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To cite this article: Carmen Romo Parra, Silvia Escobar Fuentes, Luis Miguel Rondón García & Rosa Raquel Ruiz Trascastro (2022) Analysis from university students' viewpoint of social professionals in gender-based violence in Spain, *Social Work Education*, 41:6, 1291-1312, DOI: [10.1080/02615479.2021.1948985](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1948985)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1948985>



Published online: 11 Jul 2021.



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Analysis from university students' viewpoint of social professionals in gender-based violence in Spain

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence is a pandemic with global impact, and social welfare professionals play a central role in the fight against it. The main objective of this study was to describe and interpret the opinions of a sample of 336 students from the University of Malaga on professional practice in social intervention for gender-based violence. These students were studying degrees in Social Work, Psychology, and University Master's Degree in Equality and Gender and had previous theoretical and practical knowledge of the subject. A SWOT matrix was applied to collect the data, which were analyzed through ATLAS.ti software. The results clearly show that training and professional experience—and their opposites—articulate the main strengths and weaknesses of the professional collective. Regarding opportunities, students underline the role of resources in all forms, and deficient investment in resources and normative deficits emerge as the main threats. The diagnosis presented provides valuable information for the design of curriculums and public policies that reinforce the task of professionals, present and future, in social intervention for gender-based violence.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 January 2021
Accepted 24 June 2021

KEYWORDS

Gender-based violence; university students; social intervention; professional competence; strengths; weaknesses; opportunities; threats

Introduction

Social intervention and gender-based violence: from public policies to professional practice

This research emerges from the development of the Educational Innovation Project entitled 'Skills-based learning for professional practice with groups involved in domestic gender-based violence,' funded by the University of Malaga (UMA) during the 2017–2019 courses. The main objective of this project was to improve the general and specific competencies of the students of Social Work, Psychology, and University Master's Degree in Equality and Gender, with a view to their future professional performance. Within the framework of this project, this article presents a diagnosis of professional practice in gender-based violence based on the students' opinions collected through the application of a SWOT matrix. The students had previous theoretical and practical knowledge about this reality thanks to the contents of the different subjects and the

performance of in-service internships in the professional environment. Thus, with the assessment of the students as key informants, a valuable opinion is obtained about the advantages and problems of social welfare professionals intervening in gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence is a pandemic with a global impact. As stated in the Istanbul Convention (European Commission, 2011), gender-based violence constitutes a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women, perhaps the ultimate expression of gender inequality.

In the context of the European Union, gender-based violence is one of the biggest challenges facing its member countries. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (European Commission, 2020) revealed that, in 2014, 33% of the women in the EU had experienced physical and/or sexual violence; 22% had suffered violence by their partner, and 55% had been sexually harassed.

In Spain, the consideration of gender-based violence as a social problem has arrived late. The process has followed a slow and irregular pace, rooted in the peculiar historical, political, social, and cultural characteristics of our country. The development of legislative and political measures occurred more firmly from the 1990s onwards. This momentum led to the development of official statistics to measure the prevalence of this phenomenon with macro surveys on violence against women since 1999. Strategic plans for raising awareness and prevention of gender-based violence and two organic laws should also be added: Law 3/2007 for the effective equality of women and men and Law 1/2004 on comprehensive protection measures against gender-based violence (Santana-Hernández, 2010). This law addresses gender-based violence comprehensively, noting the need to involve the legal system, the health care system, state security forces and corps, the media, and social welfare professionals (Bosch-Fiol & Ferrer-Pérez, 2012). Adam (2013) highlights that the implementation of this law implied substantially improving the counting of the victims, especially the fatalities, of gender-based violence (Government Delegation against Gender-Based Violence, n.d.). However, the desired effects have not been achieved. According to the Delegation of the Government against Gender-Based Violence, from 1 January 2003 to 10 March 2021, 1,083 women were killed by their partners or ex-partners. The limited progress in eradicating gender-based violence both within and outside partner relationships is also shown in the data provided by the latest Macro-Survey of Violence against Women 2019 (Government of Spain, 2020). For example, complaints of gender-based violence have been rising considerably up to 2020 (Ministry of Equality, 2021).

Social workers, psychologists, and postgraduates in gender and equality are a first-level resource to advance in the prevention and effective intervention in gender-based violence (Maquibar et al., 2017). As stated by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (2015), social welfare workers are at the forefront of all the initiatives in this field. It should be noted that they are the professional referents in intervention with victims and, in the field of prevention, their action is decisive to change the social perception of this phenomenon (Elboj & Ruíz, 2010).

Adequate professional work in any field requires knowledge, skills, and attitudes in tune with the social context. In the case of gender-based violence, it is essential to know its bases and differential characteristics, deeply rooted in gender inequality (European Commission, 2020). It is therefore vitally important to acquire training that addresses the

framework of interpretation of the feminist theory (McPhail et al., 2007). We consider that the gender perspective is the most appropriate epistemological tool for identifying and addressing structural inequalities that cause violence against women within the patriarchal system. Until these inequalities are overthrown, violence against women will continue to be minimized and justified (Villavicencio & Zúñiga, 2015). Through this approach, we can gain an in-depth understanding of how gender-based violence helps to maintain men's power relations over women (Pateman, 1988). This will help understand that this particular type of violence requires specific measures and actions and comprehensive intervention. Training in gender equality from these approaches is therefore a key part of effective professional performance to address and treat gender-based violence; as the gender perspective should not only be understood as hermeneutics, it also implies a commitment to social and public well-being (Bosch-Fiol et al., 2017).

