of age from two partner schools that had been previously identified in the Northern region of Portugal, namely in the metropolitan city of Porto and in the peri-urban town of Vila Verde, and who had agreed to participate in the project.

The material (PowerPoint presentations and excerpts to be submitted to the class) was provided by the researchers, together with a set of guidelines on how to structure the lessons. These were built in accordance to Dale Jacobs' insights, emphasizing the need to approach comics and graphic novels as media that can be effectively decoded only through a multimodal thinking "that moves beyond a focus on strictly word-based literacy" [85, p. 9].

Parallelly, the research team asked participating students to fill a survey aimed at assessing their level of knowledge on GBV prior to the reading of the graphic novels. Once the survey was filled, the teachers sent copies of the previously-selected graphic novels to the students. The texts were read individually by students. Each student was provided with a reading protocol consisting of instructions and of a grid to be filled with the reactions that the reading provoked. The grid was divided into three sections: in the first, the student was asked to identify the type of reaction (either thought, emotion, or memory); in the second the reaction could be briefly described; in the third, the page, section and/or element of the graphic novel that stimulated the reaction could be referenced.

The notes allowed the readers and the research team to keep a record of the students' reactions, which were then discussed during the subsequent interview process. The division of reactions into thoughts, emotions, and memories is derived from Keith Oatley's[86] experiments on reader responses to literary narratives. While Oatley's classification was not specifically tailored for comics reading, it is generally applicable for narratives and readily adaptable for the reception of graphic narratives. It aims at assessing the quality of engagement that the narrative work produces in the receiver.

This engagement is considered crucial because, according to theories developed in the area of reader response and cognitive aesthetics, it is deeply connected to the activation of narrative empathy[87]; and it produces "pre-ethical effects" by enhancing cognitive and affective "abilities which are likely to help us in making ethical inquiries" [88, p. 4].

After the reading, the research team conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the students who read the graphic novels. The interview process aimed to collect data on how students' levels of knowledge and awareness regarding the issue of GBV were influenced by the quality of their engagement with the graphic novels. This was done by discussing the responses that were previously noted in the reading grids. This discussion was complemented by another set of questions aimed at identifying both students' ability to define GBV and their perceptions related to the learning process.

The present analysis engages with the data gathered through the interview and questionnaire and aims at understanding how participants (re) conceptualize of gender, and gender-based violence, after critically engaging with graphic novels about the topic.

Our analysis follows an epistemically constructivist approach, in that we do not look at the youngsters' responses as an objective manifestation of 'truth' or 'reality' about their thoughts and feelings, but rather as a process of co-created meaning that happens in a given context — in this case, in an interview setting with one or more researchers, as well as - originally — via a digital survey.

We first present the overall data from the survey, as a means of contextualizing the overall places and classes in which this research happened. We then focus on the more qualitative, open-ended questions in the survey, alongside the face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 (self-declared cisgender) boys and girls, aged 16 and 17.

The interviews were automatically transcribed through a locally-hosted voice-to-text (VTT) system, and then the transcripts were manually checked, corrected and formatted, in order to prepare their importing onto a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Discourse Analysis (CAQDA) software[89,90] — in this case, QualCoder. Although the latest version

of QualCoder incorporated a so-called "AI" module of analysis, all the team members involved in the processing of this data disabled it beforehand, and it was never used in any stage of this process.

The coding procedure followed a mixed approach, with top-down and bottom-up elements mobilized at the same time, drawing on both more classical content analysis[91–94] and also framework analysis.[95]

This means that we coded for both more technical and binary aspects of the participants' responses via content analysis (e.g., were they customary readers of graphical novels?, did they feel like they had learned anything from participating in the project?); as well as a more non-predetermined coding, pertaining to how participants conceptualized gender, GBV, the mental frameworks used to address these issues, and the learning modes that affected this area of knowledge. This was done to try and understand how participants made sense of these matters, especially in connection with their own experience of reading the graphical novels we had provided them with. The coding and analysis of how the graphic novels' formal characteristics influenced the reader's responses and learning, despite being a crucial part of the broader research project, was not included in this study and, therefore, is outside the scope of this article.

Because the interviews were conducted with various sub-research questions in mind, and because the interview process was also reflexive — in the sense that, at times, the participants asked the researchers help with a 'true' interpretation of the graphical novels, and that the researchers also ended up sharing with the participants a layperson-accessible definition of GBV — we only coded the interviews until the point where a *prescriptive* description of GBV or related areas of knowledge was given by one of the interviewers.

The coding process was done iteratively. Both authors independently coded parts of the interviews relevant to the research question, and then compared codings. Subsequently, Nicoletta Mandolini created the first coding scheme, which she sent to Daniel Cardoso. Daniel then proposed the merging of some of the codes created, and a partial reorganization or renaming of some of the top-level topics. Those changes were jointly discussed until there was consensus, and a final revision of the coding scheme, as well as of the codes applied to the interviews was arrived at.

The coding and subsequent analysis followed a tripartite set of research questions. First, we wanted to understand the participants' perception of the learning process, which was deduced through the analysis of the answers that students gave to a specific query on if and what (if anything) they learned about GBV reading the graphic novels.

Second, we analysed how this learning process unfolded and with which results, in terms of acquired knowledge. This implied a thorough reading of the whole interview, during which we paid particular attention to the learning modes that students indirectly displayed during their speech and to the consequences that each of these learning modes had in terms of GBV awareness raising.

