



Project SPACE4US - A model of blended-experiential learning for the empowerment of young women

“Stories of fragilities”: a qualitative and comparative social study on the risk of exclusion faced by adolescent girls in Europe



// 2024

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February 2024



How to cite this publication

Mateus, S., D. Santa-Marta, R. Lindner, Â. Rodrigues, S. P. Saleiro & T. Seabra (2024). “Stories of fragilities”: a qualitative and comparative social study on the risk of exclusion faced by adolescent girls in Europe. Lisbon: Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa.

Image Cover: Raquel Lindner

This report is an output of the SPACE4US Project. It has been led by Iscte and undertaken with the support of all the project partners for the purposes of the SPACE4US project.

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Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them. Project No. 2021-1-IT03-KA220-YOU-000028810

Executive Summary

This document is an outcome of SPACE4US, a European project dedicated to empowering young women in vulnerability through a blended experiential learning model. It presents a qualitative study aimed at unravelling the intricate circumstances, values, and experiences shaping the lives of vulnerable girls across Europe. Its primary objective is to explore the gender, youth, and power dynamics inherent in everyday situations within schools, care institutions, and communities. The report targets a diverse audience, including professionals directly involved with vulnerable girls and youth, public bodies, educational institutions, social services, and NGOs.

The research employed a qualitative approach aimed at investigating the experiences, vulnerabilities, and resources of participant girls in seven European countries. Methodologies included informal interviews, visual methods, participatory techniques, focus groups, and surveys, allowing for nuanced insights into subjective experiences. Research activities occurred in various settings, including residential care facilities and educational centres, ensuring a diverse socio-cultural perspective. Ethical safeguards were prioritised, and data collection spanned for 21 months, involving 112 young participant girls.

The report summarises existing knowledge in the field. It explores the multifaceted aspects of being a vulnerable girl, including analyses on self-perception and gender experiences, presentation, needs, expectations, as well as how girls navigate different spaces and manage gender identities and gender challenges in various settings. It highlights their struggles in accessing fundamental rights, opportunities, and resources. These challenges include various forms of discrimination and disadvantage, such as trauma and abuse.

The girls' narratives demonstrate a general awareness of gender inequalities and discrimination in society, reflecting experiences across public and private contexts. Discrimination episodes encompass gender-related discrimination, health-related stigma, poverty-based judgement, and biases within family, school, and the care system.

Family and educational settings emerge as both sources of support and potential obstacles in the lives of vulnerable girls. Patterns of irregular attendance, slow academic progress, and frequent school changes disrupt their educational experiences. Schools are both protective and promoters of violence and stigmatisation. Residential care experiences are mostly positive, acknowledging support, guidance, and learning.

Finally, conclusions and recommendations are offered, synthesising key insights regarding the experiences, needs, and resources of vulnerable girls. These recommendations aim to inform future interventions and practices, emphasising the importance of:

- Gender-sensitive education
- Professional development for educators
- Policies, practices, and mechanisms for girls' participation
- Addressing gender bias and stereotypes
- Networking for change
- Trauma-informed support services
- Creating safe spaces and reporting mechanisms
- Educational support and stability
- Peer relationship building and regulation
- Provide culturally competent support
- Offer empowerment building programs
- Policy advocacy for systemic change
- Counselling and education on social media usage
- Engage boys and work in mixed groups
- Stakeholder and leadership engagement

The research sheds light on the multifaceted challenges faced by vulnerable girls across Europe and underscores the significance of understanding their diverse backgrounds and journeys for effective support and intervention and create supportive environments where girls feel heard, valued, empowered, and capable of thriving despite gender imbalances and intersectional challenges.

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1. Introduction and background

This document is an outcome of SPACE4US, a project focused on a blended experiential learning model aimed at empowering vulnerable young women. It entails a study dedicated to qualitatively exploring the circumstances, values, and experiences implied in the lives of vulnerable girls within the European context.

The primary goal of the study is to examine gender, youth, and power dynamics manifested in everyday occurrences within schools, institutions, and communities. It aims to raise awareness of the problems and challenges faced by girls at risk of exclusion, giving them a "voice" to draw an updated picture of their situation. This approach seeks to uncover significant factors contributing to vulnerability and exclusion while identifying and investigating instances of discrimination and stigma linked to their gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, social class, past, racial or ethnic backgrounds, health conditions, or residential status, among other factors. The report is intended for a broad audience, ranging from professionals directly involved with girls in vulnerable situations to public bodies, educational institutions, social services, and NGOs. It targets those frequently confronted with such circumstances and seeking deeper insights into the intersections of gender, youth, and vulnerability, while also exploring innovative approaches to address these issues.

The report begins with a comprehensive introduction and background, outlining the document's purpose, offering a brief overview of Project SPACE4US, and detailing the study methodology employed. The subsequent section explores the intersection of youth, gender, and vulnerability. It summarises the current knowledge in the field, contextualising the challenges faced by vulnerable girls in Europe.

Section 3 focuses on the multifaceted aspects of being a vulnerable girl in Europe. This section is subdivided into various dimensions, such as the social profile of girls, their daily experiences, self-perception, values, beliefs, contextual influences, and relationships. It addresses questions surrounding needs, expectations, self-presentation, and values associated with feminine identities. Additionally, it examines how girls navigate different spaces and manage gender identities in various settings.

Section 4 presents narratives in the form of exemplary cases, showcasing five selected paradigmatic biographies. The final section, Section 5, draws conclusions and offers recommendations. It synthesises key insights regarding the experiences, needs, and resources of vulnerable girls. Additionally, it outlines key ideas for future interventions with girls and provides practical recommendations for advancing educational practices and support systems within this field.

Project SPACE4US overview

SPACE4US is a European project aimed at developing and testing an innovative and integrated model for empowering young women. Grounded in the creation of blended-experiential learning activities, this model seeks to foster the social inclusion of girls at risk of marginalisation. The activities structured for this purpose included the training of youth workers, and the development and testing of a model of blended learning (digital and experiential), specifically tailored to the girls' interests and needs.

Additionally, the project intended to equip youth workers with high-quality tools and creative methodologies to effectively design and implement these activities. Moreover, the project focused on the enhancement of the personal and professional skills of the youth workers involved, addressing gaps in pedagogical knowledge and methodologies to effectively address youth issues, particularly those concerning girls.

The project involved 9 organisations from 7 European countries: Glocal Factory – Italy; L'Albero – Italy; NOESSO – Spain; GEINNOVA – Spain; MANO Europa – Lithuania; Iscte – Portugal; Synthesis – Cyprus; CZ-ART – Poland; Breza – Croatia.

The core of the project revolved around creating a model capable of attracting girls who may not typically participate in traditional social contexts, utilising innovative and stimulating workshops and activities to foster trust and interest. SPACE4US served also as a platform for exchanging good practices, training, and establishing collaborative relationships with youth workers from various European countries.

Another significant objective of SPACE4US was to offer an up-to-date framework delineating the various contexts contributing to the inequality and social marginalisation experienced by girls, particularly from a gender perspective. This objective is achieved through the study presented in this report. Operating on an international level, the action-research developed within the SPACE4US project frame and intertwines with the project's results. Ultimately, the project aims to serve as a catalyst for further research and the creation of positive links with institutions involved in shaping social and youth policies across Europe.

Study methodology

The aims of this research conducted within the SPACE4US project were to investigate:

- a) the experiences, needs, and resources of the participating girls in the project.
- b) the major predictors of vulnerability and social exclusion through the analysis of girls' personal experiences, values, actions, and reactions.
- c) the discrimination and stigma experienced by the girls because of their gender, past, background, health conditions or residential status, among others.
- d) gender and power relations in daily experiences in schools, institutions, and communities.

Finally, the study intended to lay the foundations for the development of targeted and integrated responses for the well-being of the girls by providing evidence of their needs, and thus facilitating future policy making and practice. It has employed a qualitative approach, which involved collecting and analysing data associated with gender representations and experiences. The data provided a nuanced view of the multi-dimensional social life and the gender aspects within it and produced a more comprehensive understanding of the typically intricate and multidimensional social world.

The focus was on collecting and analysing data related to subjective representations and experiences. Various methods engaging girls through a variety of 'task-centred' activities, including photography, creative writing, and storytelling techniques were employed. These methods provided a nuanced perspective on the multi-dimensional social life and gender aspects, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of complex and multidimensional social worlds. The following methods were utilised¹:

- informal interviews (profiling);
- visual methods and arts-based methodology (critical poetry inquiry, photographic diaries, mapping tool);
- Participatory methods (world café);
- focus groups;
- survey (online quiz).

Critical Poetry Inquiry, a form of critical qualitative research utilising poetry as a sense-making tool, involves crafting poetry to critically analyse subjective experiences, serving as a research tool that encourages active witnessing and expression of beliefs and experiences

¹ For a detailed description of the methods and techniques see Mateus, S., Santa-Marta, D., Saleiro, S. & Seabra, T. (2022). Research Toolkit 'Stories of fragilities': a qualitative and comparative social study on the risk of exclusion faced by adolescent girls in Europe. Paper. Space4Us Project.

through word choice, phrases, and ideas, with the data presented in poetic form for subsequent coding and interpretation. “**World Café**” is a structured conversational process for knowledge sharing, in which groups of people discuss a topic at several small tables like those in a café. Although the questions are predefined, the discussion and ideas are not. **Photographic diary** is a visual and arts-based method where participants portray everyday life; tell stories about their relationships and the people that mattered to them. In the context of this study, they were structured and based in images from the internet and magazines. The **mapping tool** is a collective mapping method to identify invisible barriers and resources, in this way learning about the social use and meaning of spaces. Participant-produced maps evoke situated knowledge.

The emphasis was on subjectivity, focusing on individuals' perspectives and employing creative processes to amplify the voices of the girls in a subtle and non-intrusive manner. These methodologies enabled individuals to be heard, even on issues that are problematic and disruptive. Data was collected by project staff following a common protocol previously discussed and established within the SPACE4US partnership.

The composition of the partnership allowed research in different socio-cultural environments such as large, medium-sized and small cities, as well as suburban areas with a strong migratory presence. The research activities took place in different settings:

- *residential care* – facilities designed to provide a stable living environment for young girls who require support and care outside of a family setting.
- *educational juvenile centre* – a temporary residential facility for youths who are in conflict with the law or are under legal supervision.
- *day centre for children and young people* – facility providing daytime care, support, and activities for children and young people within a specified age range.
- *schools* – interactions and observations within school settings, with students.
- *scout centres* – interactions with young girls participating in scouting activities in specific centres.
- *parks* – outdoor settings as public parks, where the research involved activities among young girls.
- *workshop trips* – off-site activities, providing opportunities to carry research activities with young girls in different environments.
- *reception and accommodation centre for applicants for international protection* – involving young girls who are applicants for international protection.
- *social services institutions* – institutions where various social services are provided to young girls.
- *youth centres* – centres specifically designed for youth, providing a space for recreational and developmental activities for young girls.

Because of the unique characteristics of each country, local context, and research team, the research activities were conducted with flexibility (table 1).² The findings were documented using specific templates, forming the foundation for the analysis presented in this report.³

Conducting research with young people requires specific safeguards regarding ethics. To observe national and institutional ethical guidelines, each partner has committed to prioritising the wellbeing, protection, and safety of participants. The study has been conducted in accordance with core ethical principles as minimal risk of harm or discomfort, informed consent and confidentiality and anonymity.

Data collection occurred continuously throughout the project's development, spanning a 21-month period from March 2022 to October 2023.

Altogether, 112 young individuals participated in the research activities, with further characterization provided in section 3.1 of this report (social profile of the girls). Due to the specific profile of the target audience and the institutions involved, this group was not consistent throughout the data collection period, as it was influenced by the dynamics of girls entering and exiting the reference groups. The same participant may have taken part in one or more research activities.

Table 1. Research activities performed by country

Activities Country	Girls' profiles registry	World café	Critical Poetry	Focus group with girls 1	Photographic diaries	Mapping tool	Quiz to girls 1	Focus group girls 2	Quiz to girls 2
Cyprus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗
Croatia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Italy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Lithuania	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Poland	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Portugal	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spain	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

² In part of the participating countries, a focus group was conducted with professionals, educators, and youth workers. Due to the breadth of the data collected and the emphasis on the experiences of girls, we have opted not to include an analysis of this data in this report. However, their insights are partially reflected in the conclusions and recommendations.

³ Because of the various research methods employed, their specific characteristics, and the diverse ways of reporting information, it was not always feasible to gather the age of participants. Age is provided only when the information is accessible.

The research process included approximately 100 formal or informal individual interviews with young women, nine sessions of the world café (with 74 individual participations across the seven countries involved), eight sessions of critical poetry (with 75 individual participations), 15 focus group sessions with girls (with 116 individual participations), seven sessions of photographic diaries (with 73 individual participations), seven sessions utilising mapping tools (with 52 individual participations), and 11 rounds of online quizzes with 90 responses. The analysis thus covers a total of 631 individual participations.

Table 2. Participants in research activities, by country

Activities Country	Girls' profiles registr y	World café	Critical Poetry	Focus group with girls 1	Photographi c diaries	Mappin g tool	Quiz to girls 1	Focu s grou p girls 2	Quiz to girls 2
Cyprus	25	6	4	5	13	13	0	9	0
Croatia	22	12	14	14	10	4	8	8	8
Italy	14	4+8	14	4	3	3	0	3	3
Lithuania	10	10	16	16	17	17	17	4	7
Poland	17	15	7	15	12	3	10	8	10
Portugal	14	8	10	8	4+5	4	6	4	4
Spain	10	6+5	6+4	4+8	9	8	8	6	9

Note: Cells marked with a "+" indicate that two distinct sessions were conducted in the respective country.

In the analysis of the collected data, countries were not compared (even if they can be mentioned occasionally); instead, they were treated as a single sample. The analysis process involved identifying and comparing data for each topic and then summarising their diversity into several categories (themes of representations, concerns, values, images, words, etc.). Thematic and content analysis methodologies were employed, utilising coding and additional procedures to identify patterns, themes, shared characteristics, and disparities within the data. Both quantitative and qualitative data underwent examination using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 27. SPSS provided a variety of analytical tools, including descriptive statistics, which facilitated the summarization and comprehension of the quantitative aspects of the data (primarily presented in section 3.1). Additionally, Excel was utilised to create graphical representations, such as graphs and charts, to visually illustrate data distributions.

Given the vulnerability of the girls who took part in the study, ensuring anonymity was a paramount concern. Except for the life stories, where fictitious names were employed and the country was concealed, we refrained from mentioning any names in the excerpts utilised in the report.

2. Gender, youth and vulnerability

The SPACE4US project is rooted in the view that gender is a relevant aspect of understanding the social vulnerability experienced by girls facing multiple and intersectional challenges and inequalities. Thus, it underscores the importance of adopting a gender-sensitive approach when crafting interventions for girls facing vulnerable situations and within residential care institutions. Gender legitimates stereotypes, expectations, choices, and the limits of what is available to each sex category, in a continuous process of producing and reproducing gender norms and categories⁴. Gender power relations and inequalities have been naturalised as being a product of the biological differences between women and men. As gender inequality is still a reality today all over the world, gender equality was made the fifth Sustainable Development Goal of the United Nations (UN). This organisation estimates to be needed at least 286 years for gender equality to be achieved around the world⁵, while in the EU the Gender Equality Index⁶ puts the average equality between women and men in the 27 countries at 70.2%, to the disadvantage of women, in 2023. Regarding the project partner countries, the figure ranges from 60.7% to 76.4%. These data, as so many others, show the relevance of taking action to ensure growing equality between women and men. Before addressing the results, the main concepts and problematics underlying this research will be defined and contextualised.

Gender and sex are often used interchangeably, but ‘sex’ refers to biologically determined reproductive anatomy and to the legal category attributed at birth, while ‘gender’ refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, features, expectations, and capacities attributed to girls/women and boys/men.

Rather than being a property of individuals, gender is better understood as a process, which requires a continuous production and reproduction of the gendered dimension of individuals’ subjective/cultural and material existences, social relations, and institutions.⁷ Gender is the product of a long collective work of socialisation of the biological and of biologization of the social, making it look like a naturalized social construction.⁸ Additionally, social practices are also structured in terms of gender. In this perspective, gender is a

⁴ West, C. & Zimmerman, D.H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society*, 1(2), 125-151

⁵ UNWOMEN - United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2022). Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2022. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Progress-on-the-sustainabledevelopment-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2022-en_0.pdf

⁶ EIGE - European Institute for Gender Equality (2024). Gender Equality Index: European Union. <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2023>

⁷ Wharton, A.S. (2005). *The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research*. Blackwell Publishing.

⁸ Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine Domination*. Stanford University Press

structure of social relations comprising a socially constructed pattern in social processes and practices (gender regime) and opens the possibility for the practices of social agents to challenge and reshape the power relations between women and men (gender order).⁹ Gender is thus a principle of social organisation, which reproduces itself at the individual level (through individuals' actions, identities, expectations, beliefs, and behaviours), at the interactional level (the relation with others), and at the macro level, through the processes and practices of institutions.¹⁰

Gender stereotypes are deeply embedded within social institutions and people's perceptions, as they are the result of historically preconceived ideas regarding each gender, which justify and maintain inequality and power relations between women and men. These stereotypes "can limit the development of the natural talents and abilities of boys and girls, women and men, their educational and professional experiences as well as life opportunities in general".¹¹ Achieving gender equality, thus requires an understanding of stereotypes and their diverse impacts on the dispositions of both girls/women and boys/men. This entails developing strategies to challenge these preconceived ideas about gender at both macro and micro levels.

To look at social situations and contexts from a gender perspective means to better understand how the gender system works and how it perpetuates privileges and inequalities, through dynamics that are invisible, unconscious, and subtle at times. Understanding gender as a process of recurrent (re)work in need of regulation, allows us to identify mechanisms through which it's produced, reproduced but also contested and transformed, at individual, interactional, and institutional levels, in everyday life.

Gender, youth, and social vulnerability

Despite experiencing similarities through each life stage, women and men face different sets of gendered challenges during each phase. Youth is recognized to be a structural stage for adult development and future life trajectories, during which teenagers and young people experiment with possibilities they perceive to be available to them, and during which, important life choices are made. Hence, enlarging the possibilities available to young people in vulnerable positions can be decisive for their future life courses.

⁹ Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and Power*. Polity Press

¹⁰ Risman B.J. in Risman B. J., Froyum, C.M., Scarborough, & W.J. Editors (2018). Gender as a social structure. *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*. Second Edition. Springer.

¹¹ EIGE - European Institute for Gender Equality (2023). Publications and Resources: Glossary and thesaurus.

In 2021, 17.8 million young people (aged 15-29) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU, 3.3 percentage points higher than that of the total population.¹² But women are at a higher risk of social exclusion due to gender power dynamics, systemically translating into fewer resources and opportunities available to them, during their life courses. Young women are more likely to neither be in employment, education, or training (NEETs) than young men. In 2022, 13.1% of young women aged 15–29 in the EU were NEETs, while the corresponding share among young men was 10.5%.¹³ There are a range of factors that may explain the gender gap. For example, social conventions or pressures tend to place a higher importance on women’s role within the family and on men’s role to provide for the family through work. Additionally, there is a risk for labour market issues, such as: employers preferring to hire young men over young women; young women facing assimilation difficulties when returning to work after childbirth; young women being more likely to have low-paid jobs or precarious employment etc.