The above arguments justify the need to incorporate gender equality training into the curriculum of the indicated degrees. As underlined by Greubel (2019), ensuring the coverage of gender-related content in academic programming determines students' ability to meet the challenges of professional practice in today's world (Díez-Ros et al., 2016). Gender-based training is key to reducing the incidence of gender-based violence, as it provides tools for professionals to know what it is, and how and when to act (García-Moreno et al., 2015). In Spain, the aforementioned Organic Law 1/2004 states in Article 4.7 that universities will include and promote in all academic fields transversely the training, teaching, and research in gender equality and non-discrimination. Article 15.3 also specifies that the competent educational administrations shall ensure that content aimed at training for the prevention, early detection, intervention, and support for the victims of this form of violence is incorporated into the curricular fields of Bachelor's degrees and Diplomas, and in the specialization programs of the social health professions. Axis 5 of the State Pact on Gender-based violence (Ministry of the Presidency, Relations with the Courts and Equality, 2019) also refers to the training of professionals.

The Bologna Declaration (1999), which promoted the reorganization of university teachings with the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), calls for the transversalization of the gender perspective into university learning in response to the EU's founding principle of promoting equal opportunities between women and men. On another hand, the acquisition of competencies directly linked to professional training is also emphasized (Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, 2006). Both principles have been united in a European model of higher education that promotes training for the professional approach to gender-based discrimination, focusing on the preparation of specialists capable of preventing, detecting, and addressing situations of gender-based violence as the most obvious manifestation of inequality. However, the Spanish university is a paradigmatic case of the still deficient integration of the gender perspective into higher education (Verge et al., 2018). Tobías-Olarte (2018, p. 151) notes that 'to the extent that training in gender equality exists, it is constituted as a strength,' although she insists that 'most of the subjects offered in terms of gender and/or violence against women by Spanish public universities are optional'. This shows the lack of commitment to equal opportunities training between men and women in Spanish higher education (Bas-Peña et al., 2017).

Deficits in the training of professionals in gender-based violence are also found at the international level (Danis, 2003; Heffernan et al., 2012). Investigations such as those conducted by Bennett and Fineran (2003) and Danis (2004) show that many social workers do not feel prepared to deal with gender-based violence, and this may be due to a lack of concrete training in the curriculums (Modie-Moroka, 2018). There are numerous investigations of students' perceptions of intervention with victims of domestic or gender-based violence. In the study of Black et al. (2010), students reported that they had limited knowledge about how to intervene effectively with victims. Warrener et al. (2013) note the importance of practical experience, which also helps to reduce negative attitudes towards violence against women (Bennett & Fineran, 2003; Postmus et al., 2011), increasing non-prejudiced support for the victims (LeGeros & Savage, 2012). Adequate training is also related to high self-perceived competence and knowledge of the administrative procedures (Lundberg & Bergmark, 2018) and organizational policies (Heffernan et al., 2012). Specialization also promotes teamwork (LeGeros & Savage, 2012) and increases efficiency in dealing with the excessive bureaucracy (Berasaluze, 2009) of the processes, an important source of burnout suffered by professionals in interventions in gender-based violence (Canet & García, 2006).

Method

The main objective of this study was to describe and interpret the opinions of a sample of students from the University of Malaga on the professional practice of social intervention in gender-based violence.

To meet this objective, a qualitative methodology was implemented by applying a SWOT matrix, an instrument in line with the objective of this study. In multiple investigations, the SWOT analysis has shown its effectiveness for diagnosis in any field that requires strategic planning (Gürel & Tat, 2017). In the field of education, the SWOT technique is very useful for analyzing the functioning of educational institutions (Leiber et al., 2018), the evaluation of concrete teachings (Liu, 2017; Romero-Gutiérrez et al., 2016), coping with educational challenges (O'Brien et al., 2020), the analysis of the acquisition of professionals' and students' skills (Resnawati et al., 2020) for professional performance (Westhues et al., 2001).

Participants

In this research, participants were a sample of students from the University of Malaga who, during the period 2018/2019, were studying different undergraduate and postgraduate subjects, all linked to social intervention (see Table 1).

A total of 336 students participated, of whom 271 came from different courses in the degree in Social Work; 35 from the third year of the Psychology degree; and 30 from the Master's Degree in Equality and Gender. These students had previous theoretical and practical knowledge of the area. This knowledge had been acquired through the development of the contents of the subjects in which the study was applied and the performance of curricular internships in social service centers. Therefore, the students are key informants to determine a professional reality in which they are already

Table 1. Subjects, degrees, courses, and completed documents.

Subject	Title	Course	Completed documents
Social Work with individuals and families	Degree in Social Work	2nd	26
Health, dependence, and social vulnerability	Degree in Social Work	3rd	19
Social Work, Gender, and Equal Opportunities	Degree in Social Work	4th	52
Community Psychology	Psychology Degree	3rd	14
Gender and Social and Community Intervention	Master's Degree in Equality and Gender	1st	12
Social intervention from a gender perspective	University Expert in Adaptation of Degree in Social Work	1st	6
Total			129

involved because they are in a training process that enables them to intervene in gender-based violence.

Given the feminization of the degrees in which this study is carried out, the gender ratio is approximately 5 to 1, favoring women (82.7% of women versus 17.3% of men), as we can see in Table 2. The ages of the students ranged between 21 and 29 years.

The selection of the subjects and the student sample was intentional. Subjects in which content related to gender-based violence was taught were selected. Through these subjects, students were able to acquire theoretical knowledge on the topic. Although the students did not yet have a professional contract because they were still in training, they did have practical knowledge through the performance of curricular internships. Therefore, when performing the activity through which the information for this study was collected, the students already had informed knowledge about intervention in gender-based violence.

Instrument

The SWOT matrix (*Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats*) used in this study is an optimal methodological instrument for performing a diagnostic synthesis of students'

Table 2. Participants as a function of subjects and sex.