The classification of learning modes into "learning by feeling" (corresponding to what we define as "affective resonant alignment"), "learning by thinking" (corresponding to what we define as "rational cognitive discovery") and "learning by sharing" showed up as result of a clear inductive practice of encounter with the studied interactions. However, the first two categories were sustained and theoretically validated in the analysis by references to previous research on narrative empathy and reader response practices. In particular, we draw on Suzanne Keen's definition of narrative empathy as "vicarious spontaneous sharing of affect" and as a process through "we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others" [87, p. 208]. According to Keen, empathy differs from identification, which is the tendency to see oneself reflected in the others' story, but it often "open the way for character identification" [87, p. 214]. Even though empathy, as many other affective responses, cannot be rigidly separated from the sphere of the cognitive,[87,96] we decided to separate affective from rational learning processes, following Jemelijan Hakemulder's[88] reasoning. According to the author, in deciphering reader responses to narratives on socially relevant issues, it is preferable to conceptually differentiate between "pre-ethical effects", which correspond to the "enhancement of abilities which are likely to help us in making ethical inquiries", "ethical effects", which equals "enhancement of ethical reflection" and "moral effects", "the actual persuasion in favor of some ethical moral position" [88, p. 4]. Affective and empathetic reactions that might trigger ethical processing, in this sense, are not the same as reflections, that are already ethical in themselves given their necessity to openly confront the social issue in question.

Third, we were interested in evaluating the students' ability to apply what they had learned, either affectively and/or rationally, to the area of inclusive language and GBV definitions. In order to do that, we compared the definitions of GBV provided in the questionnaire with those given during the interviews, and we analysed the vocabulary and linguistic choices employed to talk about GBV, its victims and perpetrators.

Results

Quantitative analysis of the questionnaire

The survey results, although not the centre of our analysis in this paper, serve here as a way for us to contextualize the research participants, and to better help understand how our interviewees are embedded into a wider system of sociability and shared meaning-making.

The survey was distributed in all participating classes in three schools in the northern part of Portugal. Two of these schools participated in the qualitative part of the project, while one decided not to continue with the implementation of the reading and data collection study through interviews. The decision of the third school to drop out arrived after the reading of the selected material by the professor and director of the institution, which provoked insecurities and fears regarding possible reactions of students and parents when confronted with materials that necessarily dealt with sexuality, violence and diversity. This pre-analysis result was already indicative of the climate of anxiety and (self) censorship to which professionals in the area of public education are exposed in contemporary Portugal.

The responses collected resulted in a total number of 37 valid respondents (one of the respondents was excluded during data-cleaning, for invalid data entry).

One of the questions asked pertained to a series of 5-point Likert scale type of items about beliefs and attitudes about gender, with some of the items reverse-coded. Across all of the items, responses averaged 3,21 points (SD = 0,62; N = 35). Boys' average was slightly lower than girls' answers, with the difference being statistically significant, albeit small, calculated through Spearman's rho (p = 0,017); girls' answers also presented less dispersion than boys'. This means that, in our sample, girls' have slightly more progressive gender attitudes and beliefs than their colleagues.

Besides attitudes and beliefs, we also asked them whether they knew a series of words (13 in total) related to the topic of gender (both words that are typically used by, for instance, gender-minority communities, as well as words that are usually considered to be insults or stigmatizing). There were no statistically significant differences between genders in relation to knowing, or not, specific words, apart from one exception: the word "cisgender", more known by girls than boys. Overall, the words that were known by the most person were "transgender" (n = 36), "transexual" (n = 36) and "transvestite" (n = 36) — being that the first one is the currently-accepted term to address people whose gender identity is not coincident with the one medically assigned at birth, whereas the second and third terms are considered potentially stigmatizing, 'outdated' or impolite. On the other hand, the least known words were "TERF" (n = 1) and "autogynephilic" (n = 2) — the first being a word that is often used to denote people who identify with feminism but who exclude trans persons; and the second one a rather obscure term that is used to pathologize transgender women.

Unsurprisingly, this shows that, in general, discourse around trans issues and trans people is quite prevalent. Since there was no statistically relation between gender attitudes and the number of words known, this is more evidence that gender-based narratives are a staple of contemporary conversations that exist around these youngsters. This, however, does not mean that those conversations are inclusive or necessarily critical — instead, it is important to remember that the rise in extremist right-wing populism often relies on what Judith Butler (REF) calls the phantasm of 'gender ideology' to symbolize and stoke fear and hatred of the Other, therefore constantly drawing (negative) attention to issues pertaining to transgender people, or that affect them. The situation in Portugal, over the last few years, matches this pattern, and might be an explanation for how widely known these terms are.

Qualitative Analysis of the Interviews

Perceived learning.

Participants answered the explicit question "Do you think you learned something about GBV reading the graphic novels?" with a clear positive answer given by 18 of them (9 girls and 9 boys).

Specifically, students affirmed they learned about types of violence that they did not necessarily associate to GBV, or simply did not know about. They also learned about victims' experiences of gender-related violence and abuse, as well as about perpetrators' behaviours. Moreover, they stated that reading contributed to reinforcing previous knowledge on GBV, and triggered further sensitization about the phenomenon.

Girls, in particular, tended to state that they learned about specific manifestations of gendered violence against women and girls that they did not previously classify as violence because they tend to be normalized. This is generally associated with a tendency for girls to identify themselves as part of a group or community (that of women and girls) that is

particularly affected by misogynous disrespect, a widespread manifestation of GBV. For example, *Matilde*[4] admitted that she learned from reading the graphic novels "because sometimes, on a daily basis, we suffer from some forms of discrimination and [...] do not perceive them, because we are used to experiencing this everyday, and we do not have a lot of conscience that these classify as discriminations against the feminine gender".

Moreover, participants of all genders noticed how the reading helped them recognize forms of abuse and violence that affect people who are socially positioned in different categories than they are, such as trans people, for cis girls, and non-cisgender men, for boys.

Students highlighted how the graphic novels (all of which adopted a victim-centric narrative approach) allowed them to widen their awareness and understanding of victims' experiences. Clear differences can be recognized between boys and girls responses. The latter focused mostly on the ability of the graphic narratives to extend their conscience regarding the emotional distress and consequences that violence caused both in cis women/girls and trans victims. For example, *Luisa* said:

> "I had no idea that this was so impactful. It is obvious that it has an impact on people's lives, but I did not know it was like that, that impactful. Many of these people even think about shortening their lives after suffering such violences. And I think that the graphic novels stressed this point, in my opinion."