Also, the number of women victims of gender, domestic and sexual violence, in 2020, was still high in the EU. From the age of fifteen, 1 in 3 women has experienced physical or sexual violence, 1 in 2 has experienced sexual harassment, 1 in 10 has faced online harassment (EC, 2021)¹⁴, 1 in 10 has been stalked, 1 in 20 has been raped¹⁵ and 94% of the victims of traffic for sexual exploitation are women.¹⁶ Violence in all its forms has far-reaching consequences for the victims, ranging from injuries, chronic physical and mental health issues, poverty, exclusion from the labour market, community, or other areas of society, threatened security or loss of life.¹⁷

¹² EUROSTAT (2024a). Young people - social inclusion. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young people - social inclusion](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young_people_-_social_inclusion)

¹³ EUROSTAT (2024b). Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training#Young women are more likely to neither be in employment nor in education or training than young men](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training#Young_women_are_more_likely_to_neither_be_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training_than_young_men)

¹⁴ European Commission (2021). Let’s put an end to Violence against Women. https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/factsheet_let_s_put_an_end_to_violence_against_women_november_2021_en.pdf

¹⁵ FRA –Fundamental Rights Agency (2014). Violence against women: an EU-wide survey. Main results report

¹⁶ HTC - Human Trafficking Collaborative (2024). <https://humantrafficking.umich.edu/about-human-trafficking/who-are-the-victims/>

¹⁷ Malgesini, G., Sforza, L.C., & Babović, M. (2019). Gender-based Violence and Poverty in Europe. EAPN Gender and Poverty WG - Briefing # 2. <https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/EAPN-Gender-violence-andpoverty-Final-web-3696.pdf>

As recognized by the Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023¹⁸, “Some groups of women (notably women with low levels of qualifications, single mothers, migrant, Roma, ethnic minorities women, and women with disabilities) face particular challenges, including enhanced difficulty to join the labour market, higher levels of precariousness and related risks of poverty and social exclusion” (Strategic objective 1, point 43). Interventions designed from an intersectional gender perspective, focusing on adolescent girls and young women, will encompass the diverse spectrum of gender experiences. By doing so, they can pinpoint specific needs and resources, thereby enhancing the opportunities for all girls and young women to surmount structural challenges

In the specific case of youth in Residential Care (RC), research shows that girls are more dissatisfied with RC, due to the low prioritisation of their needs¹⁹, and present higher levels of mental illness or disorder than those of boys in care, and of those of their peers not in care.²⁰ It has also been noticed that young girls’ behaviour is subject to greater scrutiny, and typical young people’s behaviours in girls, that don’t correspond to the expectations of femininity, are easily categorised as problematic. This is the case of girls’ anger outbursts or sexuality that tend to be hyper-visible and more problematized.²¹

The different ways in which girls and boys deal with and externalise trauma are connected to gender roles and expectations. An example is the high incidence of low self-esteem and the search for external validation in girls as a product of gender socialisation, that frames girls as fragile, incapable, and imperfect, whose value comes mainly from their bodies, according to beauty standards.²² Learned gender roles generate different ways of managing conflicts, expressing emotional pain, locus of control and validation (inner or outer), among others, which call for action directed not just to the girls but to everyone involved, and especially, to the conditions that produced gendered behavioural differences and gender

¹⁸ <https://rm.coe.int/ge-strategy-2018-2023/1680791246>

¹⁹ O’Neill, T. (2008). Gender matters in residential child care. Em Kendrick, A. (Ed.), Residential Child Care: Prospects and Challenges. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

²⁰ Rodrigues, S., Leal, M., Martins, A., Ribeiro, R., Azevedo, S., Campos, J, Barbosa-Ducharne, M., Del Valle, J.F. & Dias, P. (2016). Acolhimento Residencial em Portugal. Atas do 3º Congresso Nacional da Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses. <https://repositorio-aberto.up.pt/bitstream/10216/111970/2/265923.pdf>.

²¹ O’Neill, T. (2005). Girls in trouble in the child welfare and criminal justice system. In G. Lloyd (Ed.), Problem Girls: Understanding and Supporting Troubled and Troublesome Girls and Young Women. Routledge

²² Zuckerman, M., Li, C., & Hall, J.A. (2016). When men and women differ in self-esteem and when they don’t: a meta-analysis. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 64, 34-51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2016.07.007>

material and social inequalities²³. Residential care professionals' lack of gender knowledge leads to girls being perceived as more difficult to work with than boys, potentially exacerbating their marginalisation. Efforts aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of personal narratives and residential care on the life trajectories of young people must consider gender as a factor that generates varied conditions and outcomes of vulnerability among girls and boys, acknowledging their diverse experiences, to be truly effective.

Equality, participation, and the empowerment of girls and young women

Empowerment is crucial to achieve gender equality. Gender equality “entails equal rights for women and men, girls and boys, as well as the same visibility, empowerment, responsibility, and participation, in all spheres of public and private life. It also implies equal access to and distribution of resources between women and men”.²⁴ Empowerment is understood as the capacity of a woman to be in full control of her life choices, which can only be achieved by structurally ensuring equal access to rights, resources, capabilities, and opportunities. However, they “must also have the agency to use those rights, capabilities, resources, and opportunities to make strategic choices and decisions (such as is provided through leadership opportunities and participation in political institutions). And for them to exercise agency, they must live without fear of coercion and violence.”²⁵ Thus, the empowerment of girls/women implies questioning, reframing, and rethinking from a gender intersectional perspective, the social practices we all have a part in. Gender bias among educators, social workers, psychologists, operators, and volunteers is a barrier to achieve gender equality. Without proper training and the awareness of gender-biased beliefs and behaviours, the professionals working with young people may continue to apply methods that do not address the specific needs of girls, and draw upon gender-insensitive materials and practices, thus reinforcing gender stereotypes.

The literature shows that the way boys and girls are socialised and educated, whether in the family, at school, in the community or in other institutions such as residential care institutions and rehabilitation centres, tends to reproduce gender stereotypes, albeit often

²³ Santa-Marta, D. B. (2023). Educação e socialização de género de jovens raparigas em acolhimento residencial: Um estudo de caso na Casa Laranja [Dissertação de mestrado, Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa]. Repositório Iscte. <http://hdl.handle.net/10071/30258>

²⁴ Council of Europe (2018). Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023. <https://rm.coe.int/ge-strategy-2018-2023/1680791246>

²⁵ UN Millennium Project (2005). Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women. Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, p.33. http://content-ext.undp.org/aplaws_publications/1844034/Taking%20Action-%20Achieving%20Gender%20Equality%20and%20Empowering%20Women.pdf

unconsciously. That's why it's necessary to act in different contexts, starting with education (formal, non-formal, and informal). Schools and other institutions must realise the role of gender and create “gender-aware school cultures” and “school policy, which should include clear guidelines about gender-aware education”, intended at challenging educators' gender expectations and instead actively exploring the interests and talents of each kid.²⁶ To achieve the objectives mentioned above, initial training (scientific and pedagogical) and continuous training²⁷ are both key. Gender training “should not only summarise the problems caused by gender blind education, but also confront teachers with the ways in which they treat boys and girls differently”.²⁸ In particular, their expectations regarding the future career paths and areas of training for both girls and boys. In 2018, considering upper secondary and tertiary education, girls and women were still under-represented in the field of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), accounting for only 17% of all ICT students in the EU.²⁹

Research also shows that rehabilitation programmes are gender blind and anchored in male experiences and needs, not taking into account the particularities of women and young girls, recommending holistic approaches that “reflect the complexity of girls’ and young women’s experiences and address the multiple factors relating to offending behaviour”.³⁰

Further, “where services or programmes for girls do exist, they tend to focus around sexuality and sexual health, which, while useful in addressing one aspect of problematic behaviour, is restrictive in meeting a wide range of complex needs”.³¹

In short, there are three guiding principles for working with girls and young women: i) Take account of the reality and diversity of girls' experiences; ii) Pay attention to girls' strengths - a strength rather than a deficit approach will provide positive models for girls to restructure their lives and resolve conflicts; iii) Talk and listen to girls - relationships are key to effective practice and girls' insights should be incorporated into all work with them.³²

²⁶ De Baerdemaeker, S. (2015). “School curricula and career guidance” in GEC – Gender Equality Commission, *Conference on Combating gender stereotypes in and through education Report*, Council of Europe, pp. 35-39.

²⁷ Alvarez, M. T. (2015). “Combating gender stereotypes in the education system: success stories”. In GEC – Gender Equality Commission, *Conference on Combating gender stereotypes in and through education Report*, Council of Europe, pp. 28-34.

²⁸ De Baerdemaeker (2015: 36).

²⁹ EUROSTAT (2020). Girls and women among ICT students: what do we know?. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20200423-1>

³⁰ CYCJ – Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice (2021), “Vulnerable Girls and Young Women”, A Guide to Youth Justice in Scotland: policy, practice and legislation, www.cycj.org.uk

³¹ CYCJ (2021: 6).

³² CYCJ (2021: 16-17).

3. Being a girl in vulnerable situation in Europe

3.1 Girls social profile

In this section, we will examine the profiles of participant girls in the study. As outlined in the methodology section, the study engaged 112 girls who participated in diverse research moments and techniques, reflecting the distinct national contexts and variations in age, background, and social profile illustrated in figure 1. While there is a notable prevalence of disadvantaged social profiles characterised by vulnerable traits, there is some variation among countries. Poland is noteworthy for its relatively more privileged participant population, while Cyprus stands out for the predominantly migratory origin and low school frequency of the participating girls.

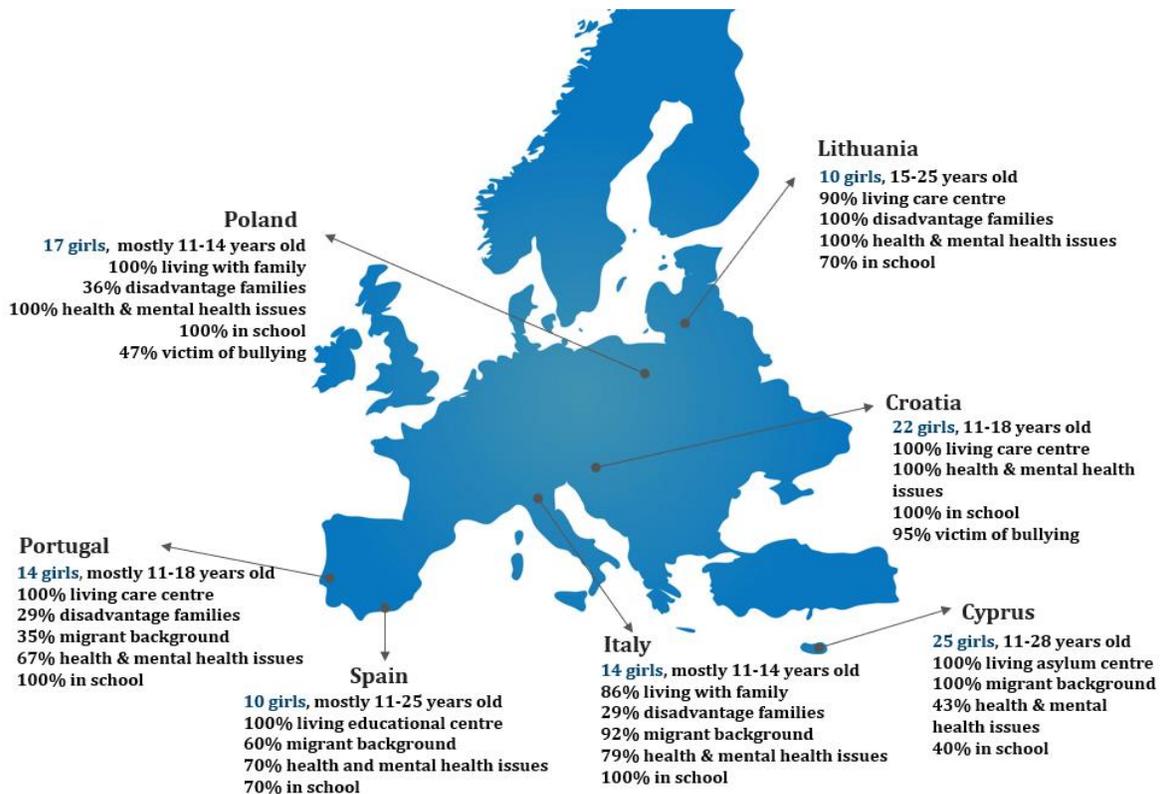


Figure 1. Participant girls by country and profile

The comprehensive profile of participants is elaborated upon in Annex 1, providing a detailed overview of indicators pertaining to age, educational background, residential status, family dynamics, and specific vulnerability conditions across different countries. This concise presentation highlights the fundamental characteristics of all the girls involved in the study.

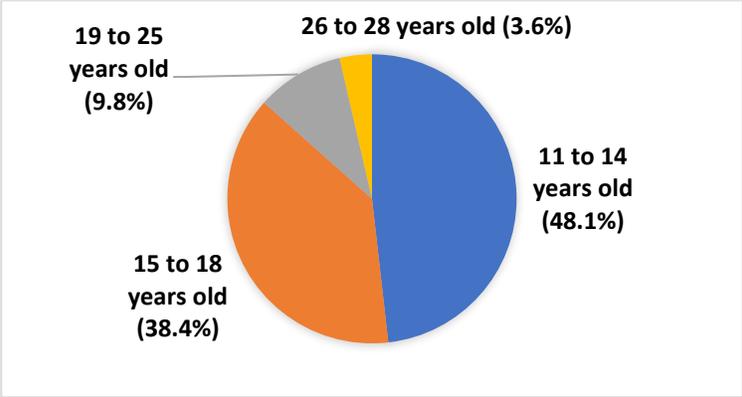


Figure 2. Participant girls by age groups

Figure 2 illustrates the percentage distribution of participants across various age groups, ranging from 11 to 28 years old. The most significant age group is the 11 to 14, comprising 48% of the total sample (54 girls). The group has a higher incidence of younger girls.

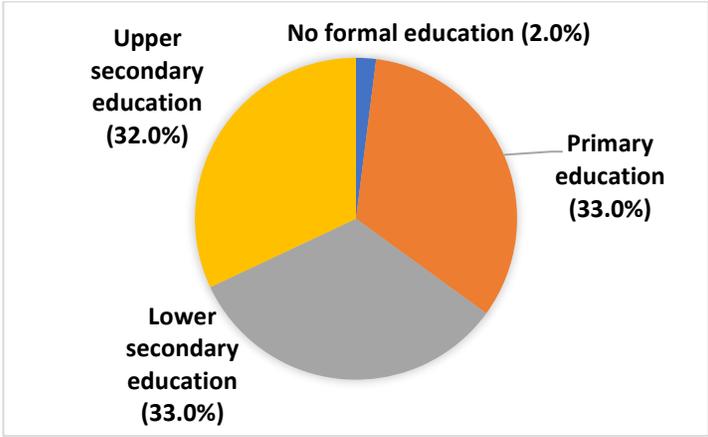


Figure 3. Participant girls by educational level

Regarding the distribution of participants across different levels of education (Figure 3), only 2% of participants reported having no formal education (2 girls). The distribution in the other educational levels indicates a relatively balanced representation, with a substantial proportion of participants having completed primary or secondary education.

Figure 4 depicts data concerning the residential status of participants, a significant indicator given that the SPACE4US project specifically targeted young girls living in institutional settings, often separated from their families due to reasons such as protection measures, conflict with the law, substance abuse, and health issues, among others. The composition of participants reflects this particular reality.

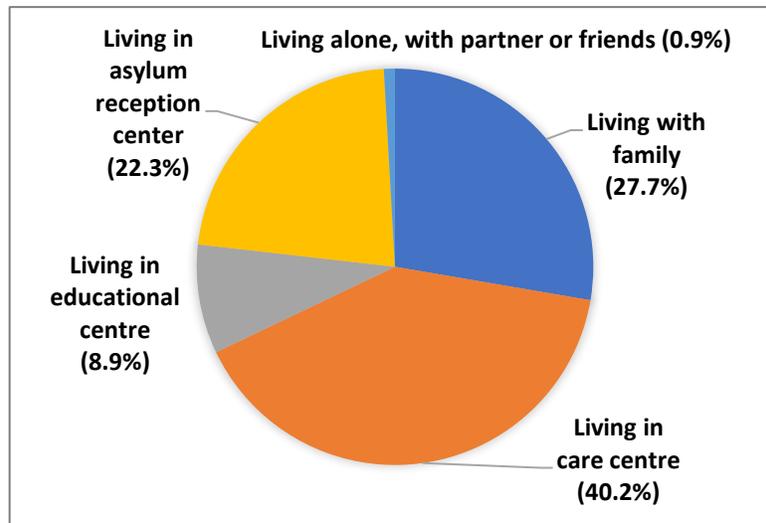


Figure 4. Participant girls by residential status

Most participants, 40% (45 girls), were living in care centres or asylum reception centres (22%, 25 girls). A smaller proportion resided with their families (28%), while only one reported living alone, with a partner, or with friends.

Figure 5 indicates the prevalence of various challenges and vulnerabilities among the participant girls. Within the participants' universe, 34.8% were in the care system due to child welfare orders, while 4.5% were involved in the care system due to conflicts with the law. Seventy-point-two percent of the participants originate from disadvantaged families. A diverse range of educational backgrounds is evident among the mothers of the participants. The majority have attained at least primary (30.9%) or secondary education levels (27.9%), with a notable proportion having completed university education (16.2%). However, a significant minority of mothers had no formal education (8%), indicating diverse educational opportunities and backgrounds within the sample. The distribution of educational levels among fathers is very similar.

Forty six percent of the girls have a migrant background (68 girls). A diverse range of countries of origin is evident among the participants. Somalia had the highest representation, with nine participant girls, followed by Nigeria with seven, and Iraq with six. Other notable origins include Morocco (five girls), Romania (three girls), and São Tomé and

Príncipe (two girls). Additionally, smaller percentages of participants come from various other countries, such as Yemen, Algeria, Cape Verde, Djibouti, Germany, India, Kurdistan, Sierra Leone, Switzerland, and Ukraine. This diversity underscores the multicultural composition of the participants.

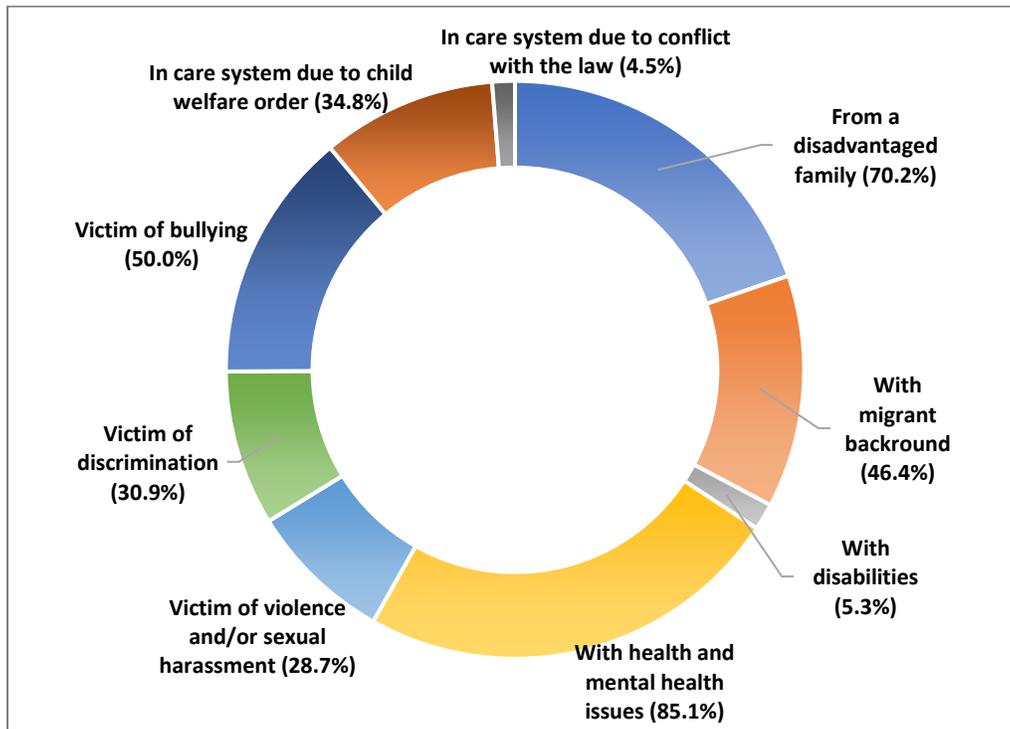


Figure 5. Participant girls by profile

Additionally, 5.3% reported having disabilities, and 85.1% stated experiencing health and mental health issues. Furthermore, 28.7% identified as victims of violence and/or sexual harassment, with 30.9% reporting being victims of discrimination and 50.0% indicating being victims of bullying.