Subject	Males <i>n</i> (%)	Females <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i> (%)
Social Work with individuals and families	16 (20.5%)	62 (79.5%)	78 (100%)
Health, dependence, and social vulnerability	8 (11.6%)	61 (88.4%)	69 (100%)
Social Work, gender, and equal opportunities	17 (14.9%)	97 (85.1%)	114 (100%)
Community Psychology	11 (31.4%)	24 (68.6%)	35 (100%)
Gender and Social and Community Intervention	5 (16.7%)	25 (83.3%)	30 (100%)
Social intervention from a gender perspective	1 (10.0%)	9 (90.0%)	10 (100%)
Total	58 (17.3%)	278 (82.7%)	336 (100%)

view of the professional practice in the fight against gender-based violence. This instrument yields positive factors (strengths and opportunities) and negative factors (weaknesses and threats). Weaknesses and strengths are internal variables, typical of the professional collective, whereas threats and opportunities are external, context-related variables that are not directly controllable but that reveal the social complexity faced by professional practice. In the light of these criteria, the research team developed a guideline for the tools validated by the Virtual Knowledge Center to End Violence against Women and Girls of the UN Women (Women, U. N., 2012) and the European Commission's Capacity4dev Platform (European Commission, n.d.). The proposal of this guideline obtained the support of the Social Services centers of the Junta de Andalucía, where the students carry out intervention practices.

The instrument for data collection had the following sections:

a. Internal factors:

- Strengths: positive characteristics, strong points of the group of professionals, on which present and future actions can be built. Some examples of questions to identify them are: what competencies and skills are identified? What is being done well? What can the collective be proud of? What resources are available?
- Weaknesses: deficient points or negative aspects whose improvement depends on the professional group. Examples of questions to identify these aspects are: what skills and abilities are missing? What is done wrong and what can be improved? What should be avoided?

b. External factors:

- Opportunities: positive external possibilities that can benefit staff performance, such as the potential of society or the community, whether at the local, national or international level. Thus, for example, some questions to identify opportunities are: what legal and institutional aspects are supportive? What social resources are available?
- Threats: external problems or obstacles that limit or negatively affect performance, not under the professionals' control. Examples of questions to identify threats are: what aspects of social life are barriers to the performance of professional work? What political and institutional decisions are negatively affecting it?

Procedure

The following describes the sequence of the development of the activity and the procedure followed for data analysis.

Data collection was carried out by the research team during the first half of 2019, within each of the subjects mentioned. The activity was carried out as part of the development of the educational innovation project discussed in the introduction of the article. Voluntary participation of students was requested and, at all times, their anonymity was guaranteed, given the publication of the study. Students' informed consent was required, following the guidelines of the Helsinki Declaration and EU Regulation 2016/679 of the European Parliament and the Council on the protection of natural persons concerning the processing of personal data.

In the first session, the work-groups were formed to carry out the activity. The teachers requested the students' informed consent for the use of the data for research purposes and gave a brief methodological explanation of the SWOT technique. Participants were distributed into work-groups. There were between 4 and 6 members in each group. The components of each group were freely chosen by the students. For 50 minutes, the main strengths and weaknesses of professionals when intervening in the studied field were discussed and transcribed through consensus. The students were also urged to present the opportunities and threats that, from their perspective, favor or impede professional intervention in the proposed topic.

At the second session, each group presented its findings to the entire class in a plenary session. At the end of the presentations, a debate on all the above-mentioned views was initiated.

The total duration of the sessions was two hours for each subject. The resulting documents were collected in the respective subjects hosted on the Virtual Campus of the University of Malaga. The works were not evaluated within the subjects to ensure freedom of expression of opinions and preserve anonymity.

As can be seen in [Table 1](#), the work-groups produced a total of 129 primary documents, which were analyzed. An inductive method was followed for the systematization of the data obtained (Charmaz, 2014). Within each of the four basic categories (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) an open encoding of the data was performed, grouping the students' responses by similarity, to discover emerging ideas that gave rise to subcategories within each section of the SWOT. A descriptive frequency analysis of the four categories and each of the subcategories was performed and completed with network analysis. The ATLAS.ti tool, version 8, was used for data analysis.

Results

After the analysis of the hermeneutic units, a total of 858 references were obtained, with threats being the most mentioned (236 references). Of the remainder, opportunities and strengths were given similar weight in references, with 211 and 210, respectively. Finally, the weaknesses were mentioned 201 times. [Figure 1](#) shows the distribution of percentages for each category.

Once the global analysis of each category had been carried out, we studied the results obtained for each of them separately, according to their division in terms of origin: strengths and weaknesses (internal origin) and opportunities and threats (external

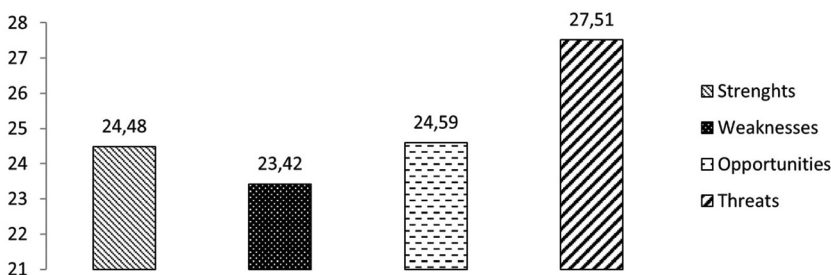


Figure 1. Percentages by category.

origin). To facilitate the understanding of each of the subcategories resulting from our study, we present a series of tables containing their corresponding definitions and examples of mentions.

We will begin by commenting on the results obtained in the area of strengths and weaknesses.

First, we will describe the strengths category. This category is made up of five subcategories. Table 3 lists these subcategories, describing their characteristics and giving various examples of quotes on which they are based.

