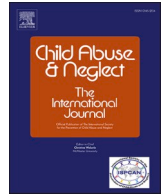




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From percentages to narratives: Giving silence a voice in child sexual abuse within the Portuguese Catholic Church, 1950–2022

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ABSTRACT

Background: Over the last two decades, several studies have examined the extent and expression of child sexual abuse (CSA) in religious institutions. In 2021, following new Vatican guidelines and under intense public pressure, the Portuguese Episcopal Conference commissioned a study on CSA in Portugal by members of the Portuguese Catholic Church (PCC) and others associated with it (from 1950 to 2022).

Objective and methods: The study draws on a web-based survey and a respondent driven sample. The questionnaire included categorical questions about victims, abusers, types of abuse, and open-ended questions. We characterized victims and abusers and developed a social cartography of abuse using Correspondence Analysis. Victims' narratives are also part of the model of analysis.

Results: We validated 512 of CSA by members of the PCC. Boys were more frequently abused (57.2 % vs. 42.2 %); male abusers predominate (96.7 %); most victims were abused more than once (57 %); the average age of victims when the first abuse occurred was 11.2 years. More invasive forms of abuse predominate (80 % manipulation of sexual organs or penetration; only 20 % had no body touching). There are patterns of abuse, and space plays a pivotal role in understanding the forms that CSA takes within Catholic environments. The richness of individual narratives was an unexpected outcome that enables us to better understand the organisational and symbolical power structures in which abuse takes place.

Conclusion: Given the characteristics of our sample, these cases are the tip of the iceberg, with CSA within the PCC likely involved thousands of children. Further research should strive to consider victims' narratives.

1. Starting points: the mandate of the independent commission

In December 2021, the Portuguese Episcopal Conference (CEP) invited a reputed child and adolescent psychiatrist (P. Strecht) to set up an Independent Commission (hereafter IC) for the Study of Child Sexual Abuse (hereafter CSA) in the Portuguese Catholic Church (hereafter PCC) from 1950 to 2022. The decision was taken against the backdrop of the 2019 Pope's "zero tolerance" guidelines on CSA, the social impact of the publication of the French Report (Sauvé et al., 2021), and an open letter of Portuguese Catholics demanding an "urgent national, independent and comprehensive investigation on CSA in the CC over the last 50 years" (Público, 2021).

The *Giving Silence a Voice Report* is part of a second wave of studies on CSA in the Catholic Church in Western societies. It follows

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seminal studies in Canada (Catholic Church. Archdiocese of St. John's, 1990), the USA (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004), and Ireland (Dublin Archdiocese Commission of Investigation, 2009), and later in the Netherlands (Langeland et al., 2015), Germany (Böhm et al., 2014; Dressing et al., 2021) and Australia (Doyle, 2017). Latecomers, which include the UK and Wales (Jay et al., 2022); France (Sauvé et al., 2021); Portugal, Switzerland (Bignasca et al., 2023) and Spain (Defensor del Pueblo, 2023)), have brought further insights and evidence of the extension and severity of these forms of aggression against children, in the past or present, perpetrated by members of the Roman Catholic Church or lay people working in catholic institutions or settings.

The growing number of national reports beckons comparative approaches, yet much needed comparisons are challenging (Böhm et al., 2014). Some studies are commissioned by the Church, others are funded by the State or sub-national entities. Differences in team composition and disciplinary perspectives shape definitions of CSA, the focus and unit of analysis, and the proposed objectives and methodologies. Moreover, there are considerable disparities concerning target populations, sample sizes, or timeframes of abuse, not to mention the time and budgets available to national research teams. Here we will not provide a comprehensive literature review on CSA within religious contexts but rather shed light on the specifics of the research process carried out in Portugal, which we believe is of utmost importance to highlight its implicit premises and identify its profile among the other efforts.

In this paper, we present key findings of the research on child sexual abuse within the Portuguese Catholic Church from 1950 to 2022. Our paper aims to: 1) identify victims' profiles; 2) investigate circumstances of the abuse (types of abuse and characteristics of abusers); 3) develop a social cartography of CSA that relates traits of victims, abusers, and locations of abuse; and 4) voice victims' narratives that exemplify patterns of abuse.

The Portuguese IC was a small, gender- and generation-balanced team composed of 5 recognised childhood and youth professionals with careers in the fields of psychiatry, sociology, and law and an "outsider" with no knowledge in the field, representing civil society. Later, a team of 5 historians and other social scientists also contributed, as we believed that a better understanding of the past would allow us to make recommendations for preventing abuse in the future. The IC worked exclusively as a study group—neither a judicial body nor an intervention or support group—dedicated to developing knowledge on CSA in the PCC within the specified period. Once formed, the IC had one year to produce a report. In that capacity, the IC freely defined its calendar and modus operandi in terms of research and writing decisions. Crucially, it was decided that results would be disseminated to the general public without previous knowledge from church officials.

We made an instrumental choice concerning the concept of CSA, defining it as encompassing all criminal acts of a sexual nature under Portuguese Law. The substantive definition and types of CSA have been enshrined in the Portuguese Penal Code since 1995. Sexual offences against children appear in Chapter V of this code (articles 163-176C). It includes the following offences: sexual coercion (suffering or committing a sexual act of any significance); rape (suffering or committing copulation, anal intercourse or oral intercourse with oneself or others, or suffering/practising acts of vaginal, anal or oral introduction of body parts or objects); pimping (encouraging or practising prostitution); exhibitionism or sexual harassment (making sexual proposals or forcing sexual contact); pornography (grooming or using minors in shows; photographing, filming or recording pornographic content with children; distributing material of a pornographic nature - in person or via a computer system); grooming, via ICT, for encounters; organising trips for the purposes of sex tourism; acts contrary to sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. Furthermore, departing from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and inspired by the contemporary childhood paradigm, the word 'child' referring to individuals younger than 18 years old (and not 'minor', which is connoted with an inferior or lesser status of children compared to adults), was used in the Portuguese report. Vulnerable or adult populations were not included in the study.

We made a fundamental methodological choice: placing abuse victims at the centre of the research, encouraging them to bear witness, and giving them a voice. We considered it crucial to make CSA victims the protagonists of traumatic, unique, and hitherto mostly unknown experiences. The IC's work was to describe such experiences in their commonalities and specificities and interpret them vis-à-vis social contexts. Unlike other studies, the IC's Report does not include an organisational or institutional perspective on the PCC, nor is it primarily focused on the analysis of former canonical or civil discourses on CSA. Finally, we did not focus on perpetrators. Having obtained written permission from the Vatican, an exploratory study of the PCC archives on CSA was also carried out for the very first time by the team of historians in all dioceses and some religious institutes. Also, interviews were carried out with all the bishops and provincials of religious institutes whose charisma is related to childhood and children. None of them were considered in this article.