In conclusion, the social profile and characteristics of the participant girls, despite being heterogenous, reveal the existence and prevalence of multiple layers of vulnerabilities expected to intersect, cumulate and to have an impact in their life conditions, experiences, perceptions and opportunities.

Many of these vulnerabilities are directly linked to gender, particularly those associated with victimisation, exposure to violence, discrimination, as well as health and mental health issues. The subsequent sections will delve deeper into the experience of gender stemming from these social positions, shedding light on the nuanced ways in which gender intersects with these vulnerabilities.

3.2 Experiencing life as a girl

Pursuing appropriate and desirable femininity

Adolescence is an intense period of identity (re)configuration. Time *par excellence* for the “construction of the self”³³, the negotiation of gender identities is particularly active and dynamic at this stage of life³⁴. Girls and boys incorporate practices and discourses that they understand correspond to the markers of *appropriate*, *normal*, and *desirable* femininities and masculinities³⁵. Failing to perform the expected gender or displaying a non-appropriate masculinity or femininity, can lead young people into situations of sanction, vulnerability, and social exclusion.

Most of the girls taking part in the SPACE4US study invoke practices and discourses that place them in an intelligible feminine subject position. Acting feminine is, for the girl participants, something that comes with being legally classified as female.



“Being a woman is being a girl, having boobs, having vagina, being feminine.”
(Participant girl, 13, Portugal)

A girl is someone who “has female sex” (Participant girl, Croatia), a “female body and mind” (Participant girl, 16 years, Spain). The intersection between the categories of *gender* and *sex* in the discourse of the participants underlines how the “processes of gendering (feminising or masculinizing) identity begin with a marking of the body as sexed based on notions originating in the biological sciences”.³⁶

The specific female anatomy seems, to the participant girls, to give access to a set of abilities that differentiate female identity: “we [girls] produce the babies and create the life”

³³ Pappámikail, L. & Vieira, M. M. (2017). A (in)disponibilidade dos sujeitos como objetos de estudo: reflexões a partir de duas pesquisas com adolescentes. Em V. S. Ferreira (org.), *Pesquisar Jovens. Caminhos e Desafios Metodológicos*, (pp.33-35). Lisboa: ICS. p.34.

³⁴ Pereira, M. M. (2012) *Fazendo género no recreio: a negociação do género em espaço escolar*. Lisboa: ICS. p. 61.

³⁵ Francombe-Webb, J. & Silk, M. (2016). Young Girls’ Embodied Experiences of Femininity and Social Class. *Sociology*, 50(4), 652-672. p. 657.

³⁶ Willis, J. L. (2009). Girls Reconstructing Gender: Agency, Hybridity and Transformations of ‘Femininity’. *Girlhood Studies*, 2(2), 96-118, p.101.

(Participant, 13 years, Spain). In fact, references to the reproductive capacities of the female body are abundant in the girls' discourses about what a girl is and what is good about being a girl. Girls "can be mothers and create a new living being in their bellies (Participant, 13, Portugal); they are the ones who "have the capacity to have children" (Participant, 14, Spain) and "bring new life to the world" (Participant girl, Croatia).



"To be a girl is a gift from God, why? Because we are all special, everybody is special, but we are the ones who give life, we know when is good, we know when is bad, we are powerful and strong".
(Participant girl, 14, Cyprus)

This reproductive nature of the female body is understood by the girls as the basis for a – supposedly, natural – feminine disposition to care for others. In girls' narratives, femininity is defined not only by the female body's ability to gestate children, but also by the aptitude for caring and "being a mother". Girls raise "children with love" (Participant girl, Croatia), they know "how to communicate with children" (Participant girl, 14, Italy) and also have 'superpowers' such as cooking and cleaning. This projection of expectations about what girls and women are, informed by the structure of the sexual division of labour, which assigns men a productive arena while consigning women to the domestic and reproductive domain of the house, severely impacts the way young girls look to *do* proper femininity. Our ideas about gender – about femininity, but also what we think about masculinity – are connected to this division: from this "structure of differences" flow "characteristically different experiences for men and women".³⁷

The aestheticization of the body according to the beauty standards of the social and media spheres constitutes another way in which some of the girls who took part in the SPACE4US study look to perform an appropriate and legitimate femininity." 'Doing' beauty is a vital component of doing femininity".³⁸ Every day, a range of female representations are present to youth girls through Instagram posts, TikTok videos or advertisements from the fashion industry. Although the spectrum of femininities available in this type of contents has widened significantly in the last decade, a "girlie", "sexy" and "(hetero)sexually desirable"³⁹

³⁷ Connell, R. (2002). *Gender*. Cambridge e Malden: Polity Press. p.61

³⁸ Lazar (2011, p.37).

³⁹ Jackson, S. & Vares, T. (2011). Media 'Sluts': 'Tween' Girls' Negotiations of Postfeminist Sexual Subjectivities in Popular Culture. Em R. Gill e C. Scharff (eds.), *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, (pp.134-146). Hampshire e Nova York: Palgrave Macmillan.

version of the female subjectivity still seems to predominate. Participant girls admire international personalities such as Kendal Jenner, Kim Kardashian, Karol G, Bella Hadid or Rihanna for their beauty and the way they *do* femininity.

Two participants, both 13, from Poland, for example, say they admire American model Bella Hadid because she is “pretty” and “slim”. Girls also tend to identify tanned bodies, with curves and defined abs as desirable. According to another participant, 17, from Portugal, girls see on social media “people with beautiful bodies, not fat, sexy, beautiful”; in their heads, they think “I want to be that person, I want to have that body”, a beautiful body “whit big breasts, a big butt, a slim waist, no skin marks”.



“[Social media] affect my thoughts. If I see a pretty girl, I ask myself why don’t I have those eyes or hair. Why can’t I have those branded clothes. Once I saw a girl has certain kind of hair and style, and I started dressing like that”.
(Participant girl, 15, Cyprus)

These images inform girls about what constitutes appropriate femininity; about how a girl should present herself to be understood as a girl. Although not all the participant girls admit that media content affects their daily practices, almost all of them seem to be involved in rituals of body aestheticization. To meet mediatic representations of femininity, girls invest in a series of activities that make them feel good as girls: putting on make-up, using creams and cosmetics, going to the hairdresser or to the shopping centre to buy new clothes.

In this sense, femininity is intrinsically associated with the act of consumption.⁴⁰ Participation in rituals and practices of beautification depends on girls being able to afford certain products and services - such as designer clothes, a new make-up product or an appointment at the hairdresser. The possibility of consumption is, therefore, a significant discriminatory factor in access to femininity. Girls like those taking part in the SPACE4US study, who experience situations of social vulnerability and whose families tend to be less financially able, can find it more difficult to perform an aesthetically valued and legitimised femininity.

This economic dimension is referred to by the participant girls, as something that increases their field of possibilities in the way of being a girl, or as an obstacle that can restrict their investment in femininity. For a 14 years-old participant from Poland, having money makes

⁴⁰ Francombe-Webb and Silk (2016, p.657).

girls feel good because it allows them to “buy a lot of cosmetics and clothes”; Croatian girls, if they could choose a ‘superpower’, it would be to “always smell good” even when they “don’t have the money to buy perfume” and help other girls when they “don’t have the money to be beautiful or to have pretty nails”; while other participant 13 years old, from Portugal, mentions how sad she feels when she realises that she can’t afford to buy the style of clothes she like and sees other people wearing.

The kind of conditions girls have to access desirable femininity is especially relevant since “femininity is very much a public performance dependent upon validation by others”.⁴¹ The way a girl displays femininity is subject to close evaluation and monitorization. If being “hot and pretty” (Participant girl, Portugal), always “beautiful in mind and appearance” (Participant girl, 14, Italy), are benefits of being a ‘proper girl’, the constant appraisal of the body seems to be one of the hardest legacies of femininity. Being insulted with “ugly names” for “bodies and looks” (Participant girl, Croatia) or “being judged by appearance” (Participant girl, Lithuania) is one of the hardest parts of being a girl. Negative and offensive comments by others create insecurities in the way girls embody femininity and make their relationship with their bodies extremely demanding. This is reflected in girls’ desires for their appearance. If girls could choose, they would be “beautiful forever”, “eat and not get fat” (Girl participant, Croatia), always “be liked by boys” and “not be judged” (Participant girl, 14, Italy).

A Croatian participant also comments on how hard it is to be labelled “low morality” just because “a girl dresses fancier”. This is a common insult, especially when it comes to girls and women from the working classes. Limited financial capacity, as well as differences in cultural capital, can make it more difficult for girls who experience social vulnerability to access a feminine subjectivity that is seen as desirable and appropriate.

Taking agency: other femininities

Gender arrangements are “sources of pleasure, recognition and identity”, but also “sources of injustices and harm”⁴². Even when invested in practices of desirable and valued femininity,

⁴¹ Skeggs, B. (1998). *Formations of class & gender*. London, Thousand Oaks & Nova Deli: SAGE Publications. P. 107.

⁴² Connell (2009, p.6).

girls who took part in the SPACE4US study recognize that the idea of an appropriate feminine subjectivity is associated with a set of stereotypes that result from a discriminatory structure of differences between women and men. A participant, 13, from Cyprus, talks about how “men and women don’t have the same roles” in society; how women are expected to “give birth”, “clean”, “work in beauty salons” and be “kindergarten teachers”. “Men think women have to dress in skirts’ ’, remarks another participant, 13, from Italy.



“I very much dislike that society expects girls to dress nicely, to look nice, to take care of their appearance, to be slim. I, for example, really like to eat and it’s upsetting when I hear the comment that I shouldn’t eat much. I don’t understand this gender restriction, boys can do something, and girls can’t”.
(Participant girl, 14, Poland)

The impact of this discriminatory structure on the way girls experience and perform their femininity is especially evident in discourses that compare the lives of boys with those of girls. Not subject to a structure of conditioning based on gender, boys seem to enjoy hyper freedom and autonomy in the girls’ narratives. Thinking of herself as a boy, a 12 years old participant from Cyprus, would “wear boys’ clothes”, “play football like crazy”, do “box” and “karate”, would “party and finish at 1am” and “have a girlfriend that’s 14 years old”. Other girls, 16 and 15, from Italy, “would do a mechanical school” and “would stay out all night”. Masculinity is understood as giving access to a set of experiences that femininity does not allow. The same structure that restricts the experiences of girls, consigning them to essentialist roles and placing them under heavy violence, doesn’t seem to affect the boys’ agency in deciding their lives.



“I wanted to act like a boy but be a girl. It’s very strange, but in fact I would never like to be a boy. I would only like to be a boy because they can do whatever they want. And because I am a girl, it’s like ‘how can you behave like that, you are a girl!’”.
(Participant girl, 16, Croatia)

It is important to recognize, however, that not all the girls who took part in the SPACE4US study position themselves passively in relation to this unequal gender structure. Some girls work creatively on their identities by introducing liberal values such as individuality, self-realisation, and choice into what is a more conservative gender discourse, in a position we could call “hybrid femininity”.⁴³ This hybrid identity is well portrayed by the heterogeneous selection of adjectives that one Croatian participant uses to describe what a girl is: being

⁴³ Where girls seek to “reconstruct their gendered subjectivity while utilising, negotiating, and reformulating dominant discursive constructions of ‘femininity’” (Willis, 2009, p.103).

“pretty” and “emotional” continue to be qualities associated with being a girl, but characteristics such as “smart”, “strong” and “brave” also appear in the discourse to define femininity. Attributes such as being “strong and independent” (Participant Girl, Lithuania), “capable” (Participant Girl, Cyprus) or “a fighter” (Participant Girl, Spain) also appear as markers of a liberalised femininity. Also, personalities such as Greta Thunberg, Emma Watson or Billie Eilish figures in the discourses as references due to their intelligence and irreverence.

Other girls in the study actively seek alternative ways of doing femininity by exercising a transgressive agency in relation to social and cultural notions that shape proper femininity. “Femininity does not often represent me, it did not often before and is not often doing so now”, writes a participant, 14, from Italy, in a critical poetry exercise. From a position of *dissident femininity*, girls challenge the discourses of appropriate femininity and embody this resistance. The life-story of Ari (see section 4) is perhaps the best example of this type of positioning: “Throughout my school experience I was teased for my body shape and the way I dressed. Some of my classmates thought I was a lesbian because I dress like a boy, I dress hip-hop style, which is the genre of dance I have been practising for several years. A few years ago, I was upset about it, but now I don't care. I feel confident in myself and who I am (...)”. Also, at another moment in the project, Ari mentions how she is not “as the girls are” but that she feels comfortable in her body – “it's me”, she concludes.

Much more than their grandmothers, and a little more than their mothers, today girls enjoy a relative space of agency that allows them to negotiate a subjective position to that offered by ‘appropriate’ femininity.⁴⁴ Projects like SPACE4US offer to the participant girls a mechanism for collective reflection on the way girls experience gender, a tool that can be used to appropriate that space of potential agency. As a participant girl from Spain put in: “if we come together as a group of powerful women, we give each other more power”.

3.3 Girls perceiving and portraying themselves

The following topics explores how girls perceive and portray themselves, by exploring the dynamics surrounding body image, self-esteem, and the pervasive influence of social media on the participant girls. Coping mechanisms employed by girls to navigate societal pressures,

⁴⁴ Budgeon (2011, p.61).

including strategies such as physical activity, self-care, and filtering out negative opinions, are examined.

Body image, self-esteem, and the influence of social media

The data collected in the photographic diaries made it possible to understand how the participant girls feel about their bodies. The activities carried out show that there are positive and negative perceptions of body image. Some of the testimonies come from girls who claim to feel good about their bodies and wouldn't change anything. Others, despite generally feeling good, admit having a desire to change a few things, the condition of their skin (acne), losing or gaining weight, hair colour, body shapes (more defined, curvier). Also, there were girls who generally feel uncomfortable with their bodies. They feel insecure and unable to find any positive traits in themselves.



“Most people look at their flaws and don't see the positives. I can't look at myself.”
(Participant girl, Poland)⁴⁵



“I look in the mirror and I don't like it... and I've been put down many times.”
(Participant girl, Portugal)

The main areas of discomfort are: the face, the nose, the belly, the lips, breasts' size and body fitness. Additionally, participants believed that not having a certain body type made them less feminine. A participant girl said that although she would like to change things in her body, there are aspects of her identity that she would never change because she would never change her mind.

⁴⁵ Because of the various research methods employed, their specific characteristics, and the diverse ways of reporting information, it was not always feasible to gather the age of participants. Age is provided only when the information is accessible.



“I would change my lips. But what I would never change, is my mind.”
(Participant girl, Portugal)

Three participant girls took for granted women feeling bad about their body image. For them it is natural and predictable that negative perceptions are shared by all women. They stated that girls always think they are fat and feel unhappy with the way they look.

Despite the diversity of perceptions about their own body image, girls from Croatia and Cyprus generally leaned towards negative perceptions, whereas those from Lithuania tended to have more positive body images.

In order to have a good relationship with their bodies and well-being, the girls' participants said that it is essential to do sport, eat well, diet and take care of themselves (take care of their hair, skin and dress well). They also said that it is important to be able to filter out people's opinions, have self-love and self-acceptance. One participant girl from Croatia believes that nothing can make women/girls feel good.

In Lithuania the participant girls pointed out very specific things that were not addressed in the other residential contexts. For them it is very important to take care of mental well-being, to promote body positivity, stay hydrated, prioritise rest and to support each other. The girls from Cyprus believe that spending less time on social media is important to preserve mental health, as they are constantly bombarded with beauty cannons.

The participants agree that social media has a huge impact on the way they look at themselves and at their lives. They said that social media perpetuates images of what it means to be "beautiful" or "perfect" and they feel that they must follow these ideals, although they are aware that these images are highly edited and do not correspond to reality. In Portugal, a participant girl said that she feels pressured to fit in with the stereotypes, but that at the same time, she considers girls that don't fit those stereotypes, beautiful, such as women with large bodies or with stretch marks. They also see social media as a source of inspiration to achieve their goals, whether related to their body image or lifestyle.

Some of the girls believe that because they don't have a body similar to the ideal perpetrated on social media, they are unable to pursue certain careers, such as modelling. On social media there is always a need to improve something, to be the best at everything - “dance better”, “kiss better”. Even the way girls speak can be influenced by the people they follow.

In Portugal, Croatia, Spain and Cyprus, participants said they have experienced online bullying, through comments directed at their bodies and mental state, in written comments and in live streams. The negative comments affected some girls' self-esteem and triggered or reinforced the desire to change. Others said they ignored the comments or responded to them in a non-aggressive way.



“(...) I was bullied a month ago. I'd never been bullied before. Because of my ex-boyfriend's current girlfriend, she said that I have to go to the gym, that I'm fat and that I'm traumatised.”
(Participant girl, Portugal)

Participant perceptions of body image are variable. Even when girls feel good, there is a need to change something. They believe that well-being and body positivity can be achieved through specific behaviours, such as physical exercise, better nutrition or self-care. On this matter, aspects related to mental health are mentioned less frequently. Girls believe that social media can have an influence on the way they behave, since it dictates social patterns. However, this influence can be positive or negative, depending on how social media is used.

Girls' needs: understanding, knowledge, and safety

The main needs expressed by girls focus on three specific areas: (i) the relationship between them and adult educators, (ii) strengthening the acquisition of information and knowledge and (iii) debating ideas about the problems that most affect them.

Regarding adult educators (at reception centres, at school or in the family), girls want to be better understood, less judged, more trusted and emphasise the need to be better prepared for their future. Participants say it is important to pass on values to girls that enable them to “stand on their own two feet” without depending on someone else. In addition to this need to learn to be independent, they require more freedom in their daily lives and less pressure from all educators.

Another aspect mentioned across the various countries was the need for girls to have stability and feel safe, especially in the school context. They also need people to show them that they are worthy and can achieve.



“It’s not about judging people. It’s understanding...”
(Participant girl, Portugal)

Another need stated by the girls is to be there for more information and training in fields such as self-defence and human rights (encompassing both women's and men's rights). They argue that there should be a school-wide debate on respecting students' rights, children's rights, women's rights, human rights, to raise awareness on these topics among students, parents but also teachers.

A third set of needs is related to the lack of spaces to debate issues such as stigma, inequalities, discrimination, the problems that affect young women's daily lives and ways of tackling them. The experience gained during the project is cited as a good example of what should happen. They lack opportunities to share experiences so as to make better informed decisions. Some girls suggest that it would be important to learn about women who have experienced similar problems to their own and who have succeeded and realised their dreams. This would help to improve their self-confidence.



“Like what we're doing now is fine, it's important... At school we don't talk much about it, only with some teachers if something happens. We don't have many opportunities to compare.”
(Participant girl, Italy)

Dreams, aspirations, and fears

With a few exceptions, all the girls expressed their desire to start a family in the future, to have children, a house and a good job. Professional aspirations vary in terms of the qualifications they require. They either hope to finish secondary school and start working or have their own business, or they aspire to obtain a higher qualification as a way of working in the careers they wish to pursue. In the first case, there’s an expectation of becoming a hairdresser or running a flower business, and in the second the desire to become a vet, a lawyer, a translator, to be a kindergarten teacher or make a career in marketing. Exceptionally, they have no concrete plans for the future, or they are undefined.

