HUMAN FORMATION IN THE TRAINING TO PRIESTHOOD IN MAINLAND CHINA

在中国大陆的天主教修道院人格培育

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HUMAN FORMATION

Ratio fundamentalis, Congreg. for the Clergy (2016).

- The divine call engages and involves the ‘concrete’ human person; a correct and harmonious spirituality demands a **well -structured humanity** (93).

- ***Human formation***, being the **foundation of all priestly formation,** promotes the ***integral growth*** of the person and allows the integration of all its dimensions:

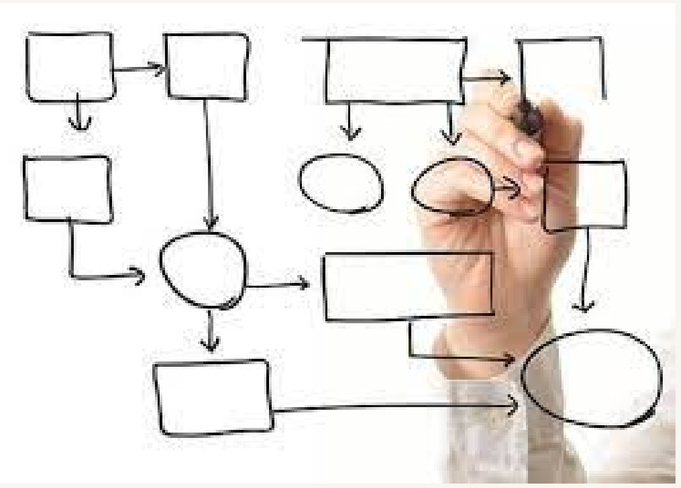
- ***traditional formation*** in the seminary was often unbalanced, focusing on the intellectual adequacy or inadequacy, and neglecting or at least undervaluing the formation at the level of **human affective maturity**;

- Child sexual abuse (CSA) cases in the Church is not correlated with the requirement of celibate life for the priesthood, but with clericalism (Doyle, 2003, 2006) and **psychosexual confusion or immaturity** (Cencini, 2005, 2015; Uriarte, 2016; Garland & Argueta, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

- 28 Seminarians (from two Chinese seminaries)
- 6 Formators (from the same two Chinese seminaries
- Control Group (30 university students)



METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Mixed Method approach

METHODOLOGY

Research Instruments:

- Qualitative Instrument*: Semi-structured Interview*
- Quantitative Instruments 1*: Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-II (MMPI-2) - Chinese version*
- Quantitative Instrument 2*: Sexual Addiction Screening Test-Revised (SAST-R) - Chinese translation*

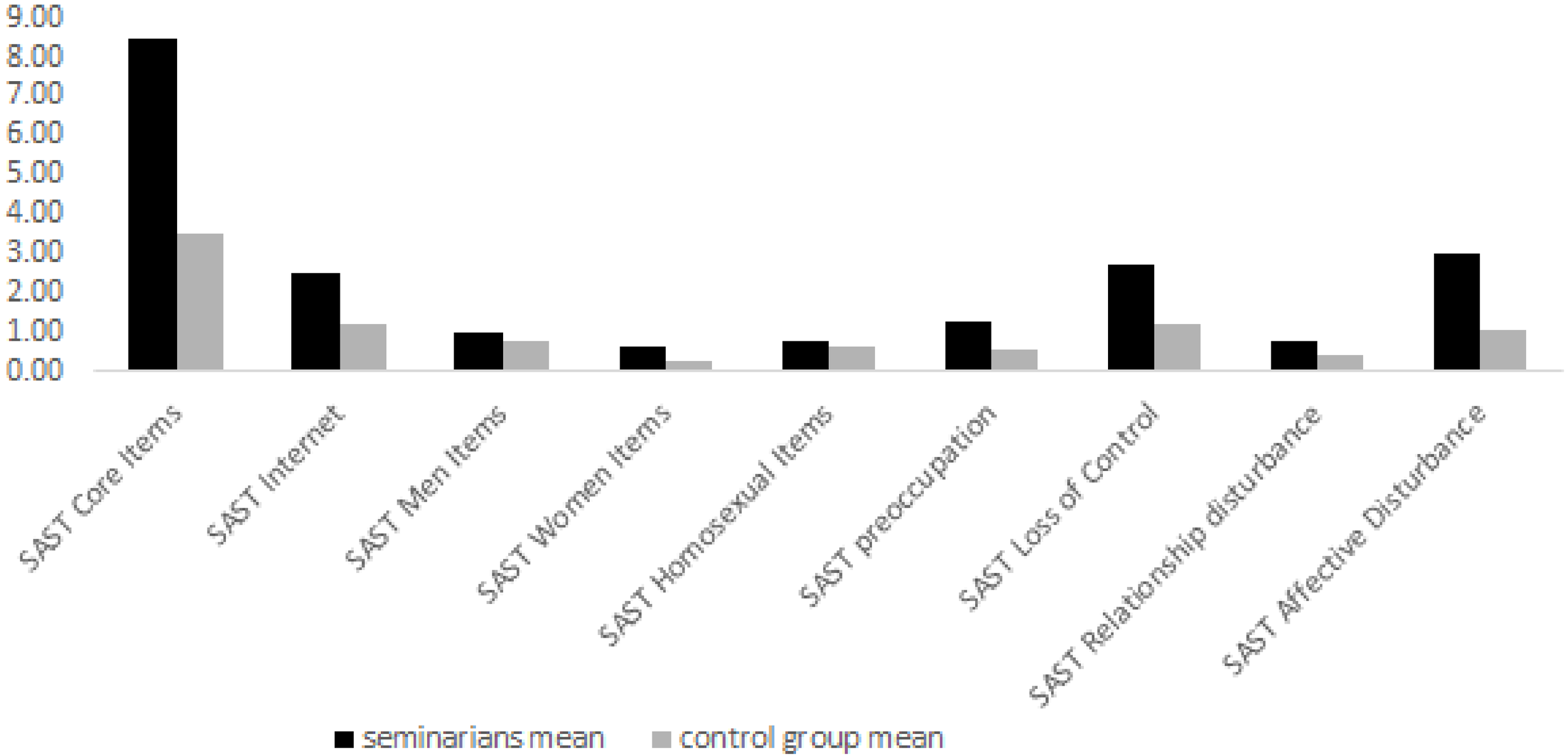
The empirical data revealed that Chinese seminarians presented ***more severe mental and psychosexual issues*** compared to their lay peers:

- **Defensiveness and Repression:** On the MMPI-2 seminarians showed intense psychological defensiveness, moralistic over-control, and the repression of health aggression or sexual impulses.

- **Psychosexual Vulnerability:** The SAST-R results indicated a high prevalence of elevated scores regarding sexual preoccupations, compulsive behaviors (e.g., cybersex, internet pornography), and sexual addictions.

Consistent with global literature, compulsive sexual behaviors often serve as a maladaptive coping mechanism to escape internal shame, loneliness, and ***unhealed childhood wounds***.