2. Participants and methods

2.1. Study design and participants

The results presented here draws on a web-based survey made available online on a site entitled "Dar Voz ao Silêncio" (*Giving Silence a Voice*). The IC appealed for participation in the online survey through TV and print media. Beyond the website, to receive testimonies, we set up a telephone line (with voice recording) and a postal address. It was also possible to give in-person testimony through interviews. All relevant testimonies given by phone or in person (51 cases) were added to the final database with the informed consent of victims of CSA by members of PCC. The questionnaire schedule included standard categorical questions and a few open-ended questions for later content analysis. The sheer amount, detail and density of the information obtained through these unrestricted narratives were an unexpected outcome that illustrates the desire of the victims to have a voice in their experiences and to contribute to a full understanding of their traumatic experiences.

The schedule focused on two distinct moments in the lives of victims. First, we requested information about their current socio-demographic characteristics (age, sex, level of education, occupation and profession, residence area, familial status, household

composition, religion, and religious practice). Concerning the past, we asked participants to describe their family's circumstances at the time of the first abuse (including the parent's occupation and household composition), the type of abuse (including specific details of the sexual acts), how old they were when it first happened, and the duration and time pattern of the abuse (if it existed). Participants were also asked about the age and role of perpetrators within the PCC, where the abuse took place, and if they ever told anyone about it. We asked why they had decided to speak now to the IC, which physical, psychological, and spiritual impacts the abuse had on the victim, and which measures should be adopted to deal with CSA within the Catholic Church. Questions were also asked about the words used by the abuser to approach them during and after the abuse. No personal information concerning the abused or the abuser was recorded; however, 25 non-prescribed cases were forwarded to the Public Prosecutor's Office for further legal investigation.

The survey was available online from January 11th to October 31st, 2022. The website was accessed 2771 times, and the questionnaire was completed by 563 respondents. On average, it took 22 min to complete the survey. The final sample includes 512 validated cases. Fifty two cases were excluded because: age at first abuse was 18 or above; abusers were unrelated to PCC; near-blank testimonials, likely from those curious about the survey; contradictions in terms of age, chronology, or location; duplicate entries (identical testimonies with similar time-stamps due to connection instability); and entries insulting the commission's work.

Our methodological approach, therefore, relied on a respondent-driven sample (Heckathorn, 1997). We chose this approach because: 1) it is highly appropriate for uncovering information that tends to remain "concealed" or silenced, or about specific groups; and 2) the costs and time frame for conducting a nationally representative sample were untenable for the IC.

2.2. Analytical strategy, outcomes, and measures

We follow a four-step analytical strategy. First, we establish the profile of victims of abuse in the considered period using descriptive statistics and compare victim gender. For this, we consider the main sociodemographic characteristics of victims, including current age (<18, 18–30, 31–40, 41–50, 51–60, 61–70, >70), highest level of completed education (<High School; High School; >High School), household structure in which they lived at the time of first abuse (with both parents, institutional, with a single parent, other situations, non-specified), and father's main occupation as a proxy of social origin. We only report on fathers, as 37.1 % of mothers were homemakers and 11.2 % had missing cases. Father's occupations were categorised using the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) at 1-level and combined into the following categories: managers, professionals, and technicians; clerks and service workers; farmers and manual workers). In the second step, we look at the circumstances of the actual abuse. The main variables in this analysis are the victim's gender and age at first abuse (<10, 10–13, >13), the abuser's age (<30, 31–50,

Table 1
Sociodemographic features of the sample.

	Total n (%)	Male n (%)	Female n (%)
Gender	512 (100)	293 (100)	216 (100)
Male	293 (57.2)	–	–
Female	216 (42.2)	–	–
Current age			
<18	13 (2.5)	4 (1.9)	9 (3.1)
18–30	34 (6.6)	12 (5.6)	22 (7.5)
31–40	43 (8.4)	15 (6.9)	28 (9.6)
41–50	125 (24.4)	53 (24.5)	71 (24.2)
51–60	104 (20.3)	48 (22.2)	56 (19.1)
61–70	116 (22.7)	49 (22.7)	66 (22.5)
>70	56 (10.9)	21 (9.7)	30 (10.4)
No answer	21 (4.1)	9 (4.2)	11 (3.8)
Education level			
<High School	90 (17.6)	56 (19.1)	34 (15.8)
High School	83 (16.2)	51 (17.4)	32 (14.8)
>High School	248 (48.4)	124 (42.3)	122 (56.4)
Others / No answer	51 (10.0)	35 (11.9)	15 (7.0)
Household at Time of Abuse			
With both parents	300 (58.6)	146 (49.8)	152 (70.4)
Institutional*	107 (20.9)	79 (27.0)	28 (13.0)
With a single parent	40 (7.8)	23 (7.8)	16 (7.4)
Other situations	24 (4.7)	13 (4.4)	11 (5.1)
Non-specified	41 (8.0)	32 (10.0)	9 (4.2)
Father's main occupation			
Managers, prof. and techs.	144 (28.1)	86 (29.4)	58 (26.9)
Clerks and service workers	79 (15.4)	45 (15.4)	34 (15.7)
Farmers	40 (7.8)	24 (8.2)	16 (7.4)
Manual workers	100 (19.5)	49 (16.7)	50 (23.1)
No answer	149 (29.1)	89 (30.4)	58 (26.9)

Cells in bold reflect significant gender-based statistical differences (using the chi-square test and analysing standardised residuals that contribute most to the difference).

* Institutional Households refers to situation where individuals resided within PCC institutions, namely monasteries, convents, or shelters/asylums.

51–70, >70) and role(s) within the PCC (priest, educator, clergy assistant, consecrated, scout, top-level clergy, other), and the year of first abuse (1945–1970, 1971–1990, 1991–2010, 2011–2022). We also asked about the type of abuse (touching, manipulation of genitals, exposure of genitals, masturbation, oral sex, sexual grooming, anal sex, viewing or showing of pornography, image collection, and copula), its duration (once, a few times, < 1 year, \geq 1 year), and if victims ever revealed it.

In a third step, we aim to establish a social cartography of CSA in the PCC by examining patterns of association between types of victims, abuser traits and roles within the PCC, types of sexual abuse, and the abuse location. To this end, we use the multivariate statistical technique known as Correspondence Analysis (CA), which is useful to effectively describe large crosstabulations of data. By converting data into a multidimensional space with *two* to *n* dimensions (axis), CA allows us to identify underlying patterns in the data and enables an inductive reconstruction of the structure of abuse. The meaning of dimensions is constructed by comparing the relative distances of categories with above-average contributions to each axis (Greenacre, 2007). One of its key advantages rests precisely on avoiding substantialism: proximity between categories means association but not causality, and association indicates tendency but does not imply group homogeneity. All statistical analyses were performed with SPSS software, and no weighting was used. Finally, in keeping with the purpose and title of our report, in a fourth and final step, we give voice to the victim's narratives that exemplify the

Table 2
Characteristics of CSA by gender.