Firstly, as can be seen in Figure 2, with almost 60% of the mentions, the students pointed out that the subcategory of experience and professional competence are professionals' strengths. They also felt confident about their specialized training, although their number of mentions represented just over a third of the references made in the previous subcategory. In any case, the sum of these two subcategories accounted for almost 81% of the total references.

Thirdly, although the number of references was significantly lower, the emphasis was on the ability to carry out coordinated work between professionals. In other words,

Table 3. Strengths: Subcategories, Descriptions, and Code References.

Subcategories	Description	Example quote—Groundedness
Specialized training	Training of professionals at various educational levels, from formal education to specialization courses in the gender perspective taught by different institutions and associations. This training considers aspects such as knowledge of regulations, resources, and techniques for diagnosis and intervention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher and specialized academic training. Resource knowledge.
Experience and professional competence	Capacity to handle situations related to gender-based violence as a result of the experience and professional skills acquired (technical and social skills).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional experience. Professional's ability to deal with the situation. Commitment and bonds of trust.
Professional self-acknowledgement	Acknowledgement of the importance of the role of professionals and satisfaction with professional achievements in addressing gender-based violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are very proud of the work we do.
Sensitivity to the problem	Awareness of the dimension of the problem, awareness and involvement in its resolution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased awareness of the subject
Interdisciplinary coordination	Importance granted to working in coordination with other professionals from different fields.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different professionals involved in the problem.

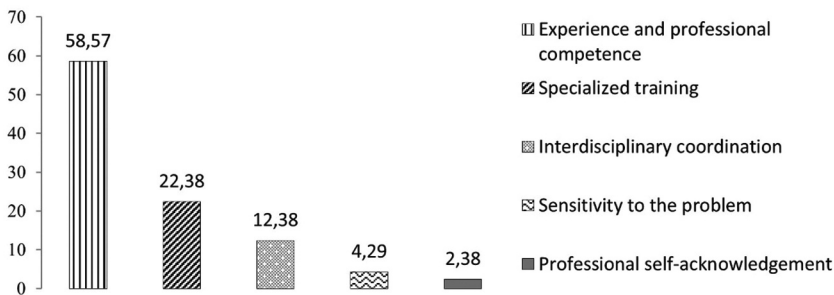


Figure 2. Strengths in percentages.

according to this, in line with what is specified in the regulations, the interdisciplinary approach seems to be fulfilled from the students' perspective. Following a descending order, sensitivity to the importance of gender-based violence as a social problem and professional self-acknowledgement were indicated by only 4.3% and 2.4%, respectively. However, we cannot fail to note that the proactive attitude of the collective and their pride in the work being done in the area of gender-based violence eradication are defined as strengths.

The weakness category is also broken down into five subcategories. These elements are described, developed, and exemplified in [Table 4](#).

The study of the weakness category revealed that practically the same aspects that were previously considered positive were not solid enough and that they could also imply weaknesses in the professional intervention. As can be seen in [Figure 3](#), the main subcategories mentioned here are lack of social skills and training and educational deficiencies, with the former being particularly noteworthy, with almost half of the total references (49.2%). On another hand, the relationship between the two aspects is clear if we take into account that training in social skills is a key component of the acquisition of professional competencies. In any case, if we add the percentages of these two subcategories, we reach 80.1% of the total references received within the category of weaknesses.

Far from the previous subcategories, 12.9% of the students considered that the scarce professional experience in the field of gender-based violence also implies a lack of experience in dealing with the situation.

Finally, the problems of communication among professionals and the general lack of knowledge of the social reality, especially of the family circumstances of the persons involved in situations of gender-based violence were indicated, with a scarce 5.5% and 1.5%, respectively. These deficits may be related to the criticism of a limited professional vision that does not address the different aspects and scenarios in which gender-based violence develops and is sustained, showing the routine of individual intervention without attending to a necessary ecological perspective.

Table 4. Weaknesses: Subcategories, Descriptions, and Code References.

Subcategories	Description	Example quote—Groundedness
Communication problems between professionals	Deficiencies in communication and collaboration between professionals arising from different causes and hindering case management.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of coordination between the professionals and/or entities involved
Training and educational shortcomings	Little specific training in the gender perspective and in dealing with gender-based violence. Persistence of beliefs and prejudices resulting from gender socialization that interfere with the treatment of the problem.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of training and updating. ● Education received: sexist and patriarchal
Little professional experience	Difficulties in intervening in problems associated with gender-based violence due to limited practical training and professional experience not specifically focused on this field.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Little practical experience during training. ● Inexperience (not being familiar with the situation)
Lack of social skills	Lack of social skills to correctly manage the professional relationship with people involved in situations of gender-based violence and little initiative and creativity to solve problems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Not having enough skills to help. ● Lack of proactivity in terms of professional achievement and lack of initiative.
Unawareness of the social and family context	Lack of involvement when it comes to deepening the user's social reality, taking into account all its dimensions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unawareness of family reality.

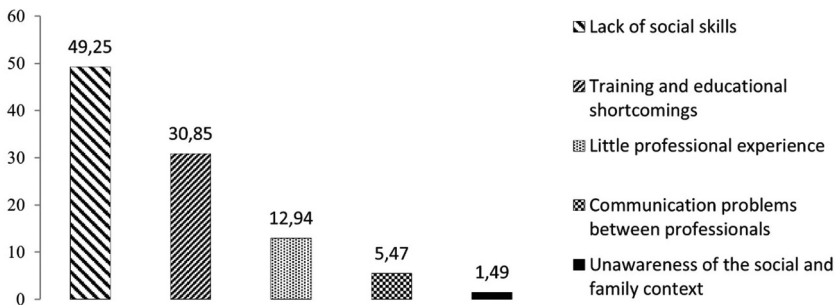


Figure 3. Weaknesses in percentages.

