

Motivations for breaking the cycle of violence among women hosted in the Lilac Room of the Forensic Medical Institute in downtown Rio de Janeiro in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Motivações para o rompimento do ciclo de violência em mulheres acolhidas na Sala Lilás do Instituto Médico Legal do Centro do Rio de Janeiro no contexto pandêmico de Covid-19

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ABSTRACT What motivates a woman in a situation of physical violence to file a police report and break the cycle of violence in which she was involved? The phenomenon of violence against women is complex and entails historical, religious, cultural, social, political, and economic factors that influence intimate and social relationships. To answer this problem question, a qualitative study was conducted based on interviews with fifteen adult women who had been physically assaulted and had been taken in by the Lilac Room Project at the Forensic Medicine Institute, Center RJ (Projeto Sala Lilás IML Centro RJ). The research took place in July 2022, while the pandemic was still underway and home confinement led to an increase in domestic violence. The findings show that the motivation for battered women to file a police report is not a reaction to the last episode of violence they suffered but a result of experiences throughout their lives that end up having an impact on their decision-making process.

KEYWORDS Gender. Violence against women. Cycle of violence.

RESUMO Quais motivações levam uma mulher em situação de violência física a realizar o registro de ocorrência em uma delegacia policial rompendo o ciclo de violência em que estava envolvida? O fenômeno da violência contra a mulher é complexo, envolvendo atravessamentos históricos, religiosos, culturais, sociais, políticos e econômicos que influenciam nas relações íntimas e sociais. Visando responder à pergunta-problema, foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa, a partir de entrevista com 15 mulheres adultas, agredidas fisicamente, acolhidas pelo Projeto Sala Lilás IML Centro RJ. A pesquisa ocorreu em julho de 2022, ainda em período pandêmico, quando o confinamento domiciliar determinou um aumento da violência doméstica. A estratégia de pesquisa consistiu em traçar um perfil sociodemográfico das mulheres agredidas e dos contextos da agressão a partir do qual foram analisados os depoimentos levantados após o atendimento à mulher na Sala Lilás. Concluiu-se que a motivação da mulher agredida para realizar o registro de ocorrência policial não é uma reação ao último episódio de violência sofrido, mas como desfecho de experiências vivenciadas ao longo de sua vida, que acabam impactando no seu processo de decisão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Gênero. Violência contra a mulher. Ciclo de violência.

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Introduction

Physical aggression is a stressful and traumatic experience for women due to the multiple cultural and socio-economic inequalities that make them vulnerable.

In the late 1970s, the American psychologist Lenore Walker¹ described the Battered Woman Syndrome, pointing out that aggression occurs as a sequentially repeated cycle of violence, consisting of three phases: Phase 1: increase in tension in which the aggressor is irritated, has fits of rage, utters insults, makes threats and may even destroy objects in general, the woman is prone to denial, to keep quiet about the facts before others and to blame herself for her partner's reaction; Phase 2: the act of violence is materialized, the aggressor loses control and goes on the rampage with verbal, physical, psychological, moral and/or property violence; and Phase 3: characterized by the aggressor's manipulative strategy, appearing repentant and affectionate in search of reconciliation. Confused and manipulated, the woman tends to forgive and give her aggressor another chance until her aggressor restarts a new Phase 1, closing the cycle².

Nevertheless, women exposed to domestic violence break the vicious cycle in which they are trapped and decide to report their situation. In this way, they ask for help and accuse their aggressor, ask for him to be removed from the family, and request protective measures and legal guarantees to safeguard them from the context of aggression.

Given this context, what motivates a battered woman to break the cycle of violence by reporting her aggressor to a police station?

In search of answers to the guiding question, a qualitative analytical study was conducted in July 2022 based on information gathered through individual interviews. Fifteen adult women took part, aged between 18 and 59, living in the city of Rio de Janeiro in a situation of domestic violence due to physical aggression. They filed a police report at a police station and were referred for a forensic

examination at the Projeto Sala Lilás IML Centro, RJ (Lilac Room Project of the Forensic Medical Institute Center, RJ). The results of the socio-demographic profile of the interviewed women, as well as the results of the categorical analysis of the collected statements, will be presented. In other words, the study analyzed who these women are and discussed the reasons behind their decision to break away from the cycle of violence.

