

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE VICTIMIZATION: PREVALENCE IN ADOLESCENTS AND DISPOSITION TO FORGIVE

## VICTIMIZACIÓN DE VIOLENCIA SEXUAL: PREVALENCIA EN ADOLESCENTES Y DISPOSICIÓN A PERDONAR

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### Abstract

**Antecedentes/objetivos:** La victimización de violencia sexual es un problema de salud pública y social con efectos adversos en la salud mental. Se diseñó una encuesta a adolescentes españoles con el objetivo de conocer la prevalencia de victimización de violencia sexual y la relación con el perdón por sus efectos terapéuticos en la salud mental. **Método:** 652 adolescentes españoles, 51.5 % chicas ( $n = 336$ ) y 48.5% chicos ( $n = 316$ ), con edades comprendidas entre los 13 y los 17 años ( $M = 15.38$ ,  $DT = 1.01$ ), respondieron a medidas de

victimización de violencia sexual y del perdón. **Resultados:** Los resultados revelaron que dos de cada cinco adolescentes (37.6 %, IC del 95 % [.339, 413]) sufrieron violencia sexual, con una probabilidad significativamente mayor en las chicas (43.2 % vs. 31.6 %). Además, los adolescentes víctimas de violencia sexual informaron de una disposición significativamente menor al perdón que las no víctimas, cuantificada en un 20.1% menos de disposición al auto-perdón, un 17.2 % menos al perdón a otros y un 22.4 % a situaciones fuera de su control. También se encontró que los diferentes tipos de victimización comparten mucha varianza, es decir, se dan conjuntamente. **Conclusiones:** Se discuten las

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implicaciones de los resultados para la prevención y reducción de agresiones sexuales y de la falta de disposición al perdón por parte de las víctimas en el tratamiento de los resultados adversos en la salud mental.

**Keywords:** negative outcomes; sexual harassment; sexual aggression; sexual abuse; self-forgiveness; forgiveness of others.

### Abstract

**Antecedentes/objetivos:** Sexual violence victimization is a public health and social problem with adverse effects on mental health. A survey of Spanish adolescents was designed with the aim of finding out the prevalence of sexual violence victimization and the relationship with forgiveness for its therapeutic effects on mental health. **Method:** 652 Spanish adolescents, 51.5 % girls ( $n = 336$ ) and 48.5 % boys ( $n = 316$ ), aged 13-17 years ( $M = 15.38$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ), answered to measures of sexual violence victimization and forgiveness. **Results:** The results revealed that 2 out of 5 adolescents (37.6 %, 95 % CI [.339, 413]) experienced sexual violence, with girls significantly more likely (43.2 % vs. 31.6 %). In addition, adolescent victims of sexual violence reported significantly less willingness to forgive than non-victims, quantified as 20.1 % less willingness to self-forgive, 17.2 % less willingness to forgive others, and 22.4 % less willingness to forgive situations beyond their control. Furthermore, it was found that the different types of victimization share a lot of variances, i.e., they occur together. **Conclusions:** The implications of the findings with regard to sexual assault prevention and risk-reduction, and of the victims' unwillingness to forgive in dealing with adverse mental health outcomes are discussed.

**Palabras clave:** efectos adversos; acoso sexual; agresión sexual; abuso sexual; auto-perdón; perdón a otros.

### Introduction

Sexual violence has been labelled as a serious public health and social problem (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021), mainly in childhood and adolescence (Ajayi & Ezegbe, 2020; Baiden et al., 2020). This type of violence includes non-consensual sexual acts, attempted non-consensual sexual acts, abusive sexual contact, and non-contact sexual abuse (Basile et al., 2014). In recent decades, the literature has focused on examining this type of violence with adult (Chen et al., 2020; Mailhot-Amorski et al., 2022), especially that committed against women (Grose et al., 2021). However, several studies point to this form of violence in young people and highlight the need to increase knowledge about sexual victimization in this population (Miller et al., 2018; Orindi et al., 2020). At international level, prevalence rates reflect that 1 in 10 adolescents experience sexual violence (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2021). In turn, this phenomenon also occurs in the virtual context (Moral & Prieto, 2022; Reed et al., 2019), with an average prevalence of 20.3% for exposure to sexual violence and 11.5% for experiences of sexual violence (Madigan et al., 2018).