	Total n (%)	Male n (%)	Female n (%)
	512 (100)	293 (100)	216 (100)
Age groups of victims at first abuse			
<10	130 (27.9)	56 (20.9)	73 (37.1)
10–13	218 (46.8)	139 (51.9)	79 (40.1)
>13	118 (25.3)	73 (27.2)	45 (22.8)
Gender of abuser			
Male	496 (96.9)	284 (96.9)	210 (97.2)
Female	8 (1.6)	2 (0.7)	5 (2.3)
Unspecified	8 (1.6)	7 (2.4)	1 (0.5)
Abuser's age			
<30	77 (15.0)	52 (17.7)	24 (11.2)
31–50	247 (48.3)	145 (49.5)	100 (46.3)
51–70	109 (21.3)	52 (17.7)	57 (26.4)
>70	12 (2.3)	4 (1.4)	8 (3.7)
Unknown	67 (13.1)	40 (13.7)	27 (12.5)
Abuser's role(s)*			
Priest	394 (77.0)	213 (72.7)	180 (83.3)
Educator	62 (12.1)	43 (14.7)	19 (8.8)
Clergy assistant	43 (8.4)	22 (7.5)	19 (8.8)
Consecrated	23 (4.5)	15 (5.1)	8 (3.7)
Seminarian	22 (4.3)	19 (6.5)	3 (1.4)
Scout	10 (2.0)	6 (2.0)	4 (1.9)
Top level clergy	9 (1.8)	6 (2.0)	3 (1.4)
Other	34 (6.6)	26 (8.9)	7 (3.2)
Unknown	14 (2.7)	10 (3.4)	4 (1.9)
Year of first abuse			
1945–1970	140 (27.3)	77 (26.3)	63 (29.2)
1971–1990	200 (39.1)	108 (36.9)	91 (42.1)
1991–2010	81 (15.8)	57 (19.5)	24 (11.1)
2011–2022	34 (6.6)	20 (6.8)	14 (6.5)
Unknown	57 (11.1)	31 (10.6)	24 (11.1)
Type of abuse*			
Touching	309 (64.0)	158 (57.9)	149 (72.0)
Manipulation of genitals	276 (57.1)	191 (70.0)	83 (40.1)
Exposure of genitals	166 (54.4)	123 (45.1)	42 (20.3)
Masturbation	143 (29.6)	105 (38.5)	38 (18.4)
Oral sex	98 (20.3)	78 (28.6)	20 (9.7)
Sexual grooming	73 (15.1)	35 (12.8)	37 (17.9)
Anal sex	52 (10.8)	49 (17.9)	2 (1.0)
Viewing/showing pornography	28 (5.8)	19 (7.0)	9 (4.3)
Image collection	21 (4.3)	11 (4.0)	10 (4.8)
Copula	16 (3.2)	–	16 (7.7)
Duration of abuse			
Once	167 (32.6)	84 (28.7)	83 (38.4)
A few times	25 (4.9)	19 (6.5)	6 (2.8)
< 1 year	127 (24.8)	77 (26.3)	48 (22.2)
\geq 1 year	141 (27.5)	81 (27.6)	59 (27.3)
Unknown	52 (10.2)	32 (10.9)	20 (9.3)
Had told anyone about abuse	266 (52.0)	149 (50.9)	117 (54.2)

Cells in bold reflect significant gender-based statistical differences (using the chi-square test and analysing standardised residuals that contribute most to the difference).

patterns of association identified above.

3. Results

3.1. The social profile of CSA victims by members of the PCC

The data on the victims of the 512 validated cases is shown in [Table 1](#). Concerning gender, the sample has more men (57.2 %) than women (42.2 %). Roughly two-thirds (67.4 %) of respondents are aged 41 to 70 years, with 17.4 % being 40 years old or younger and 10.9 % being older than 70 years. Overall, slightly less than one quarter had not finished high school (17.6 %), 16.2 % completed high school, and almost half (48.4 %) were university graduates. Overall, the level of education in the sample skews considerably higher when compared with national data and is significantly higher among women who participated (56.4 % against 42.3 % among men) ([DGEEC/DSEE, 2023](#)). Sociodemographic data thus points out that victims of sexual abuse in the PCC are far from belonging only to deprived or marginal groups in society, as many of them are nowadays members of the political, economic, and social elites.

Most respondents resided with both parents at the time of first abuse (58.6 %), 20.9 % lived in institutions, an additional 7.8 % lived with a single parent (almost all of these lived with their mothers), and the remaining were in other or non-specified situations. The institutionalization rate is significantly higher among men than women (27.0 % vs. 13.0 %). Close to 3 out of 10 participants' fathers had higher-level occupations, around one-fifth were manual workers, and 15.4 % had clerk or service occupations. However, a high proportion of respondents did not provide data concerning parental occupations (29.1 %).

Although men are still the majority in our sample, there is a higher proportion of women when compared with similar other studies on abuse by members of the Clergy (with percentages of women ranging from 17 to 35 %) ([Bajos et al., 2023](#); [Barth et al., 2013](#); [Doyle, 2017](#); [Langeland et al., 2015](#)). High levels of educational attainment and full-time labour market participation of women in Portugal across all age groups are probable explanations for this difference ([CIG, 2022](#)), as both factors contribute to more autonomy and training to speak out about one's own life. Going back in time, female empowerment and voicing may have been further enhanced by the absence of men due to male migration and mobilisation for the war in former colonies during the sixties and the seventies and the greater proximity of women to Catholic Church structures ([de Almeida, 2011](#); [Duque, 2022](#)).

3.2. Modalities of abuse and the profile of abusers

We now look at the circumstances of the reported CSA cases ([Table 2](#)). In most cases (46.8 %), victims were 10 to 13 years old, with 27.9 % being younger than 10 years old and 25.3 % being 14 or older. On average, the first abuse occurred at the age of 11.2, with a standard deviation of 3.1 years, and the most common age of first abuse is 12 (data not in [Table 1](#)). Compared to other studies, the Portuguese sample stands out for the lower proportion of 10 to 13-year-old victims and the higher proportion of victims aged 14 to 17 ([Bajos et al., 2023](#)). Comparing the distribution by gender, abuse among girls is significantly more concentrated in the younger age group (<10 years: 31.1 % vs. 20.9 % among boys). On average, the first abuse suffered by boys occurs at a later age than among girls (11.7 vs. 10.5 years), even though the most common age of first abuse among girls is higher than among boys (mode: 14 vs. 12 years) (data not shown).