SAST-R Results by groups



Instrument *: Semi-structured Interviews*

- **<u>Seminarians' interview</u>** (six variables):

✓*significant life-experiences*

✓*self-image*

✓*vocational values*

✓*Human formation*

✓*psychosexual development*

✓*affective maturity*

➢ **<u>Formators' interview</u>** explores other variables:

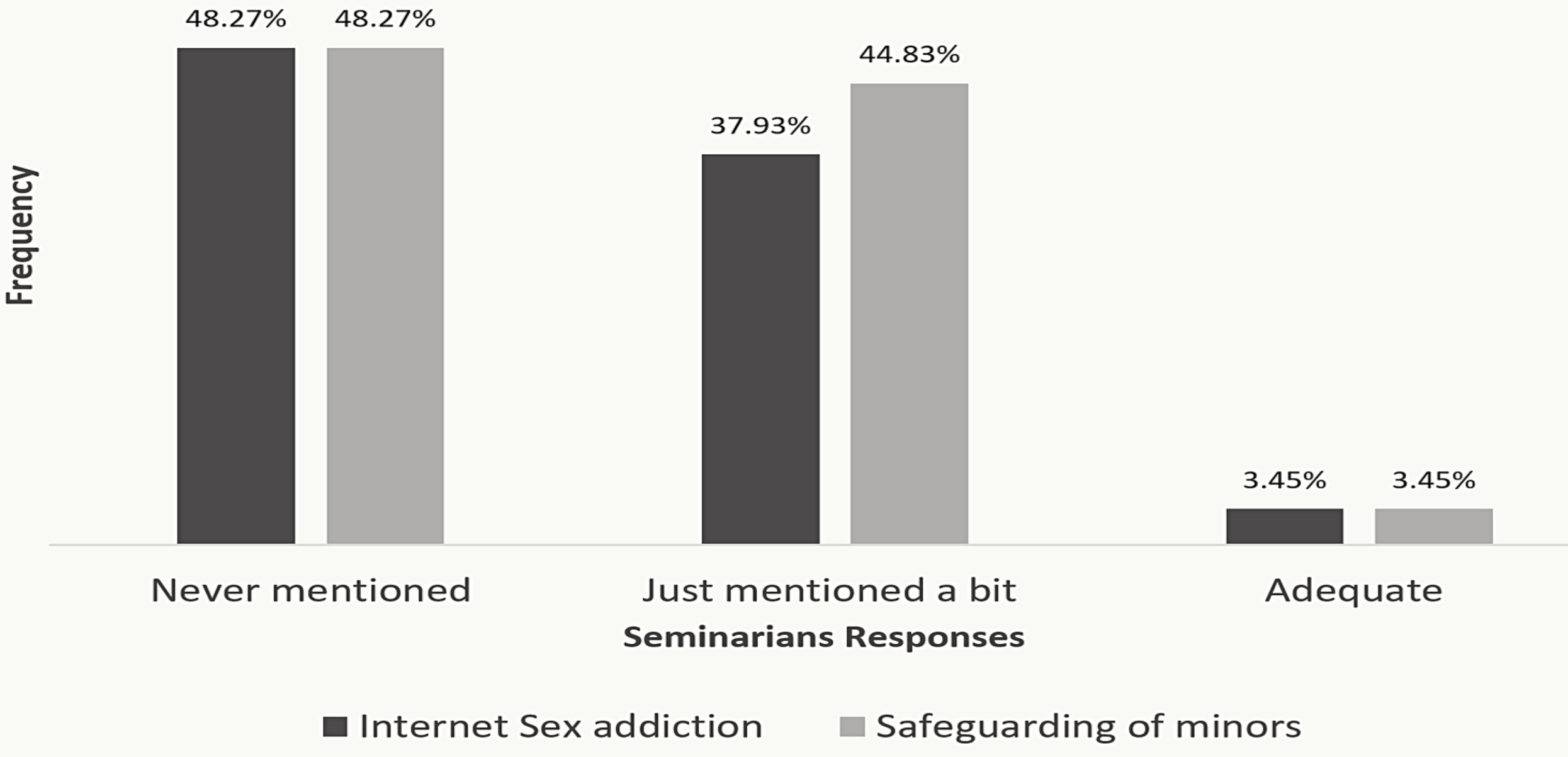
✓*HF program in the seminary*

✓*Candidate's involvement in the formation*

✓*Psychosexual difficulties of the seminarians*

✓ *Preparation of the formators*

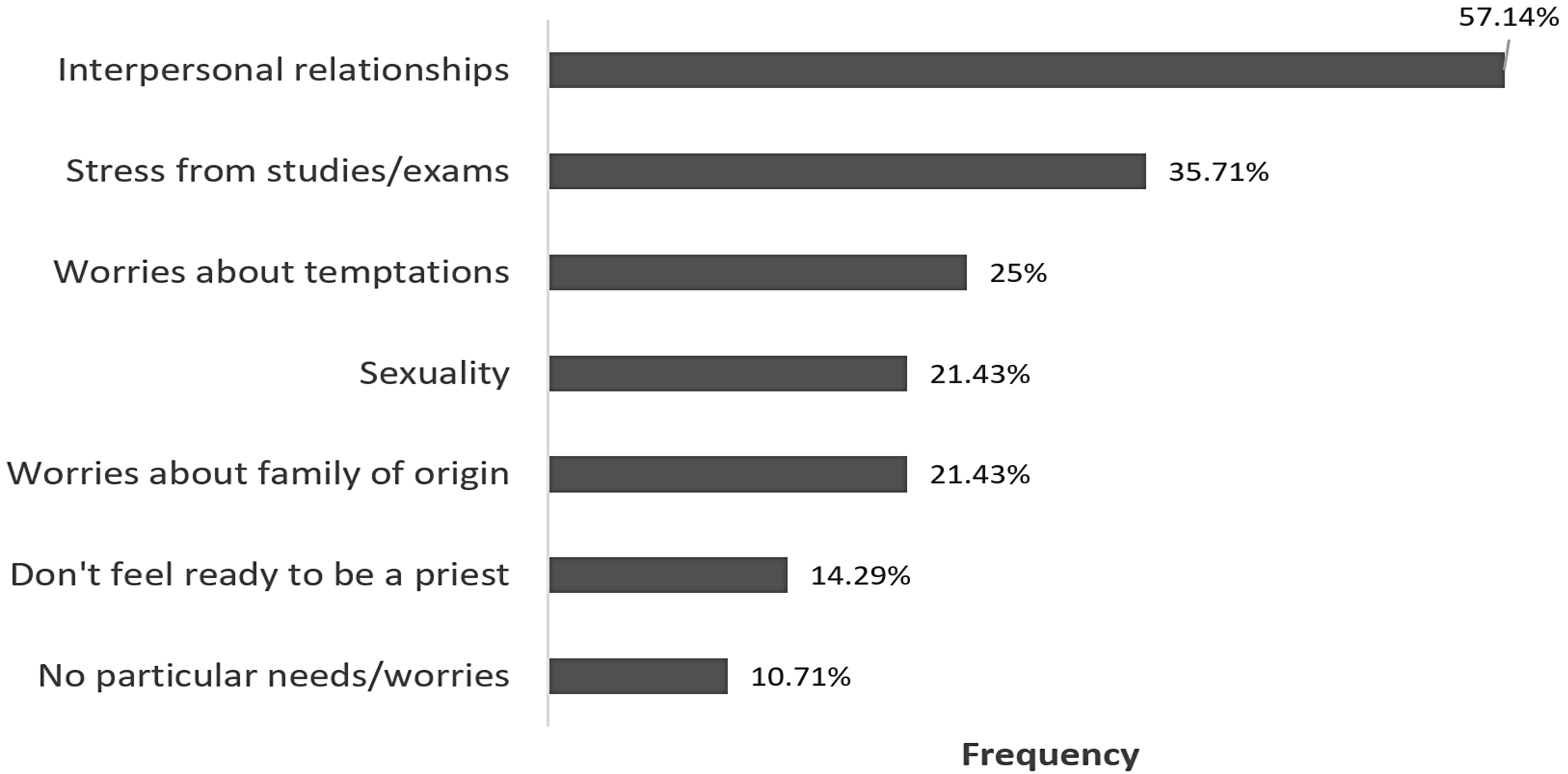