Boys, instead, concentrated specifically on the emotional dimension and admitted that they learned about the way victims perceive violence/abuse as well as about how those most targeted by violence deal with the extent and risk of it. In some cases, like that of Martim, who mentions the graphic novel about women's abuse in public spaces *Manda mensagem quando chegares*, this resulted in a learning process that permitted him to revise personal behaviours:

> "Maybe I learned how to avoid these situations and how I should act with other people in order to prevent aggressive behaviours of mine, or inadequate ones. [...] I think it gave me a better understanding on how I can behave when talking [to girls], in order to be less intimidating."

Both boys and girls declared themselves surprised by the variety of perpetrators' behaviours represented in the graphic novels, and admitted they learned about the extreme forms that toxic masculinity and men's violence against women can take. Interestingly enough, feminine perpetration, which was mostly represented by the character of the mother of the black girl in *Em ti me vejo*, went almost completely unnoticed or unmentioned. Only when questioned about the presence in the corpus of abusive behaviours carried out by feminine subjects, some students remembered about the character and labelled her a perpetrator.

Another relevant finding is the discursive obliteration of any form of institutional or structural violence. Despite being present and discussed in at least two graphic novels of the corpus (*Filosofia do mamilo* and *Juízo*), these violent deeds did not receive students' attention or surprise, which was mostly dedicated to direct examples of either physical or psychological violence.

In order to now understand how participants learned, and how different learning strategies affected their knowledge of GBV, we now turn to the specific learning modes that we could identify from the analysis of the interviews.

Learning modes.

The learning mode we termed "affective resonant alignment" was the most common type showcased by participants during the interview process. It includes general empathetic responses to the vicissitudes of characters who are not perceived as part of the same social or identity group, as well as identification processes, and other manifestations of specific affects, such as enjoyment and happiness, shock, disgust or shame, rage, fun and sadness. The common minimum denominator of this learning mode is the engagement with the texts through an emotional response that triggered learning. That is, it allowed the students to understand, in the emotional plane, experiences of GBV and, in some cases, positively resonate with personal past experiences, anticipated futures, or specific emotional processes.

Empathetic responses allowed participants to put themselves in the shoes of characters who suffered forms of GBV specifically tied to gender identities or social positionings other than their own, that Keen labels as "ambassadorial

[4]All the names used are pseudonyms. All interview excerpts were originally in Portuguese and have been translated into English by the research team. We also consciously avoid the use of terminology like "female" or "male", due to its connotation with a cisnormative connotation of 'sex' as taking precedence over 'gender'.

strategic empathy" [97, pp. 486–487]. Girls' capacity to empathize with the non-binary protagonist of *Filosofia do mamilo* for the institutional and social discriminations they suffered is the clearest example of how the graphic novels acted as spaces in which students could experience affectively charged encounters with forms of victimization that were previously unknown and perceived as distant. An emblematic example is that of *Margarida*:

> "I liked a lot this graphic novel because I started reading without understanding much about the topic it addressed and for this reason I was learning and I found it interesting. I think that this is the one I liked the most. I thought that, I don't know, I think that the drawing of the graphic novel was quite aligned with what the main character was feeling, because there were parts in which it was all dark and it was all scribbled, and I liked to feel the emotions of the character while I was reading."

Other examples include girls' (and, less commonly, boys') declarations of empathy towards racialized black women and girls who are particularly affected, in light of intersecting discriminatory practices, by the cultural violence of beauty standards. This type of abuse was presented to students through the graphic novel *Em ti me vejo.* In this case, empathy is clearly entangled with the students' ability to recognize themselves as different, though potentially subjectable, as individuals who were socialized as girls, to a similar type of violence, which corresponds to what Keen labels as "bounded strategic empathy" [97, p. 481]. *Camila*, for example, told us that "yes, maybe, I could put myself in her shoes and I think that if my mother, for example, I have a straighter type of hair, but if I had curlier hair and my mother forced me to straighten it, I think that I would not feel good with myself with that hair."

Although less common, empathetic reactions by boys mostly coincided with compassion for the experiences of GBV against women represented in the graphic novels *Manda mensagem quando chegares* and *Boy dodói.* This is exemplified by *Vicente*'s statements, which labels a particular excerpt of the first text, in which the protagonist is portrayed while she tries to escape a man who masturbates in front of her, as "perturbing". This is how he replied to the interviewers' questions about the feeling that he had registered in the reading grid:

> Interviewer: "So, did you feel the fear?"
>
> Vicente: "Yes, for her. I tried to put myself in her situation in order to see how bad it would be, especially considering that she had roller-skates on, and she could not [easily escape]."

Girls, on the contrary, were effusive not only in relation to the frequency of their empathetic reactions but also about emotional responses stimulated by identification processes, which allowed them to feel what the character was feeling. It is through these responses, as well as by means of other cognitive processes that will be mentioned later, that some readers recognized themselves as belonging to the same social group (most of the times, that of keepers of the social burden of femininity) to which victims belonged, and the reason for the victimization. In this sense, emotional reactions linked to identification allowed young women participants to bridge their own reality and that of the portrayed characters, thus permitting to affectively understand that GBV was affecting their own lives.

Among the specific affective incentives that the graphic novels provided, a feeling repeatedly mentioned by girls was rage, which seemed to act as a crucial push for broader reflections about the injustices that affect other subordinated categories or, most commonly, categories with which the participants identify. *Teresa*'s comments, when questioned about her overall feelings and thoughts from the reading experience is emblematic in this sense:

> Teresa: "Honestly, I got a bit angry."
>
> Interviewer: "Angry, okay …"
>
> Teresa: "Because I think that when I saw this, I stopped and thought: 'Wow, what an effort women need to make just to go out and buy some bread'. When it's kind of getting dark outside, should I go, should I really go? And this is something a man would not think about!: 'Ah, I want to buy bread, I will buy bread!'"