Looking at the profiles of abusers, an overwhelming majority are men (96.9 %). Concerning their roles within the PCC, almost 4 out of 5 (77 %) are priests, 12.1 % are educators, 8.4 % are clergy assistants, 4.5 % are consecrated members of religious orders, and 4.3 % are seminarians (other roles have small percentages). The high proportion of diocesan or religious priests as abusers is a feature of the Portuguese case when compared to others, where abusers are more dispersed among members of the church ([Bajos et al., 2023](#); [Defensor del Pueblo, 2023](#)). We also observe that although priests are always the vast majority regardless of the victim's gender, members of the PCC with other roles, such as seminarians, are more often perpetrators of abuse on boys. In terms of their age, most abusers are 31 to 50 years old (48.3 %), 21.3 % are aged 51 to 70, 15.0 % are 30 or less, and 2.3 % are older than 70. In 13.1 % of cases, the age of abusers is unknown. Abuse of boys tends to be perpetrated by younger abusers (17.7 % of boys' abusers are younger than 30, compared to 11.2 % of girls' abusers), and, conversely, abuse of girls skews significantly older (30.1 % of girls' abusers are older than 50 years, compared to 19.1 % among those who abused boys).

Regarding the moment in time when the abuse took place, the decades between 1970 and 1990 are those in which there is the highest percentage of reported cases (39.1 %). In 27.3 % of cases, the abuse took place before 1970, and in 15.8 % between 1991 and 2010. From 2011 until the end of the period considered in the study, 6.6 % of cases were recorded. In 11.1 % of cases, it was not possible to determine when the abuse took place. The Portuguese peaks do not coincide with the ones described in other reports, which occurred in the sixties and seventies ([Bajos et al., 2023](#); [Defensor del Pueblo, 2023](#); [Jay et al., 2022](#); [John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004](#); [Langeland et al., 2015](#)). In Portugal, the peak occurred later in time and, remarkably, the 1974 democratic revolution did not have an impact on reversing a growing tendency.

In roughly 1 out of 3 cases (32.6 %), the abuse happened once, a proportion that is significantly higher among girls than boys (38.4 % vs. 28.7 %). In 4.9 % of cases abused occurred a few times, in 1 out of 4 cases (24.8 %) it took place over a period of up to one year, and it was repeated over more than a year in 27.5 % of cases. Duration is unknown in 10.2 % of cases. Finally, a little over half of the victims (52 %) had previously revealed the events, a proportion that is slightly higher among female victims (54.2 % vs. 50.9 % among men).

Looking at the types of abuse inflicted on victims, touching other erogenous areas (64.0 %), manipulation of genitals (57.1 %), and exposure of genitals (54.4 %) are the most common forms, all with an overall prevalence above 50 %. These types of abuse are followed by masturbation (29.6 %), oral sex (20.3 %), sexual grooming (15.1 %), and anal sex (10.8 %). Lastly, there is also the viewing of pornography (5.8 %), taking sexual images of victims (4.3 %), and copulation (vaginal sex) (3.2 %). In this respect, the differences

between genders are striking and statistically significant for most types of abuse. Manipulation and exposure of genitals, as well as oral sex, anal sex, and masturbation, are much more common when the victims are male. On the other hand, when the victims are female, there is a higher incidence of touching other erogenous zones, sexual grooming, and vaginal sex.

3.3. Social cartography of child sexual abuse by members of the Portuguese Catholic Church

In this section, we use Correspondence Analysis to describe the main patterns of association between types of victims, abuser traits and roles within the PCC, types of sexual abuse, and the abuse location. In the analysis, we considered six variables: age and gender of victims (combined), age group of perpetrators, role of perpetrators within the Catholic Church, types of sexual abuse, location, or context of abuse (Table 3).

Correspondence Analysis shows that three axis account for more than 80 % of the total variance of the original variables. We focus our attention on the first two, which make up for approximately ¾ of the variance in the relationship between all variables (Table 4).

The first axis (horizontal) explains over 53 % of the total variance. It contrasts **spaces of daily pastoral action**, widespread within the vicinity of parishes, with **secluded spaces** where children are removed from other adults and the outside world. While some spaces of daily pastoral action, such as sacristies and confessionals, are restricted, most are accessible to parishioners, which means that it is always possible that other people are present, circulate, observe, or intervene. Such is less plausible in spaces where children are kept isolated from other adults, like in boarding institutions or events where hierarchies and control are stricter. In these spaces, many children are under the tutelage of small groups of powerful adults, either in long-term seclusion, which renders them close to prototypical total institutions (asylums, boarding schools, monasteries) (Goffman, 1961), or for temporary retreats (scouting activities). Accordingly, abuse occurring in confessionals is in stark contrast to abuse inflicted in seminaries, religious boarding schools, and similar institutions, and the features of each space are associated with the type of abuse. More forceful and difficult-to-contain forms of abuse, including anal sex, oral sex, and masturbation, are associated with secluded places. Conversely, more fleeting, and easier-to-camouflage forms of abuse (like touching and grooming) are associated with spaces of pastoral action. The contrast between these two poles also relates to the features and roles of perpetrators, especially their age, an indicator of both their physical ability and the intensity with which they express sexual desire through physical contact. Thus, younger abusers (aged up to 20, mostly seminarians) are associated with secluded spaces, and subsequent age groups of abusers travel across the space to the right in the figure, with older abusers (typically priests) concentrated near the pole of spaces of daily pastoral action. However, the latter association is weaker as the more professionally active priests (ages between 30 and 60) often take on other roles that warrant their circulation among a multiplicity of interstitial spaces. Furthermore, there is also a statistical effect due to the high proportion of priests among abusers. Importantly, the first axis also underlines a contrast in the prevalence of different types of abuse exerted on boys and girls. More violent forms of abuse, i.e., including penetrative sex are clearly associated with male victims and secluded spaces, while forms of abuse that involve touching or insinuation are associated with girls and spaces of daily pastoral action.

The second axis (vertical) explains about 21 % of the variance in the variables. It contrasts abuse that takes place in **collective spaces open to the community** with abuse that takes place in **priests' private spaces**. Catholic schools are the prime example of the former. In these spaces, there is often a double master-disciple hierarchy of teachers or schoolmasters who often also act as religious leaders, a condition that inevitably reinforces their symbolic power. However, these collective spaces are used by others (pupils, teachers, auxiliary staff, and parents), which undoubtedly influence the strategies and practices of the abusers. In contrast, abuse takes place in the priest's private space, in the rectory, in the parish house (vicarage), or in his car (see figure below); in this context, there is greater personal and familial trust and inevitable physical proximity, and the presence of observers is less likely to happen. In what concerns perpetrators, this axis contrasts situations where abusers are members of religious orders or educators, i.e., teachers or rectors of educational institutions, with cases where they are scouts (leaders). Strikingly, the second axis also polarises victims' ages, especially in the case of boys, with younger victims associated with younger abusers who are members of religious orders or educators and victims over the age of 14 associated with scouts and clergy assistants. A detailed inspection of the dispersion of categories reveals further noteworthy associations, namely concerning interstitial spaces or occasions. Namely: 1) abuse inflicted on boys aged between 14 and 17 by abusers aged between 21 and 30 and 31 and 40 involving masturbation and the viewing of pornography (bottom left of the figure); 2) abuse perpetrated on boys aged up to 9 by educators (top left of the figure); and 3) abuse through grooming (talk) or image collection from girls aged between 14 and 17 (bottom right of the figure) (Fig. 1).