SAFEGUARDING OF MINORS & INTERNET SEX ADDICTION



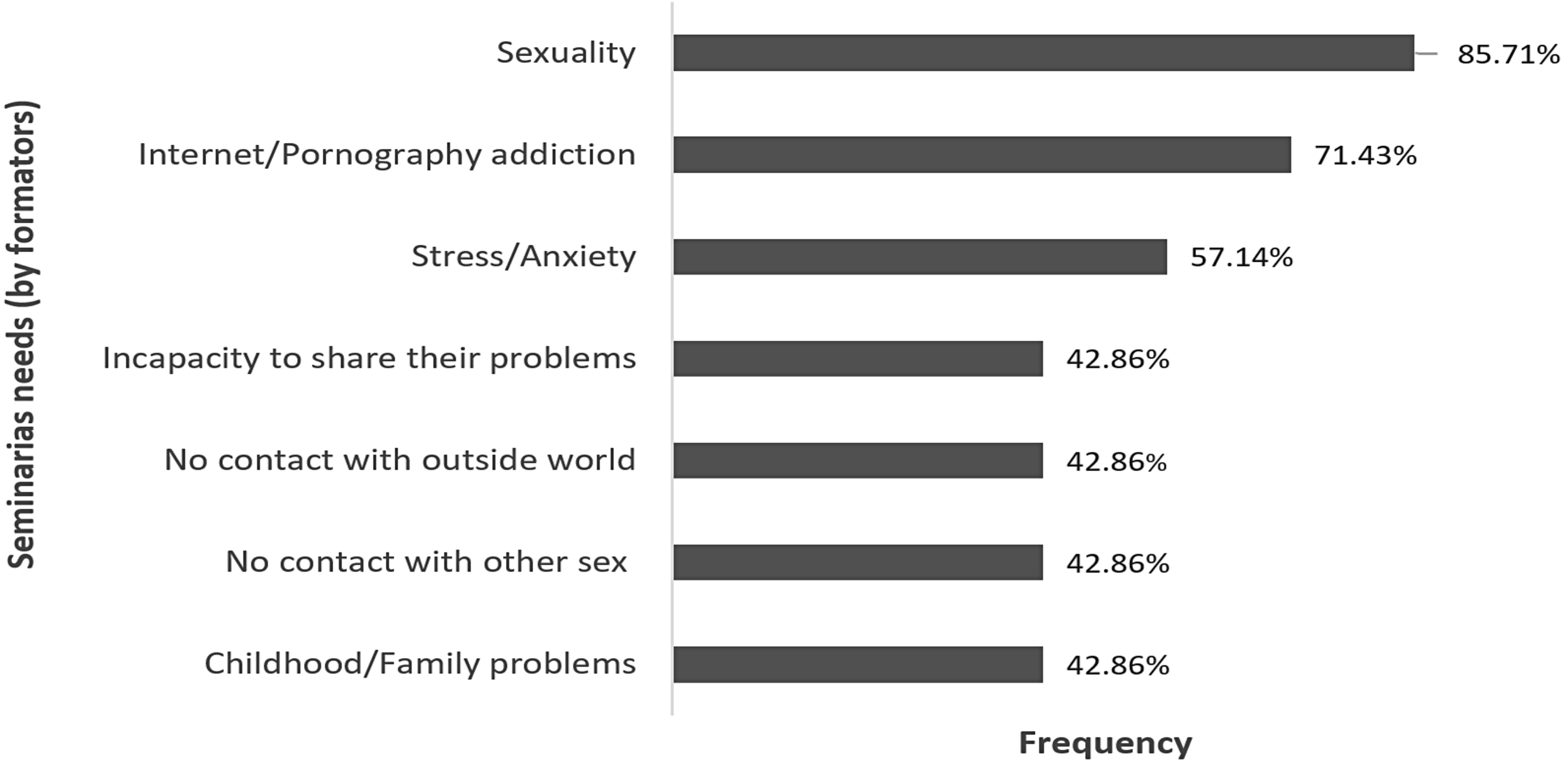
A FORMATOR: “It is really hard to offer a human formation which is really helpful to them. For instance, we still don’t have a ***psychological evaluation*** for the seminarians. Here in China, it is very difficult to find ***qualified professionals***, who also understand the peculiarity of a seminarian’s vocation.

Without a psychological assessment, it becomes really tough for us formators: ***we are not prepared enough*** to help them to face their deep psychological issues or traumas.” (SMBF 001, line 31)