Next, we will analyze the students' view of the opportunities and threats to professional practice in gender-based violence.

As with the categories of internal origin, we begin by analyzing the positive dimension. The opportunities are broken down into nine subcategories specified in Table 5.

The opportunities offered by the environment to professionals are rich and varied. The percentages obtained for each of the subcategories reflected in Figure 4 are distributed more regularly than in the observed previously categories, with legislative advances and a diversity of resources for addressing gender-based violence, in this order, which, from the students' perspective, are the main elements that favor professional work. With a similar number of references, the role of associations and institutions and social involvement constitute significant aspects, thus underlining the leading role of civil society. With many references in descending order, the benefits of social support for victims, the role of the media in making the problem more visible, and the growing promotion of interdisciplinary teamwork are also highlighted, with 9%, 8%, and 6%, respectively. Also, although they are the subcategories with the lowest number of mentions, the progressive importance granted by the public administration to the social reintegration of people involved in situations of domestic gender-based violence and the users' proactive attitude when seeking a way out of their situation, thus favoring professional relationships, are highlighted.

At the other end of the scale, we find the category of threats (Table 6). This is the category from which the most subcategories were obtained, namely twelve.

Thus, among the threats to achieving effective intervention, we find an even greater variety of subcategories, also distributed in regular progression in terms of the reference weight. There are many concerns, as we can see in Figure 5.

Firstly, the students are concerned about the deficient investment in resources of all kinds—professional, economic, social, etc.—, a situation that undoubtedly hinders intervention in gender-based violence. This is followed by the lack of social response, based on conformism and the still limited perception of gender-based violence as a social problem that can only be resolved with the effort and involvement of the entire population. With little percentage difference from the previous subcategory, normative deficits (16.9%) are mentioned as a threat to accurately address gender-based violence.

Fourthly, the excessive bureaucratization of management processes in dealing with gender-based violence (10.1%) is reported, which slows down work and also promotes

Table 5. Opportunities: Subcategories, descriptions, and code references.

Subcategories	Description	Example quote—Groundedness
Social involvement	Advances in society's awareness of gender-based violence as a social problem, thanks to research and the mobilization of the feminist movement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increased awareness of gender-based violence.
Associations and institutions	Highlighting the importance of the actions of the associative and institutional movement to achieve prevention and intervention with different groups (especially women) in the field of the eradication of gender-based violence and equal opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The progress of society thanks to research studies carried out. ● Existence of associations for women and groups. ● Existence of institutions dedicated to women.
Media	Participation of the media in reporting and in social awareness of gender-based violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Greater visibility of the problem in the media.
Legislative developments	Evolution of regulations at the national and international level in the treatment of gender-based violence, including the benefits of decentralization and the transversal application of the gender perspective to all levels of political action.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Legislation related to equality. Specifically, the Integral Law of 1/2004.
Social support	Importance of social support from different groups for the recovery of victims of gender-based violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Support from the victim's family environment.
Positive user attitude	Positive attitude of people who suffer from gender-based violence to find solutions to their situation, favoring collaboration with the professional.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collaboration of the victims.
Diversity of resources	Wealth and diversity of existing resources for addressing gender-based violence, distributed among the different levels of territorial organization of the State.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic resources. ● 016 telephone. ● Resources and benefits.
Treatment of social reintegration	Importance granted by the administration to the social and labor reintegration both of the victims of gender-based violence and the aggressors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reintegration of the abuser.
Fostering interdisciplinary teams	Importance and deepening of the role of multi- and interdisciplinary teams to carry out a holistic approach to gender-based violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Different professionals involved in the problem.

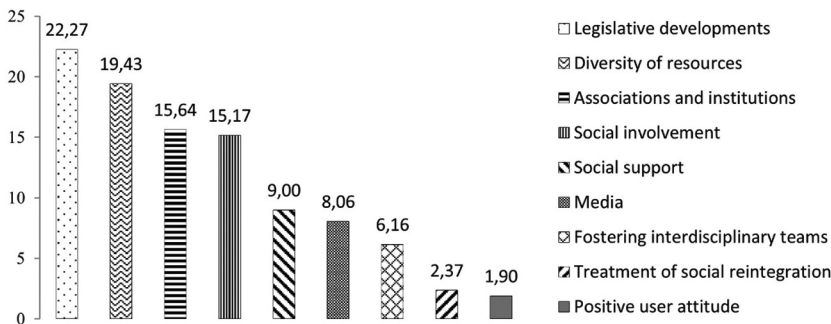


Figure 4. Opportunities in percentages.

stress and burnout among professionals, as mentioned by the students in their remarks. This is compounded by the users' lack of cooperation, which accounts for 8.5% of the total number of references.

The insufficient political concern that we can relate to the subcategory of deficient investment and the scarce social support for victims, especially by the family, constitute the next threats in percentage terms.

Finally, the subcategories with the least number of references range in descending progression from the 4.2% who report little professional acknowledgement, the rivalry between professionals (3%), misinformation about resources (2.5%) of the victims and their environment, ending with failures in the informational rigor and palliative interventions as the most common way of addressing gender-based violence, both accounting for 2.1% of the total references in this category.

Network analysis

The relationships established within the strengths category show the importance attached to experience and professional competence as a central key piece. This is evident in [Figure 6](#). Based on co-occurrences, experience and professional competence are closely related to three other strengths: specialized training, interdisciplinary coordination, and problem sensitivity. In this sense, experience and professional competence are based on the specialized training and sensitivity of the group of social workers to the problem of gender-based violence, whereas good interdisciplinary coordination is based on the strength of experience and competence in dealing with gender-based violence.