Table 3

Variable used in correspondence analysis.

Variable	Modalities
Age and gender of victims	Male<10; Male10–13; Male14–17 Female<10; Female10–13; Female14–17
Age group of abusers	<20; 21–30; 31–40; 41–50; 51–60; 61–70; >70
Role of abuser within the Portuguese Catholic Church	Top level clergy (Bishop, Chaplain, Chancellor); Priest; Seminarian; Consecrated (Abbot, Abbess, Sister, Brother, Friar, Nun); Clergy assistant (Acolyte, Deacon, Sacristan, others); Educator (Professor, Director); Scout
Type of sexual abuse	Exposure of genitals; Manipulation of genitals; Masturbation; Oral sex; Anal sex; Copulation; Viewing Pornography; Touching; Image collection; Sexual grooming
Location or context of abuse	Church; Confessional; Catechesis; Vicarage (Parish House); Victim home; Seminaries, Religious Boarding School, Orphanage (Sem_RBS_Orphanage); Catholic College; Scout camp or activity; Car

Table 4
Eigenvalues of percentages of the axes.

Axis	Eigenvalue	Inertia: percentage	Cumulative percentage
Axis 1	0.076	53.67	53.67
Axis 2	0.029	20.70	74.43
Axis 3	0.017	12.38	86.81

3.4. Beyond the social cartography: abuse in the first person

We now develop an in-depth perspective that draws on the victim's narratives, as they were conveyed in the online survey. Each of the 512 cases validated is a unique individual whose life was affected by a distinct experience of abuse. However, for 48.2 % of those taking part in the survey, this was the first time that they shared their experience, with those that previously revealed mostly speaking with family members (male victims more often with partners and female victims more often with parents, namely mothers). While most were believed, in the overwhelming majority of cases, nothing was done to remove abusers (65.8 % of cases), with 77 % of the victims never making a complaint to the Church, and only 4.3 % taking their cases to court.

Using our social cartography as a blueprint to locate patterns of abuse, we illustrate the 7 typical spaces of abuse that fit into different quadrants of the chart. Narratives are reproduced using the victims' words and expressions. Readers are warned that the following pages contain detailed graphic descriptions of rape and sexual abuse. To preserve anonymity, victims are presented as M (male) or F (female); priests as P; O stands for the other abusers (friars, scout leaders, etc.).

3.4.1. Secluded, long-term retreat spaces: seminars, foster care institutions

Seminars are exemplary of "total institutions," usually large and austere spaces where children are concentrated apart from the outside world. There, children are subject to a daily community of discipline filled with timed activities (prayer, study, sports and cultural practices, reading, leisure, mealtimes, and sleep), watched over by adults. Chains of command and obedience are indisputable. Ran by the PCC, seminars were important educational institutions in a poor Catholic country such as Portugal, where, until the 1974 revolution, access to public schools was not universal and deprived families could not afford children's education. Going to the seminar at an early age was a schooling opportunity for boys, even if most didn't pursue a clerical career.

This was the case of M1, who was born in the 1950s. He grew up in a large working-class family of rural origin. They went to Mass every Sunday, where M1 felt happy and welcomed. His parents saw in him a vocation to become a priest and, at age 10, he left for the seminary, which was also a way of saving money, as "we lived in great distress." He recounts: "Father P1 was the perfect dorm supervisor, and he took a liking to me. He'd come to my bed with a candle and feel me up, stick his tongue in at me, and ask me if I'd ever sinned. I began to ask to confess to other priests so that it wouldn't always be the same, but at the end of the day, everyone knew about my thoughts and my life. It got back to the vice-rector, who slapped me on the wrist, and I was expelled for being in bad company. It was a huge disappointment for my parents, who put me to work, but then I ended up in another town, in a refuge for destitute children. There were 20 orphan boys. Friar O1 was there. He was much worse because he was a sadist, a pig, very bad. One day, I went with him to the house of a well-to-do man and during the night he told me to sleep with him. I went round among the boys. I'd lie down and fall asleep. I'd wake up with his penis between my legs and all dirty. Then he'd say: now you must go to confession. I felt very guilty. Steeped in sin. I didn't say anything in confession, you know."

As mentioned before, in seminars, forceful and difficult-to-contain forms of abuse, including anal sex, oral sex, and masturbation, are common and typically perpetrated by younger priests or other religious figs. M2 is another example of a boy, the typical prey in seminars. Born in the 1970s to a family of civil servants, he studied in diocesan seminaries from 10 to 15 years old. M2 recalls: "The large group of boys I lived with was heterogeneous: they came from many different parishes, from very different backgrounds, and from very different families (in means, in how they viewed life and the lives of their children, in their dreams and resources). I remember friends who had never tasted many of the seminary's foods, people who only went to the Algarve at the hands of the course director, who rewarded us at the end of Year 9 for all our good school results, people who had no money for a better coat, no money to go home at the weekend (every fortnight), etc.

Once a week, we went to see Father P2 for spiritual guidance in a room in one of the corridors on the first floor. He would sit in a chair facing the door, which was kept closed, and I would sit in another chair opposite him with my back to the door. Very close chairs—too close. As soon as he asked questions—and I don't remember any of them—his hand would land on my legs, and his legs would be between mine. And he would grab me, holding me against his legs, his chest, and his groping hands. With me, it was never more than that—more than the hands and legs, the breath and breathing, the silences, the subjects I don't remember, and I don't know if I gave the answers. But one day someone told me that Father P2 had surprised another boy naked masturbating in his bedroom. I thought it was strange—what would Father P2 be doing in a student's room? That boy, always sad and the most fragile of all my classmates, seemed almost non-existent".

Foster care institutions, where vulnerable or orphan children live under the tutelage of religious institutes or diocesan clergy, are also very often closed spaces where severe forms of sexual abuse occur. The next case involves a woman, F1, now 50 years old. She was a long-term victim of abuse by nuns and a priest (a renowned law professor at a prestigious university) in a religious foster care home. She recalls that "my father was a travelling salesman, and my parents never lived together. Between the ages of 5 and 10, I went to primary school in an orphanage. There were more than 300 girls. I was abused for the first time when I was 5 by the priest, who was Doctor P3, from University N, about 40 or 50 years old. He was chubby." F1 mentioned that the abuser showed genital areas,

manipulated sexual organs, touched, and kissed other erogenous zones, masturbated her, had anal sex, and made her watch pornography with him. All this took place in the priest's room or the sacristy once a week for years. "With the connivance of the nuns," the abuser would send for her and take her away. She complained to a nun, who yelled at her, "You are crazy and a liar. I didn't eat for three days". Caught in these secluded spaces where adults were colluding in silence, she had no way to denounce the nightmare she was experiencing.

3.4.2. *Temporary retreats: scouts, excursions, and camping*

Activities outside the church, such as study trips, scout camps, and spiritual retreats, also place children in isolated spaces under the supervision of small groups of adults working for the PCC. While these activities are temporary, they still create opportunities for severe forms of abuse, more often exerted on boys in our sample.