Those who mention marriage as a goal emphasise their desire to be loved and respected by their partners. Girls aspire to be happy and to achieve their dreams. To this end, they are aware that schooling is decisive and they strive to go as far as possible, avoiding to give up.

The girls recognize the significance of education in achieving their goals and strive to maximise their educational opportunities. They also emphasise the aspiration to be

financially independent, though they acknowledge this as a significant challenge and source of fear for the future.



“Girls shouldn’t give up on what they want, they should always look for a way and not give up.”
(Participant girl, Cyprus)



“I would like to study marketing, however, I do not have finances for that, so hopefully I can get a place which would be financed by the state. For this reason, this year I pay a lot of attention and dedicate a lot of my time to my school because I want to have the best results during exams.”
(Participant girl, Lithuania)

They also fear not being able to realise their dreams, failing in their determination to achieve them and, in general, making mistakes. In addition to these fears, which are common to most young girls, in some cases there is the fear of being abandoned with nowhere to go or being unloved.



“When I grow up, I would like to have a family, a husband and children. I would like to have a happy marriage and a man who respects me. Furthermore, I would like to not have financial problems and have a lot of money.”
(Participant girl, Italy)



“I’m afraid I’ll end up living under a bridge.”
(Participant girl, Spain)



“I am afraid that I will be alone in the future.”
(Participant girl, Poland)

It is also relevant to emphasise that some young girls with an immigrant background say they want to return to their country of origin and/or help solve the problems there.

Overall, the analysis reveals a nuanced picture of young girls' hopes, aspirations, and fears as they navigate the transition to adulthood, highlighting the more universal desire for love, fulfilment, and stability, alongside the challenges and uncertainties they may face along the way.

3.4 Values and beliefs associated to girls

This topic of the report aims to elaborate on the following question: what values and beliefs are associated to feminine identities? The research activities prompted participant girls to articulate their perceptions and views on gender, reflections on significant women in their lives, and the celebrities they admire. Taking a more introspective approach, they identified

both their existing strengths, referred to as "superpowers", and envisioned desired ones. Additionally, participants shared insights into what they would do differently if they were boys and outlined actions and freedoms they would never associate with being boys. This process helped delineate positive and negative attributes perceived related to girls and boys.

Beliefs and idealizations associated with gender categories and gender stereotypes

Beliefs and idealizations linked to gender categories and stereotypes have a substantial impact on how masculinity and femininity are perceived, significantly shaping expectations, behaviours, and opportunities for individuals based on their gender. In descriptions and self-descriptions, participating girls frequently navigate a spectrum of stereotypical, complex, critical, and contradictory perceptions.

Key attributes and values associated with femininity

The attributes associated with femininities reveal a complex mix of positive and negative stereotypes, and a diverse and sometimes contradictory set of beliefs about femininities. They span several different areas of people's characteristics, such as physical appearance, personality traits, behaviours, social roles and occupations. While some attributes portray positive and empowering qualities associated with femininities, others may perpetuate traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Positive attributes encompass strength, kindness, creativity, and resilience, whereas negative traits revolve around expectations of vulnerability, obedience, and limitations. Other attributes are described as externally imposed to girls, such as physical appearance and conformity to social expectations.

Some descriptions rely on biologicistic representations of differences between genders: "girls are living beings", "a person who is more mature than a child", "someone with a female sex or a vagina", "the ones who give life", "able to be a mother"; but also, a more fluid and contemporary understanding of gender: "a person who feels feminine".



"A human being, any person who feels like one. She is also a person who must always meet expectations if not exceed them."
(Participant girl, Italy)

On a stereotypical note, girls are often characterised through conventional lenses, emphasising elements of beautification and fashion, as well as traits associated with passivity and submissiveness. This includes being described as kind, beautiful, nice, funny,

vain, special, lovely, peaceful, pretty, elegant, stylish, cheerful, and even referred to as a "gift from God." There is a portrayal of a human being who "wears a lot of makeup" and emphasises caring about oneself and personal appearance.

Other narratives highlight attributes that focus on empowerment, assertiveness, confidence, and self-determination. Terms such as unique, powerful, strong, unstoppable, hard workers, important, capable, smart, free, brave, creative, resourceful, persistent, fierce, courageous, clever, great, and disobedient underscore a more dynamic and proactive perspective. Some representations also centre around domesticity and care, depicting girls as helpers, cooks, friendly, honest, supportive, compassionate, organised, tidy, and individuals who raise children with love, and foster solidarity among women.



"A girl is a human being not like others. She is kind, beautiful, and powerful. Sometimes girls will not show what they really feel, but if a girl is angry, you better run... Ahahah..."
(Participant girl, Cyprus)

On a more critical note, devalued attributes emerge, including being labelled as emotional, moody, vindictive, serious, jealous, contradictory, and embarrassed. More critical views suggest that girls may be misunderstood, compliant, ignored, more vulnerable, expected not to have a boyfriend, expected to listen to their parents, expected to be successful, expected not to be a bad person, capable of hiding feelings, having a "right" to be vulnerable, and someone who must always meet expectations, if not exceed them.



"Be creative with makeup and clothes. One can be beautiful and have a lousy character. If you don't smile, they think you're depressed."
(Participant girl, Italy)

Girls have also shared the significant **challenges** they face in their daily social experiences. The reported difficulties encountered by girls can be categorised into various topics, underscoring the complex and diverse nature of the challenges they navigate.



" Always having to prove something to someone. Physical and hormonal changes. Expecting to depend on someone".
(Participant girl, Italy)

Emotional and physical challenges:

- Confronting unpleasant comments and harassment.
- Menstruation challenges.
- Insecurity and being labelled as too emotional.
- Coping with the challenges of pregnancy.
- Facing social expectations and complexes.
- Feeling misunderstood and facing judgement from both men and other girls.
- Struggling to be heard and have interests without judgement.
- Pressure to be polite.

Social and gender inequality:

- Discrimination and sexism from men.
- Being objectified for others' pleasure.
- Coping with big expectations and prejudices.
- Unequal rights and pay compared to males.
- Limited job options and social expectations.
- Fighting for rights and dealing with social unawareness.
- Balancing a career in "serious" professions and motherhood simultaneously.

Body image and appearance:

- Receiving offensive comments about body and looks.
- Pressure to be skinny for social acceptance.
- Obligation to conform to a certain body type.
- Insecurity about physical features.
- Breasts hypervisibility.
- Changing oneself to meet social beauty standards.
- Fears related to appearance.

Safety and Freedom:

- Fear of men, especially at night.
- Lack of control over one's body in certain places.

- Restrictions on dressing as desired.
- Challenges of going out alone at any time of the day.



"There is no effective way, whatever you wear, whoever you go with and wherever you are, you can be harassed."
(Participant girl, Spain)

These difficulties shed light on the pervasive impact of gender inequality, social expectations, and the challenges girls face in various aspects of their lives, encompassing social, physical, emotional, and safety-related dimensions.

Key attributes and values associated with masculinity

The actions that girls envision if they were boys provide valuable insights into their perceptions of gender roles and social expectations. These narratives reveal a keen awareness of the expectations imposed on girls and a proactive desire to challenge traditional gender norms. The narratives emphasise both the appropriation of certain aspects of masculinities, such as clothing and activities, occupations, safety, freedom, and independence, and a commitment to deviating from masculine social norms by caring for women and taking on domestic responsibilities while promoting peace.

In the first scenario, girls express a yearning to wear boys' clothes and engage in activities traditionally associated with boys, such as playing football, boxing, karate, and partying. This indicates a longing for liberation from gender-specific constraints in fashion and recreational choices. The mention of walking alone at night and hitchhiking underscores a desire for enhanced safety and independence. Another idea expressed is the wish to roam around the house without trousers, and the aspiration to not "worry about hair 24 hours a day" signifies a yearning to break free from social pressures related to appearance and grooming. Expressing relief from period cramps and dismissing concerns about hair reflects a desire to alleviate physical discomforts and resist social expectations linked to femininity.



“I would go to a mechanical school. I would treat the girls as they deserve and take them to the most beautiful places. I would give the girl I'm with time and I wouldn't run too much. I would make my friends feel safe. I would put football in third place.”

(Participant girl, Italy)

In the second scenario, the desire to have a girlfriend is articulated, signalling a wish to explore romantic relationships from a different perspective. The intention to respect and understand a girlfriend further underscores a commitment to cultivating empathetic and genuine connections. Admiring women's strength and acknowledging the unique process of birth demonstrates a need for appreciation of the physical and emotional aspects associated with womanhood. Expressing a desire for many female friends, a commitment to protecting and understanding girls, and rejecting harmful behaviours reflect a dedication to fostering supportive and respectful relationships. The rejection of harassing people in the streets and avoiding being perceived as foolish demonstrates a commitment to responsible and respectful conduct.

In summary, these narratives collectively convey a desire among girls to experience aspects of life typically associated with boys, challenging stereotypes and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable gender dynamic. The narratives reveal a nuanced understanding of the complexities of gender roles and a proactive stance toward redefining social roles and expectations.

Other topic from the research addressed what **girls would never do if they were boys**. The actions and values that girls express reveal a strong commitment to principles of respect, equality, and empathy, and also a rejection of stereotypes associated with traditional gender roles. Some of the girls said they would never have sexist attitudes, underpay women and blame them for negative situations.



“If I were a boy, I would never raise my hand against a woman.”

(Participant girl, Poland)

They would never show naked pictures of a partner without permission, never hit a woman, and never beg for explicit photos underscoring a strong emphasis on consent, respect, and protection of personal boundaries. They also reject viewing a woman in terms of stereotypes, as a sexual object, or insulting girls. Expressing a commitment to not abuse women, not touch others to harm them, not abusing young children, and treating partners and families with respect shows a strong stance against harmful behaviour and violence. Other statements

include not abandoning family, not being unfaithful, making friends with girls, listening to them, respecting their opinions, and not discriminating against them.



“I would like just to be a boy for one day in order to show other friends how not to behave with girls because I would be able to tell it from a girl's experience.”
(Participant girl, Lithuania)

The rejection of physical violence and bullying (not making fun of women, not teasing or bullying, and making friends with girls) convey a commitment to fostering positive and respectful relationships.

In summary, these expressions reflect a profound commitment to values such as respect, equality, empathy, consent, anti-bullying, kindness, and the rejection of harm and abuse.

Elaborated perspectives on multiple versions of masculinity are lacking, and the men portrayal tends to be essentialist. However, there are marginal references in Poland and Spain to vulnerable masculinities that intertwine with the reproduction of hegemonic discourses. These connections can be linked to the rise of anti-feminist and misogynistic ideas in the digital environment.



“We are demonising men”.
(Participant girl, Spain)



“The scales have tipped the other way. Men have it harder than women these days”.
(Participant girl, Poland)

Major differences between girls and boys

Perceived differences between girls and boys were identified, and reflect a focus on social expectations, treatment, and opportunities (figure 9). “Living in a society with gender stereotypes” (Participant girl, 20, Spain), with “discrimination” (Participant girl, Lithuania), in which women are only “able to do certain jobs” (Participant girl, 16, Italy) and are subject to “sexism and abuse” (Participant girl, Lithuania) seems to be a heavy burden that girls carry from an early age in their lives.



“For example, you do something that a man did but women will be more penalized. Men get away with almost anything.”
(Participant girl, Portugal)

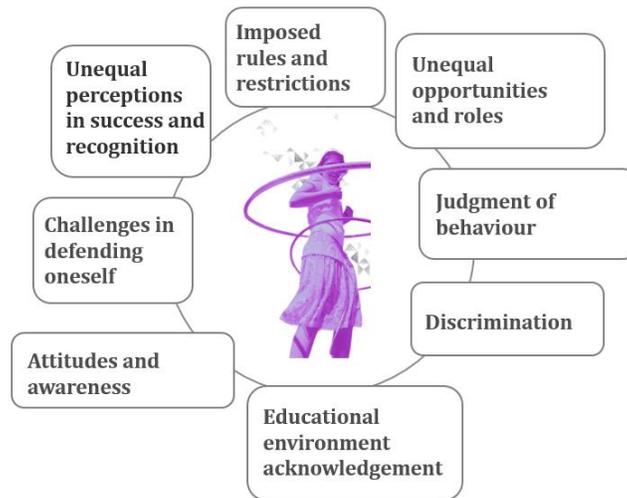


Figure 6. Major differences between girls and boys, as perceived by girls

The next topics summarise the prevalent assumptions on these differences.

- **Imposed rules and restrictions:** girls face more rules, restrictions, and expectations. This includes social expectations related to behaviour, appearance, and career choices.
- **Unequal opportunities and roles:** girls are often expected to adhere to traditional roles as housewives and caregivers. The declarations of participant girls reflect concerns about underpayment, limited opportunities in certain professions, and the perception that men and women are not treated equally in the workplace.
- **Judgement of behaviour:** girl's behaviour, especially in terms of sexual behaviour, is perceived to be judged more harshly compared to boys. There's an emphasis on the greater freedom boys have with their bodies.
- **Discrimination:** perception that social views still favour boys in various aspects. Examples include the belief that boys are seen as more important in the family, for instance. Girls feel pressure to conform to traditionally "feminine" jobs.
- **Educational environment acknowledgement:** differences are noted in the educational environment, with girls feeling that teachers may react more negatively to boys; stereotypes persist regarding acceptable behaviour and dress codes.

- Challenges in defending oneself: girls feel it's difficult to defend themselves, both verbally and physically. Some express the need for self-defence courses.
- Unequal perceptions in success and recognition: girls reflect a sentiment that women's achievements and contributions are sometimes overlooked or undervalued, leading to feelings of worthlessness and a desire for recognition.
- Changing attitudes and awareness: there's an acknowledgment of changing attitudes, human rights discussions, and claims that discrimination has reduced over time. However, most of the girls feel that the challenges persist.

Social roles and personal traits

Girls' photographic diaries provided insights into aspects concerning their perception of themselves and the social roles they occupy. Among the most frequently mentioned are relational roles: daughter, granddaughter, sister, friend, cousin, colleague. The roles chosen by the girls encompass diverse aspects of their identities, showcasing the multifaceted nature of their lives. These roles can be categorised into several themes:

a) Family roles: daughter, granddaughter, sister, cousin, only child.

b) Cultural and national identity: being from a city, a country.

c) Personal traits and characteristics: introvert, leader, creative; shy, friendly, passionate, weepy, eater (someone who eats a lot), freak, egotist, aggressor, loving, always sick.

d) Relationships: friend, girlfriend.

e) Professional and aspirational roles: student, tutor, artist, makeup artist, dancer, actress, singer.

f) Hobbies and interests: swimmer, scout, pet owner or dog owner, soccer player, volleyball player, horse rider.

In Italy, Cyprus and Croatia professions were mentioned: make-up artist, nail artist, dancer, assistant. In Cyprus, they consider themselves successful professionals. Their gender is often referred to, showing that most of them consider being a girl/woman a social role.

In Spain and Portugal, there were references to cultural identity, through indications of place of birth or ancestry, namely Cape Verde or "Latina".



“I’m half Portuguese, half Latin.”
(Participant girl, Spain)

In Portugal and Croatia roles were identified related to sports — horse riding, swimming, soccer, volleyball. The participating girls from Cyprus have different profiles, they seem to be associated with travelling and motherhood. They are also distinguished by the importance given to their professional careers.

In their self-perception, their relational roles are very prominent. Notably, the participant girls from Cyprus articulate roles that distinguish them from others, with a significant association with domestic responsibilities and caregiving, possibly influenced by the fact that this group comprises the oldest participants.

They also had the possibility of expanding further on their personal traits. The traits can be grouped into several categories, reflecting a diverse range of skills, interests, and characteristics. Girls describe:

- Creative abilities: drawing clothes, photography, creative writing / storytelling, painting, making friends with pets, knitting, make-up, jewellery making, dancing, skating, singing, sewing.
- Care and caregiving: cooking, baking cakes, working in the garden, cleaning, grooming, style, face care, taking care of children, babysitting, shopping.
- Physical activities: running, hiking, sports (volleyball, soccer, football, swimming), skateboarding.
- Intellectual skills: good at English, estimating well, planning schedules, good intuition, curious, studious, easy to adapt, good memory.
- Social skills: making friends, being the life and soul of the party, assertiveness, loyalty, kindness, supportiveness, good conversationalist, listening skills, faithful and loyal.
- Personality traits: cheerful, ambitious, honest, stubborn, perfectionist, introverted, friendly, determined, dreamer, patient, organised, dramatic, generous, caring.

These traits showcase the girls' multifaceted personalities, indicating their diverse skills, and interests. In Portugal, there was a participant girl who said she wasn't good at anything.

Another method used to collect information was critical poetry inquiry, an arts-based research method, a form of critical qualitative research that uses poetry to critically analyse

subjective experiences. It serves as a base for expressing beliefs and subjective experiences, allowing for participants' vocality through word choice.

Starting from a given poem (figure 7), participant girls were asked to construct a personal narrative by selecting and adding words (figure 8). About 4261 words were registered in total. Major words and word frequency resulted in the following word cloud (figure 9). The list of words chosen by girls offers insights into identities, gender experiences, values, and perspectives.

<p>I unsettle all passion open space in my arms insubordinate love disobey and unite I wrong-foot my boundaries I light fire all the time I set forth the feminine I take I tear I cross lines I contradict my fate speak what I do not hear I avoid what I was taught I invent I change I dispose I refuse my inside-out killing all that I may dream I jump over the impossible I fly wherever I please I'm a witch I'm a sorcerer I'm an unravelling poet I write and spit on the flames</p>	<p>Not Change Love avoid Don't Fly Passion Dream Invent Hear Want Taught Impossible Arms Wherever Fate Witch Feminine Contradict Disobey Time Open</p>
Original poem by Teresa Horta	Most frequent 25 words used by participant girls

Figure 7. Original poem by Teresa Horta proposed in the poetry inquiry research activity, with most selected words highlighted, and most frequent 25 words used by participant girls



“By pushing the boundaries / I set them.”
(Participant girl, Poland)



“I unlock my limit, there is never a limit / in my life. I always find continuity in any / path.”
(Participant girl, Italy)

They often identify themselves as “witches”, “sorceresses” and “poets”, inspired by the references in the original poem by Teresa Horta. The words “witch” and “sorcerer” suggest: a) their relationship with the spiritual and the embracing of unconventional identities, b) their ability to fly on a witch's broom, c) their connection with the feminine, d) a bad person who harms someone. The word “poet” refers to: a) a metaphor to show that they have the power to write their own destinies, b) the fact that they are poets in the artistic/creative sense.

In the poems they share some episodes of their lives, addressing aspects regarding emotional connections, relationships, and challenges faced. In Portugal, Spain, Italy and Poland many poems were written addressing emotional and sentimental themes. Italy is particularly significant, with speeches predominantly concerning the emotional state of the participant girls. In all four countries, the participating girls stated their fear of suffering. This fear leads them to avoid things they consider negative, to rely on their faith, to become colder and distant, to avoid what they have been taught, to escape torture and the feeling of being trapped.

The Not / Don't words suggest a sense of resistance or negation. It could imply a reaction against societal expectations or constraints imposed on girls, indicating a desire to defy limitations. The words Love, Passion / Dream / Invent relate with powerful and positive emotions. Its inclusion suggests the importance of emotional connections and relationships in the lives of these girls, as well as suggest a desire for personal fulfilment, creativity, and the pursuit of one's aspirations. "Fly" is often associated with freedom and breaking barriers. It may represent aspirations for independence and the pursuit of dreams. "Want" reflects desire and personal agency. It indicates a sense of knowing what one desires and perhaps a determination to pursue those wants. The term "Impossible" reflects challenges or barriers. It may indicate an acknowledgment of existing difficulties or a recognition of societal limitations. Avoid/ Disobey / Contradict point to a sense of rebellion or defiance against imposed norms. It indicates a willingness to resist constraints and assert individuality. "Fate" may suggest a belief in destiny or a recognition of external forces that influence one's life, and “Witch” may carry symbolic or cultural connotations. It might represent a desire to challenge stereotypes or embrace unconventional identities.