Sexual violence can produce consequences on the physical and mental health of the person who suffers it (Adams et al., 2018; Chynoweth et al., 2022), both in the short and long term (Hailes et al., 2019; Morais et al., 2018), as well as directly or indirectly (Yoon et al., 2018). In fact, consequences at different levels (e.g., physical, psychological, academic) have been reported (Walker-Descartes et al., 2021), including depressive symptoms (Oshodi et al., 2020), emotional dysregulation (Villalta et al., 2020) and self-injurious behaviors (Černis et al., 2019; Koçtürk, 2023). In addition, associations of sexual violence have been found with sociodemographic variables, such as gender and age (Chen et al., 2020; Kania & Cale, 2021), as well as with psychosocial and cognitive variables (Jung et al., 2020).

A recent line of research examines the role of forgiveness in situations of adolescent peer victimization (Choe et al., 2021; Quintana-Orts et al., 2021). Thus, the empirical exploration of forgiveness has flourished (Enright, 1996), noting that forgiveness does not imply reconciliation (Ho & Worthington, 2020), nor does it

equate to forgetting (Mullet, 2012), nor to legal condonation (Thompson et al., 2005). According to Enright (1996), forgiveness is a process made up of three dimensions: the propensity to forgive oneself, to forgive others, and to receive forgiveness from others. It is defined as an adaptive trait or behavior (Freedman & Enright, 1996; Malcom & Greenberg, 2000), which benefits people who are involved in victimization processes and is related to psychological well-being (Freedman, 2018). Specifically, sexual violence has been found to be negatively associated with forgiveness (Davidson et al., 2013). Nevertheless, more scientific evidence is needed on the role of forgiveness in relation to sexual violence, as well as on the prevention of sexual violence in adolescence.

Having in mind the state of the literature, a survey was designed with the aim of estimating the prevalence of sexual violence victimization in Spanish adolescents; the disposition to forgive of the sexual violence victimized adolescents, and the relationship between the type of sexual victimization and the forgiveness triad (i.e., self-, others and situations).

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 652 Spanish adolescents participated in the study, 51.5 % girls ( $n = 336$ ) and 48.5 % boys ( $n = 316$ ), aged between 13 and 20 years old ( $M = 15.38$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ). Regarding the school year, 28.7 % were in 3rd of Compulsory education (14-15 years) and 41.6 % in 4th of Compulsory education (15-16 years), while 21.6 % were in 1st of Baccalaureate (16-17 years), 7.1 % in 2nd of Baccalaureate (17-18 years) and the remaining 1.10 % in Formative cycles. Regarding the school failure, 15.3 % of the sample who have repeated a grade. As for the type of school, 72.1 % belonged to a public school, 23.8 % studied in a state-subsidized school and 4.1 % in a private school.

### *Design and Procedure*

A non-probabilistic convenience sampling survey was designed (confidence level: 95 %; margin of error  $\pm 3.83\%$ ) to estimate the prevalence of sexual violence victimization in Spanish adolescents; the disposition to forgive of the sexual violence victimized adolescents, and the relationship between the type of sexual victimization and the forgiveness triad (i.e., self-, others and situations). To obtain the sample, authorization with the secondary school, the permission of the parents and the consent of the participants were processed. The instruments were managed by experienced and trained researchers and in a single session. Data were gathered and stored in compliance with the Spanish Data Protection Law (Ley Orgánica 3/2018, de 5 de diciembre, de Protección de Datos Personales y Garantía de los Derechos Digitales, 2018).

### *Measure Instruments*

*An ad hoc socio-demographic questionnaire* was designed to gather gender, age, school year, school failure (number of repeated grades), and type of school (public, state-subsidized and private school).

