

## STEPS Project:

A training program to avoid secondary victimization in the assessment and treatment of child sexual abuse

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## Introduction

In Catalonia, the process to be followed after a child reports being a victim of sexual abuse is complex (Save the Children, 2018). Some of the most serious problems are the lack of professional training in this field and the absence of coordination between institutions. In Spain, there is no official training available for professionals working with child sexual abuse victims. **STEPS** is a holistic interdisciplinary educational and training project that aims to reduce the secondary victimisation faced by victims of child sexual abuse by implementing the Barnahus model. The Barnahus Model, which originated in Iceland in 1998, has already been implemented in various European countries (see PROMISE Project). This approach is based on a multidisciplinary approach, wherein all professionals involved in cases of child sexual abuse collaborate and work "under the same roof" (Johansson et al., 2017). Its theoretical principles have strong scientific support, and the initial studies analysing its effectiveness have reported positive results (Nesvold et al., 2005; Kaldal et al., 2010; Rasmussen, 2011; Stefansson et al., 2012; Landberg & Svedin, 2013). The main objective of the project is to create, design, and evaluate a training program for the development of specific skills and personal abilities needed by future Barnahus professionals in Catalonia.

## Method

A hybrid format training program was developed, which included a general module and three specific courses tailored to targeted professional profiles. To assess whether this training improved professionals' knowledge, the same survey was administered both before and after the completion of the training. The survey comprised sociodemographic data, two validated questionnaires concerning child sexual abuse myths and attitudes, four questions regarding knowledge of the Barnahus model. The training is targeted towards professionals in the fields of mental health, child protection, paediatrics, and law enforcement agencies involved in the care of child victims of sexual abuse. It was estimated that approximately 150 professionals will participate in the program.