Rational cognitive discovery, a phrasing we use with the aim of identifying reactions involving specifically intellectual and analytical processes, were also heavily employed by participants according to their own accounts.

Rational dynamics showed up as constant consequences of the reading practice and seemed to play a fundamental role in the youngsters' learning process about GBV. They tended to show up in connection with empathetic or emotional responses, though this association was not always automatic nor guaranteed.

Take *David*, who refers to *Filosofia do mamilo* as a "graphic novel that I did not understand well, but from which I learned how [non-binary people] think when they are in public and what they suffer on a daily basis." Here, the participant admits that he could get in contact with the protagonists' suffering, but could not fully understand their situation or the origins of their needs.

The reading experience pushed participants toward reflections that Hakemulder would call "ethical effects" [88, p. 4]. These reflections, in some cases, allowed participants to reinterpret past or recurring experiences and, in turn, to match affective reactions, thus opening the path towards the consolidation of an idea of in-group belonging and identification, especially for girls.

For *Matilde*, as already mentioned, this reinterpretation concerned mostly the re-evaluation of her personal experiences as experiences from a group of people - women. For her, reading of *Manda mensagem quando chegares* helped her recognize things that are generally normalized as manifestations of GBV, and that affect nearly all women and girls. For *Margarida*, reading and understanding a graphic novel like *Juízo* was crucial in retrospectively interpreting the reaction that her mother had when she communicated that she had gotten her first menstruation. It was through the reflection that the encounter with the text activated, and in particular with the protagonist's expression of dread upon discovering her daughter's menarche, that the participant came to understand her own mothers' feelings of fear and to associate them with the intergenerational dangers (including unwanted pregnancy and the related difficulties in accessing abortion care) that being able to become pregnant entail.

Finally, for boys in particular, the reading led to learning things that had not even been imaginable to them before, as explained by *David*'s surprise in commenting the vicissitudes of *Em ti me vejo*: "I had never realized that someone could suffer in order to have their hair similar to that of others".

Our research also shows how participants benefitted from collective or interpersonal discussions about the graphic novels in their understanding (and thus learning) process. This is mostly true for boys, who declared to have shared their doubts about the content of some texts with their girl classmates, so they could help them make sense of the narratives. This is the case of *Xavier*, who relied on fellow young girl participants to build part of his interpretation:

> "I discussed a bit with my classmates after the reading, for example, since we had girls in our class, there were things that they understood better than us, and this helped a little, as a group dynamic. It is always simpler when we can count on each other to understand."

In cases like this one, the intergender sharing dimension allowed girls to understand images and contexts that boys felt they had no lived context to adequately decode. Particularly significant is the case of *Juízo*, the graphic novel about lack of access to reproductive rights in which the abortion story is not explicitly addressed, being narratologically covered with the metaphor of a wisdom tooth extraction. The correct interpretation of the graphic novel (when present) was often facilitated by conversations that boys had with their girl peers, who had already identified the metaphorical comparison. In other cases, the discussion with the girls confirmed to boys that most of the manifestations of gendered violence against women portrayed in the narratives were realistic, and part of their colleagues' lived experience, thus providing them with an enriching learning process on the dynamics and vastness of women's victimization.

Learning facilitators and obstacles.

The learning modes listed above describe common approaches that participants showcased in relation to the texts, and how they expanded their knowledge about GBV, both affectively and encyclopedically. However, the analysis of the interviews also allowed us to identify what we termed "learning facilitators" and "learning obstacles", depending on their characterization as either promoters or inhibitors of knowledge acquisition about GBV, by the participants.

Among the learning facilitators, the positive influence that the perception of the narrated stories as non-fictional was clear. Despite the presence of a fictional story in the corpus (*Juízo*), some participants collapsed the whole set of texts into the non-fictional category and claimed to be affected by this narrative feature in their processing and validating information about GBV and its dynamics.

Dinis, for example, commented on *Manda mensagem quando chegares* stating that

> "the fact that the girls in the novel had really been pursued, ended up being not a shock, but something curious, because in the beginning I thought it was something imagined, something that was not real. But it ended up being true and maybe is the most common situation that women pass through, specifically in the street."

Here, the assimilation of what was read as reliable knowledge was conditional to the veracity of the represented stories, which in turn permitted the student to overcome his doubts and recognize that these are abuses that women are constantly confronted with.

In some instances, participants highlighted the importance of autobiography, the most recurring non-fictional narrative form in the corpus, as an element that allowed them to better understand the experiences and feelings of the victims. Gender positioning affected the dependency of participants from non-fictionality for validation, with boys resorting to it much more than girls.

This was connected to another learning facilitator, namely the feeling of surprise that many participants revealed when recalling their reading experience, and the encounter with specific scenes of abuse that impacted them, not necessarily because of their explicitness, but for representing behaviours deemed unimaginable. The surprise enabled emotional engagement and thus memory fixation, while non-fictional perception prevented participants from discarding them as not realistic.

Learning obstacles identified in the study included the failure to understand the graphic novels due to perceived visual over-complexity. This was particularly evident in the case of *Juízo*, characterized by an indirect approach to the representation of systemic lack of access to reproductive rights, which many students failed to grasp, thereby impairing their capacity to develop knowledge on the topic.

Another obstacle to learning was rage, experienced by some girls who found the depiction of abusive and manipulative behaviour, especially in *Boy Dodoi*, so frustrating that it negatively impacted their willingness to continue reading.

Ability to define and employ respectful language.

At a quantitative level, results do not show a significant impact of the graphic novels' reading in the students' capacity to define GBV, as demonstrated by a comparison between the definitions provided by each student in the questionnaire and those verbalized during the interview, in relation to Pandea et al.'s[2] definition, explored above.