*The Sexual Harassment Survey (SSH; American Association of University Women, 1993)* was administered to evaluate offline sexual violence was used; consisting of 14 items, (e.g., “Forced someone to do something sexual other than kissing”, “Pulled someone’s clothing off or down”) responded in a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Never* (0) to *Daily* (4), structured in two factors: Visual-Verbal Sexual Harassment (VVSH) (behaviors as insults or jokes, behaviors with a visual component) and Sexual Harassment with Physical Contact (SHPC) (behaviors involving physical contact). Indeed, this scale does not measure only sexual harassment, but sexual abuse and sexual violence too (Marcos et al., 2023). For the sample of this study, the internal consistency observed was of  $\alpha = .88$  [.86, .90] for the total scale, with an  $\alpha$  of .78 for Visual-Verbal Sexual Harassment and an  $\alpha$  of .81 for Sexual Harassment with Physical Contact subscales.

**The Sexual Cybervictimization scale (SCV; Sánchez et al., 2017)** was employed to measure online sexual violence. It comprises 9 items (e.g., “Written you sexual messages or shown sexual drawings”, “Shown you their behind or other parts of the body via photos”) answered in a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Never* (0) to *Daily* (4). The scale is structured in two factors: Ambiguous Sexual Cybervictimization (ASCV) (referred to sexual exchanges the content of which does not directly refer to the person receiving such messages) and Personal Sexual Cybervictimization (PSCV) (referring to receive insults about the victim's sexual behavior and identity, as well as unwanted personal sexual requests and images). This scale presented an internal consistency of .97 for Ambiguous Sexual Cybervictimization and .97 for Personal Sexual Cybervictimization. In this study, the total scale showed an adequate internal consistency  $\alpha = .89$  [.88, .90], as well as Ambiguous Sexual Cybervictimization ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and Personal Sexual Cybervictimization ( $\alpha = .80$ ) factors.

**The Spanish translation (back-translation procedure) of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson et al., 2005)** was administered to measure the dispositional forgiveness—with subscales to assess forgiveness of self, others, and situations—(e.g., “I continue to be hard on others who have hurt me”, “I hold grudges against myself for negative things I've done”, “It's really hard for me to accept negative situations that aren't anybody's fault”). It consists of 18 items, that participants responded in a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *Almost always false of me* (1) to *Almost always true of me* (7). This scale presented a total scale internal consistency of .86, as well as good psychometric properties in all factors ( $\alpha = .75$  for Forgiveness of self,  $\alpha = .78$  for Forgiveness of others and  $\alpha = .79$  for Forgiveness of situations). In present research, it was obtained an adequate reliability for the total scale,  $\alpha = .79$  [.77, .81], and alpha values of .71, .60 and .64 for the forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situations factor, respectively.

## Data Analysis

The prevalence rates of sexual violence victimization were calculated. As for this sexual victimization was codified according to Marcos et al.'s (2023) operational defi-

inition of sexual violence: (a) the sexual behaviors or activities categorized as sexual abuse (i.e., any form of sexual behaviour or activity between adults and those underage to consent) or sexual aggression (any forced sexual act) were recoded as victimized adolescent; and (b) the unwelcome offensive conduct of a sexual nature committed by other children or adolescents (sexual harassment) were recoded as sexual violence when the criteria of intentionality, duration and chronicity were verified. Subsequently, 2 (victimization of sexual violence: yes vs. no) X 2 (adolescent gender: girls vs. boys) chi-square tests ( $\chi^2$ ) were performed, estimating the effect size with prevalence ratios. The observed prevalence of sexual victimization in adolescent boys was contrasted with a constant, a trivial prevalence (.05; Fandiño et al., 2021), and the magnitude of the effect was appraised with prevalence ratios. A MANOVA was performed to compare victimized and non-victimized adolescents in forgiveness ( $\bar{r} = .397$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Multivariate heterogeneity of variance was observed (Box's  $M = 11.94$ ,  $p = 0.45$ ). Pillai's trace multivariate test reported as it is robust to heterogeneity of variance (Olson, 1979), and the magnitude of the effect with partial eta squared, quantifying the effect as the probability Superiority of the Effect Size (PSES; Arias et al., 2020). To protect against the false acceptance of the alternative hypothesis in univariate effects, three criteria were tested in significant empirical  $F$ s (Mayorga et al., 2020): a) that the empirical  $F$  was higher than the theoretical  $F$  (3.841); b) that the observed effect size (Cohen's  $d$ ) was  $\geq 0.20$  (small effect); and c) that the ratio between type II error and type I error was  $\geq 1$  (i.e.,  $\beta/\alpha \geq 1$ ). Correlations were performed to estimate the interconnection between the different types of sexual violence and the triad of forgiveness. Additionally, internal consistency of the measurement instruments was calculated for the present study computing Cronbach's alpha coefficient ( $\alpha$  values  $\geq .80$  for the total scale are adequate in basic research and  $\geq .90$  in applied settings; Nunnally, 1978).