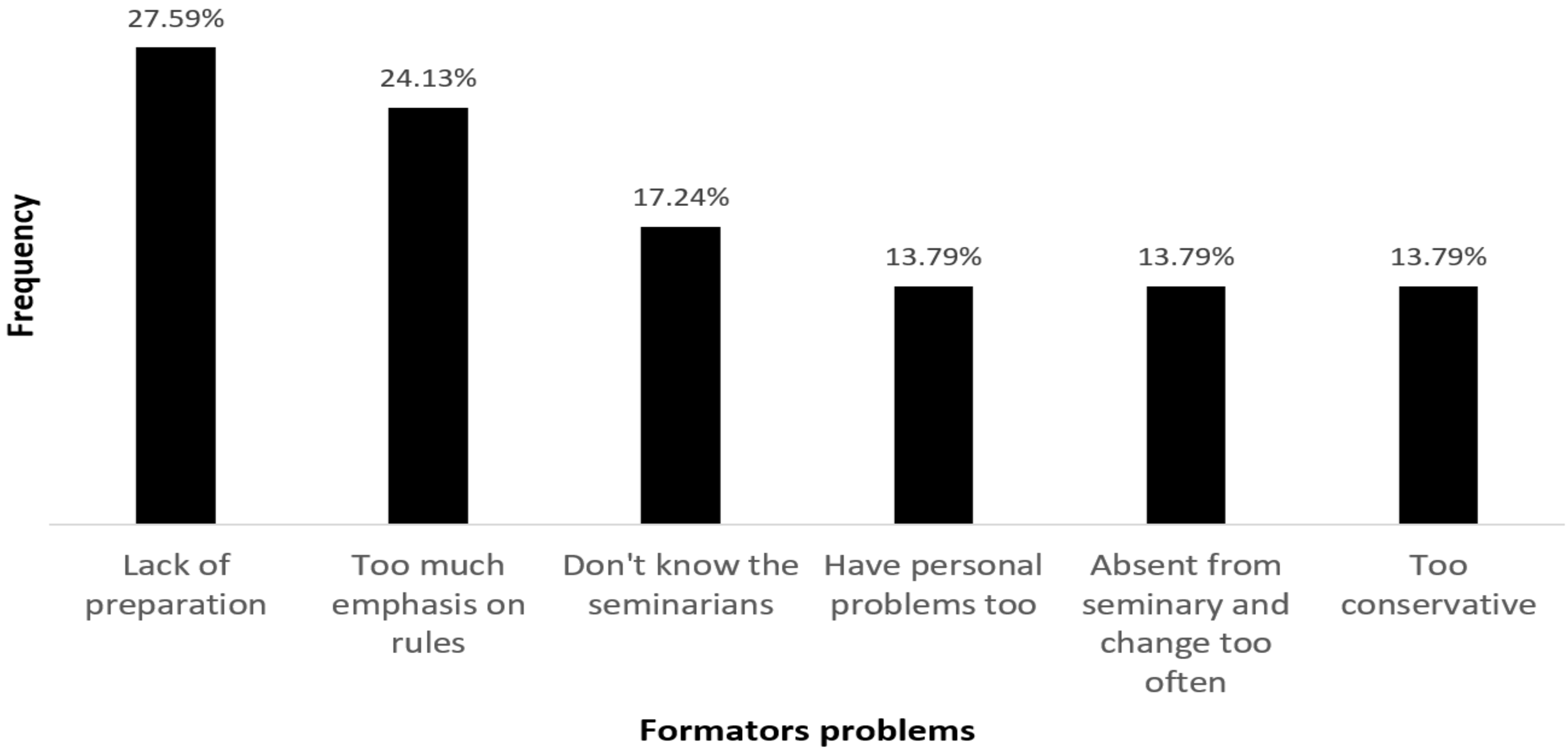
SEMINARIANS' PERCEIVED DIFFICULTIES/NEEDS



SEMINARIANS' DIFFICULTIES ACCORDING TO FORMATORS



FORMATORS PROBLEMS ACCORDING TO SEMINARIANS



Foreseen·Difficulties·in·the·Celibate·Life·(Seminarians'·Interviews)·¶

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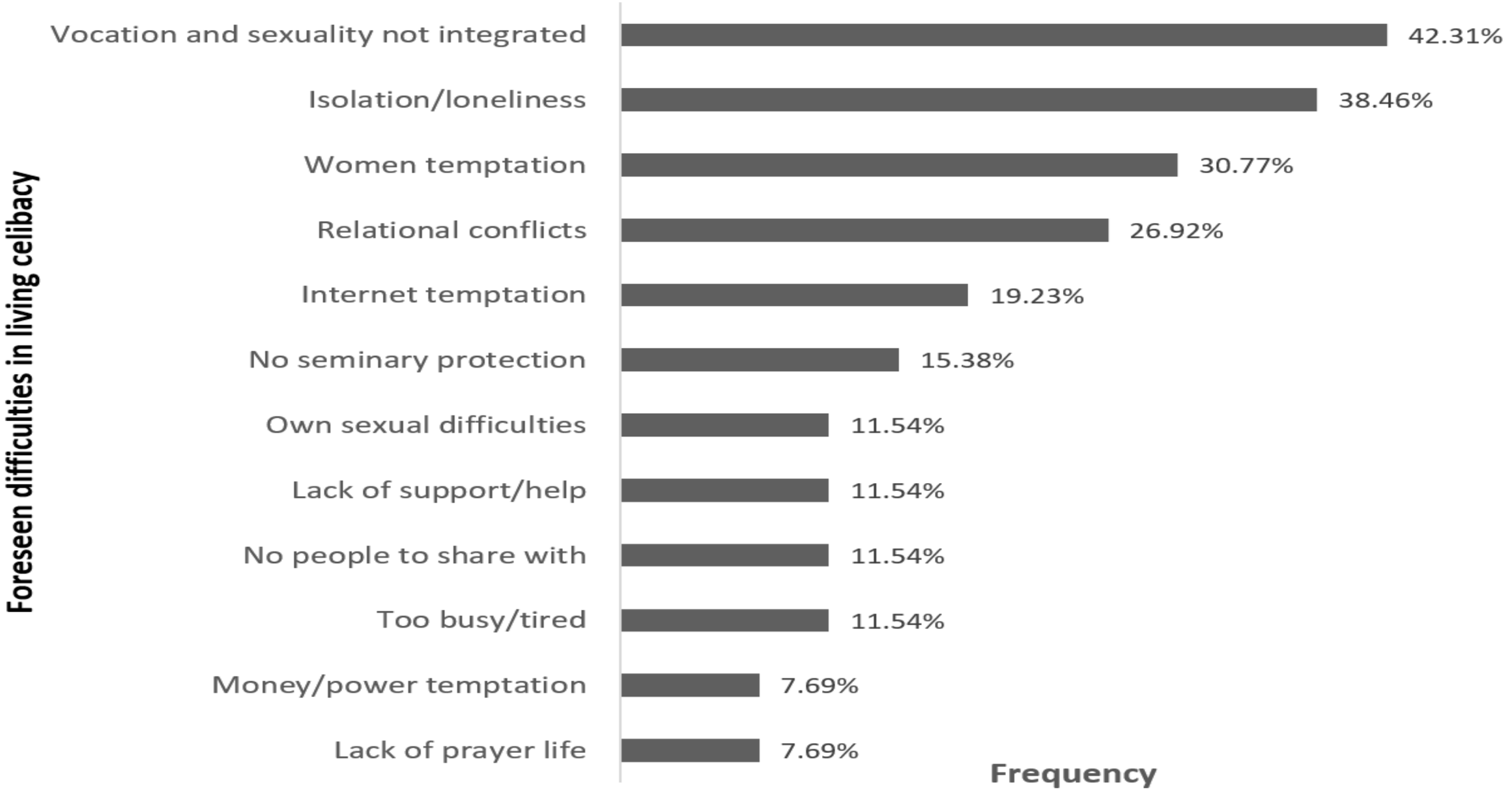

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Concrete·Helps·for·a·Fruitful·Celibate·Life·(Seminarians'·Interviews)·¶