Table 1, In some cases, there was even a seeming regression, which might be related, among other things, to different abilities to abstract and summarize when dealing with written (questionnaire) versus spoken (interview) language. This is suggested by the fact that some instances of setback display a frequent reliance on polarizing gender discourses stereotypes, perhaps associated with the informalities that characterize spoken language. Moreover, some of these are also connected to the difficulty in integrating different manifestations of GBV into a single definition. This is particularly relevant in relation to transphobia, a manifestation that one of the graphic novels (*Filosofia do mamilo*) addressed and that appeared to act as a totalizer, erasing from the definition references to more visible forms of GBV (such as gendered violence against cisgender women).

Therefore, we believe that this inability to systematize a definition does not coincide with lack of learning.

A parallel movement (i.e., expanding GBV beyond cisgender women) is also distinctive of some of the cases in which literacy about GBV increased, without then erasing cisgender women as victims of GBV. In these cases, the contact with the graphic novels resulted in a process of complexification and not reduction of the definition.

Table 1. Comparative definitional accuracy of GBV between pre-reading survey and post-reading interview.

Def. accuracy	Respondents	Gender breakdown
As accurate	4	(2B; 2G)
Less accurate	7	(5B; 2G)
More accurate	8	(3B; 5G)
Not provided	1	(0B; 1G)

Transphobia is one of the most discussed forms of gender-based violence in the interviews (despite the presence of only one graphic novel out of five focusing on it) and trans subjects are often mentioned by students as principal victims of GBV. However, discussions on transphobia do not always adhere to trans-inclusive language (e.g., gender-appropriate pronouns), but are often associated with more or less accurate descriptive statements on how the victim is presented in the graphic novel.

This is clear in the case of the non-binary protagonist and narrator of *Filosofia do Mamilo*, who is rightly recognized as someone who does not fit the gender binary, despite several of them not knowing how to address such an identity. In many cases, students use the term non-binary and provide an accurate description of the character but fail to use correct pronouns. An example of that is *Carlos*:

> Carlos: "*The woman* did not identify as a man nor as a woman." [our emphasis]
>
> Interviewer: "How do we term those who are like that?"
>
> Carlos: "Non-binary".

Even those who do not use "non-binary", or who misgender the character, counterbalance it by accurately, and reflexively, addressing the crux of the issue as in the case of Dinis, who says that "*He* cannot change his gender because *he is not trans enough*, supposedly", thus identifying the character as someone who does not fit the parameters of normative (and binary) transness by focusing on his own interpretation of the gender-of-centre, rather than on the sex assigned at birth, of the character.

Even though a minority of participants completely failed to identify the protagonist as a subject who rejects gender dichotomies, they tend to admit that they could not recognize them either a masculine or feminine being. *Filipe*, for example, said:

> "I could not identify the character who wanted to do top surgery nor as a man nor as a woman. And I could not understand if it was to put [breasts], but I think it was to take the breast out. Maybe it was a transition to become a man."

Both the scarcity of encouraging results regarding participants' ability to define GBV and their demonstrated lack of linguistic awareness when it comes to accurate and respectful gender vocabulary testify to a weakness in abstracting and applying knowledge that, far from being absent, was (also) acquired during the reading process.

Discussion

Gender violence, gender as violence

Perhaps one of the most surprising parts of the interviews, for the team, was the amount of times that participants reported considering gender-based violence as being violence mainly against transgender people (broadly defined). In a way, this is a form of understanding gender as (also) violence in itself, and those that are outside of the normative gender system as the single most targeted by that gender violence. Up to a point, this does match existing statistics, even if these young people were not aware of it - cumulative international data shows that transgender people are, proportionally, victims of violence between 2.5 to 4 times more than cisgender people, especially racialized trans women, and especially when it comes to police violence.

What changed, especially comparing the interviews with the open-ended answers to the surveys, was the relevance given to the topic, and the budding awareness of how impactful violence against transgender people is.

At the same time, the lack of conceptual clarity in how they refer to transgender people and issues is still evocative of cisnormative beliefs based around a bio/logics[19] that makes 'sex' precedent over 'gender'. Besides that, *Filosofia do Mamilo* was one of the two graphic novels that, at the same time, triggered the majority of empathetic responses and elicited a certain degree of incomprehension or distanced appraisal. Most participants made a point to articulate that they were able to empathize with the non-binary protagonist and feel compassion for their suffering. However, some of them could not fully understand why someone would want to do top surgery, or how could someone see themselves as neither man nor woman, even as they were feeling the character's struggles, and speaking up against the medical and institutional violence that targeted them.

This demonstrated the presence of a gap, or at least of a non-linear relationship, between feeling and understanding the experience of victimized others who do not belong to our identity category. For this reason, we keep separate the

categories of affective resonant alignment and rational cognitive discovery, despite acknowledging that, as Nussbaum[96] famously stated, emotions are not external to the sphere of the cognitive, and they do play a crucial part in ethical thought. We read this through Butler's[25,98] work on how one of the things gender performs is determining a certain horizon of understandability, beyond which certain categories become almost-unrecognizable.

Furthermore, part of the experience of not fully understanding that character's experience comes from the embodied element of wanting to alter one's own body. Herein we can detect another productive tension - participants would often remark on their own experiences of gender as an embodied experience and (especially in the case of the young women who participated) of feeling how their body was sometimes a source of discomfort. Nonetheless, this experience - which can be seen as gender dysphoria, an experience that is not exclusive of trans people, but rather a product of gender norms[99] - was not explicitly connected to the narrative of *Filosofia do Mamilo.*

Between individual resistance and collective violence

Part of the narrative several of the participants mobilized around the protagonist in *Filosofia do Mamilo*, as well as *Em ti me vejo*, had to do with body image and self-acceptance. Here, too, is an interesting split between an injunction to self-acceptance (for instance, the claim that it would be good for the young racialized girl to accept her own hair and be proud of it), and an acceptance of one's own right to bodily self-determination (expressed by the fact that various participants noted that the nonbinary character from *Filosofia do Mamilo* had the right to change their body if they didn't feel good in it).