"I avoid what I was taught / So that later in love / Men don't torture me and at / The end confine my wings."

(Participant girl, Croatia)

The participant girls often expressed their openness to love and passion, even though these feelings may cause suffering. Thus, the emphasis given to the word "love" and "passion" in the word cloud. In Portugal, Spain and Croatia, questions and opinions on love and the importance of core values were raised. They seem to not understand why love is so complicated, but at the same time, they wish to have it. In Portugal, they said that love has no limits and that it shouldn't be kept on a shelf, meaning that it shouldn't be an "empty" word with no practical meaning. A girl participant expressed her position, by claiming that until the word "respect" is not given the meaning and the use is needed, she refuses to have good manners, time, and respect. She reinforces this sense of unease with the usage of words without any real meaning. In these three countries, the participating girls are in similar residential settings, all living in residential care facilities.

In Cyprus, there are references to cultural belonging issues, with references to their linguistic diversity and the urge to overcome/cross borders. They express a desire to eliminate borders and to confront their linguistic barriers. In Cyprus, a bilingual girl participant wrote two different poems, one in French and another in English. The poems depict her in two different ways: powerful and confident in the English poem; vulnerable and dreamy in the French poem. This may suggest that she has different perceptions of herself, depending on the language she uses. Still in Cyprus, another girl participant describes her internal conflicts, and her difficulty in dreaming, as she feels that her dreams, thoughts and feelings are immersed at the bottom of the sea. These references may be due to the asylum situation in which the girls' participants in Cyprus found themselves during the project.



"I try to refuse my inside/But it kills all that I may dream /all my thoughts/ dreams, feelings / are disposed of in the sea."

(Participant girl, Cyprus)

The overall impression is one of resilience, a desire for positive change, and a willingness to challenge societal expectations and limitations. The most written words reflect a mix of personal aspirations, emotional depth, and a recognition of external influences on one's journey.

Social roles

The participant girls emphasise their relational roles, especially those linked to the family. They often mention the emotional challenges they faced, their fears, inner conflicts and deep longings, presenting themselves as change makers, in charge of their destinies. There is a strong orientation towards agency, with positions that aim at bringing about positive changes in their personal and social experiences. They are aware of the external influences on their perceptions of self, such as social media, yet they point out that these affect people in different ways.

When asked to identify **role models**, the girls indicated especially family members- the mothers - and international celebrities such as Kendall Jenner, Rihanna, Greta Thunberg, Bella Hadid, Katerina Kasanova, Angelika Trochonowicz, Matylda Szymczyk, Noel Fitzpatrick, Kim Kardashian, Luísa Sonza or Bárbara Bandeira. Mothers are admired for their caring nature, cooking skills, strength, multitasking abilities, educational strictness for the well-being of their children, and constant support. They are described as superheroes juggling multiple responsibilities while still being there for their children. Celebrities are admired for their physical appearance, artistic work, professional success, environmental advocacy, sensitivity, independence, and personal characteristics.

The most important women in their lives include family members such as mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, and many friends. Notable figures like Marie Curie and Michelle Obama were also mentioned. Overall, mothers were consistently acknowledged as significant and inspiring figures in their lives.

Attributes and qualities associated with the admired women include caring, strong, successful, resilient, loving, rich, and confident. Additionally, characteristics like kindness, helpfulness, patience, supportiveness, forgiveness, and being always there for others were highlighted. The admired women were described as patient, hardworking, responsible, resourceful, foresighted, funny, smart, compassionate, emotional, friendly, generous, honest, optimistic, determined, creative, trustworthy, loyal, thoughtful, charismatic, fair-minded, tolerant, genuine, rational, and understanding. Overall, the qualities mentioned reflect a diverse range of virtues, many associated hegemonic femininities.

The most important men in their lives include fathers, brothers, partners/boyfriends and friends. Grandparents were only seldom indicated, and “no one” was also mentioned a few times. Attributes and qualities associated with admired men include emotional support and trust, humour, warmth, strength, resilience, hardworking, adventurous, wise, brave, confident, generous, patience, rational, helpful, loyal. Overall, the traits pointed out draw a picture of men who are not only emotionally supportive and trustworthy but also exhibit a range of positive qualities, including humour, strength, resilience, intelligence, and kindness.

“Superpowers” and gender constructs

The list of superpowers declared by girls offers a glimpse into the multifaceted and nuanced ways in which girls perceive their strengths, abilities, and roles in society, highlighting a blend of traditional and modern ideals. The list acknowledges qualities such as bravery, beauty, and obedience alongside independence, creativity, and the ability to perform tasks typically associated with men. They can be organised in dimensions as qualities, abilities, care, connectedness, biology and privileges.

Qualities include: courage, patience, will, strength, creativity, persistence, happiness, edginess, honesty, obedience, resourcefulness, adaptability, fearless, love for food, kindness, will to be good, creativity, good memory, confidence, joyfulness, independence, responsibility, control, empathy, commitment, credibility, bravery, love, friendliness, diligence, self-love, facing deception, ability to cry, staying positive even in challenging situations, tolerance to pain.



“Knowing how to face judgments and prejudices with simplicity and grace.”
(Participant girl, Italy)

The second most extensive category of superpowers concerns abilities: dance, handball, boxing, different sports, cooking, communication, cleaning, raising children, having a sixth sense, being convincing, long-term memory, not allowing other people's opinions to affect oneself, proving the ability to do things men do, remaining calm in difficult situations, the ability to defend oneself.

Other superpower dimension is related with care (love for animals, holding back one's needs, helping parents with chores, knowing how to take care of any living being); connectedness (connecting with others, flirting, recognizing emotions in others, making people happy, surprising others); and biology (menstruation, giving birth and bringing new life into the world, having a good sense of smell, developing faster, living longer).

Part of the superpowers described are in the fashion and aesthetics fields: beauty, dressing up, nice style, wearing heels, dresses, good looks, freedom of dress, attractiveness, being hot and pretty.



“To have the strength to wake up in the morning to straighten one's hair.”
(Participant girl, Italy)

Finally, some are declared as privileges: having priority, preferential treatment, no combat tasks, and numerical superiority.

Another list requested was the list of **wished superpowers that** can provide insights into social expectations, cultural influences, and the ways in which girls perceive and navigate their gender roles, constraints and possibilities in social life.

The declared superpowers include abilities and actions within empowerment and self-improvement (self-acceptance, make people believe in themselves; immediate understanding in unfamiliar situations; always be herself; trust everyone), demonstrating a desire for confidence and adaptability, authenticity and self-love.

It also reflects a wish for positive impact and social transformation, with wishes related with social justice and solidarity (change the world; make things fair; help people in any way; redistribution of resources) and empowerment of women (transforming bad men; give voice to abused women: a commitment to addressing gender-based violence and amplifying survivors' voices).



“Give voice to every woman who is abused so they can be heard and know it's not their fault.”
(Participant girl, Lithuania)



“If I could choose my superpower, I would be the bravest person in the world, the bravest in the mind. So, I don't have to listen to “beautiful compliments” from men.”
(Participant girl, Croatia)

Other wishes relate to time manipulation and indicate a desire to rectify or revisit past events and anxiety connected with controlling the future (bring back lost people; stop and rewind time; go to the future; or immortality). Finally, magic and fantasy wish express creativity and desire for versatility and adaptability (invisibility; transform into anything; go to the moon/be the sun; see through walls; fly/telepathy/telekinesis; clone things; talk to animals; see in the dark; breathe underwater; travel instantaneously; create food instantly).



““Invisibility, when someone shames you, you can disappear.”
(Participant girl, Italy)

These wished superpowers indicate a deep yearning for personal growth, empowerment, social justice, and the wish to shape a positive, harmonious world. They reveal a tapestry of aspirations encompassing self-improvement, social responsibility, time manipulation, and fantastical abilities.

3.5 Contexts and relationships

This section covers the ways in which girls' experiences are shaped in different physical and cultural spaces. It addresses the types of opportunities and support systems girls perceive they have, and how gender identities are managed in the family, institutional, school, community as well as virtual settings. Girls' perceptions of gendered experiences are analysed through three main topics: i) Safety and access to public spaces and services; ii) Social discrimination, bullying and stigma; iii) Media and technology.

Safety and access to public spaces and services

There is a general feeling among the participant girls that public places are less safe and/or uncomfortable for girls/women than for boys/men, due to sexist values, beliefs, and group or individuals' practices. The girls signalled several public spaces where they feel either unsafe or uncomfortable, which sometimes can be made safer by the presence of trustworthy adults, as is the case with schools, or by having a lot of people, such as in shopping centres.

Girls from all participating countries have indicated episodes where either they or other girls have suffered harassment, discrimination, or bullying in public places by peers, known and unknown adults. The girls acknowledge that there is harsher judgement on girls' behaviours, creating less palpable feelings of unease in public places, which get exacerbated at night-time. Indeed, most girls believe that to avoid being harassed or discriminated against, it is appropriate not to go out in the evening or go out with someone, not to trust people, not go through certain places, plan a strategy in case someone attacks you, and make use of pepper spray. It was mentioned, in some countries, that girls should be taught self-defence classes. In one of the countries it was recommended, that, when possible, to record the harassment, bullying, or discrimination act and then post it on social media.

Some participant girls stated that girls are made to see that they are delicate, unprotected, and dependent on someone else for happiness and protection. At the same time, they are aware that it is beyond their or anyone else's control to predict or avoid harassment, discrimination, and bullying. On one hand, girls talk about strategies that spring from and nurture fear and untrust, resulting in the self-restriction of girls' freedom, and on the other

hand they show to be aware that uncomfortable or violent situations can happen randomly, everywhere, and for reasons that are beyond their control.



“Always go out with someone and not at night. I saw a video on TikTok of social experiments on the theme of violence (a boy pretends to rape a girl), people passed by, but no one stopped.”
(Participant girl, Spain)



“There is no effective way, whatever you wear, whomever you go with and wherever you are, you can be harassed.”
(Participant girl, Spain)

The contradictions found in girls' discourses suggest an awareness of how overcoming gender inequalities and gender-based violence is a social challenge that must involve everyone in society and is not just down to individual struggles experienced by girls and women. Yet, the girls recognize that there are strategies that can be learned to ameliorate personal situations, to a certain extent, and suggest that more could be done to promote girls' knowledge and safety everywhere, at home, in schools, in residential institutions, through the media, etc.



“Make girls feel like they have freedom, that they have the right to decide for themselves.”
(Participant girls, Cyprus)



“I believe that those people who spread hate and discriminate against others should be provided with necessary help and consequences for this behaviour. Because if there are no consequences, they will continue doing it and others will continue suffering.”
(Participant girl, 16, Lithuania)

Experiencing and managing safety and violence in public places

When it comes to safety and violence in public places, the participant girls mentioned several occurrences of physical and/or mental violence and discrimination; whether to them, to people they knew, and in which they were intervening either as the targeted person, a bystander or as an aggressor. They referred mostly to gender-based aggression but also to racial, ethnic, and class-related, sometimes involving more than one aspect.



“At school, they once drew a picture of me arriving by boat in Italy, but I was born in Italy.”
(Participant girl, Italy)

While sharing their stories on violence and stigma, the girls referred to the ways they have dealt with it. Overall, they think that it is impossible to avoid and very hard to deal with situations of violence and stigmatisation, having no concrete strategy to put a halt to them.

Yet, they mostly agree that it is important to be able to rely on a support network, both from adults and peers and to report it to adults in charge and to their parents. The girls mentioned actively encouraging and supporting others to do it, as their most common form of intervention, “I have encouraged another girl to speak out and not to remain silent out of fear” (Participant girl, Spain). Two participant girls from Spain mentioned education as the most effective way to deal with violence and stigmatisation, stating that “there must be workshops and training to teach on what bullying can cause from a young age” and that “education is the way that bullying can be prevented” (Participant girl, Spain).

Some girls reported that after being bullied they either became friends with the bullies, becoming bullies themselves, or became violent and started bullying bullies. Girls reported responding with indifference, as a sign of strength that they believe will either stop the aggressors or create a protective shield. Yet, through their speeches, it’s clear that it does affect them.



“Yes, I intervened in the teasing. In class they make fun of a girl, my classmates, and I try to defend her, but it is not easy.”
(Participant girl, Italy)

Girl’s experiences in the schools and community

There are three main public spaces where girls have either reported experiencing sexual harassment or pointed out as being more unsafe for girls than for boys: train/bus stops, crowded public transportation, and schools. Schools were described as slightly safer because of reporting mechanisms and for the presence of some, not all, trustworthy adults. Yet, girls generally believe that “at school, they don't respect girls”(Participant girl, Spain).

It's noteworthy that while in the streets or public transportation, sexual harassment was reported to be mostly perpetuated by adult unknown men, while in school the incidents described were perpetuated only by male peers. Schools were indicated as overall safer for boys than girls, due to gender discrimination and harassment. Girls shared cases as having the bottoms touched Physical education, photographed and sent to the school virtual group. They don't always report to school authorities, because they fear their classmate's reaction for snitching on a colleague. This suggests that schools' reporting mechanisms are not efficient on their own, and that action to solve sexual harassment and other forms of aggression must move beyond individuals' punishment to group learning and transformation strategies, involving peers to protect targeted people, rather than aggressors.

It is important to point out that these are public spaces, which cannot be avoided by girls, and where it is not always possible to have trustworthy company. This adds to the questioning of the efficiency and fairness of the most widespread strategy among girls, to fight violence and stigma in public spaces, by avoiding certain places deemed unsafe. An interesting fact is that, except from Poland, all participating girls stated that there are no unsafe places just for boys.



"I was on the bus to go to the dentist, and the man sitting next to me kept rubbing his knee against mine. My mother had a bit of a fight. He got off and changed buses. I wanted to get up, but I was ashamed I didn't know what to do. I told my mother with my eyes."
(Participant girl, Spain)



"I was at the bus stop, and a gentleman kept hassling me. 'Give me your number'. Wherever I went he'd follow me, I was on the bus, and he got closer. I was super uncomfortable. I didn't do anything, I just got up and went to sit somewhere else where he couldn't sit."
(Participant girl, Portugal)

The accounts of gender and other types of discrimination and bullying, told by the participant girls, were either related to the body or the different management of girls' and boys' behaviours by adults. Discrimination and bullying directed to the body happened either through body-shaming, by dismissing girls' physical skills, inappropriate gender expression, or judgement due to clothing deemed improper or immoral. The violence reported happened mostly in schools, among peers of all genders, but teachers were also mentioned, either as aggressors or enablers; in social media among peers and unknown accounts; and male-dominated public spaces.



“I once caught a girl in my class cutting herself because she suffered from racism. They made fun of her, beat her, bullied her. Of black people.”
(Participant girl, Portugal)



“At the gym, which most men go to (adult or older men). They make fun of me and my physical ability and often make joking references to sex, wanting to shame the girls. They exclude me because I'm a girl and try to disrupt my self-esteem by force.”
(Participant girl, Poland)

The participating girls feel they are not looked at in the same way as boys and are often thought of as less capable, weaker, and incompetent to perform certain tasks, making it harder for girls to access certain activities. They mentioned the use of humiliating and denigrating comments, regarding girls as less skilled and the use of aggressive actions by peers and adults to push girls out of masculinized spaces and activities. For example, not being able to play football in school, because the boys kick them out of the pitch, as in the example given by one of the girls.

In the case of one of the mixed-population residential institutions, the terrace where the sports pitch is, was one of the spaces unanimously indicated as unsafe for girls, “because that’s where most fights happen” (Participant girl, Portugal). Some girls feel they have limited access compared to boys/men to sports opportunities, both in school and professionally. This perception arises from certain school and teaching practices, such as inadequate allocation of playtime for girls, the absence of female teams for interschool sports, or receiving harsh comments on girls’ bodies and abilities, which can discourage them from participating and fully developing their skills.



“I like volleyball a lot, but our school's official team only has boys, so we girls were just there playing friendly games. It's that thing of them speaking better about the boys, but then they lost, and we won.”
(Participant girl, Portugal).

Some girls also feel that actions are evaluated differently, depending on whether they are being performed by girls or boys. They say that girls are judged in harsher ways and shamed more than boys for their behaviours, especially if connected to sexuality, body freedom, anger expression, and when acting mischievous or playfully. In Lithuania, the girls have mentioned that some teachers excuse boys' aggressive behaviour on age and hormones that

give boys a hard time and reproach girls for reacting to boys' provocations, hassling, and sexual harassment. The girls conclude that "boys continue doing it because society treats them easily" (Participant Girl, Lithuania). The mentions of teaching practices based on their gender beliefs and expectations, shed light on the need for gender training targeted to all people, directly and indirectly, working with young people.



"A teacher pointed out my way of dressing as weird and alternative whilst Bruno's dressing was also alternative and old-styled, and she never told him anything."
(Participant, 16, Croatia)

Girls' experiences in the family

Regarding their wider experiences within the family context, some girls have mentioned having hardships with material conditions and mental and emotional aspects related to their parents, such as lack of money, poor housing conditions, parents' working hours, fathers not having been good enough that resulted in divorces, and parents burdening them with their problems. However, many girls across the participant countries referred to the family (which in many cases refers only to the mother and their siblings) as a source of love and care. It is important to mention that most girls feel and have the family as a great emotional reference in their lives, even being aware of the aspects to be improved. Despite prejudices and cultural differences, many see it as important and as a support. The family was referred to by many girls as the first people they think of when it comes to solving problems and sharing good things.



"My mom is very damaged and can't function on her own, she needs someone, she depends on men."
(Participant girl, Croatia)

The sharing of gender experiences in the family was mostly collected from the participant girls still living with family and is therefore not so thorough. Yet, it was possible to gather relevant ideas. For example, in Cyprus, participant girls have generally agreed that boys enjoy more freedom because the parents tend to be more protective and controlling of girls, who are perceived as more vulnerable than boys. The girls explained that in comparison to the boys, everything bad can happen to girls, so the girls hear a lot of "You cannot do it".



“Because something bad happened to one girl, parents shouldn’t generalise that it will happen to their daughters too.”
(Participant girl, Cyprus)

In terms of gender expectations, in some cases, the girls pointed out that there are different expectations for boys and girls, with “parents expecting more from their daughters, both in terms of academic performance and care of the home” (Participating Girl, Italy). More is expected from them in terms of household chores, cooking, and cleaning, which is not required from her brothers: “They always ask me and my sister to do the cleaning, but never my brother” (Participant Girl, Italy). In most countries, the girls discussed caregiving and household chores responsibilities concerning women, demonstrating awareness of the gender gap in caregiving responsibilities. Some of the girls experiencing gendered treatment at home feel it is unfair, but still think that it is normal. Other girls said they don’t experience gender expectations in their homes. For example, in Portugal, girls said that their families only expected them to be “in good ways”, to be responsible, warriors, and working people. In Poland, some girls stated that in all families, girls and boys are expected to study and get good jobs and professions, such as doctor or lawyer.



“It is just me and my mum, I wouldn’t change a thing about her, she is like a friend. The only expectation she has of me is to be successful, which can be in any way; it can be my choice.”
(Participant girl, Cyprus)



“When I get a low grade, they get angry, when it happens to my brother they don’t.”
(Participant girl, Italy)

In Poland, some girls mentioned being expected to look and behave in a more girly and feminine way, such as “to have long hair”, “no make-up”, “wear dresses”, “choose colours appropriate for girls”, and “girls should not laugh very loudly”. In Croatia, some girls mentioned that they are expected to have girls’ jobs and their families would not be happy if they did a men’s kind of job. Their sexual behaviour was also reported to be under more scrutiny as they mentioned that it is expected for them not to have a boyfriend. One of the girls in Portugal, who is bisexual, complained about her family being pejorative – “They are very homophobic” – hinting that her sexual orientation may have been unaccepted by her family.