## Results

### Prevalence of Sexual Violence

The results revealed that 37.6 %, 95 % CI [.339, .413] of adolescents have experienced sexual violence, i.e., around 2 in 5 adolescents suffered victimization of sexual violence.

A significant association,  $\chi^2(1) = 9.20$ ,  $p < .05$ , between gender and sexual violence (see Table 1) was observed prevailing 1.36 times more (PR = 1.36, 95 % IC [1.11, 1.67]) sexual violence in adolescent girls (43.2%) than in adolescent boys (31.6 %). In any case, the prevalence of victimization of sexual violence among male adolescents is not trivial (constant = .05),  $Z(N = 316) = 21.70$ ,  $p < .001$ , being the observed prevalence 8.77 (PR = 8.77, 95 % CI [7,96, 9.80] times more than trivial.

**Table 1.**

Prevalence rates of sexual violence by adolescent gender.

	Victimization f(%)	Non-victimization f(%)	Total
Girls	145(43.2%)	191(56.8%)	336
Boys	100(31.6%)	216(68.4%)	316
<b>Total</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>407</b>	<b>652</b>

**Table 2.**

Univariate effects on the forgiveness triad for the victimization factor.

	F	M <sub>v</sub>	M <sub>Non-v</sub>	1-β	d[95% CI]
Forgiveness of self	25.38***	28.27	25.58	.999	0.41[0.39, 0.43]
Forgiveness of others	19.06***	28.07	26.00	.992	0.35[0.33, 0.37]
Forgiveness of situations	31.18***	26.17	23.45	1.00	0.46[0.44, 0.48]

Note.  $df(1, 150)$ ;  $n$ : 407 non-victimized and 245 victimized;  $M_v$ : mean of the victimized adolescents;  $M_{Non-v}$ : mean of the non-victimized adolescents;  $1-\beta$ : achieved power;  $d[95\% CI]$ : Cohen's  $d$  effect size[95% Confidence Interval]; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Sexual Violence and Forgiveness

The results exhibited a significant multivariate effect on forgiveness,  $F(3, 648) = 14.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $1-\beta = 1.00$ , for the gender factor, accounting for the 6.2 % of the variance,  $\eta_p^2 = .062$ , an effect higher than 64.06% of all possible ( $P_{ES} = .6406$ ). In other words, victimized and non-victimized adolescents of sexual violence differ in the dispositional tendency to forgive.

The univariate effects (see Table 2) showed that non-victimized adolescents have a significantly higher tendency to forgive themselves, others, and situations beyond anyone's control than victimized of sexual violence adolescents. Quantitatively, non-victimized of sexual violence adolescents have a 20.1% ( $r = .201$ ) less disposition to forgive themselves, a 17.2 % to others ( $r = .172$ ) and 22.4 % ( $r = .224$ ) to situations beyond their control than non-victimized.