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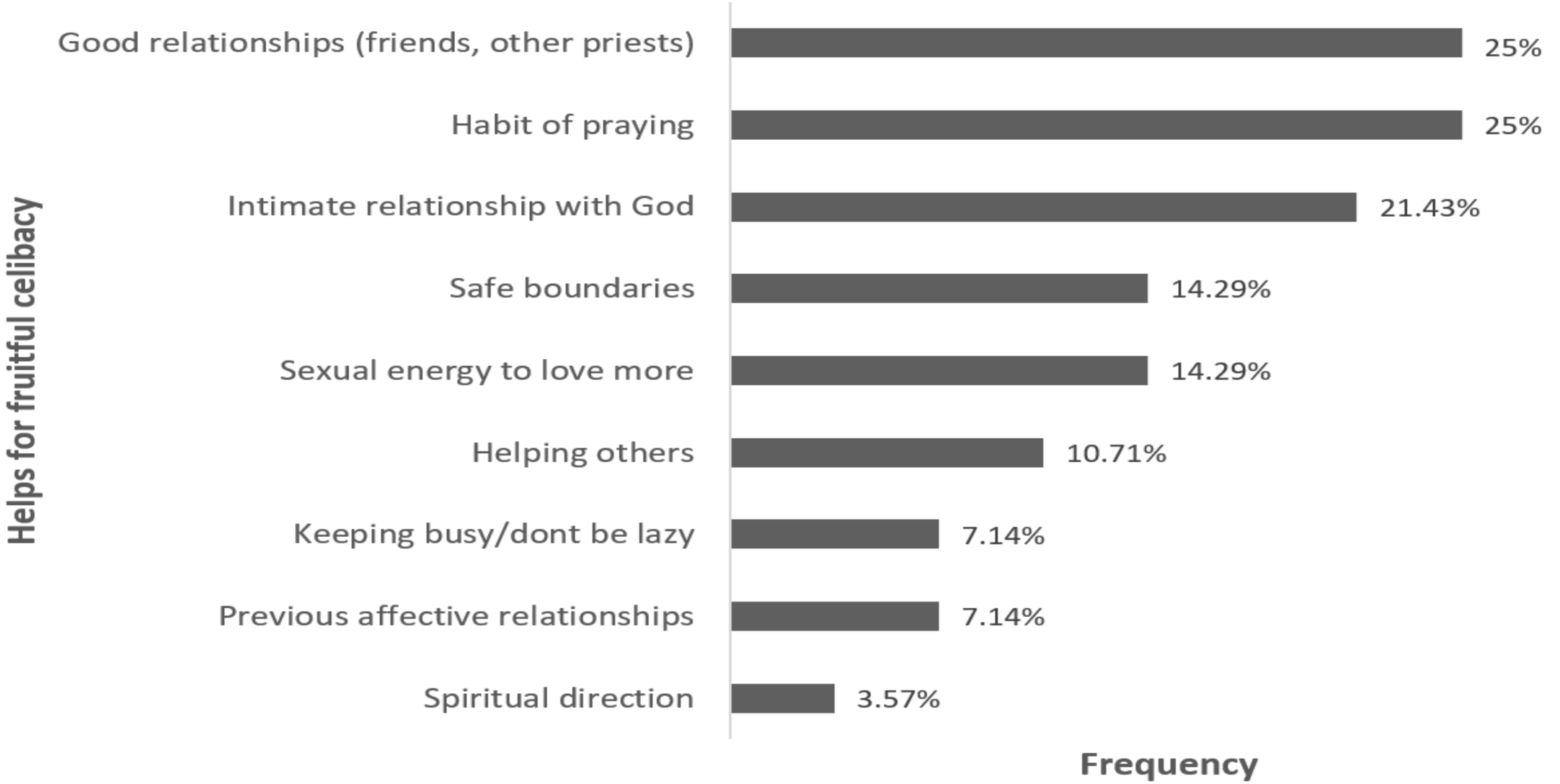

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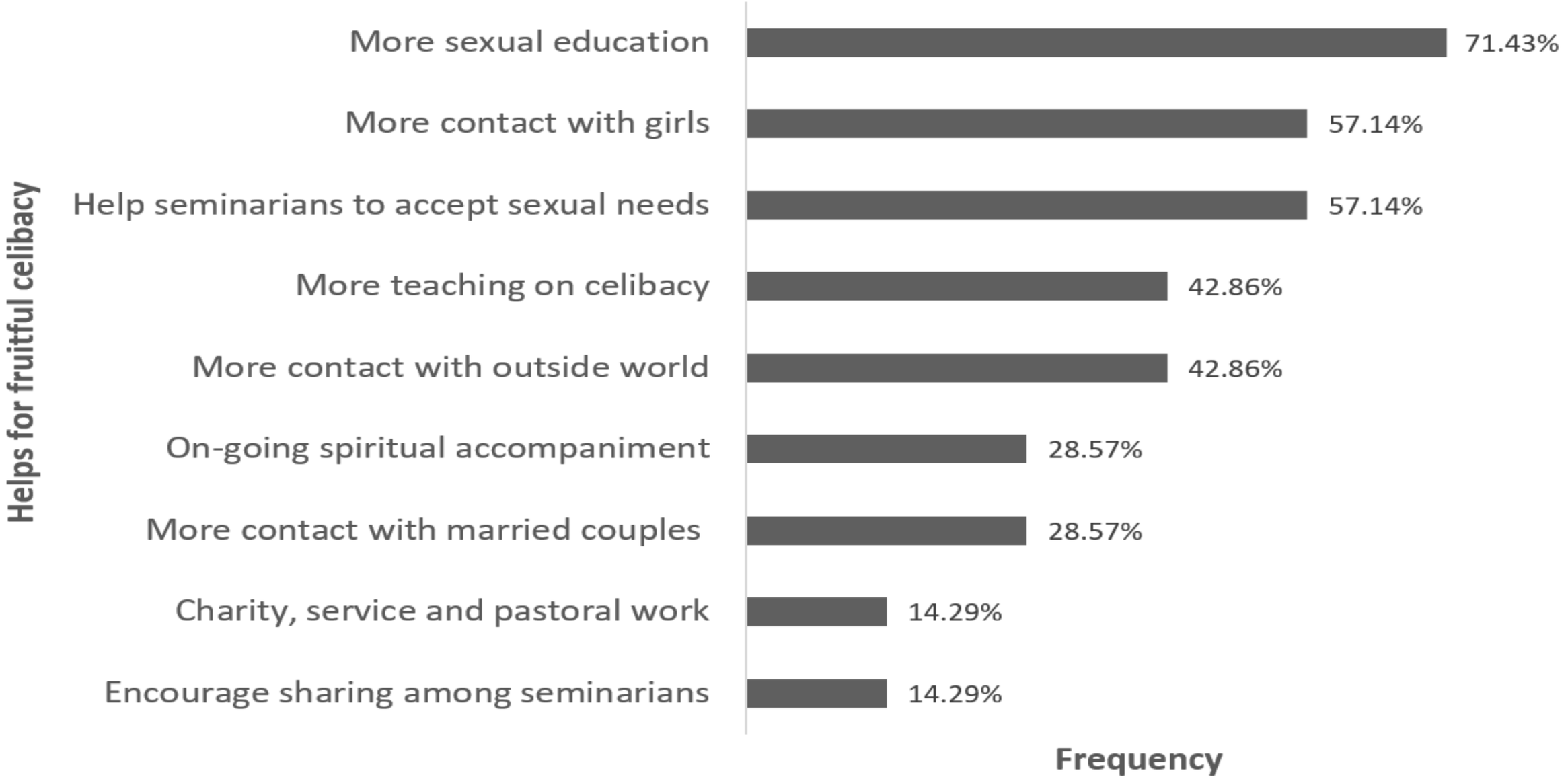

