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## **Sexist attitudes appear in teenagers' virtual relationships**

**The Basque Youth Observatory is presenting its research titled, *Gender inequality and sexism in social networks*, a qualitative investigation on how teenagers use social networks in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country**

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The study is based on an indisputable fact: young people, especially teenagers, are experiencing new forms of relationship thanks to new technologies and to the ease with which they can connect and communicate via virtual social networks

The latest data from the Basque Youth Observatory on the expansion of social networks among young people indicates that their use has become widespread. **91% of boys and 93% of girls aged 15 to 19 have a social networking profile.** This teenage generation is growing-up and building its identity along with social networking.

In order to know how these new forms of communication are influencing and transforming younger generations, the Basque Youth Observatory has identified the need for this study to determine **how boys and girls use these social networks and their importance in order to understand any differences that may exist based on sex and age.**

This research was conducted from **September to December 2012** in collaboration with Sortzen Consultoría, coordinated by the authors, Ianire Estébanez and Norma Vazquez. Since the primary interest of the research was to go beyond mere numbers and obtain an insight into how gender identities moulded and how equality or inequality in these social networks arises, we chose a qualitative method - **discussion groups - with young girls and boys aged 13 to 17 and 25 to 29.**

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The latter groups were used to contrast the views of teenagers. **Eleven groups were formed to collect the experiences and opinions of almost one hundred young people.**

The material collected in the groups has served to conclude that **boys and girls make use of social networks differently and that sexist attitudes and even male gender violence are present in the virtual relationships of our young people.**

It was found that boys and girls, regardless of age, use social networks in a different way. **Girls use them as a personal and social medium with which to express themselves, while boys use them in a more instrumental manner or for leisure.** One consequence of this different use is that **girls, especially teenagers, expose themselves more through social networks**, uploading a greater number of pictures and describing their feelings and experiences with a view to establishing relationships. **Consequently, they are also more exposed to attacks on social networks.**

We also found differences in age in relation to the type of social networks used: **teenage boys and girls mainly use Tuenti**, although the number of **Twitter** users is on the increase, while **young people aged 25 to 29 use Facebook more often**. The messaging application, **Whatsapp**, despite not being a social network, has been highlighted by all groups and, therefore, seems to have become the favourite means of communication between friends. Its immediacy and some of its features sometimes make it an **element used to exert pressure and control**. Girls of all ages have stories to tell of experiences of control and jealousy that they have experienced at times through this application. In the case of boys, this experience of being constantly "on-line" can also become annoying, especially for older people.

Both girls and boys agree that girls suffer more sexual harassment through the networks, and that **girls regularly speak about unwanted contacts in a normal manner**. While **teenage girls do not feel violated at attempts to contact them and in cases of sexual harassment, young girls develop**

**greater awareness of the risk** and worry about younger girls whom they see as more vulnerable than they were. Today, teenagers are growing up in social networks, which did not exist for those who are now aged 25 to 29.

The fact that teenage boys and girls **see sexist situations** on social networks as normal and that they feel they are not affected by them and that these situations have no impact on their lives is worrying and requires prevention and awareness. Older boys and girls are more aware of this situation and it is this group, especially among girls, where we find *cyber-activism* against sexism, because they are convinced that social networking is also a space where they can fight against sexist attitudes.

In short, the paper aims to become a useful contribution for young people and for those who work in favour of equality and the eradication of sexist attitudes in families and in formal and informal educational institutions.