“My parents expect me to choose a woman’s job. A hairdresser like my sister. And I wanted to take over my dad’s shop, he is a carpenter.”
(Participant girl, Croatia)

Girls' Experiences in Residential Care (RC)

In the context of the project, it was relevant to capture feelings of safety/comfort and insecurity/discomfort regarding residential care, from the girls under care. Because of local conditions, thorough data regarding this point was mainly collected from girls in Portugal, with insights from girls in other organisations. It is important to mention that all groups of girls currently living in a residential facility have indicated them as generally safe for girls. The girls in Cyprus, living in an asylum-seeking camp, said that in the early hours of the morning, when it is still dark, it feels unsafe for girls because they don’t know everyone living in the camp, but have otherwise referred to it as a safe place for them.

In Portugal and Spain, both mixed-population RCI’s, the girls shared their perceptions of safety in different parts of the facilities. In Portugal, shared spaces were classified as unsafe, which in most cases meant uncomfortable, due to the mess made by the other children/teenagers. Except for the girls’ bathroom, a place of great distress for the girls, the mess was made mostly by boys, making them safe/comfortable spaces for them. Their feelings of unease are mainly due to lack of privacy and other girls/boys' poor hygiene habits and untidiness. Some girls mentioned feelings of unease and distrust in their rooms because the other girls snitch on them or leave the doors open, not minding their privacy. Whilst in Spain the girls have only mentioned a room without furniture where they go when having an anger episode, boys' rooms, and boy’s toilets, as unsafe.

In both countries, the educators’ offices have been pointed out as a safe place by the girls. In Portugal, the girls associate it with a place where they “can vent out, and are heard, cared for, trusted, and can trust” (Participant Girls, Portugal). Although this was the most predominant feeling, there were also feelings of unease towards the educators’ offices, depending on the educator who was in it. Among the reasons given by participant girls to feel safe in the RCI, they mentioned positive reinforcement given by educators that motivates them to study and better themselves, and support and companionship provided by staff and some girls/boys supports, and activities provided. This highlights the relevance of healthy and balanced

relationships with educators and other professionals in the RCI, as well as the quality of the services offered by RCI's, for constructive residential care contexts.

The girls in Portugal believe that girls and boys should live in separate units for privacy. They shared that having male workers and male teenagers in the house makes them feel uncomfortable, because of sexual issues. Also, in Poland, some girls said the perfect institution (school) would be girls only. Here it is important to think about why girls feel this way, which can be a result of personal experiences or rational and irrational fears that must be confronted and deconstructed. This is to say that although safe places need to be created in certain moments, systematic strategies for girls/women's safety in RCI and educational institutions, must be structural and involve boys and men, to create alternative masculinities that are caring and trustworthy, as much as femininities are.



“I like many things. I like the security here; I like the educators and the staff. I won't say I like the atmosphere, because sometimes it's a bit heavy. But, ok, that's it. I like the house; I like the people.”
(Participant girl, Portugal)



“Before I entered here, I didn't go to school, I didn't care about it. But after I entered here, I started to study, I started to think about what I wanted, and I had the support of educators. This is something that makes me very happy, every day. For example, I go to school, I do a test, I bring the note and I get support from them and that is something that makes me very happy.”
(Participant girl, Portugal)

Girls' experiences in the social media

Most girls use social media to i) communicate with their local network and those with a migrant background also with their networks abroad; ii) to improve or learn new skills; iii) to learn about topics they have an interest in, from make-up to politics; iii) to be updated on world and local affairs and cultural events; iv) entertainment; v) get inspired by people; and vi) fill out the boredom. They do this by “following” their family and acquaintances, and famous and less famous people they admire, and by exchanging information among friends and peers. Some of the uses pointed out by girls were, “communicate with friends and family”, “find dates online”, “be up-to-date and connected with the outside world”, “find out about new things”, “fill out the boredom”, “being informed, not being narrow-minded”, “discovering new things, exploring your sexuality”, “finding out new passions and hobbies, entertainment and knowledge of new information”, “to keep up with friends from our home-country”, learn many things on social media like dancing, about art, English and Arabic”.



“To be informed and not be narrow-minded. I would watch a video and see something contrary to something I believe in. You uncover new passions, hobbies, and interests. You develop your sexuality. Become more aware. You learn to set boundaries.”
(Participant girl, Croatia)

Almost all the girls agreed social media affects thoughts and behaviour, if not in the present, it has in the past. Others said that it does not affect them, “because everything you see on social media is fake” (Participant Girl, Italy). Some say that you can choose where to channel your interests in a way that social media affects you positively and not in a negative way. Very few girls said to not use social media because you cannot learn anything good from it.



“Social media can make people feel bad because they show perfect bodies, perfect faces, perfect lives. When we see it, we think, why is my life like this? It could be better. That’s where complexes come from.”
(Participant girl, Poland)

Girls expressed how they believe to counter the influence of social media, such as being aware that not everything you see there is real and remember that what you have is also good and appreciate it. For example, a girl from Portugal says, “But you know well enough that what they post on YouTube or Instagram is not like their life. Because the videos they record, if something goes wrong, they won't show that part”. Another girl from Lithuania explains that she is using “social media because it helps me to learn many things, I know not everything is real there, but I am trying to watch more positive things rather than focusing on hate”.



“They dress so nicely, filled up lips. I always think I want to be like them. She is beautiful. But actually, I myself, I am beautiful, I just sometimes underestimate myself.”
(Participant girl, Croatia)

The girls are aware that social media can expose them and younger children to violence or information that is not age-appropriate and that it can be used by abusers to target, especially children, young people, and young women. Some participant girls mentioned having been harassed or bullied on social media, where you can be targeted directly for your likes, looks, or behaviours or for those of your family, which are more accessible through social media. As one girl from Poland explains, “The negative aspect of social media is hate, people over the internet become emotionally drained, hateful, jealous. People spread hate speech and may even take pleasure in it”. On many occasions cyberbullying and harassment spread to physical sites and can become more dangerous or difficult to deal with. A girl from Spain shared that was “harassed by an adult on social networks for a long time who wouldn't

stop talking to me and when I blocked him, he kept talking to all my contacts, he even came to look for me in person.”



“A word can destroy someone’s life. In second grade my hair was cut off, because I have a boy’s name and liked boy things. They laughed about the way I dressed. Another example, a girl from foster care who took photos of her private parts on my phone. The next day, she uploaded it to all social media and said it was me.”
(Participant girl, Croatia)

Regarding protective strategies, the girls in all participant countries said that it is best to have private profiles, only with close friends and people you know well, not accept invitations from strangers, to block and report people on the platforms in case of suspicious or explicit behaviour. A participant from Portugal also calls attention to the contents of one’s post, “You have to protect yourself, not post things that you know can harm you, be careful about posting”. Another exemplifies “Once I posted a picture of myself in a bikini and then I found out that a colleague from my house went to show my picture to a guy in his 30s. And then I had a comment on that photo and had to delete it”. Some girls also believe that if you observe other people being bullied online, they should report it or they become accomplices.



“The best way to protect yourself is not to add people we do not know and that are suspicious, not to download suspicious apps, not to share your information. If we notice bullying, we should stop it right away, otherwise, we are a bully.”
(Participant girl, Croatia)

In summary, girls use social media for various purposes, including communication with local and international networks, learning, staying updated, entertainment and inspiration.

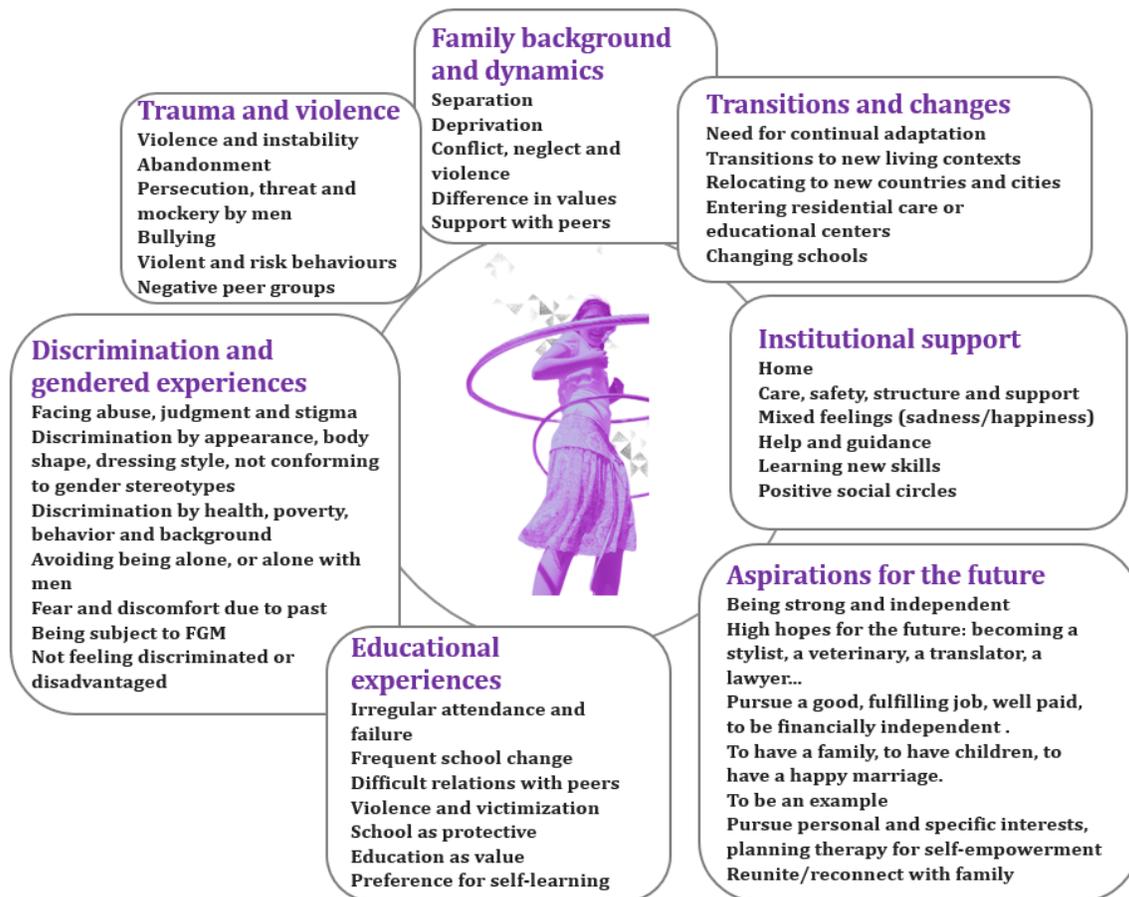
While acknowledging the influence of social media on thoughts and behaviour, opinions regarding its impact vary among girls. Some recognize its potential to affect them positively or negatively, while others believe they can control its influence by focusing on positive content. Although few girls refrain from using social media entirely, many express strategies for mitigating its negative effects, such as being discerning about content authenticity and maintaining private profiles.

However, girls are also aware of the risks associated with social media, including exposure to violence, inappropriate content, and cyberbullying. Instances of harassment and bullying on social media platforms have been reported, with negative effects extending beyond the digital realm. They also stress the importance of intervening when witnessing online harassment to prevent its escalation.

4. Stories of fragilities and strength

The research gathered narratives in the form of life stories from 15 girls across all European countries participating in the project. These life stories illustrate typical examples that underscore the challenges impeding girls' ability to attain fundamental rights, opportunities, and resources necessary for social integration. Five of those life stories are shown in this section, and the remaining 10 are included in Annex B.⁴⁶

Of the girls whose life stories are featured in the collection, 11 reside in institutional settings: seven in residential care, two in an educational centre, and two in a reception centre for asylum seekers. The remaining four live with their families. Their ages range from 12 to 26 years old, with seven of them having a migrant background.



⁴⁶ The stories, initially shaped by local research teams with a strong emphasis on participant privacy, are presented in a fully anonymized format. The collection underwent uniformization and light editing by the study's core team to ensure coherence.

Figure 10. Common experiences and major dimensions in life stories

Analysing the life stories reveals several common experiences and major dimensions related to their vulnerabilities and strengths as young girls (figure 10). It's a complex and sensitive exercise that requires careful and respectful analysis. Despite their varied backgrounds, they have common vulnerabilities, including challenging family dynamics, educational obstacles, experiences of trauma and abuse. Additionally, they exhibit strengths such as significant adaptability, a reflective approach to their challenges, a desire for independence, and ambitious aspirations for the future.

They describe themselves in a complex and sometimes paradoxical way, with attributes such as loyalty, peacefulness, pride, truthfulness. However, there is also a dimension of rebellion and stubbornness. The establishment of boundaries and limits, along with recognizing to have complex characters, further adds to the multifaceted nature of their identities.

The participating girls displayed common traits centred around transitions, encompassing changes and the need for continual adaptation to new and challenging environments. Many faced the significant upheaval of moving to new schools, signifying a shift in educational settings. Moreover, a considerable number underwent transitions to entirely new living contexts, with some relocating to different countries, others to new cities, and some entering residential care or educational centres. These changes highlighted the intricate nature of their experiences, involving significant transformations in cultural and living environments.

Several girls demonstrated shifts in their perspectives, encompassing changes in their views on significant aspects of their past, present, and future lives. These shifts were attributed to various factors, including migration paths, the impact of emotional and meaningful support received at residential and educational centres, as well as the process of growing up. The changes in perspective extended to areas such as the relationship with the family, and considerations about the role of care workers and the conditions of living in a care institution.

Essential and pivotal themes, serving as organising elements within personal biographies and life trajectories—such as family, education, institutional support, trauma and violence, discrimination & gendered experiences, aspirations for the future, and conditions for empowerment—will now be explored in greater detail.

Family background and dynamics

Life stories illuminate the challenges faced by girls navigating removal, separation, and deprivation from their families. The family emerges as a pivotal source of support while simultaneously presenting potential obstacles. These are the most common aspects found in the stories:

- Removal from family
- Separation from family
- Deprivation
- Conflict, neglect and violence
- Lack of opportunities
- Different values and norms among family members
- Family as support from challenges in peers' relationships

The life story of Ba is an illustration of these challenges.

Life Story 1. Ba – Being a boy would have been the same

Ba is 14 years old. She was born in the capital of a country located in the southwestern part of Europe, like her mother and father. She is currently in the 8th grade, considering herself to be an earnest and punctual student. She has failed one year, in the 3rd grade, due to her grandmother.

As a child, together with her brothers, she lived first with her parents and then with the grandparents, after it was deemed that the former didn't have the necessary conditions to look after her. With her grandparents, she lived in what she considered to be a good house: "It was an apartments' block, the house was good, but it was full of bugs. Cockroaches, rats and all that". Ba doesn't have good memories of the time she lived at her grandparents' house, where she experienced violence from her grandmother and uncles. She remembers returning to her parents' house, accompanied by the police, after a call for help due to aggression on the part of her grandmother. On the "last night" she spent at her grandparents' home, she remembers being assaulted several times: "my grandmother broke a broomstick over my back".

For Ba, returning to her parents' home in a social housing neighbourhood was a moment of returning to normal; that is, to a life "with joy, without discussions", in which the "sadness disappeared". However, she remembers other episodes of sadness that followed this moment, such as when her brother was taken away from her family to a care institution, or when her mother was taken to a shelter for victims of domestic violence in other part of the country.

Ba arrived at the residential care centre where she currently lives when she was around 12 years old. Living with her parents, "things started to get messy at home, every day, every night", and the court decided to definitively remove Ba and her brothers from the family. At that point, the "gloominess was slowly coming back".

However, Ba admits that her integration into the care centre didn't just bring sadness to her - it also brought "a lot of joy". While there is "sadness" for not being with her parents, there is also the "joy" of "meeting new

people, letting off anger when I needed to and having more help". By help she means to be looked after and cared for - "when I needed it, when I was at my grandparents' house, my grandparents didn't care about me". Ba doesn't recognize that being a girl has given her any advantages or disadvantages in life. She believes that her story "would have been the same" - she mentions, as an example, how her brother "is a boy" and how this didn't prevent him from being the target of violence such as her. She recognizes, however, that for a girl experiencing a situation similar to hers, it is necessary to insist, to fight for her studies and dreams, and to have a lot of affection and love.

In the future, Ba wants to "have children", "be a kindergarten teacher" and "have a good job and earn a good living". To do this, she knows she needs to continue her studies and "not give up". Not giving up, for Ba, means being more focused and taking care of herself.

Source: Ba (14), SPACE4US Project

Educational experiences

In the context of education, girls exhibit patterns of irregular attendance, slow academic progress, and frequent school changes, reflecting disruptions in their lives. Challenges in forming meaningful peer relationships go with these issues. School has a paradoxical position, both protective and promoter of experiences of violence and victimisation. Despite a strong academic focus, some girls perceive school as uninteresting, leading them to prefer self-directed learning. Nevertheless, there persists a profound belief in education as a protective factor, crucial for building social status and ensuring stable futures. These patterns are the most frequently encountered in the life stories:

- Irregular attendance
- Falling school years
- Frequently changing schools
- Difficulties in establishing meaningful relations with peers
- Episodes of violence and victimisation
- School recognized as protective and first institution acknowledging risk
- Seeing school as not interesting or motivating
- Preference for self-learning
- Strong academic focus
- Belief in education as protective, as important for building status and stable futures, or for realising dreams
- Continuation of studies as a shared aspiration
- Self-representation as punctual and regular students

Wi's life story serves as a portrait of some of these patterns.

Life story 2. Wi – Comfortable in my own company

Wi is currently a high school student. She is 15 years old. She lives in a small town, in the countryside, together with her sister and parents. They moved to the countryside when she was a small child. She commutes to school on her own, by bus. She doesn't feel very connected to the place she lives in, although she prefers the countryside to the crowded city. Her friends and acquaintances live in the city. Both of Wi's parents work and are professionally active. They do not have much time for her. Currently an important person in the family is her sister. For some time now, however, her contact with her parents has been better, this has to do with some difficult events in her life.

Wi is very secretive, reluctant to share her experiences and opinions even with her friends. However, as her friends say, she has something about her that makes people reach out to her. They like her. Even though she, in her own words, doesn't like people. When she does get out of the house, she likes to hang out with her friends, go to the cinema, to the shops, to the park. Not necessarily to school. Most teachers at school are not people she respects. However, she does well with her studies. She only learns what she feels like learning. She has her favourite subjects. She is very good at these. She often misses lessons. There have been months when she has only been at school sporadically to pass tests. She considers going to school a waste of time and finds it stressful having to meet her peers. She prefers staying alone. She says she feels most comfortable in her own company. When she is alone at home, she studies, she draws and learns how to play the piano. She says she wanted to play the piano when she was small. But the instrument was not easy. And the teachers were strict. So, she failed. Now drawing is something she greatly appreciates.

Wi says little about herself. She believes she is an introvert. She values honesty. Wi has experienced trauma in her life. She was abused twice when growing up. She told her parents about it the first time, they did not believe her. She didn't share the second time. Since then, Wi has faced difficulties and has a negative attitude towards her body. "I can't look at myself" - she says. Later, the parents acknowledged the situation and surrounded their daughter with care. Wi's bond and trust with her parents was rebuilt. Today, Wi says that she has a good relationship with them. On the other hand, all this time, until now, she refused to see a professional who could help her cope with the trauma. Wi does not want to talk about recommendations for empowering girls or young women. However, perhaps she hopes to empower herself. She started therapy. She currently has the conviction that she needs it. She is not planning her future with details. She will probably go to university.