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Seminarians'·Evaluation·of·their·Sexual·Education·(Seminarians'·Interviews)·¶

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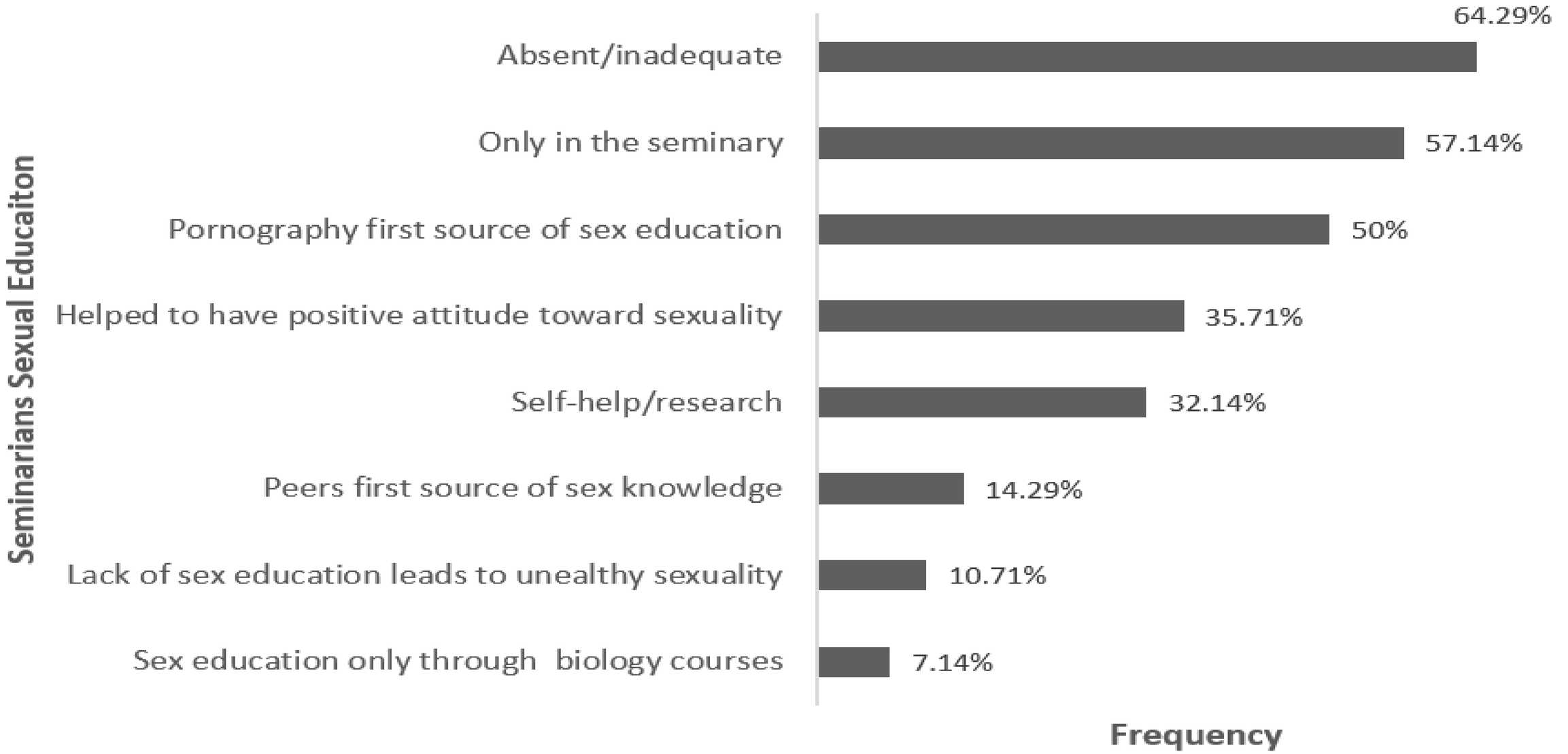

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Seminarians'·Openness·to·Formators·regarding·Sexuality·(Seminarians'·Interviews)¶

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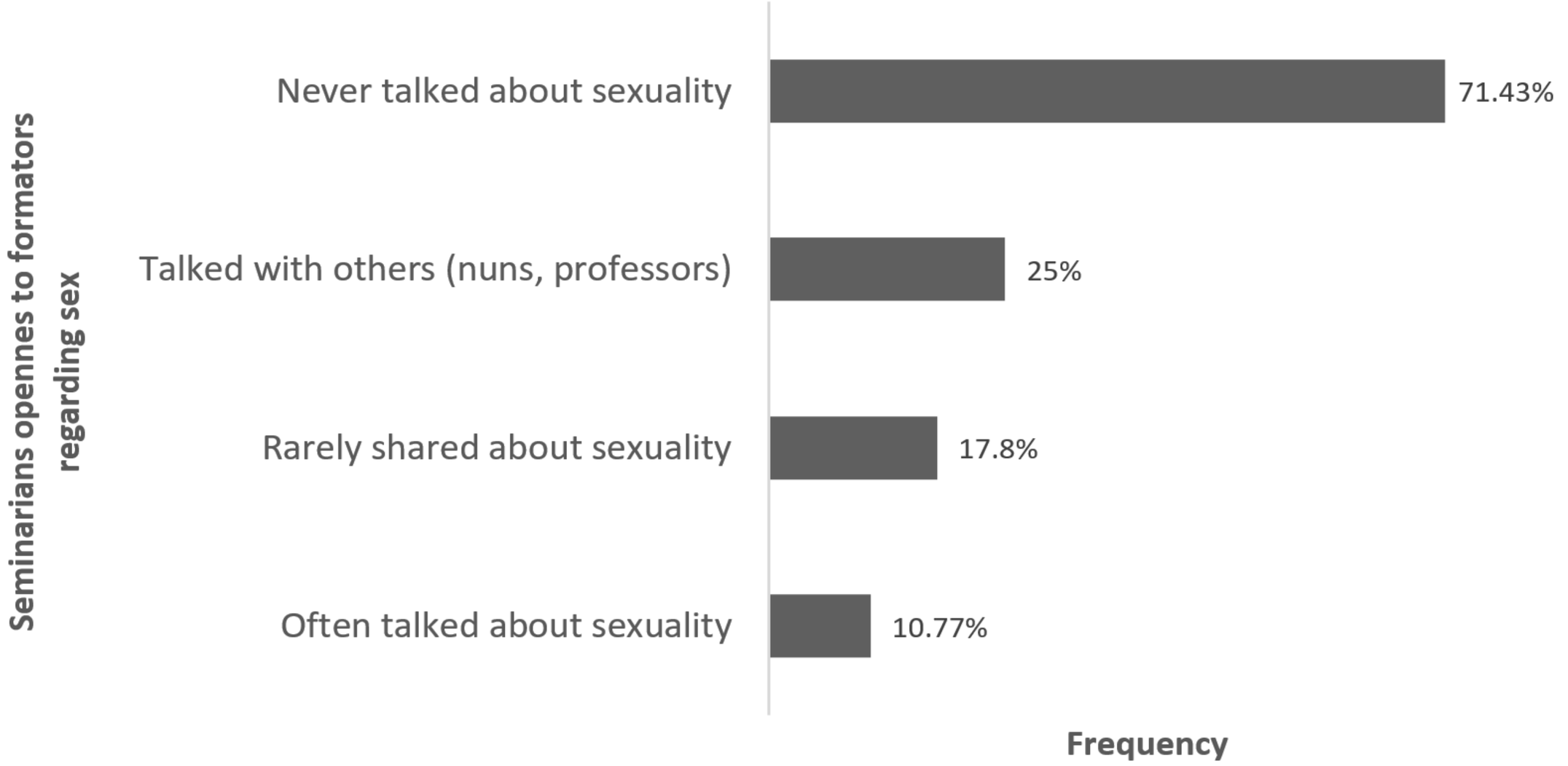