The correlations between the different types of sexual victimization (see Table 3) exhibited a significant, positive, and more than large effect correlations ( $r > .60$ ), sharing, as an average, more than 50 % of the variance ( $\bar{r}^2 = .535$ ): that is, there is an interconnection between ambiguous sexual victimization, persona sexual victimization, sexual violence with physical contact and visual verbal sexual violence. In addition to this finding, the results showed significant, negative and an effect size of a small to moderate ( $.10 < r < .30$ ) between sexual violence, both offline –face to face– and online –cybervictimization–, and the self-forgiveness, the forgiveness to others, and the forgiveness of situations beyond anyone's control.

**Table 3.***Correlations between sexual violence and dimensions of forgiveness.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. <i>Visual-verbal sexual harassment</i>	—						
2. <i>Sexual harassment with physical contact</i>	.743***	—					
3. <i>Ambiguous sexual cybervictimization</i>	.762***	.617***	—				
4. <i>Personal sexual cybervictimization</i>	.858***	.659***	.751***	—			
5. <i>Forgiveness of self</i>	-.228***	-.200***	-.227***	-.247***	—		
6. <i>Forgiveness of others</i>	-.211***	-.219***	-.193***	-.215***	.184***	—	
7. <i>Forgiveness of situations</i>	-.252***	-.228***	-.266***	-.273***	.697***	.311***	—

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

The generalization of the results of the study is conditioned for the following limitations of the design. First, results should be generalized with caution to other sociological contexts. Second, sample was gathered by a non-probabilistic convenience sampling, then it differs from a real sample. Third, the measurement instruments used, self-report measures and, hence, the possible influence of social desirability (Redondo et al., 2019) denial of negative characteristics (Arce et al., 2023) and biased clinical self-judgments (Fresán et al., 2022) in the participants' responses, both forms of dissimulation. Thus, part of the effect may be due to measurement method than to the measured constructs (Podsakoff et al., 2023). Fourth, the mediating role of other variables, mainly that linked to pseudo-forgiveness (Jenkins, 2018).

With these limitations in mind, the results obtained are discussed below. It was recorded that 37.6 % of adolescents reported sexual violence, in line with previous studies (Madigan et al., 2018; Reed et al., 2019; UNICEF, 2021). As the different types of victimization of sexual violence are strongly interrelated, the victimization of multiple types of sexual violence is common. Furthermore, and in line with concomitant research (Álvarez-Muelas et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020; Kania & Cale, 2021), gender differences were found with female reporting significantly more sexual violence victimization. Moreover, and in line with related literature, male sexual victimization is not trivial (López-Barranco et al., 2022). Having in mind the extraordinary high rate of sexual vio-

lence victimization in adolescents and that sexual violence prevention and risk-reduction programs are effective (Walsh et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2020), then prevention programs should be implemented in school to adolescents.

As for forgiveness, adolescent victims of sexual violence reported less disposition to forgiveness to others, to situations and to themselves. Similar tendency has been observed in other contexts and samples (Davidson et al., 2013). Thus, the lack in the disposition to forgive is part of the victimization process (Quintana-Orts et al., 2021), and, by extension, carries on adverse effects on well-being and mental health (Freedman, 2018). In particular, self-forgiveness is revealed as a fundamental dimension of forgiveness in the recovery of the negative outcomes of victims (Nguyen & Bellehumeur, 2013). However, it is an inconvenience that the creation of any moral obligation and to maintain a concept of forgiveness that protects victims (Prieto-Urzúa, 2022).

Given the scarce literature on the subject, it is proposed for future studies to increase knowledge about the relationship between victimization processes and dimensions of forgiveness, as well as to analyze the role that other psychosocial and cognitive variables may play (Jung et al., 2020); with the aim of improving prevention and risk-reduction programs on sexual violence in adolescence (Marcos et al., 2020).

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**Consentimiento informado/Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians and from participants involved in the study.

**Declaración de disponibilidad de datos/Data Availability Statement:** The data are available from the authors upon reasonable request. Data are not publicly available due to legal restrictions of data from underage.

**Conflicto de intereses/Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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