Source: Wi (15), SPACE4US Project

Institutional support

Out of the gathered life stories of girls, 11 cases involve residing in institutional settings. These girls highlighted positive experiences within institutional support, emphasising the significance of residing in care centres, benefiting from professional guidance, acquiring new skills. They experience mixed emotions during transitions, sadness combined with valuing the care, safety, structure, and support provided, and appreciating more positive social circles provided by the new institutional living contexts. Being taken care of by educators, teachers, and being socially supported is generally considered a positive side of their lives. Related to the institutional support, is worth noting the following traits and patterns:

- Mixed feelings (as sadness and happiness) upon moving to residential care
- Benefiting from the help and guidance of professionals
- Learning new skills
- Valuing the care, safety, structure and support (and some strictness) received
- Understanding that new social circles can be positive

Ma's life story serves as an illustration of these experiences.

Life story 3. Ma – Girls need support, not judgement

At 14 and a half, Ma lives in a residential care centre in a small city situated at the junction of Central and Southeast Europe. "It's been a tough journey, but I'm finding my way," she shares with a sense of hope. Ma hails from a seaport city, different location in the same country. Her early teenage years were marked by conflict at home. "I didn't see eye to eye with my parents. It was always a storm at home," she recalls. Ma got involved with a group that led her in the wrong direction. "I thought they were cool, but they were a bad influence," she reflects on her past associations.

In the care residence, she found structure and support. Ma acknowledges the positive impact of her current living environment - "It's strict here, but it's for the best. I feel safer". Ma's experience in the care system has been transformative. "I was angry at first, but now I see why I'm here". Today, Ma is introspective and more self-aware. "I've learned to value honesty and hard work," she states. Her aspirations revolve around her passion for cooking and photography. "I want to combine these passions into a career," she says, dreaming of a future where she can thrive.

Discussing her gender experiences, Ma notes: "being a girl in my situation was tough. People judged me more harshly." She faced stigma due to her past behaviour. "I was labelled as 'trouble', which made things harder," she shares about the discrimination she encountered. Her recommendation for empowering girls is understanding and patience. "Girls need support, not judgement. We need to feel heard", Ma emphasises. Looking forward, Ma is focused on completing her high school education. "I've got plans, and I'm not giving up on them," she asserts confidently, her eyes set on the future.

Source: Ma (14), SPACE4US Project

Trauma and violence

Life stories reveal exposure to various forms of violence, both in family and in the society, including experiences of family violence and instability, family abandonment, persecution, threats, and mockery, bullying, engagement in violent and risky behaviours, and involvement with negative peer groups. In connection with trauma and violence, it's worth highlighting the following characteristics and experiences:

- Violence and instability in the family
- Abandonment from family

- Physical and sexual abuse
- Persecution, threat and mockery by men for being a woman
- Experience of bullying
- Engagement in violent and risky behaviours
- Involvement with negative peer groups

EH's life narrative serves as an illustration of specific patterns mentioned earlier.

Life story 4. EH – The story I will tell my daughter

EH lives in a reception centre for applicants for international protection. She still feels a sense of shock in her present situation, she often feels sad, everything is different – the language, the culture. She is getting more used to it now, it's better than when they first arrived. In the camp she feels good, safe and comfortable. "But about myself, in my heart, I want to see my family back home". Back home she finished the first grade of high school, but she is currently not in school. They told her that the high school does not have any availability for any more students, she hopes to continue her schooling next year. She is 16 years old, and comes from a West Asian country. She is now in a European country with her family (her parents, her sisters and her cousin). Her home country was a good and happy place for her. She had friends, a cat and her family close. However, it is also the reason they had to flee the country. In a way, she feels personally responsible for uprooting her family, even though it was not her fault. The reason they had to flee was because "someone was following me, one day after school. I was walking home, and he tried to push me in his car – but I screamed and created noise so people gathered and he let me go. He was a family member. He often gets drunk; he is much older than me. From the time I was born he wanted me. When I was just a baby he came to visit with his family, and they told my dad that they wanted me because I was beautiful and that when I am older, they will have me (...). So, when I got older, he kept asking my dad to marry me. But my dad protected me, he would tell him that I am still young and that they want me to finish school etc. When he realised that my dad wouldn't allow the marriage to happen – he tried to kidnap me. My parents realised that he would never stop trying so they decided that we had to leave". They left their home for a neighbouring country with her parents, sisters and cousin. However, they heard from family and friends back home that somehow the offender found out where they were and due to fear they decided that they should go further away.

She says that the "asylum centre has a lot of men, but they never did anything to me. I just find it uncomfortable, and I get scared just because they are men". When talking about her, she stresses that "a lot of the times I feel sad and I want to be alone. What helps is to take walks with my mum outside the camp. I walk with my mum; I'm scared to go alone. Makes me feel more comfortable than being inside the camp. At the moment what makes me feel good about myself is doing skincare – I have different kinds of products and I like to take care of my skin. When I go out of the camp, it is always what I want to buy. But I don't like makeup". She considers it is important to believe in yourself – "my mum encourages me to be strong and independent. She has sacrificed a lot because of me. My mum and I are like one person. She is my role model. My grandmother is also the same, my mum and her also had a strong relationship. One day I want to be able to tell my own daughter my story." EH considers women should be role-models for each other - "It is difficult to become a strong woman without fear and without being influenced.". In her perspective, the mother is their source of empowerment, playing a crucial

role, aiding in her strength and serving as a positive role model. She acknowledges the importance of education and envisions engaging in various pursuits as she matures, potentially including a career as a chef. She prefers to stay occupied, avoiding excessive free time to prevent dwelling on the past.

She expresses a desire not to attend school in the European country she is living currently; instead, she envisions going to another European country to complete high school. Her aspiration is to attend university with the goal of becoming a translator. Currently, she provides translation services voluntarily, but her aim is to turn it into a profession, potentially working for a company or organisation. She is already fluent in three languages.

EH advises other girls, saying: "Don't be ashamed. Don't be shy. You should get even a small job or something to be proud of. It can be difficult in the beginning. But you should believe in yourself and it can also be helpful to have someone to push and encourage you, but otherwise push yourself."

Source: EH (16), SPACE4US Project

Discrimination and gendered experiences

In the life stories, girls recounted a range of discrimination episodes. These episodes encompassed gender-related discrimination such as abuse, judgement, and stigma related to being a woman or a "wrong" kind of woman. Additionally, the experiences extended to discrimination based on health issues, poverty, behaviour, background, and being in the care system. Gendered experiences encompass feelings of loneliness, shame, and fear, as detailed below. Only a small number of younger girls do not perceive themselves as facing discrimination based on their gender, indicating that experiences of gendered discrimination tend to change as girls mature. These are some of the patterns found in the life stories:

- Facing abuse, harsh judgement and stigma for being a woman
- Being discriminated by appearance, body shape, dressing style, by not conforming to gender stereotypes
- Being discriminated because of health issues, poverty, behaviour and background, due to being in the care system
- Avoiding being alone, or alone with men
- Fear and discomfort due to past
- Being subject to Female Genital Mutilation
- Not feeling discriminated or disadvantaged for being a woman (younger girls)

Ari's life story can help us understand the gendered experiences.

Life story 5. Ari – Women can also be strong and independent

Ari is 16 years old and comes from a country in West Africa. She lives in an apartment in a European country, with her mother and younger brother. She attends high school. Throughout her school experience, she was teased for her “body shape” and the way she dressed – “Some of my classmates thought I was a lesbian because I dress like a boy, I dress hip-hop style, which is the genre of dance I have been practising for several years. A few years ago, I was upset about it, but now I don't care. I feel confident in myself and who I am, even if it's not right that there are people who judge you based on your appearance.”

She has never been in a relationship, even if there have been “guys” she has liked, but “there's never been anything”.

For the future, she would like to be financially independent, live alone and have a good job that makes her “earn a lot”.

Ari considers herself as ambitious – “I have a lot of respect for my family, especially my mother, but I would like to do more, to become someone”. She would like to become a lawyer to show that “women can also be strong and independent”.

Source: Ari (16), SPACE4US Project

Aspirations for the future

The girls' life stories reflect a diverse range of future aspirations, encompassing themes of strength and resistance, a desire for independence, including living alone, forming a family and having high hopes and dreams for the future, as listed below.

- Being strong, becoming independent, living alone
- Pursue a fulfilling job, earn well, be financially independent
- High hopes and dreams for the future: have a good job, becoming a veterinary (declared by three girls), a stylist, a “psychological doctor”, work in a publishing house, a translator, a lawyer, kindergarten teacher, marketeer, combining passions for cooking and photography into a career, studying science, or help home country's health system
- Pursue personal and specific interests, planning therapy for self-empowerment or reunite/reconnect with family
- To have a family, to have children, to have a “happy marriage”
- To be an example.

Empowerment and advice

At the conclusion of their life stories, some of the girls provided advice on empowering other girls just as they are. Girls advice for more understanding and support systems, emphasising

education for empowerment, the need for determination in pursuing studies and dreams, advocating for understanding, patience, and support, promoting the showcasing of talents, encouraging perseverance, focus, and self-care, sharing real-life success stories, and advocating for strength and independence.

- Be strong and independent, not to be ashamed, and fight for studies and dreams
- Not giving up, staying focused, and taking care of oneself
- More understanding, patience and support systems for girls, beyond discipline
- Importance of affection and love
- Focus on education as a means of empowerment for girls
- Not fearing to showcase talents and passions
- Hanging out with people who value and respect girls and do not accept disrespect
- Sharing real-life success stories for empowerment and hearing success stories of women with similar backgrounds
- Focus on individual growth and push themselves, believe in their capabilities

The collection of life stories provides valuable insights into the nuanced and dynamic experiences of the girls.

Conclusion and recommendations

The research offers a comprehensive understanding of the lives of girls from diverse European countries, revealing vivid narratives that depict the challenges impeding their access to fundamental rights, opportunities, and resources crucial for social integration. These narratives elucidate complex and sometimes paradoxical experiences and traits, emphasising the multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage faced by young girls from diverse backgrounds. Themes such as trauma, abuse, and the intense dynamics of transitions are common, highlighting the centrality of continual adaptation to new environments in their lives. The study emphasises the intricate nature of girls' experiences, encompassing substantial transformations in cultural and living environments. Moreover, the girls' shifts in perspectives reflect changes in various aspects of their lives. Social vulnerability emerged in several instances: difficulties in expressing themselves, in expressing their feelings and in being heard, in feeling safe, in denouncing violence and harassment experiences, in performing an aesthetically valued and legitimised femininity.

The girls' discourses demonstrate that girls are in general, aware of gender inequalities, and discrimination across society. Throughout the research, participant girls, in all countries, have shared their stories, feelings, and perceptions on how gender is done, understood, imposed and performed, in a myriad of places, ranging from public to private contexts and relations. Discrimination episodes include, intertwined, gender-related discrimination, health-related stigma, poverty-based judgement, and biases within the family, school, and the care system. Notably, the study reveals that gendered experiences of discrimination tend to evolve as girls mature, with only a small number of younger girls not perceiving themselves as facing gender-based discrimination. In some instances, girls have mentioned fear of reporting cases of harassment or discrimination to people in charge or confronting aggressors in public places, fearing not being believed or suffering backlash from peers. The girls recount feelings of loneliness, shame, and fear, emphasising the complex and intersectional nature of their experiences.

Family emerges as a complex source of both support and potential obstacles, influencing the girls' experiences of separation, and deprivation. Within the educational settings, patterns of irregular attendance, slow academic progress, and frequent school changes reflect disruptions in their lives, accompanied by challenges in forming meaningful peer

relationships. The paradoxical nature of the school as both protective and a promoter of violence and victimisation is evident. Education is generally recognized as central to overcoming the vulnerabilities experienced.

Residents in institutional settings highlight positive experiences such as support, guidance, and the acquisition of new skills. Living in care institutions evokes mixed emotions, with sadness coexisting with appreciation for the care, safety, and support provided in new institutional living contexts. Being cared for by educators and teachers is generally considered a positive aspect of their lives.

Overall, the research sheds light on the multifaceted challenges and experiences of these girls, emphasising the relevance of understanding their diverse backgrounds and journeys for effective support and intervention.

Recommendations for future interventions with girls

Based on the findings of the research, the following recommendations are proposed for interventions and practices that educators, youth workers, and other professionals in educational and care fields can implement to support young girls. By adopting these recommendations, they can create supportive environments where girls feel valued, empowered, and capable of thriving despite gender imbalances and the specific intersectional challenges they may encounter.

Gender-sensitive education - Incorporate gender-sensitive education and awareness programs to help girls and boys recognize and challenge gender inequalities and discrimination in society. This includes promoting critical thinking skills and empowering girls to advocate for themselves and others in the face of discrimination and harassment. Boys must be included and a specific target in gender-sensitive educational actions and practices.

Professional development for educators - Offer professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their understanding of the challenges faced by girls and build their capacity to provide effective support and intervention. This may include training on trauma-informed practices, cultural competency, and gender-sensitive approaches to education. Adults and educators training in gender-sensitive education is crucial to effectively

incorporate gender-sensitive education and awareness programs into schools, youth centres and care institutions. Educators need to understand the complexities of gender dynamics and the ways in which gender inequalities and discrimination manifest in society. Namely, on the social construction of gender and how gender norms and stereotypes impact individuals' experiences, behaviours and opportunities. This includes recognizing the intersectionality of gender with other aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, disability and socio-economic status or sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. Educators should learn strategies to promote gender equity in the classroom, school and institutional environments, and to empower girls and boys to recognize and challenge gender inequalities and discrimination.

Policies, practices, and mechanisms for participation - Advocate for policies, practices, and mechanisms that prioritise listening to and involving girls in all decisions impacting them, particularly in shaping their future life endeavours, in all the living and social contexts (community centres, schools, residential care).

Addressing bias and stereotypes – Educators should be trained to recognize and address their own biases and stereotypes related to gender. This involves reflecting on their own attitudes and behaviours, challenging gender norms within themselves and others, and creating an environment where all students feel valued and respected. Overall, training educators in gender-sensitive education is essential for creating inclusive and empowering learning environments where all students, regardless of gender, can thrive and reach their full potential.

Networking for change - Create networks with women's, feminist, LGBTI+ and gender equality associations for promoting, understanding and addressing gender equality within care, school and community contexts.

Trauma-informed support services – Provide trauma-informed support services for girls who have experienced abuse, trauma, or family instability. This includes access to counselling, therapy, and other mental health resources to help them cope with their experiences.

Safe spaces and reporting mechanisms - Create safe spaces within schools and communities where girls feel comfortable reporting incidents of harassment or

discrimination. Implementing clear reporting mechanisms and protocols ensures that girls feel supported and believed when coming forward with their experiences. This involves implementing clear policies and procedures for handling complaints, supporting victims, and holding perpetrators accountable, thereby promoting a culture of safety and equality. By taking proactive measures to regulate relationships and promote safety and equality, adults and educators can help create environments where all individuals can thrive and reach their full potential.

Educational support and stability - Implement strategies to support educational success and stability for girls experiencing disruptions in their schooling due to irregular attendance, slow academic progress, or frequent school changes. This may involve providing additional academic support, mentorship programs, and advocating for policies that address the needs of mobile students. Also, working together with school and community actors to build awareness of the specific needs of girls and especially vulnerable, racialized and in risk of social exclusion.

Peer relationship building and regulation – Facilitate opportunities for girls to form meaningful peer relationships and social connections, both within and outside of the school and institutional environments. This can help combat feelings of loneliness and isolation and promote a sense of belonging and support. It is crucial for adults and educators to recognize and regulate relationships that are prone to abuse and discrimination, particularly in contexts where young girls may be vulnerable. By establishing clear boundaries, enforcing policies, and providing guidance, adults and educators can help create safer environments where girls feel protected and supported. Regulating relationships involves promoting healthy dynamics based on mutual respect, consent, and equality. This includes addressing power imbalances, preventing bullying and harassment, and fostering an inclusive and supportive culture where all individuals feel valued and respected. Educators play a pivotal role in modelling positive behaviour, providing education on healthy relationships, and intervening when necessary to address instances of abuse or discrimination.

Culturally competent support - Provide culturally competent support and services for girls from diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, physical and mental abilities, ethnic and migrant backgrounds. This involves recognizing and addressing the unique challenges and barriers they may face, such as stigma, discrimination or language barriers.

Empowerment building - Offer programs and initiatives aimed at building girls' self-esteem, and empowerment. Mobilise the sharing of experiences of other girls who have been through the institutions or public figures who have faced different situations of vulnerability. This may include leadership development programs, self-defence classes, and opportunities for girls to meet role models and to explore their interests and strengths.

Policy advocacy and systemic change - Advocate for policy changes and systemic reforms to address the root causes of discrimination and inequality faced by girls, in their diversity. This includes advocating for gender-responsive policies in education, social services, and other sectors, as well as addressing structural barriers that perpetuate inequality.

Counselling and education on social media usage - assessing habits, facilitating discussions on online participation, and offering usage strategies. expanding the conversation on social media applications and establishing safe spaces for discussing the influences and effects on girls.

Engage boys and work in mixed groups - involving boys in gender and policy work and training is essential. It's imperative to engage boys in gender and policy work and training, alongside implementing male-focused gender transformative efforts. Gender-sensitive education and awareness programs have the potential to enhance men's and boys' attitudes and behaviours towards gender equity. These interventions extend to areas such as sexual and reproductive health, parenting, caregiving, and combating intimate partner and sexual violence. Using these processes and frameworks to not only strengthen the practice of gender equality work with men and boys but also strengthen relationships and learning with ongoing women's rights work is a crucial opportunity.

Stakeholder and leadership engagement: Involve stakeholders and influential leaders in gender-sensitive education and awareness training and discussions. The active participation of key actors in the process will be essential for developing a comprehensive approach to addressing gender issues in organisations, communities, and public policy.