I am about to graduate and I have never talked about these sexuality issues with my formators. **(SMA 011, line 97);**

Basically, I have never talked about my sexual issues in the seminary. Because ***I don't trust*** *my formators, and also because they* ***never openly asked me about it.*** **(SMA 010, line 85)**

Usually we don't naturally talk about sexual issues in class or even in our spiritual direction. Our formators feel ***embarrassed to ask, and we also feel very embarrassed to talk about it*** **(SMA 012, line 85).**

Formators'·Suggestions·for·Improving·HFP·(Formators'·Interviews)¶

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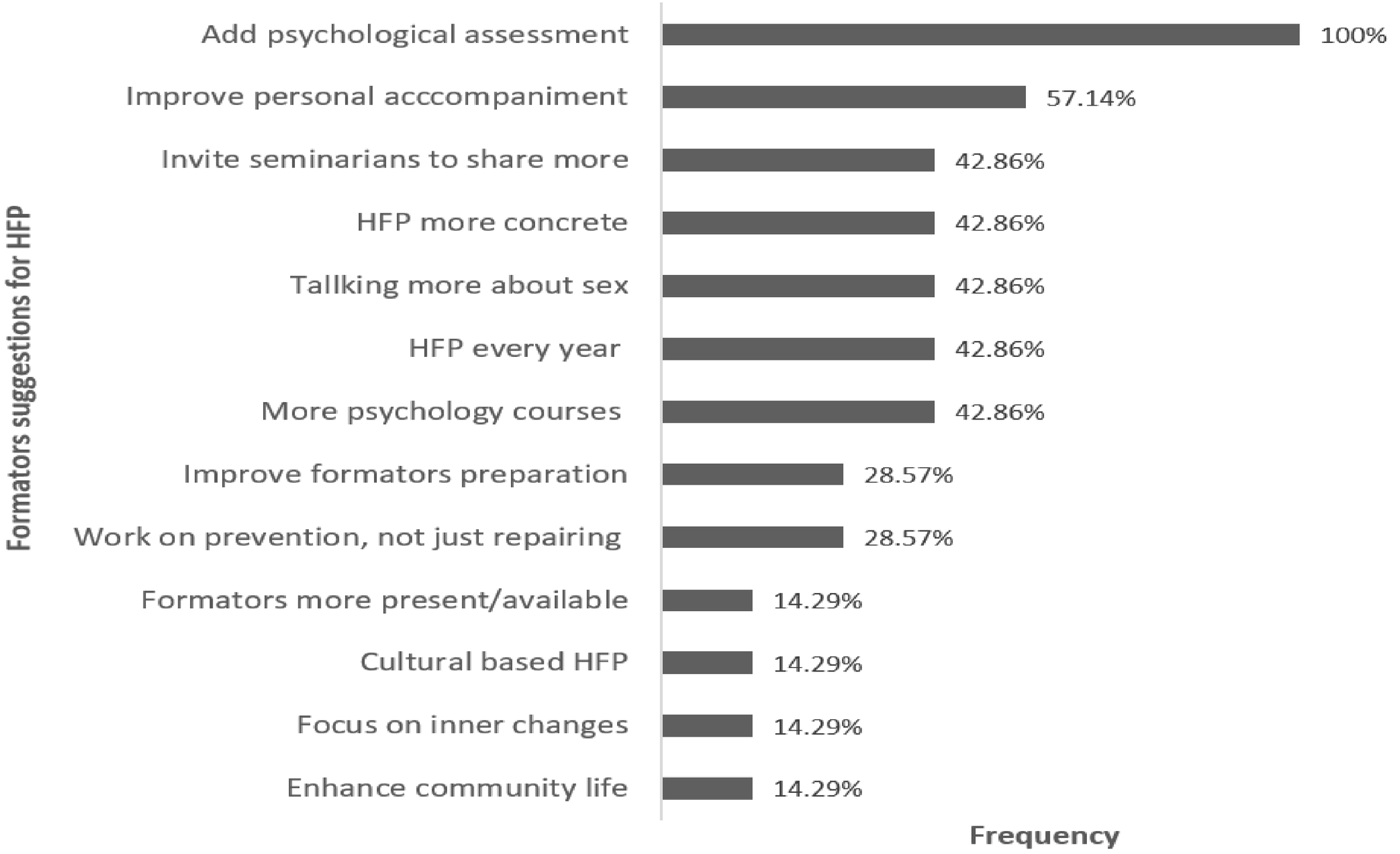