While we make no direct claims of equivalence between these two things, at the centre of both approaches we find a common element - the ways in which the responsibility, obligations and injunctions are located in the specific individuals that suffer violence.

Another element that the participants mentioned several times was coming to an awareness of the structural, systemic, and fundamentally *collective* dimension to the individual experiences of discrimination and violence that all girls self-reported during the interview. This realization, combined with the individualistic approach to resisting violence, is demonstrative of why broader cultural changes and dynamics around neoliberalism and individualization[100–102] need to be read in intersection with gendered experiences of inhabiting the world.

The young men in our sample, too, deployed a similar type of dual thinking - on the one hand, they saw themselves as allied bystanders, or as occasional witnesses to gender-based violence, for whom reading the GNs was a way of coming into contact with 'another' reality; and, on the other hand, they saw perpetrators (especially men), as Other in relation to themselves, and as constituting a group unto themselves, separate from them. As noted above, a few of the young men did express an intention to reflect on their own behaviour and to consider how they themselves might have made (or make) someone else uncomfortable with their behaviours, but this was an exception.

The unavailability for identification with the perpetrators mirrors a recognised tendency in mainstream (mostly journalistic) narratives to represent those responsible for violent acts as external and/or extraneous to the category of (hegemonic) masculinity.[103] Moreover, it needs to be said that victim-centered narratives tend, in light of the focus they promote on the perspective of victims/survivors, to overlook the characterization and problematization of the perpetrators, as well as explorations of their psychological/emotional dynamics, which in turn might affect empathetic responses and identification in readers, or promote empathic engagement only through preexisting mental schemas, even when they might not directly apply to the situation.[104–106] This should encourage reflections on the importance of critical perpetrator-centered narratives that, for lack of representativity in the mapped Lusophone graphic novels, were absent from our corpus.

Here, too, we can see both the potency and the limitations of affective connections that involve empathy and/or identification - the framework of individual response and responsibility that is so relevant to the storytelling underpinning intimate citizenship[70,107] can also potentially make it harder for our participants to understand gender, and their experience of the world as gendered people, to be related to (structurally formed and negotiated) subject positions, rather than an immanent truth about some ontological or metaphysical aspect of themselves.

Likewise, and especially in the case of the boys, by being in empathic alignment with the victims of GBV as portrayed in the stories, and simultaneously distancing themselves from their own potential for acting in harmful ways, they deploy a form of dehumanization (of perpetrators) which ironically normalizes everything but the most extreme violence, and which uses the condemnation of those 'extreme' behaviours to shift the definition of what is acceptable.[108,109]

Shock, revulsion, and the potency of negative affects

As we mentioned before, empathy does not only rely on 'positive', or warm, feelings - especially when the core issue under consideration is violence. Experiences of revulsion, disgust, incomprehension, frustration, and more, were peppered throughout the interview transcripts. Besides the evident ethical concerns this raises about the potential for revictimization and retraumatization for some of our participants, it is important to note that strong affective experiences are often associated with longer-lasting learning experiences.[110]

Because many of our participants were differently-situated in regard to their (disclosed) personal experiences of having been victimized, it was possible to note how boys tended to express emotions that were much more performant of masculinity, than girls' emoting. That is to say, the anger or incomprehension that boys tended to express would sometimes result in the desire to protect girls and/or to physically confront potential aggressors. While bystander intervention is fundamental to push back against structural violence (including GBV), their approach to it reifies the norms of *hegemonic* masculinity.

This is even more telling when placed side-by-side with the very non-normatively masculine experience of intellectual confusion that arose from *Juízo.* While some of the boy participants made sure to tell the team that they were versed in knowing how to read and interpret a book, the visceral and metaphorical potency of that splatter-horror inspired story seemed to present them with an unsurmountable challenge. In that narrative - which, as several others, does not have an individual, self-evident, masculine character to be cast as the perpetrator — confusion settled in and empathy then required further mediation.

As we explained before, several of the boys spoke to other colleagues or girlfriends in order to be able to understand what the story was *about.* This signals a relinquishing of the (intellectualized) hermeneutical privilege often associated with hegemonic masculinity, cherishing the situated knowledges that people who might one day need to terminate a pregnancy can impart; and a systemic difficulty to think beyond one's own embodied experience, relying instead on the emotional work of assigned-female-at-birth people to reinterpret the narrative *for* them, rather than with them.

Those who spoke to other boys sought to reaffirm the apparent incomprehensibility of the work, rather than to seek collaborative understanding of what it might be.

While operating in a very different way than *Filosofia do Mamilo*, both works are reminiscent of the category of abjection, as Julia Kristeva[111] calls it. Through abjection, "'subject' and 'object' push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again — inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable" [111, p. 18]. The participants returned to those two works time and again in the interviews, and they seemed to be more clearly present in their memories in comparison to most other GNs that we had provided them with; at the same time, these were also the ones that generated the most pushback from them. These stories refuse disembodying their characters in a very self-evident way, catching many participants in a logic of revulsion and compulsion, where seeking a cognitive understanding of what is being portrayed, and why, could alleviate or purify the abject (and, thus, the participants themselves).

This is not to say that only young men showed disgust or incomprehension in regard to *Juízo* - various young women were also confused as to what it was referring to. Several others did understand the underlying message, but were still upset by the explicitly gory content, as well as by the symbolic style the author uses. Mixed in with that upset was also the realization that differences in one's country legislation are also gendered, and that there is a formal political dimension to lived experiences of gendered and sexed bodies that is often harder to understand for those who are more relatively privileged.

Reality, realism and epistemic (in)validation

As mentioned it the Results, the issue of realism, and its connection with reality, stood out during the interviews.

Empathy is not an automatic or self-evident process - rather, it requires a series of assumptions to be met, which render 'something' as being a valid (or worthy) target of empathy. For Clohesy,[112] the deepest mobilization of empathy requires that the empathic subject places their certainty of selfhood, in peril:

> "an empathic experience of difference, in giving us a *lived* sense that our lives represent only one way of being in the world, and by giving us a *lived* sense of the violence we commit to Difference in order to sustain the unity of our identities, has profound ethical implications" [112, p. 25].