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Annex A. Sociodemographic profile of girl participants

Participants		Cyprus	Croatia	Italy	Lithuania	Poland	Portugal	Spain	N	%
Girl participants (n)		25	22	14	10	17	14	10	112	100.0
Age groups	11 to 14	48.0	31.8	78.6	0.0	88.2	42.9	30.0	54	48.2
	15 to 18	12.0	68.2	21.4	80.0	11.8	57.1	40.0	43	38.4
	19 to 25	24.0	0.0	0.0	20.0	0.0	0.0	30.0	11	9.8
	26 to 28	16.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4	3.6
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	112	100.0
Social profile of the family	Disadvantaged family	85.7	95.5	85.7	100.0	35.6	28.6	no info	59	70.2
Migrant background	With migrant background	100.0	4.5	92.9	10.0	5.9	35.7	60.0	52	46.4
Residential status	Living with family	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	31	27.7
	Living in care centre	0.0	100.0	0.0	90.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	45	40.2
	Living in educational centre	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	10	8.9
	Living in asylum reception center	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	25	22.3
	Living alone, with partner or friends	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1	0.9
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	112	100.0
Education status	In school	40.0	100.0	100.0	70.0	100.0	100.0	70.0	91	81.3
Educational level	No formal education	15.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2	2.0
	Primary education	38.5	45.5	14.3	0.0	76.5	14.3	10.0	33	33.0
	Lower secondary education	38.5	22.7	0.0	70.0	0.0	50.0	90.0	32	33.0
	Upper secondary education	7.7	31.8	85.7	30.0	23.5	35.7	0.0	32	32.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100	100.0
With disabilities		12.5	4.5	7.1	0.0	5.9	7.1	0.0	5	5.3
With health and mental health issues		42.9	100.0	78.6	100.0	100.0	64.3	70.0	80	85.1
Victim of violence and/or sexual harassment		42.9	59.1	21.4	20.0	0.0	0.0	60.0	27	28.7
Victim of discrimination		57.1	72.7	28.6	0.0	0.0	35.7	0.0	29	30.9
Victim of bullying		42.9	95.5	14.3	10.0	47.1	35.7	70.0	47	50.0
In care system due to child welfare order		0.0	81.8	21.4	90.0	0.0	64.3	0.0	39	34.8

Participants		Cyprus	Croatia	Italy	Lithuania	Poland	Portugal	Spain	N	%
Girl participants (n)		25	22	14	10	17	14	10	112	100.0
In care system due to conflict with the law		0.0	18.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.1	0.0	5	4.5
Working status	Not working	100.0	86.4	100.0	80.0	100.0	100.0	40.0	84	88.4
Mother Educational level	No formal education	28.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	44.4	6	8.8
	Primary education	28.6	26.7	37.5	0.0	0.0	88.9	44.4	21	30.9
	Lower secondary education	0.0	26.7	62.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9	13.2
	Upper secondary education	28.6	40.0	0.0	40.0	53.3	11.1	0.0	19	27.9
	Post-secondary non-tertiary education	14.3	0.0	0.0	20.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2	2.9
	University education	0.0	6.7	0.0	40.0	46.7	0.0	11.1	11	16.2
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	68	100.0
Mother working status	Not employed	100.0	86.4	100.0	80.0	100.0	100.0	40.0	84	88.4
Father educational level	No formal education	28.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	37.5	5	8.2
	Primary education	28.6	8.3	16.7	0.0	0.0	55.6	25.0	11	18.0
	Lower secondary education	0.0	41.7	83.3	0.0	0.0	22.2	0.0	12	19.7
	Upper secondary education	28.6	41.7	0.0	25.0	53.3	22.2	0.0	19	31.1
	Post-secondary non-tertiary education	14.3	0.0	0.0	75.0	0.0	0.0	12.5	4	6.6
	University education	0.0	8.3	0.0	0.0	46.7	0.0	25.0	10	16.4
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	61	100.0
Father working status	Not employed	14.3	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	92.9	100.0	43	86.0

Annex B. Collection of life stories

[Life stories one to five are included in section four]

Life story 6. Lu – To be "big" and not depend on anyone

Lu is 12 years old and is currently studying. She considers herself a "happy", "helpful" and "nice" girl. At school, she says she is an "attentive and studious" student, with English being her favourite subject. She was born in a southwestern European country, but her mother is from a West African Country. She's not sure if her mother ever worked but knows that her father works as a mechanic in another African country.

In 2022, Lu was taken away from her family and placed in a residential care centre, along with four of her seven brothers: "Sometimes we didn't go to school and our mother didn't make us go, so it seemed to me that my siblings and I were failing at school. I failed twice in the fourth grade because I missed too many classes". She used to live with her mother and father. She remembers her house being in a "building block", a "small house" with "3 bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room and a kitchen" and the neighbours being "very nice". It was "a small place, but with a lot of people", some born in the country, others born abroad, as in her family.

Lu describes the care centre where she currently lives as "a very big" and "friendly house". If she had to describe how she felt the moment she moved into the centre, she would say sadness but, at the same time, happiness: "sadness because I'm away from my parents and happiness because I've met new friends". Living in the centre, Lu has made friends, goes to school and attends rhythmic gymnastics classes. Having her siblings around gives her "strength". She keeps in touch with her parents; and her mother visits her and her brothers at the weekend. Due to his residence abroad, her father is unable to visit them.

Lu admits that she likes herself a lot and has no problem with her body. She doesn't think her life would have been any different if she had been a boy - she thinks "it would have been the same". She also says that she has never felt discriminated against or unable to do anything just because she was a girl. At home, her parents have always shared childcare tasks and, between her siblings, household chores have always been shared. She tells young girls to "try to like themselves more", to "be more confident" and to "believe in their dreams". To do this, they could look at themselves "in the mirror and say things they like about themselves". In the future, Lu wants to be "big", "not depend on anyone" and "maybe be a vet". She believes that dreams can come true and that for them to happen "you need to be at school".

Source: Lu (12), SPACE4US Project

Life story 7. Ali – Educated people are more respected

Ali, 13 years old, is a student at a high school. She was born in a large provincial city in a Central European Country, where she lived with her parents for 2 years. She still visits her grandparents there. However, Ali does not like big cities, she feels "like a caged animal" there, as she says. She now lives in the family home in a smaller city in another part of the country. It is "an ageing city from which young people tend to leave". Ali also says that "there are no attractions for the young here, nor are there enough prospects for students". Her parents have a university education and both work. Ali is an only child. She has a dog and a cat. She is an animal lover. She would like to live in the countryside. Cities depress her. She has a group of friends from primary school with whom she had a close relationship for the last 2 years of school. Nowadays, she still keeps in touch with them, but she is trying to redefine the word "friend". Peer acceptance has always been very important to Ali. This is also something she has always had the biggest problem with. She has often been bullied by her peers since kindergarten, she says. Her most difficult experience was at a summer camp when she was 8 years old. Ali says that this event completely changed her character. She became more distrustful and aggressive.

Ali's experiences at her first school were not good either. She felt bullied there too. Some pupils from other classes followed her at breaks and called her names. After her parents intervened with the teacher, the situation improved. In class, she did not have satisfactory contacts with her peers. However, there was one person with whom she managed to build something like a friendship, which was very important to Ali. At the age of 11, her parents transferred her to another primary school in the same town, mainly at Ali's request. At the new school, however, the situation was similar at first. Ali had one close friend, but, as she now claims, it was a toxic relationship. The whole class, Ali says, was hostile to each other. Again, she found it difficult to fit in. After a year of changing schools, the Covid pandemic began. The school switched to online teaching. Ali liked this period, when she could stay at home. Once things were back to normal, a new student joined her class, with whom Ali became close friends and with whom she found understanding. The break in contact caused by the lock down has had a good effect on relationships in the classroom. Ali says that "everyone appreciated the opportunity to interact and the break calmed negative emotions". The atmosphere in the class improved and Ali made more friends. She felt that she was part of a group and that she was accepted, for the first time in her life. At the same time, the lock down has also brought about negative changes. She began to notice increased hypochondria and social anxiety in herself. The primary school graduation ball was a difficult experience for her. She felt overwhelmed by the "chaos and noise". School is not a safe place for her. But she never misses school, with almost 100 percent attendance. She believes that going to school is her duty and she is very dutiful. She is a very good student. Since September 2023, Ali has been in a new secondary school and feels alone again. She suspects that her difficulty in finding friends is due to her character traits. Ali defines herself as having a complex character. She herself says that "anger and revenge are 1/5 of her character". She always wants to show that she can't be "pushed around".

She values truth and truthfulness. She considers herself to be ambitious, intelligent, with a good memory and also determined. She is persistent in her pursuit of her goals, but if things don't work out, she is able to let go. Magic and fantasy are an important part of her life. She is working on her book with a fantasy theme. Ali has a rich imagination. She also has a flurry of thoughts and images, which is why she decided to write a book. It is important for her to educate herself. Her parents support her in this. She wants to finish her degree in veterinary medicine, have a fulfilling job and earn well. Her parents persuade her to go into medicine, but she thinks working with people will be too difficult. She prefers to treat animals and limit contact with people. After her studies, she would like to get a PhD - specialising in surgery. Ali has very specific plans for the future. Ali recommendations for empowering girls and women are all about education. Ali believes that educated people "are more respected". It is also important, according to her, to define a life goal. Everyone should set a goal and work towards it.

Source: Ali (13), SPACE4US Project

Life story 8. Flo – Feeling less different than others

Flo is 14 years old and her family came from a West African country. She was born in a European country. She lives with her parents, a younger brother and a younger sister. The family has “some economic problems”, and have been in the care system for several years. She gets on well with the social worker – “she is helping me and my family”. She started high school; and she really likes it – “I chose fashion because when I grow up, I would like to be a stylist and travel a lot”. Compared to last year, she feels “less different than others, or perhaps I accept my differences more”. She wears a brace to straighten her back, which often prevents her from doing the same things friends or classmates do. In previous years this was a problem for her – “I was often made fun of, now I accept it more”. She describes herself as a “nice and generous girl”. She doesn't like school very much, but she enjoys going because of her friends. She has never been in a relationship. She would like to start working, even though she knows that she “still has a lot to learn”. For the future, she declares: “when I grow up, I would like to have a family, a husband and children. I would like to have a happy marriage and a man who respects me”.

Source: Flo (14), SPACE4US Project

Life story 9. AT – Have my own house, money and buy my whims

AT, 15 years old, lives in an educational centre for youth in conflict with the law. Born in a European country, she originates from a family from the Maghreb region. Her family and she don't get along very well, although she gets along very well with her sisters. Coming from a Maghrebi community, she faced restrictions on her choice of clothing within her household. Resources were scarce, with little money available at home. She emphasises, “Now I can dress as I want since I live in a centre.” She spent the years from 4 to 12 living in such centres, stating, “I learned respect, but when I left at 12, I lost it again. I had to return due to issues like drug use, fights, etc.” Despite these challenges, she perceives herself as “an empathetic, kind, and, above all, sincere and loyal person.” She has been criticised because of the way she walks and dresses. That is felt as discrimination. As a child, she “had plans of a future with a charming prince. I wanted to work as an airline stewardess and have always wanted to be the boss of something.” Now, her plans for the future are “to be an example as a person, I want to work in a book publishing house, have my own house, money and buy my whims by myself. I want to have children and a husband”. In how to empower girls, AT recommends to “get them to hang out with people who value them, respect them and are sincere.”

Source: AT (15), SPACE4US Project

Life story 10. Peti – Like parallel lines, never really meeting

Peti, now 16, has been living in a residential care centre in a small city of a country at the crossroads of Central and Southeast Europe for the past six months - "This place is a fresh start for me," she says, reflecting on her journey towards positive change. Originally from another city, Peti's early years were challenging, marked by a strained relationship with her parents. "We were like parallel lines, never really meeting", she describes her family dynamics back then. Her birthplace city was vibrant but overwhelming for her. Now, in this small city, she finds peace in its calm and green spaces. "It has a quiet strength that I admire," Peti observes.

In the care centre, Peti's living conditions are structured and supportive, a stark contrast to her previously turbulent life. "It's disciplined here, but it's what I needed," she admits. Her experience in the care system has been transformative. "I was sceptical at first, but they really care," Peti notes, appreciating the support and guidance she's received. Through her journey, Peti has grown into a more reflective and empathetic person. "I've learned the hard way the value of patience and kindness," she says, indicating her personal growth. Peti dreams of becoming a veterinarian, driven by her love for animals. "Animals have been my teachers; I want to dedicate my life to them," she expresses her aspirations.

As a girl, Peti feels her challenges were often overlooked. "Girls are expected to be a certain way, but we have our own struggles," she points out the gender biases she's observed. Peti acknowledges the discrimination she faced due to her behaviour and background. "People often judge without knowing the whole story," she reflects on the stigma she experienced. To empower girls, Peti suggests more understanding and support systems. "Girls need to be heard and supported, not just disciplined," she advises. Looking ahead, Peti is focused on her education and career as a veterinarian. "I have a long road ahead, but I'm ready for it," she says with newfound confidence.

Source: Peti (16), SPACE4US Project

Life story 11. Yum – Having a more realistic goal

Yum, 17 years old, is residing in a centre for minors with behavioural issues due to involvement in theft, drug consumption and trafficking, as well as non-attendance of school. She was born in another country in North-western Europe, home of her father. Her mother was from a Central European country. She used to have "a very bad family situation, fighting with my mother and brother and bad with my father for being alcoholic and being an absentee father." Her mother grew up in a minority cultural group - "the food is very different and they are very religious. They don't understand gays, lesbians, or wearing short clothes". Now, her mother accepts her as she is, "even though it has been difficult for her to understand me (...). We have missed each other a lot, moving away from her has made me value her and her me too". She has never lacked for anything "but there was nothing left over, my mother sacrificed herself to give things to me and my brother, I admire her a lot".

This is the first centre she has lived in. Her experience at the beginning was very bad because she is "very rebellious and stubborn, it has been complicated to adapt to the rules. I am overwhelmed by feeling locked away from my family, so I am only partly grateful for the help". However, she says that "thanks to the centre I have been able to change my way of seeing things." She describes herself as "very loyal, very unproblematic but I set a lot of limits but I try to be peaceful". In her childhood, she aspired to become a lawyer after talking to her father's lawyer while he was in jail. "I wanted to be like her. Now I want to be a hairdresser because it seems like a more realistic goal".

Yum shares that men "have tried to abuse me several times, I have been chased in the street, jokes of contempt for being a woman". She does not feel, however, discriminated against or disadvantaged: "I don't feel that way now, but I have felt that way in the past". She has plans for the future: "I will turn 18 and go with my mother to make up for lost time, either back home or here. Later I will become independent and set up my own business and spend time with my brother and friends and get my car license."

Source: Yum (17), SPACE4US Project

Life Story 12. Dei – Doing my best just to finish this chapter of my life

Dei, now 18, is currently in the care system, living with social workers, “doing my best to finish high school, it is not easy for me because I do not have so much motivation for studies, but I am doing my best just to finish this chapter of my life”. She was born in a country in the Baltic region of Europe. Due to issues in the family, she ended up in the care system. She explains that “I have a younger sister with whom I am living and both parents. However, I do not live with them nor keep in touch”. She enjoys residing in the city where she currently is – “I like to live here and for now cannot imagine another better place where I could live, here are all my friends, sister”. She is living in a social flat while completing her final year of school. Although she is not employed at the moment, she plans to seek employment and “earn her own money” once she completes her education. She likes the workers who are taking care of her, considering them “very kind and helpful”. Dei sees herself as an “honest person but sometimes too impulsive”. She is working “on it”. She values her friends and “people who are kind and good to me”. She has been criticised for her appearance, but she does not “pay attention to these types of comments because these people are just trying to hurt me”. For the future, she would like to have a job, earn her own money. She does not plan to study further. Also, “of course, in future I would like to have a family and kids”. She doesn’t have a “very long-term plan”, just finished school and then found a job: “afterwards I can plan my next steps”. Next to that, she would like to continue to get involved in girls-oriented activities. Concerning how to empower girls, Dei thinks “every girl should not be afraid to show her talents, passion and express her opinion, and projects like this helps a lot to believe in yourself, to feel better self-worth”.

Source: Dei (18), SPACE4US Project

Life Story 13. Pli – Real-life examples always remind me that everything is possible

Pli is already 18 years old and currently is living in a social flat. She was born in a country in the Baltic region of Europe. Since the age of five, she has been placed in the care system as a result of neglect from her family. Regarding the care system, she emphasises: “I feel like it’s my family, it will be hard to split”. She describes herself as a “reliable person”, who knows “how to keep secrets”, and stubborn. Her disadvantage is that she did not grow up in a regular family – “I felt discrimination because of it some time ago”. She was bullied in previous school due to being in the care system. However, afterwards, she was transferred to another school where she felt safe and made friends. Her circle of friends is quite small, but for her “that’s enough”. About how to empower girls, Pli shares – “personally for me the best empowerment is to hear other success stories, to see how much other women from similar backgrounds achieved, how was their journey and so on. The real-life examples always remind me that everything in life is possible”. Pli is passionate about social media. Following graduation, her aspiration is to pursue studies in marketing. Unfortunately, she lacks the financial means for this project. She hopes to secure a place with state financing. For this reason, this year she is paying a lot of attention and dedicating a lot of time to school, because she wants to “have the best results during exams”.

Source: Pli (18), SPACE4US Project

Life Story 14. UC – School saved me

UC was, like her parents, born in a southwestern European country and is 20 years old. She recalls that some distant family members are from a minority cultural group.

She has been living in a residential care centre for 6 years. UC suffered from physical violence at her mother's hands, while her parents were together. After they separated, UC decided to go with her father, and her sister stayed with the mother.

After a while the father got together with another woman and her life became "hell" - they didn't feed her properly, they punished her and bit her up. Her grades started dropping at that time. That's when she went to live with her mother, but a lot of violent episodes happened and that led to residential care.

UC thinks that in residential care the positive is that she was "pushed" to be herself: "And they are still doing it until today".

On the negative side, she explains that she "felt closely what is to be abandoned by your entire family. The family felt that I had other people taking care of me, so basically, they didn't care about me, and abandoned me. So, I felt abandonment up close". She stresses - "School saved me. Because at school they saw what nobody else saw. I think that it isn't that I think that everyone saw that I was suffering, but that nobody had the capacity or the courage to take a step forward. So, school took that step, and put me in a care residence, where I'm today. And where I was bullied, but I got through it. And I'm there until today."

For the future, UC sees a straight, not an upwards or downwards, line. "I think that straight is healthy. Isn't up nor down. I guess that straight is in the perfect equilibrium. I think that now, for example, I reconnected with the children, I reconnected with the older ones, so I think that's the perfect equilibrium".

UC considers that her story would have been different if she was a boy - "Probably I wouldn't have suffered from domestic violence, probably if I were a boy I would have turned against my father or defended myself. Or the father wouldn't have the courage to hit a male son. Secondly, because one of the biggest traumas was in the process of going to live with my father and my mother. Something happened, and I think that if I was a boy ... Nobody knows, right? In our days he wouldn't have that problem." She also considers that there is nothing good about being a girl in her story.

Source: UC (20), SPACE4US Project

Life Story 15. Ad – I want to help build the health system of my country

Ad, 26 years old, was born in a country in the Horn of Africa, and now lives in a reception centre for applicants for international protection, in a European country. She considers that “the camp is good and safe. I don’t have fear anymore and I don’t think about escaping the whole time – it feels a bit like home. This country welcomed me, I have access to a doctor, shelter and food.”

She has one sister and five brothers, all younger, all living in the home country. Three years ago, it was her first time out of the country. She went abroad for medical treatment. After 2.5 years of treatment, she went back home – “The conflict began when I started a job far away from home. One day after work terrorists approached me and told me to work for them as a doctor. I felt threatened. I told them that I already had a job and that I couldn’t work for them also because I didn’t believe in what they believed. The third time they approached me, they said I didn’t have a choice and that it was either I work for them, or they will kill me. I told my parents what was happening, my father had a friend that lived in a safer area and I lived with him for a while. My parents told me that I had to leave, my life was in danger. I couldn’t tell anyone, you don’t know who works for them; they are everywhere, you cannot trust anyone. While I was staying with my father’s friend the terrorists went to my parents’ home, my father saw them and got a heart attack. (...) He didn’t make it, he died. After that I went back to the country of treatment because it was the fastest way to get out of the country as I already had a residence permit. From there, some friends told me about this European Country I knew nothing about”.

She considers herself a “strong girl, well educated. I have lived in a place that is not safe, witnessed killings & bombs. I have also been in pain for the last ten years because of my condition. I left my country, but I hope to be a doctor and go back to my country”. Going back home and helping her people is her dream. She is hopeful: “if you have people that love you or love from God – then you have motivation and can achieve anything”.

In Ad’s home country FMG (Female Genital Mutilation) is practiced – she faced this when she was six years old. “You cannot go outside alone. There is fear of men. I am lucky because my parents are educated. But usually, women are discriminated against. For example, if there is a family of six, three boys and three girls, the parents will encourage the boys to study and be educated but they will not allow the girls to be educated. Because they think that they will get married anyway so there is no purpose. Here, it is different, no disadvantages - it is different outside the country. Here it is better, I haven’t faced any disadvantage yet, there is no discrimination in the camp. If anything, they will help girls more – it is an advantage”. For the future, she wants to become a psychological doctor and focus on women, poor women, homeless children – “there are a lot back home. I want to help my family. I want to help build the health system of my country. And help people that have the same health problem as me”. Ad offers guidance to other girls by stating – “Empower girls: build yourself and value yourself. Make sure to study something, even as a mum you need to help your child, it will make you more confident. Don’t accept any disrespect. Don’t let emotion overcome – think logically. Trust – never stop fighting – your chance will come”.

Source: Ad (26), SPACE4US Project