M3 was born in the 1980s to a family of teachers. When he was 12 years old, he went on a trip organized by the public school he attended. During the night, the Catholic Religion and Morals teacher and priest, who was around 30–40 years old, abused him. The abuser showed his genitals, manipulated sexual organs, touched erogenous areas of the body, masturbated, and performed oral sex on him. He wrote: "You know you weren't the only one: at least the other two boys in my room; we were the shyest, perhaps the most fearful; we were together; I went one night, G went another, and H went twice (the first and last of the trip) (...). I'll never forget that G couldn't stand it, and one night he came (...) and was crying his eyes out and sitting on his bed in our room. He didn't say anything, and I didn't tell him that I'd already been victimised the night before by this pervert. So, I asked him if he was afraid, and he said yes, crying. I told him to lie down on my bed so we could both sleep, and we did, but it took him so long to stop crying. (...) We were alone, far from home and our parents, and there was nothing or no one to tell, so we just consoled each other".

There were many other examples concerning girls and boys, mostly consisting of touching and manipulation. F2 was born in the 1970s. She was abused by a scoutmaster when she was 16 during a camping trip. The abuser was 25–27 years old. At night, he entered the tent and touched and kissed her. Similarly, M4 also took part in a camp when he was 15. There, he was abused by a priest, aged around 30, who "called us to his tent to give us massages after activities and hikes; he called everyone; who wouldn't be tired?". He was subject to many forms of abuse: showing of genitals, manipulation of sexual organs, touching and kissing of the body, and masturbation. "It was in silence. He would go up my body, from my legs to my crotch, and start approaching my genitals, where he would end up touching them, first under my clothes, then I would get more comfortable, and finally, he would pull down my underwear." "It happened several times during that camp, and there were attempts afterwards. (...) I think, my God, how many have been touched in this way by abuse by him?"

3.4.3. *The confessional*

Confession is a sacrament and a tradition for Catholic believers. It corresponds to a private and inviolable conversation, bringing a believer face-to-face with a priest in a small structure inside a church, where frequently both are hidden from the exterior. There, girls and, less often, boys of different generations were subjected to different types of abuse (grooming, touching, suggestion, and seldom penetration), perpetrated by tendentially older priests.

Born in the 1930s, M5 filled out the online survey with the help of his grandson. He recalls that when he was 14, he went to confession in an important church, and the priest asked him "inappropriate and sexual" questions. He said: "Are you dating yet? Have you ever put your hands on your girlfriend's boobs and thighs? I left and never entered a church again." He told his parents who asked him "not to talk".

However, girls were typically the prey for the abuses in the confessional, as shown in the example of F3, born in the 1970s to farm labourers. Aged 7, she was preparing for her first communion and went to confession every week at the parish church for a year. The catechist priest had a prominent position in the diocese and was around 30 or 40 years old. She was always abused inside the confessional: "obscene words and sayings, inviting me to do obscene acts with other children, particularly my brother. It was in the confessional, like that of many other girls at the time who everyone knows very well how to identify because the person in question was an animal, a large-scale molester, a monster whom no one ever wanted to accuse given his power, which he still holds for now. We were in the confessional, and he would start touching us all over our legs until he got right to where he wanted to be, and in between he would say obscene things to us and to my older brother, who was around 13 to 14 years old".

In turn, F4, from a younger generation, was the victim of inappropriate questions and insinuations in the confessional, which left serious marks on her psychological and emotional wellbeing. Born in the first decade of the 21st century to service workers, she went to confession often while she was in catechism. She felt abused by the priest in charge of her confession, who was around 45 years old. She recalls that "the priest asked me dirty questions in the confessional. He made the girls talk about dirty things. He didn't touch the girls, but he asked if we masturbated, if we stuck our fingers in, if we thought about making love." The same happened with "many girls from the scouts and the Sunday school. (...) I was very ashamed and had nightmares. I'm still very ashamed and I think I'm dirty. I can't have boyfriends because I'm afraid they'll ask me things or want to do things to make me feel dirty. The priest made me feel very ashamed and he would ask me things like I was crazy, and he would gasp and shout at the girls. He threatened with the devil".

3.4.4. *Inside the church premises; the sacristy, the altar, the auditorium, the priest's office*

Inside churches, there are several spaces where priests carry out their activities on an itinerant basis, moving from one place to another, either celebrating Mass or interacting with other people. Clergy auxiliaries (e.g., deacons, sacristans) often wander on these premises, which also offer many opportunities for perpetrators. Their strategy is always similar: ensure proximity with the young child and make them fall into a trap where victims find themselves in a face-to-face interaction, sheltered from outside eyes. Touching, manipulation of sexual organs, or even forms of penetration (with boys) could happen.

Born in the 1970s and the daughter of industrial workers, F5 was 8 years old when she was first abused. It took place in the sacristy of the parish church, and the pretext was that the priest, aged around 40, asked her to help him “cut the wafers.” “I sat on his lap in an armchair, and he made movements. Only later did I realise what it meant.” The abuse happened from time to time until the priest was moved to another parish.

As mentioned, such abuse also happened with boys. M6, born in the seventies, experienced something similar. He recalls: “I can't forget what happened to me when I was six years old. After catechism and with the excuse of preparing for first communion, the priest of the village where I lived called the boys and girls in turn to be alone in a closed room with each one. I don't know what happened to the others, I just know that the boy before me left the room in tears, but with me, the priest sat me on his lap, hugged me, kissed me, caressed me all over my body and my private parts, while he moaned, and I could feel his erection on my thighs and then the warm wetness of his ejaculation”.

Some forms of extreme sexual violence were witnessed by boys. It was the case of M7, born in the 1960s in the Azores archipelago. He left for North America with his family as a child. They settled in a city with a large Portuguese community, and, close to home, there was the Church of the Virgin run by Azorean priests. The family was very religious and took an active part in Catholic rituals. M7 and his twin brother started out as altar boys. They went to the 6 o'clock Mass every day: “the boys took care of the priests' clothes, sorted out lockers, flowers, took care of the tapers, etc.”. They became victims of sexual abuse by a church employee at the age of 11. He remembers: “This person was always in the sacristy and even in a prominent place on the altar during the celebration of Mass (...) The man was always there, accompanied by two boys”. The abuse was very frequent, “whenever the priest was away”. They happened “anywhere: the parish hall, the priest's office, the sacristy, even behind the altar” and they included the manipulation of sexual organs (both), touching other erogenous zones of the body and/or kissing in the same zones (both), oral sex (both), anal sex (on him). He told his parents, and they didn't believe him: “You're crazy!”. And his father hit him violently with a belt.

3.4.5. *The family home*

In their pastoral activities and as prestigious members of the local community, priests very often visited parishioners at home. Such was common in rural areas (namely when poor families were experiencing difficulties or losses), but also, since the late 1960s and following the opening brought by the II Vatican Council, in urban areas, with middle-class families involved in new Catholic movements. The private space of the family house appears as a scenario for CSA: by establishing relationships of proximity and trust with the families, the priest could easily reach the children during his visits.