It is through this perspective that we looked at the various ways in which our participants qualified certain stories, or aspects of stories, as being more or less "real" or "realistic". They were not doing so from the perspective of literary criticism, but as a way of assigning more or less epistemic validity to some narratives, in comparison with others.

The majority of those comments did not come from the diegetic elements of the works, but rather from the editorial content framing the GNs themselves - the fact that some of the authors chose to underscore the fact that their works are autobiographical, or are the result of collected narratives from various persons, was then used by some of the participants to justify why they were lending credibility to them, and why they had felt their impact.

However, this creates an ambiguity which often resulted in the invalidation of other narratives through the same process. In a way, this is the authorial intention working according to plan - authors, by stating that their work is a manifestation of actual events, foreclose the criticism often levelled against denunciations of GBV as being hyperbolic, prosecutorial or unrealistic (what Fricker[9] describes as epistemic injustice). The readers, in our case, clearly have accepted that epistemic claim. However, they also used that epistemic claim to justify believing and being affected (or having learned) by/from those stories, and even made explicit connections between the epistemic status of those narratives and their own empathy (e.g., by claiming that it was the real-ness of the narratives that made it easier, or possible, for them to empathize with it). From there, some of the participants took that chance to also explain that other works, or narratives that they had come across from outside of the project, did not merit the same type of response because they seemed to be (or were) not 'real' (with the unstated assumption that 'not real' equals false).

As expected, this was an attitude that was most often seen in the young men who participated, rather than in the young women - since the latter had stories of their own to share with us, and could often retell situations that they had experienced, or knew someone who had.

The obverse of this, however, is that visibility and self-disclosing storytelling functions simultaneously as a form of political action that pushes back against systemic asymmetries in who gets to use the public space, and how; and as a form of obligation that creates a spectacle out of the self-disclosure of suffering, that demands that suffering be continuously reenacted, re-presented, and re-lived, in order to sustain its own epistemic status. Thus, visibility alone is not what is at stake, but rather who controls the terms and limits of that visibility, under which interests, and in service of whom.[113–119] The underlying assumption is that any 'real' story validates nothing more than its own truthness, whereas any potentially 'not-real' (i.e., fictional, auto-fictional, historically fictional, etc.) story invalidates the whole discursive system of feminist denouncing of patriarchal violence.

On the other hand, this also has implications for literary and audience studies - if fiction has long been considered as a process of exploring alterity and of understanding our reality by ways of producing alterity, this approach would ultimately invalidate any empathic potency or function that fiction might have, and reintroduce a dangerous precedent that would meld together "realistic" with "real", in an apparent - but self-contradictory - celebration of pure factuality that still centres on hegemonic experiences to determine what is 'real'.

In this sense, the participants that expressed such views seem to be operating in a logic similar to what some authors have called motivated ignorance and selective exposure.[120–122] Motivated ignorance is not the lack of knowledge or information, or disinterest in a certain topic, but rather as a purposeful, strategic and actively maintained process of not-knowing as a way of reducing cognitive biases, as well as provoking the least amount of uncertainty in regard to one's social identity and position.

Placing fiction as something outside the real of what is worthy of empathy is one of the most striking result that we have arrived at, in this analysis, cutting to the core of what (in) validates the logics of when to mobilize empathy, on behalf of whom, and with what concerns.

Conclusion

In her now famous essay, *Paranoid reading and reparative reading*, Eve Sedgwick[123] complained about paranoia, which she characterized as "placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se - knowledge in the form of exposure" [123, p. 138]. This almost prescient quote seems more applicable now, in the age of social media and datafied existence, than when it was written, at the end of the 20th century.

Sedgewick's critique is aimed, not at the hegemonic masculinist status quo, but rather at the strand of feminist and political movements who claimed to be able to push back against that status quo by an almost-religious strategy of showing others (the 'masses', the 'brainwashed', the 'ignorants') 'the truth'. It seemed to her then, as it does to us now,

that there is more to it than knowledge on one side, and ignorance on the other, and that exposure does not operate, or even exist, in a void where reality would somehow bear an ontologically self-evident, irresistible, mark of its own epistemic status.

However, Sedgwick's response to this paranoia was the deployment of reparative readings — of literature as well as of reality — as a way to sustain the building up of alternative forms of existence that could serve as a counterpoint to the existing norms.

In a way, it could be argued that this article is somewhat guilty of that very same paranoia, for all the critique that it contains. However, we would instead argue that this article demonstrates the ambivalence and constitutive contradictions of various processes of building up knowledges about gender, violence, and identity.

We neither had self-appointed and self-declared queerphobic representatives, nor did we have participants who were unerring in their mobilization of complex terminology around gender and sexualities, or who were able to account for all the possibilities that an intersectional approach to these stories would require - after all, several white girls empathised with the racialized character that was being forced to straighten her hair without attending to the specificity of race in that story; many saw stories as being gendered but not violent, or violent but not about gender.

This is not, we would argue, an issue of lack of literacy (in the traditional, institutional sense of the word), but rather part of the multitude of ways in which these youngsters are (re) constructing and (re) negotiating their own "categories [of] 'feminine' and 'masculine'", to return to Pereira's [18, p. 35] definition. Many of the responses of our participants showed an acute awareness - via their words, but also their silences - of how complicated it is to address issues of gender, especially in a context as politically charged as the one extreme right-wing populist movements and parties have created, where gender, race and class are often made to stand in for one another and, most of all, for phantasmic articulations of sameness and difference.[124]

In this sense, empathy - notwithstanding its etymological centring of suffering - can be seen as a form of positive affect, so relevant to Sedgwick's counterpoint to paranoia. As she herself noted, "to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise" [123, p. 146].