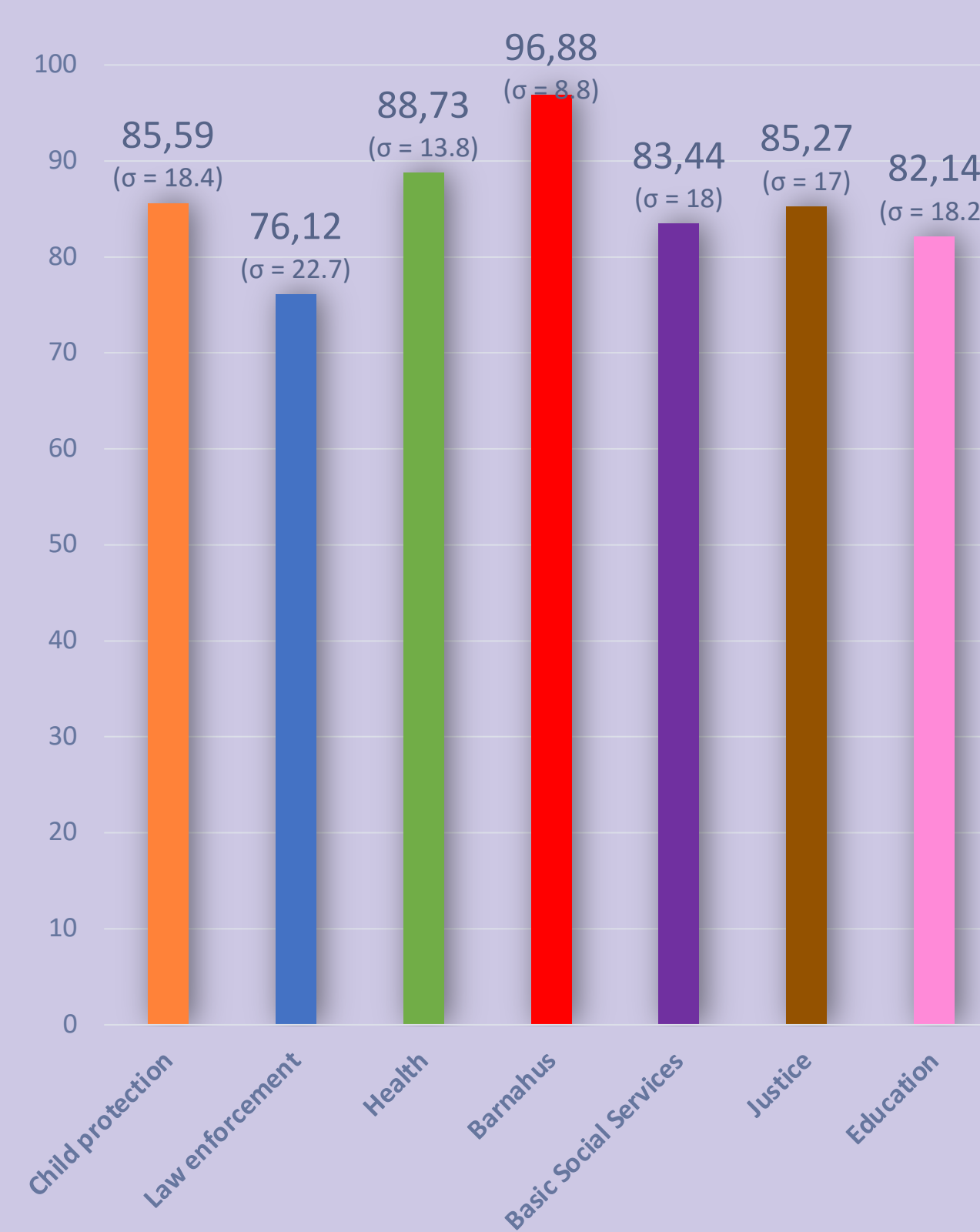
## Results



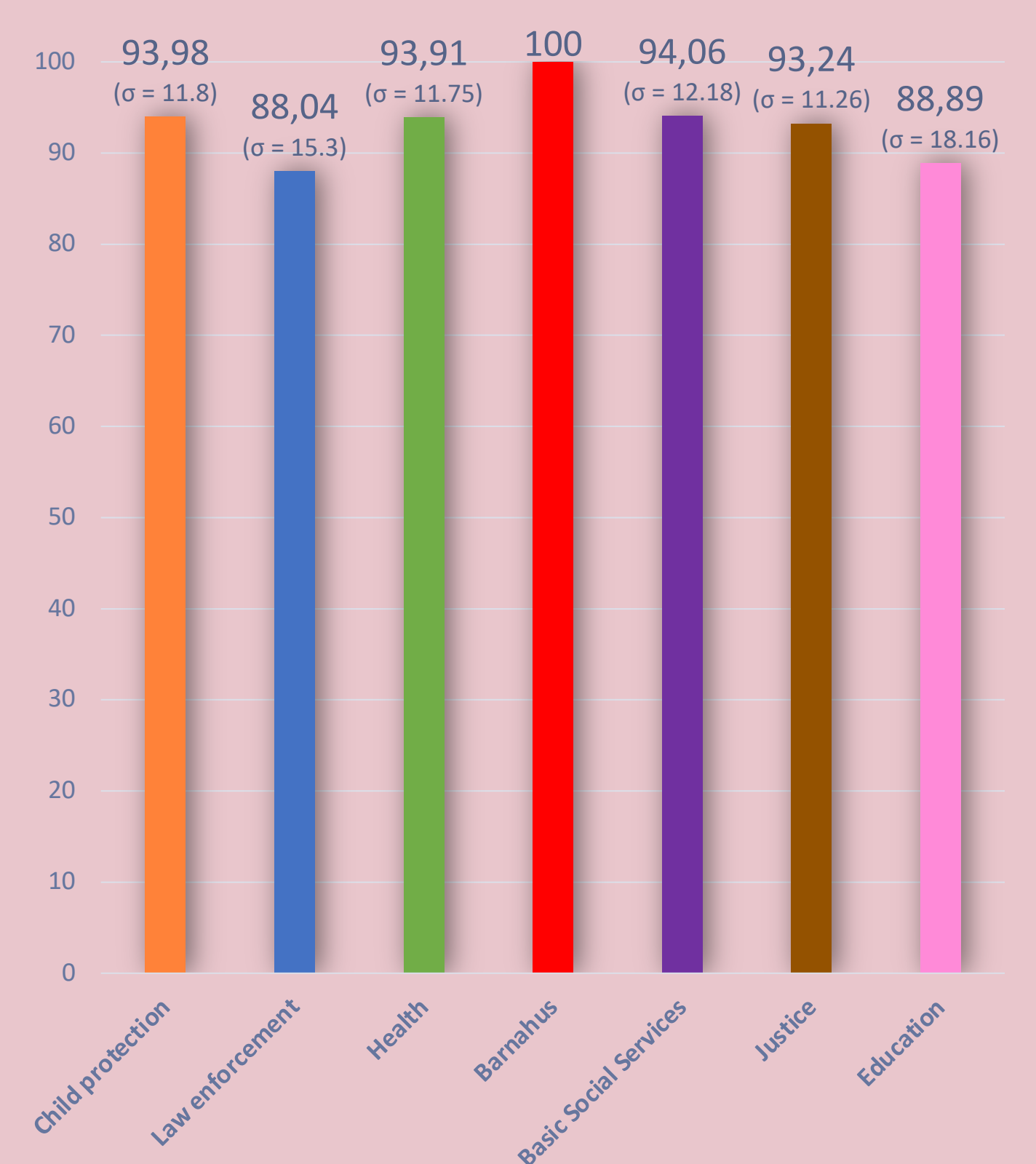
In total, **1007 participants** took part in the program. Among them, 86.1% identified as female, 12.9% as male. The mean age of participants was 42.23 years ( $\sigma = 8.87$ ). Regarding specific training in violence against children and adolescents, 65.9% received training, while **30.5% had no training**. The majority of participants worked in the **child protection sector** (39.6%), followed by **basic social services** (23.8%), **health** (14.1%), and **law enforcement** (13.3%). Other areas represented included **justice** (5.6%), **education** (1.4%), and professionals in the **Barnahus pilot project** in Tarragona (Catalonia, Spain) (0.80%). As for work experience, 32.8% had over 10 years, 23.4% had 2 to 5 years, 19.2% had 6 months to 2 years, 15.6% had 5 to 10 years, and 8.6% had less than 6 months.



The baseline knowledge already held by professionals was at a high level. The mean score of participants on the knowledge questions was **84.11** ( $\sigma = 18.64$ ). The mean for each professional field can be observed in the graph. In addition, while the majority of participants reject the myths and stereotypes before training, there is still a percentage of professionals working with sexual abuse victims who hold or partially hold these false beliefs.



After the training, **all groups of professionals experienced an increase** in the average rating on the knowledge questions (see graph). Also in the post-evaluation survey, professionals were **more likely to disagree with the myths**, as evidenced by a statistically significant decrease in the mean scores of some items (p-values ranged from 1.33E-10 to 0.02). However, the mean score for an item concerning to the fact that the harmful aspect for children is not sexual contact with adults, but the resulting social stigma after disclosure, has significantly increased.



## Discussion

The Barnahus model is a very useful resource to address the problem of secondary victimization suffered by victims of child sexual abuse (Pereda et al., 2021). The training of professionals is a fundamental part of this approach. STEPS training has demonstrated its effectiveness in enhancing professionals' understanding of the misconceptions surrounding child sexual abuse, while also increasing their knowledge of best practices in caring for these victims. The increase in beliefs on some items could be explained by the content of the training, that emphasizes how harmful child contact with professionals can be following disclosure. This may have influenced the increase in the number of professionals who agree with this myth. It is important to emphasize that any sexual victimization during childhood is a harmful experience in itself that requires, in most cases, the intervention of highly qualified and trained professionals.