Concerning the category Weaknesses (see [Figure 7](#)), we note the interrelations between the three subcategories that the students highlight the most as the professionals' main weaknesses.

Although it had previously been shown to be a strength, deficits in professional experience are also a major weakness. The established relationships are largely focused on this, fed by training and educational deficits. Training deficiencies are reflected in scarce professional experience and the latter, coherently, implies that social skills are not developed to facilitate intervention with the users. Thus, following the appearance of co-occurrences, a strong connection is revealed between training deficiencies as a cause of

Table 6. Threats: Subcategories, Descriptions, and Code References.

Subcategories	Description	Example quote—Groundedness
Lack of social response	Social resistance to perceive the problem of gender-based violence as a structural issue, which induces conformism and the reinforcement of patriarchal mentality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Negative influence of the patriarchal ideology. ● Society does not grant enough importance to this problem.
Information failure	Dissemination of misconceptions or lies by the media about gender-based violence due to lack of knowledge or misrepresentation of the issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The media becomes a target for certain aggressors to become protagonists.
Normative deficits	Failure to configure a legal and normative framework that is truly efficient in addressing and complying with actions in this area, as well as the lack of institutional coordination.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Manipulation of the media. ● Legislative changes/derogations. ● Little protection from the law. ● Scarce laws on the issue.
Institutional bureaucratization	Scarce effectiveness, slowdown, and rigidity of the management derived from an excessive bureaucratization of the work processes that, in addition, generates professionals' overload, stress, and burnout.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of coordination between institutions. ● Bureaucratization. ● Overload of work. ● Highly subject to the established protocol of action.
Insufficient political concern Poor social support Lack of users' cooperation	Insufficient concern and political commitment to the fight against gender-based violence Lack of social support at all levels (family, institutional, etc.) to leave situations of gender-based violence Rejection, dependence, and resistance to change of the users (women).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The rise of the far-right in political power. ● Little or no involvement by the extended family. ● Resistance to therapy. ● Emotional dependence on the therapist by the victim.
Disinformation on resources Poor investment	Lack of information in the families or individuals who experience gender-based violence about existing resources to address their problems. Insufficient social, financial, and personnel resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The victim does not want to report the abuser. ● Victims of gender-based violence are unaware of the existence of the help we can offer them. ● Cuts in social policies. ● Low social spending (lack of professionals, little support for new projects..) ● Little acknowledgement of the profession.
Little professional acknowledgement Professional rivalry	Lack of citizens' acknowledgement of the work carried out by social welfare professionals. Confusion of roles, interference, and competitiveness among social welfare professionals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Competitiveness among social welfare professionals.
Palliative intervention	Promotion of social interventions that are focused on the short term and do not address the root of the problems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The root of the problem of gender-based violence is not being addressed. ● Greater investment in treatment than in prevention

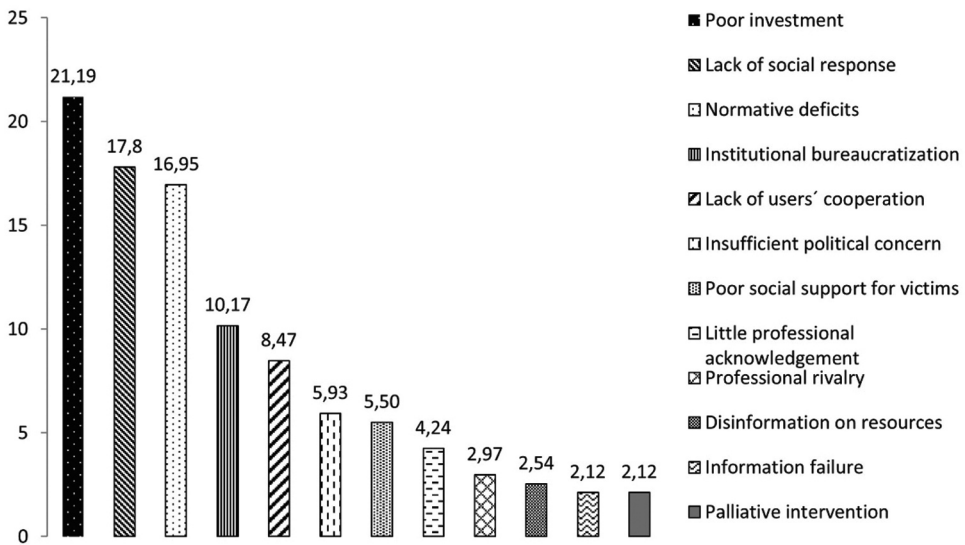


Figure 5. Threats in percentages.

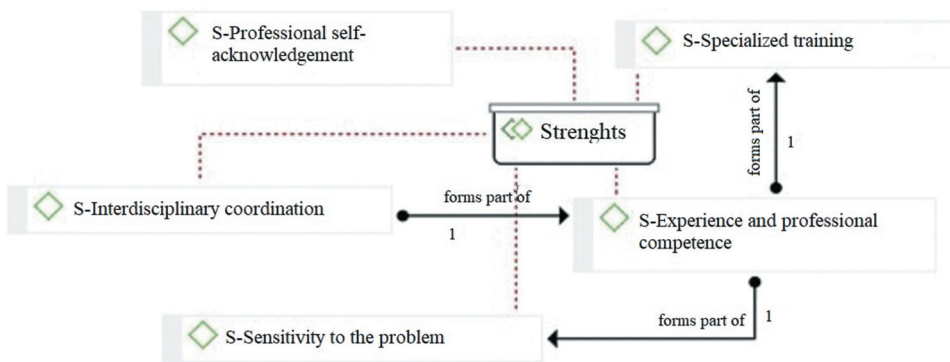


Figure 6. Strengths category network.