The case of M8, born in the late forties, is told by his older sister, who witnessed the abuse. They were very poor and lived in a small rural parish in the north. The priest (“he would be 40 years old”) was a regular visitor after their father's death, “to support mum.” He also took the opportunity to abuse the younger child, aged 13. She wrote: “And what I saw wasn't pretty, and I can't go to the other world, pass away, and carry this secret with me. Once, in that storage room in the garden, I found it strange... and when I went to look, there was my brother, poor thing, he was very handsome and perfect, white skinned, he had his trousers and underwear off, and the priest was lying on the floor putting his organ in his mouth. I'd never seen that before in my life. It all seemed to pass very quickly, because I looked away and when I looked again there was my little brother, poor him, what he had suffered, I don't know what that soul could have suffered, he was now on the floor like an animal and he was behind him, the priest, thrusting into him and he was in tears from crying”. The fact that he was a boy from a very poor, vulnerable family was certainly a strong factor in the triggering of the abuse. However, home was also a risky place for middle-class families. Here are two illustrative examples.

M9 was born in the nineties into an urban, middle-class family and was abused when he was 8 years old. His parents had divorced, and he lived with his mother and grandparents. They were friends with a young and “highly educated” priest (30–40 years old) who often visited their house. He offered to tutor the boy at home and mentor him in his studies “because he was distracted and disorganized.” The tutoring took place in the home office, and there, after asking him, “Shall we start by playing or studying?” the abuse took place: showing genitals (both), manipulating sexual organs, and oral sex. “You can't imagine what it's like for a child in a physically lower position, of course, to look up and see a penis on his face for years and years and to have to suck it and move it and watch that thing grow. I'm sorry, I'll stop here.” He never told anyone about this abuse, which went on for four years and was regular: on weekdays, at the end of the day.

The third example involves a girl. F6, born in the seventies into a well-off family with many children. At the time of the abuse, she was in the 6th grade. She wrote, “He was a marriage counsellor and was the one who married my parents. I'd also like to mention that, in the 1970s, the Teams of Our Lady or couples accompanied more closely by a clergy counsellor would often receive them in their homes, especially in the evenings, for dinner. In the family environment, while we were waiting for my father to arrive for dinner, Father P4 (about 50 years old) would play with us and watch cartoons, etc. In the middle of us, he tried touching, and once I only realised his intention, which disgusted me: to fondle my breasts under my pyjamas while I was playing. I stopped and ran to my room, and he followed me, but I had already locked the door. Speaking quietly on the other side of the door, he said something along the lines of “It was just a gentle, caring gesture; I didn't hurt you, did I?”. We find the pattern mentioned previously: typically, sexual abuses involving boys were far more violent than the ones perpetrated against girls.

3.4.6. *The catholic school*

Our cartography shows some dissimilarity between abuse taking place in spaces that are open to the community (such as Catholic schools) and the private spaces of clergy members. It also suggests a continuity between types of abuse, from those easier-to-camouflage forms (like touching and grooming) to those implying touching and penetration over boys and girls.

In Catholic schools, priests or consecrated religious are often teachers with daily interactions with the pupils. Such was the case of M10, born in the seventies. He explains: “I was nine, and I had a (repeated) problem with a teacher who, although not a priest, was an

active member of the Order's community. The teacher in question was one of the heads of the school, with a central role in its dynamism, as well as in a group that existed at the time outside the school. At the school, I took part in various activities in which this teacher played a prominent role, alongside the classes he also gave. He's an unforgettable person for many reasons. He had his own office, which I think only the headmaster of the school had, and it was normal for him to call students into his office for more personal conversations, often on the pretext of the club, Faith, behaviour, etc.". He adds that "one day he sat me on his lap in an affectionate and seemingly harmless act. My parents had been separated for some years, and I had little contact with my father. So, there could have been some fragility or lack of male attention on my part, and I could have easily created or given in to this man's affectionate approach. I remember that with me on his lap, he would "hook" my feet behind his legs (in the twin area), unzip my trousers, leaving them above my knees, and masturbate me slowly. I didn't know what it meant because I shouldn't have had a clear idea of the sexual component of the act. But I knew it was strange, and so I kept it to myself."

Another example comes from a girl born in the 1970s. F7 attended a religious school and was abused at 10 during Portuguese language classes. "Father P5 would tell us to read a text, and he would pass between the desks. He would stand behind our heads, put his hand inside our blouses, and feel up our boobs. He was aroused and would rub his penis against our heads. At other times, he would simultaneously put his tobacco-scented fingers into our mouths and work them around in our mouths and on our tongues. We adopted strategies: turtleneck jumpers, and some boys who realised our discomfort would interrupt our reading and asked questions to make him stop. And so, a school year went by without really understanding what was going on and without anyone describing it as abuse."

3.4.7. *The priest's private spaces*

At the lower bottom of the vertical axis, the private spaces of the priests appear. Luring and surrounding the victim, they would bring the child into their home, the parish house, or the car. Severe forms of abuse were typical in these cases, either over boys or girls.

F8 was born in the 1950s to a family of farmers. A minor friar abused him when he was six years old. The abuser "was generously welcomed into my grandmother's house, a widowed and well-respected lady who lived next door to my parents' house. In the villages, there was always a Catholic family of reference who welcomed the members of the church. These friars ate at my grandmother's house but stayed overnight in another house that was vacant and belonged to a couple who lived abroad. When I was five or six years old, my grandmother told me to go and show the friar, who was coming for the first time that year, to the house. "So, I took him to the house, where he was welcomed by the daughter of the owners of the house next door. As I started my journey home, I was encouraged by the 'gentleman' to wait a little while before offering me a 'little saint', i.e., a prayer card of some saint, which he was carrying in his suitcase. And so it was. But in a flash, I found myself lying on the bed without my knickers, and the man began to touch my genital organs. As if by a miracle, the lady of the house returned on the pretext of finding out if anything was missing and... saved me!".

M11 was born in the 1970s and was an altar boy at his parish church. He was around fifteen years old when the 60-year-old priest began to invite him on frequent outings. The abuse took place in the car or the parish house: manipulation of sexual organs (both), masturbation (both), anal sex (by the abuser), and viewing pornography together. The abuse lasted about two years. "It will never go away in my mind and knowing that the person in question here never paid for what he did".

The case of F9, born in the eighties, is the last example. She lived with her family in a small village. She told the IC: "I don't remember the beginning or the end. I was in 7th grade, and I was a member of the choir. The priest's house was at the end of a street, hidden away, where there was nobody! He would pick me up from home because I sang and there were choir rehearsals, which he directed. That was the excuse. Then we'd go to his house, and for three hours or so, we'd watch TV, have a snack, and then sit on the sofa, and he started touching me. There was never any penetration. Only once did he put his penis against my body. He undressed me, but not completely. He pulled down my knickers, moved me around and masturbated me. I don't remember how it ended, but perhaps the fact that I went to another school outside the village was the cause...."