Surprise - both positive and negative - was often summoned as an affective experience by our participants. Some were surprised by how violence takes place; some that the violence they know is not only theirs, but shared; some that people would actually be able to commit such forms of violence; some by being shown drawn sketched-up representations of a penis, or a bleeding vulva, in a school-supplied reading.

That surprise was, at least to some, not just *in*formative but potentially *trans*formative of how they understood their relationship to themselves and to others, built by, and through gender (and race, and class, and able-bodiedness, and …). We, too, were surprised at some of the ways in which their articulation of how gender operates was able to touch upon topics that, even at an academic level, people sometimes struggle with (e.g., the internalized narrative of not being 'trans enough').

However, some of the limitations and constraints of how the project was set up and enacted must also be taken into account here. While reading is — despite the stereotypical figure of the lone and silent reader in a library — a deeply social activity, the framework of this project had them read in solitude, and actively discouraged conversation about the works during the reading. The teachers themselves, which have the responsibility (and, at times, also the capacity) to incentivize critical thinking and literacy, were asked not to engage in hermeneutical exchanges with the participants.

This was because we sought to prevent the typical classroom dynamics that places the teacher as the sole arbiter of 'true' meaning. We wanted to encourage youngsters to find their own ways around the texts and images, to imagine and feel things without a higher authority telling them what to feel, how to interpret and which message was the 'right' one. It is telling that, during the interviews, several participants looked for that validation and safety in the interviewers from the project, at times almost anxiously asking about what this or that "actually means" (especially, but not only, in relation to *Juízo*).

Empathy, then, does not operate on its own, nor is it immanent to a given subject position, bodily configuration, or set of attitudes about gender. It starts, first and foremost, from the position each person sees themselves in, and how that position is produced by articulating relations of sameness and difference in specific ways with/against other perceived social

positions. At the same time, empathy without a scaffolding on more in-depth knowledge and critical thinking also does not necessarily translate into a praxis that manifests that same empathy.

Likewise, empathy can also serve as a scapegoat for (wilfully or not) devaluing one's own contribution towards a (more or less violent) gender system that no one can opt out of.

If there was a point of commonality across all participants, was that none of them, regardless of gender, thought it comprehensible (intellectually or emotionally) how some people could do some of those things — but, taken in aggregate, various of those 'incomprehensible' things were actually perfectly comprehensible for others, *if and when* they were not perceived as violence, as in the case of *Em ti me vejo*, where the mother's concern for her daughter was the focal point for empathy, due to it being seen as well-meaning and instrumentally geared towards preventing a greater violence, perhaps as much as the suffering of the daughter herself. The most evident cases of violence — often involving a sexual component — were uniformly seen as incomprehensible, in the literal sense of the word.

Here, perhaps, lies a crucial limitation of the political strategies around empathy - as it is often seen as a humanizing emotion, it is framed as being inadequate for perpetrators, since it would potentially validate or erase the harm they cause. However, by dehumanizing those who enact violence, our participants risk making the *logics* of violence unknowable, rather than just unknown, creating a false dichotomy between being human(e) and being a perpetrator of violence and, ultimately, between themselves and those who do violence. This, we would argue, is the next step in working with multimodal representations of GBV and critical readership - a move from identifying GBV and feeling for those who experience it, to comprehending *how* GBV operates, accurately defining it, and then opening up the potential to act against it.

Ethics and consent

This paper presents results that are part of a wider research project, called GENTEEL Project – Graphic Novels Against Gender Violence (https://doi.org/10.54499/2023.14621.PEX), whose main objective is to experiment with graphic novels as texts to be recommended or used to stimulate awareness of gender-based discrimination and violence in secondary schools. The whole of the project has received approval from the Internal Review Board *Comissão de Ética para a Investigação nas Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade do Minho* (translated, Ethics Committee for Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities, of Minho University), under the approval number CEICSH 001/2025. The approval encompasses the collection and classification of Lusophone graphical novels, of surveys used to collect preliminary data from students, the companion reading sheets where participants were asked to write out what they felt and what caught their attention, as well as the semi-structured interview script used by the team, and the audio recording (and posterior transcription) of the interviews, as well as the focus group script, recording and transcription of the focus groups with the teachers that participated in facilitating our connection to the students. Individual participation in the project was voluntary, and did not have any connection to any evaluation procedures that the students might have had. Since the students participating were minors, we sought out explicit written consent from both them and their carers. To participate, they and their carers had to manifest their consent by signing an informed consent form, after being given a leaflet where information about the project, the context for collecting and using the data, and the ways by which they could end their participation was explained, alongside with our data safeguarding strategy and pseudonymization protocol.

Data availability

The data pertaining to this article is composed of semi-structured interview transcripts, and open-ended responses to a survey. The dataset comprises almost solely personal data, as defined in Article 4 of the GDPR, and further consists of special categories of personal data as defined in Article 9 of the GDPR (racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs). In addition to that, the dataset is composed of data collected from minors, with the due written consent of both themselves and their legal guardians, solely for usage in the context of this specific study. For these reasons, the Internal Review Board has considered this dataset to be sensitive and that its public and open access would constitute an undue and disproportional risk to the participants' wellbeing, privacy and associated rights, as well as a breach of the consent that was given. Nonetheless, provisions have been made for the data to be made available upon request to the Principal Investigator, Nicoletta Mandolini. This request should clearly identify: 1) the need to access the data; 2) the scope of usage; 3) a Data Management Plan that can demonstrate that the safeguarding of the data will be in compliance with Portuguese and European data protection laws, and a timeline for the secure destruction of the copy of the dataset; 4) the identification of the Data Protection Officer, and of the hosting institution where the copied dataset will reside; 5) the identification of the applicant for access to the dataset. The request can be submitted via email to the PI of the Project, Nicoletta Mandolini, via nicoletta.mandolini@ics.uminho.pt – it will then be sent to the IRB identified below

(see section 'Ethics and Consent') for deliberation on whether the conditions have been met, and to proceed with a protocol for data transfer, if so. along with a justification for the request; the request will be submitted for Ethics review.

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