Seminarians'·Suggestions·for·Improving·HFP·(Seminarians'·Interviews)¶

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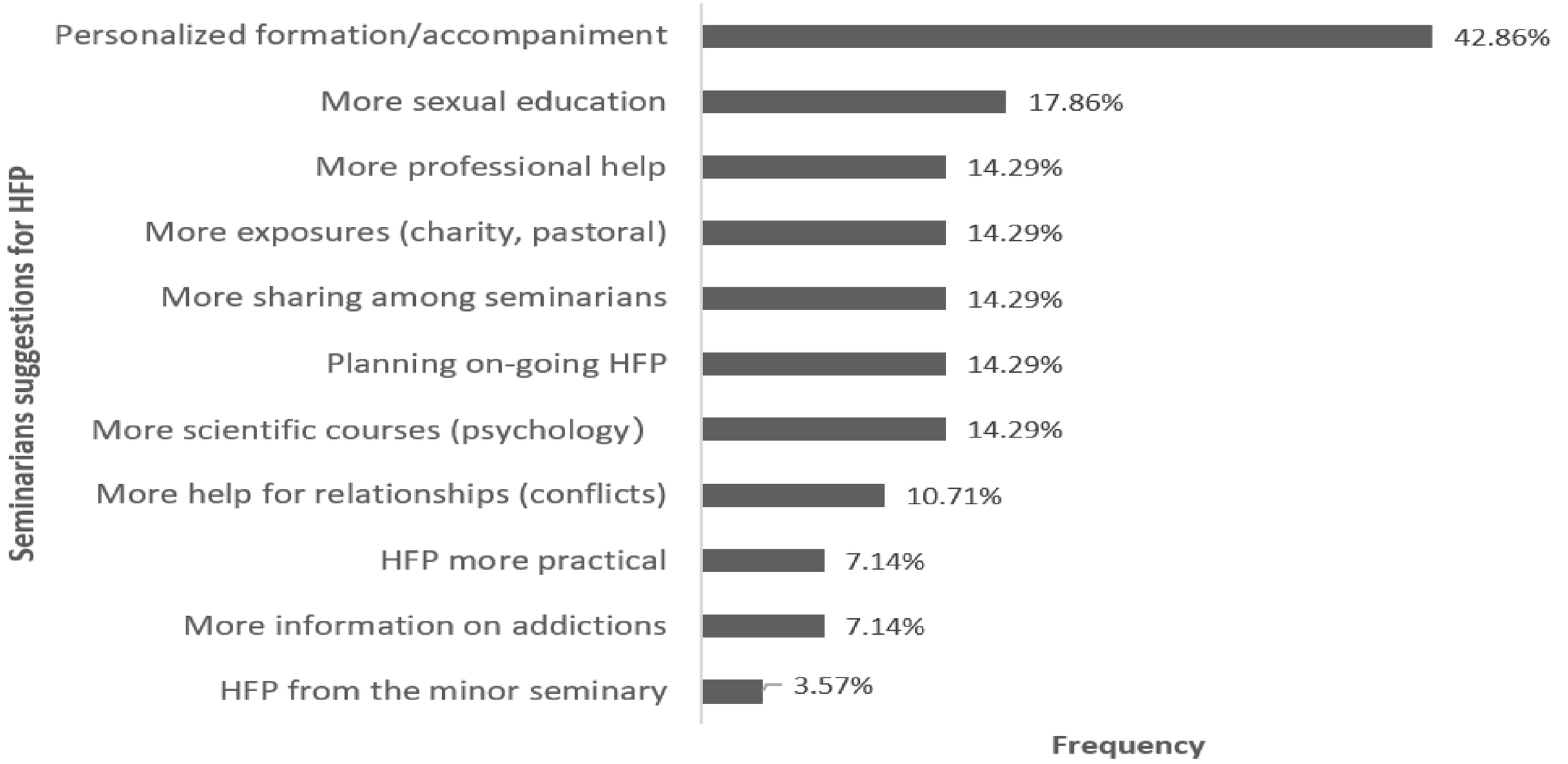

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SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

- filial piety (孝, xiào)
- 重男轻女
- Migrant children 流动儿童
- smoking and drinking
- dealing with some government policies on religion
- priests' financial situation (i.e., health, retirement)

SOCIAL & CULTURAL FACTORS - filial piety (孝, xiào)

According to Chinese culture and tradition, parents are very serious and strict with their children and keep a relational distance from them" (SMA 013, line 36);

Because my father and grandfather have passed away recently, I am now really worried about my mother, my grandma, and my younger brother. I feel a little guilty because of filial piety, ***I should be there and to help*** (SMB 013, line 16).

SOCIAL & CULTURAL FACTORS - 重男轻女

When I was a kid, my mother beat me badly once! It was the first time I saw my mother losing her temper with me. It hadn't happened before because my mother had always followed the principle 重男轻女 *('boys more important than girls').* (SMA 008, line 12)

SOCIAL & CULTURAL FACTORS - Migrant children 流动儿童

*I belong to the so-called category of 'migrant children' (流). **My parents were never at home** when I was a child, so I grew up with my grandma* (SMA 013, line 36);

My father worked outside and we had to follow him to other cities. It was very hard, because we didn't have the right to access public schools or health care, and it was hard to have stable friends (SMA014, line 11).

SOCIAL & CULTURAL FACTORS - Smoking and drinking

As a future priest, if members of the Church
or the government invite me to drink with them,
what do I have to do?
I really do not like to drink alcohol like them,
but it will be very difficult, almost impossible, to refuse.
(SMA 006, line 38)

SOCIAL & CULTURAL FACTORS - Smoking and drinking

One huge problem for me is the relationship with the faithful in the Church. In fact, the current mentality of the Catholics in China is the same as that of other people in society. ***They like to smoke and drink alcohol, which is a way for Chinese people to build trusting relationships****.* *However, I am not interested in any of these. I don't like smoking or drinking, so I don't know how I will be able to build good relationships with the parishioners. It will be difficult. It is not that I am afraid, but sometimes it becomes inconvenient (不好意思 bù hǎo yì si) to refuse to drink or smoke. I also believe that at that time, when I will work in the Parish, God will help me find a good way to build a relationship with the faithful, without being forced to drink or smoke*. (SMA 011)

SOCIAL & CULTURAL FACTORS - Government…

the major difficulty for a priest in China is definitely how to deal with some government policies on religion. This ***affects our daily life and pastoral work****.* (SMA 016, line 40)

The division between official and underground Church is often produced by external and material problems (government control, power issues, reciprocal hate). ***When you can't change the system, you just need to struggle to be a good person yourself****.* (SMA 014, line 35)

My family has been Catholic for a long time, belonging to a traditional ***underground community****. As kids, they forced us to attend Mass and pray; my grandma would often tell us stories about the martyrdom of some Chinese priests.* (SMB 013, line 23)

SOCIAL & CULTURAL FACTORS -
Financial (salary, health, retirement)

Another problem is the issue of post-retirement health care for clergy. Many priests are worried about who will take care of them when they get old. I know some priests began to pay for private healthcare insurance every year, so they could get some money or medical support. In some Dioceses, they have begun to build some retirement homes for the elderly, as a source of financial income and as a way to solve the problem of the elderly priests. (SMB 016)

The Asian and Mainland China Context

- **Psychological Distress:** social and political pressures, including restricted religious freedom. This external stress frequently translates into heightened anxiety, depression, and vulnerability to sex addictions.

- **Systemic Deficiencies:**

  Overcrowded seminary environments.

  A critical scarcity of well trained formators.

  Lack of specific courses dedicated to the **safeguarding of minors**

- **Cultural Taboos around sexuality and psychotherapy:** seeking professional help often carries a ***heavy stigma***, driving seminarians to suffer from severe psychosexual or mental issues in silence rather than seeking help

DISCUSSION

Recommendations for seminary formation

Implementation and reorganization of HFP

Formation of formators

Renewal of seminary structure and formation

Psychological screening and professional help

Priest as a social status (Clericalism)

NO officially reported cases of Child abuse cases in the Catholic Church in China?

Favata, F. *(2025).* Human Formation in the Training to Priesthood in Mainland China.
Religions & Christianity in Today's China, XV(2) 43-66.

https://www.china-zentrum.de/fileadmin/PDF-Dateien/E-Journal_RCTC/2025/RCTC_2025-2._43_-_66_Fabio_Favata_-_Human_Formation_in_the_Training_to_Priesthood_in_Mainland_China.pdf

Thanks!