4. Discussion

Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church has become an object of study over the last decades, with reports being produced by different entities in several Western countries. With an interest in contributing to a comparative perspective, in this article we presented the starting point, methodologies, and key results of the Portuguese Report *Giving Silence a Voice* (2023). Placing the victim and their unique traumatic experience at the forefront of the analysis was a distinctive feature of our approach. This involved combining an extensive perspective, supported by statistical data from an online survey conducted with a respondent-driven sample, with a qualitative perspective that adds depth and detail to the numerical indicators by incorporating the victim's narratives into the analysis.

What did the sample reveal? First, the assumptions, often defended by members of the Portuguese Catholic clergy or religious sectors, that Portugal was "unlike" other countries regarding CSA - a bishop went as far as comparing the relevance of the problem to the probability of a meteorite falling in the city of Oporto - are entirely denied by empirical evidence. The 512 cases validated by the IC are just the tip of the iceberg, with CSA within the CC likely involving several thousands of children. Moreover, the phenomenon was/is widespread in all regions of the country and has continued over time. More importantly, the devastation, the cruelty, and the harm associated with CSA cannot be understated or ignored.

As in other reports, boys were more frequently abused than girls (57.2 % vs. 42.2 %); male abusers predominate overwhelmingly (96.7 %); most victims (58.2 %) knew other children who were victims of the same abuse; most victims were abused more than once (57 %); the average age of victims when the first abuse occurred was 11.2 years (11.2 girls, 10.5 boys). We found that all types of abuse were committed, but the more invasive forms predominate (80 % manipulation of sexual organs or penetration; only 20 % had no body touching). However, there are some figures that differentiate the Portuguese sample from others. Considering time, the peak of abuse occurs between 1960 and 1990, some decades later than in other countries; priests largely prevail as abusers (77 %), compared to other

members or lay collaborators of the Catholic Church; almost half of the victims (48.2 %), now adults, spoke for the first time of their abuse to the Independent Commission, i.e., in 2022.

In addition, we demonstrate that types of abuse are not randomly distributed. The social cartography that we developed shows that space, i.e., physical location, is a powerful shaping factor of CSA in the PCC. Space plays a pivotal role in describing and understanding the forms that CSA takes within Catholic environments. This finding builds on the French team's use of CA, which identified six configurations of abuse relating to historical time and abuser profile (Sauvé et al., 2021).

Following other studies and reports on the subject, we can thus say that while individual factors may exist, they certainly are not the most important explanatory factors at stake regarding CSA within the church. We contend that the so-called “rotten apple theories” (White & Terry, 2008), which emphasise that CSA exists because some priests or individuals working for the church have moral failures, paraphilias, or cognitive distortions of reality, have very limited to null explanatory power. First and foremost, such theories fail to take into consideration the organisational and symbolical power structures in which abuse takes place. Secondly, as shown in this article, they fail to consider how space is also a factor that creates opportunities for abuse to occur or to be concealed. As the adage says, “opportunities make the thief.”

Our research also shows the importance of considering the narratives of actual victims in the analysis. Statistics and figures are important tools to describe major tendencies and reveal the extent of abuse. They demonstrate, beyond the shadow of any doubt, the extent to which abuse is present in the institutional workings of the Catholic Church. However, in this field, a few decades after research on CSA started, statistics rarely bring out major news: with little variation, different reports identify similar figures in terms of prevalence and incidence of CSA in the CC (either considering the victims or the clergy). Therefore, we believe that it is important to move forward and to explore how CSA plays out, for example, by exploring the association between characteristics of victims, abusers, and places where abuse takes place. Sexual abuse is a diverse reality that is not randomly dispersed in time, space, or social contexts. The Correspondence Analysis exemplifies the potential of a more refined methodologies in building patterns or typologies that group (or split) sets of internal or external variables in coherent arrangements with specific common traits. Furthermore, to understand CSA in the past and prevent it in the future, research must be attentive to the environmental, structural, and material factors which lay the ground for sexual misconduct of adults towards children.

Research on CSA needs to take into consideration the victims' irreducible narratives, i.e., to incorporate their voices and perspectives in the analysis. Building on macroanalysis, an in-depth and qualitative approach gives body and words to abuse and places those who were abused in a specific setting. The narratives enable researchers to reconstruct, from the point of view of the victim-subject, the experiences, representations, and emotions associated with CSA. We argue that, much more than details or illustrative data, these elements are a fundamental element in uncovering the logics of power and violence in which victims of CSA in the CC are trapped, and the life-altering effects of abuse on individuals.

Sexual abuse of children is a grave violation of their human rights, with devastating, often lifelong, consequences. Our study lifted the veil on the extent of Children Sexual Abuse within the Portuguese Catholic Church. Given these results, urgent measures must be taken to prevent abuse by members of the clergy and others working for religious organisations. In keeping with the unequivocal recognition of the Rights of the Child, these include 1) full recognition by the Church of the existence and extent of the problem and a commitment to appropriate measures to prevent it in the future, which first and foremost involve the immediate removal of abusers from any contact with children, denunciation of alleged cases, and full collaboration with the Public Prosecutor's Office; 2) setting up permanent, reliable, and entirely independent abuse reporting mechanisms, and preventive measures including “best practice manuals” and provision of “support and locales for victims and family members to testify, and corresponding follow-up”; 3) public requests for forgiveness by the Church and initiatives that provide reparations and psychosocial and legal support for victims; 4) setting up ongoing external training and supervision of members of the Church, with specific reference to sexuality (their own and that of children and adolescents); and 5) ceasing religious practice and meetings in closed, individual physical locations,

Future research can explore several themes within the context of children sexual abuse in the Church. Key areas of investigation may include assessing the impact of ecclesiastical formation on the prevalence and forms of abuse, analysing the trajectories of individuals who engage in abusive behaviour, examining abuse within the Catholic Church through a broader historical lens—requiring full access to ecclesiastical archives—and exploring instances of abuse within other non-Catholic religious denominations.

4.1. Limitations

Our study has limitations and biases that must be acknowledged. Firstly, it relies on an online survey, which requires proficiency with IT, a feature unevenly distributed in the Portuguese population, with older and less educated segments being at a disadvantage compared to younger people, university graduates, and those who use the Internet (Cruz-Jesus et al., 2016; Lapa et al., 2023). Beyond technology-related limitations, the ability to speak out and the strength of personality to do so consistently are very unevenly distributed. It is therefore not possible to extrapolate from this sample to the wider world. Unlike the French or Spanish teams (Bajos et al., 2023; Defensor del Pueblo, 2023), we cannot extrapolate from the sample to the overall population, for the probability of being included is not the same for every person abused by a member of the Catholic Church. Nor does the sample reflect, in their entirety, the social and demographic characteristics of the universe so sampled.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Vasco Ramos: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ana Nunes de Almeida:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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