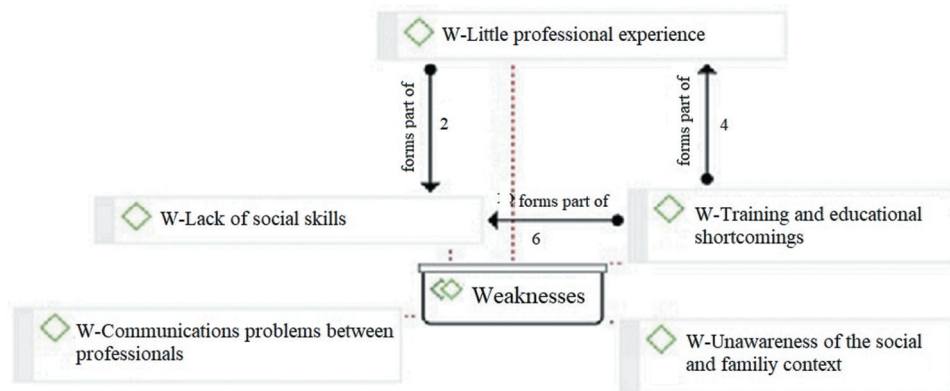


Figure 7. Weaknesses category network.

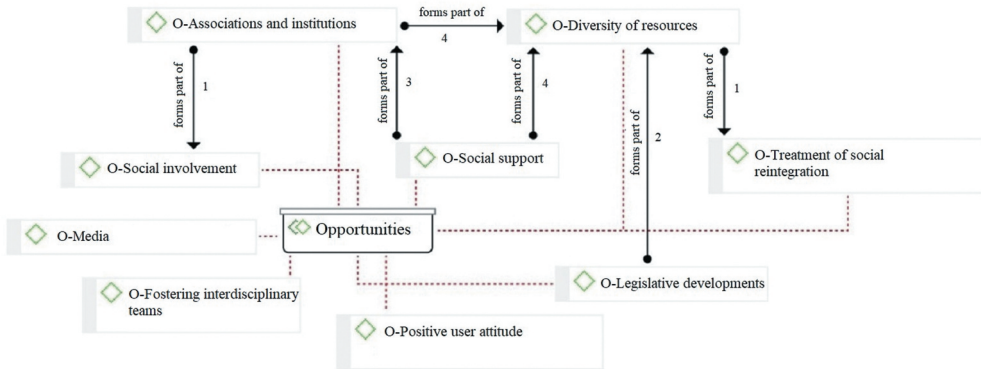


Figure 8. Opportunities category network.

the lack of social skills to deal with the subjects involved in situations of gender-based violence.

As far as opportunities are concerned, most of the subcategories are closely related to each other. When examining [Figure 8](#), not only do we find a greater number of co-occurrences, but also the number of connections between the subcategories that make up the opportunities increases.

For the students, the existence of associations and institutions constitutes an important part of the diversity of resources, also endorsed by this last subcategory by the large number of references received, as we saw in [Figure 4](#). In turn, The social support received by the people involved in situations of gender-based violence and the legislative advances in this line are part of the characterization of the diversity of resources as an opportunity, as the emphasis is placed on the role of the resources in the treatment of social reinsertion. Likewise, the existence of these associations and institutions seems to be considered as a result of social involvement, with social support being an important part of the function that the associative and institutional movement should practice. Finally, it should be noted that social support, despite not having a large number of mentions, is at the base and reinforces the link we have commented on between the diversity of existing resources and the role of associations and institutions.

[Figure 9](#), describes multiple connections within the Threats category which, as shown in [Figure 1](#), was also the one that contained the largest number of references.

The misinformation about resources is not only related to the failure of informational rigor, but also to the professionals' lack of acknowledgement, which, in turn, leads to a lack of social support for the victims. In this context, it is interesting to observe how normative deficits negatively influence professional assessment and how these normative deficits, in turn, result in poor social support for victims, which is part of the lack of social response to the problem of gender-based violence.

Continuing with the threat posed by normative deficits, we can observe how these lead to deficient investment, which is also affected by institutional bureaucratization that ultimately generates professional rivalry between social welfare professionals.

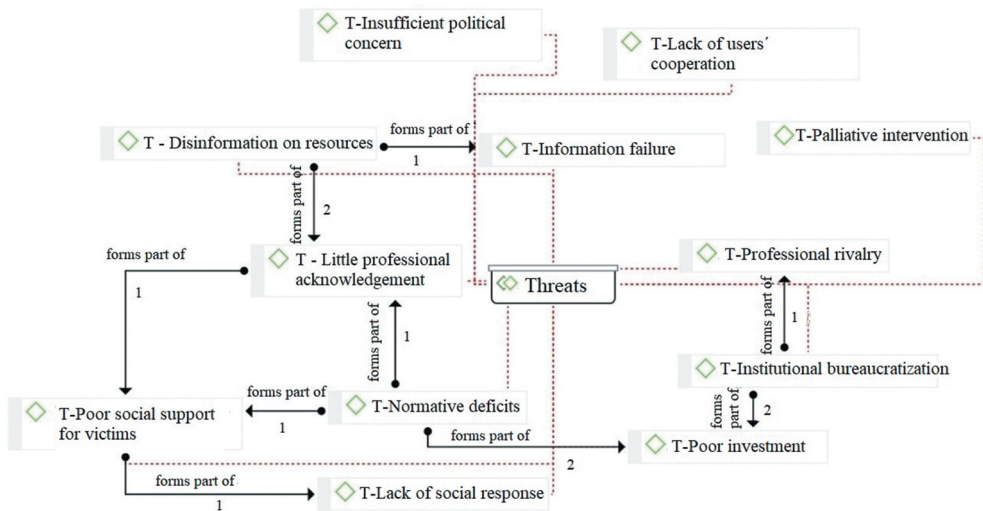


Figure 9. Threats category network.

Discussion and conclusions: revealing the keys to professional intervention, strengthening the response to gender-based violence

The main objective of this study was to describe and interpret the opinions of a sample of students on the professional practice of social intervention in gender-based violence. Although these students are still in the process of training, their views are not a mere summary of what they have learned in different subjects. Their deepening of specific subjects and their contacts with the professional field through the performance of internships allow them to offer a sufficiently trained opinion on the professional task, both from a theoretical and practical point of view. Moreover, their perceptions are largely consonant with the conclusions of other studies at the international level.

First of all, we can draw two conclusions. On the one hand, students have particularly emphasized the threats faced by social welfare professionals who intervene in gender-based violence. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that many of the subcategories that have emerged in this work had positive and negative signs simultaneously. This should not be interpreted as a contradiction, but instead, shows that the advantages (strengths and opportunities) must be further addressed (weaknesses and threats) to achieve optimal levels of success.

We can establish a series of key ideas that we now comment on.

The students make it very clear that experience and professional competence and their opposite, the lack of professional experience, are the main knots that articulate the strengths and weaknesses of the professional collective. We underline the importance of training at all levels, theoretical and practical, to address gender-based violence, as reflected, among others, by the research of Bennett and Fineran (2003), Black et al. (2010), Danis (2004), and Heffernan et al. (2012), and Postmus et al. (2011).

Moreover, for students, adequate training must be based on the triad of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Lacks in training and reduced experience lead to a lack of social

skills, as referred to in the study of Warrener et al. (2013), and in difficulties to overcome sexism and false beliefs associated with violence against women, as highlighted in the research of Bennett and Fineran (2003), LeGeros and Savage (2012), and Postmus et al. (2011). Adequate training creates greater sensitivity to the problem and this induces critical professional competence, as awareness-raising leads professionals to take an interest in and deepen all the aspects that affect gender-based violence.

Achieving professional competence also promotes interdisciplinary coordination, reflecting the importance attached to teamwork, which can be hindered if communication is not entirely smooth. Although professional self-acknowledgement (Lundberg & Bergmark, 2018) emerges as the last of the strengths mentioned by the students, its presence indicates the need to claim the empowerment of the professional collective, called on to be an essential and referent element for the treatment of gender-based violence.

Let us now examine the opportunities and threats that favor or hinder professional intervention in the field of gender-based violence.

Students highlight the important role of resources. Together with resources, associations and institutions are an essential part of the above-mentioned opportunities, constituting important sources of social support. Legislative progress has promoted the emergence of resources and these, in turn, are promoting the social reintegration of the people involved in situations of gender-based violence. However, it should be noted that deficient investment in these resources and normative deficits, which prevent the real and effective implementation of the legal framework, emerge as major threats. This may reflect the perception of problems of adaptation of the still very recent incorporation of the treatment of gender-based violence into the Spanish legal system, as discussed at the beginning of this work. It is noteworthy that normative deficits are also at the heart of poor professional valuation, poor social support for the victims, and deficient investment in resources.

Low levels of investment are also based on the institutional bureaucracy that fuels professional rivalry. Excessive bureaucracy of processes, as highlighted by Berasaluze (2009) and Canet and García (2006), is a problem to bear in mind. Sometimes, attention to the victims is slow and ineffective due to the complexity of the intervention protocols, which are not agile, resulting in secondary victimization. Although attention to the social reintegration of the persons involved in situations of gender-based violence is positively valued, purely reactive and palliative interventions are denounced.

As mentioned, The diversity of associations and institutions represent clear opportunities. Added to this is the social rejection of gender-based violence, although students find that the level of social response and support from the environment is not yet adequate. The media play an important role in the environment. Their function of denunciation and social awareness defines them as a valuable tool, while failures in informational rigor—dissemination of misconceptions or fake news—pose a threat to progress in the eradication of gender-based violence. Students also warn that users' disinformation about existing resources may be related to failures in informational rigor, and this misinformation also negatively impacts professionals' low acknowledgment.

We think that the students' opinions are a key aspect to explore social intervention in gender-based violence in our country. These views reinforce the conclusions of other studies at the international level, revealing the consistency of the students' perspectives beyond political, social, or cultural frameworks. Given the importance of training

professionals in multiple ways, we highlight the need to further delve into the introduction of specific contents and competences on violence against women in the curriculums. Considering their reflections about the collective of professionals, the students are concerned about the acquisition of skills and attitudes that are not always guaranteed in the university curriculum. This can be observed when, among the weaknesses, the students highlight their concern about lack of social skills.

The findings of this research aid the design of university training plans, the supervision of the learnings within the internship centers, and they promote lines for improvement of professional recycling. The dissemination of the results of the article in the academic and professional communities will support the actions of present and future professionals, granting ethical meaning to research as a powerful tool of social transformation, this time committed to the advancement of equal opportunities. Recognition of the role of professionals as essential agents in the struggle against gender-based violence demands that society as a whole be involved in this task.

The main limitation detected in the study refers to the opinions of students from a single university. Consequently, as an immediate objective, we plan to gather the opinions of students in other higher education centers in the Spanish territory. With regard to future lines of research, we also intend to examine the opinions of practicing social intervention professionals. In addition, in order to delve deeper into the analysis, other information collection techniques, such as interviews or focus groups, will be applied. The work presented lays the groundwork for upcoming research that will contribute to improving professional effectiveness in the field of gender-based violence.

Author contributions

C.R.P., S.E.F., L.M.R.G., and R.R.R.T. have equally contributed to this study. This paper is part of a project directed by C.R.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was funded by the University of Malaga, within the project Skills-based learning for professional practice with groups involved in domestic gender-based violence.

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