This study may add to knowledge about the effects of violence against women, a problem of intrinsic social relevance given the number of lost lives, violated rights, and avoidable suffering. Knowing more about a problem is crucial for implementing well-grounded public policies to tackle it effectively. Moreover, this study is expected to contribute to a better understanding of the problem on the part of healthcare professionals who daily face perplexing situations when dealing with women who have been physically assaulted. Handling cases of violence against women requires technical knowledge and theoretical and methodological reflections that enable the deconstruction of the symbolic hegemony of male, patriarchal, sexist, binary, and heteronormative domination to provide respectful, humanized, rights-based interventions that make it possible to break the cycle of violence effectively.

It is worth noting that the research was conducted amid the lifting of home confinement as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 pandemic. This unique historical context contributed adversely to situations of domestic violence.

Research contexts

The historical context of the research was characterized by constraints on daily life imposed by actions to control the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, there was evidence of domestic violence against women, according to data from the 'Women's Dossier

2021⁴, in a context where battered women were virtually forced to confine themselves to their abusers, conditioned by forced cohabitation, economic insecurity, and the fear of contracting the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In addition to the health externalities, the political climate was also unfavorable to the implementation of any gender-related agenda since, under the administration of former president Bolsonaro, with a conservative and anti-feminist profile, issues such as violence against women were considered a purely ideological agenda.

Even in these circumstances, reports of domestic violence against women in 2020 were published by the Public Security Institute of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ISP-RJ) in the report 'Dossiê Mulher 2021' (Women's Dossier). The document states that, in Brazil, 105,821 reports of violence against women were made through Call 180 (Ligue 180) and Dial 100 (Disque 100). In Rio de Janeiro, the dossier reports that the state's police stations received a total of 98,681 reports of violence against women. Of these, 34,241 (34.7%) correspond to the municipality of Rio de Janeiro. Concerning the official classification of violence (physical, psychological, moral, sexual, and property), the report shows a higher incidence of physical violence (34,192 cases; 34.6%). When breaking down the data on reports of physical violence by age, it was found that 36.7% correspond to the 18-29 age group, while 51.1% correspond to the 30-59 age group. In other words, reports of physical violence against adult women account for 87.8% of all notifications⁴.

The research occurred in the Lilac Room Project IML Center, RJ, at the Av. Francisco Bicalho, 300, and it is worth briefly describing this space as part of the intersectoral public policy. This was the first venue to be set up in December 2015 for the project's implementation. According to information on the Rio de Janeiro State Court of Justice (TJRJ) Website:

The Lilac Room is a venue created to provide specialized and humanized care to women who have been victims of physical and sexual

violence, and it operates within the Forensic Medical Institute (IML). The room is equipped to conduct forensic examinations and has a multidisciplinary team of police officers, social workers, and nurses to provide specialized care. The integrated services are intended to help victims feel more comfortable reporting and talking about the violence they have suffered. The more welcoming and cozier atmosphere, with messages written on the walls, provides support for victims who are in times of extreme physical and emotional fragility. The project is a partnership between the Civil Police of Rio de Janeiro and the State Court of Justice, the State Health Department, the Municipal Health Department, and the state-owned organization Rio Solidário⁵.

Later, in 2018, a second facility was set up in Rio de Janeiro, this time in the Campo Grande district. Similar agreements were later established with other town halls, expanding the service to the cities of Petrópolis in June 2020, Niterói in August 2020, São Gonçalo in December 2020, and Nova Iguaçu in December 2021.

Initially, when planning the Lilac Room Project's activities, it was intended only to welcome women; however, when the services began, it soon became apparent that all people in situations of domestic, sexual, homophobic, and community violence needed to be assisted. The Lilac Room Project welcomes children, adolescents, women in all stages of life, older people, and the LGBTQIA+ group who need to undergo a forensic examination following situations of physical and sexual aggression.

Formally, the technical team of the Lilac Room Project IML Center, RJ is multidisciplinary, made up of public servants from both the State Department of Public Security (police officers and medical experts) and the Municipal Department of Health (nurses and social workers), with the support of staff provided by the RioSolidario organization.

The persons referred by the police to undergo a forensic examination at the IML

are greeted at the forensic examination desk by a police officer. They are then referred to the health team in a private and confidential place, where they can be listened to without moral judgment and where they can express themselves and even reflect on the cycles of violence. All receptions are recorded on an attendance spreadsheet, and the Notification Form for Interpersonal and Self-harm Violence is filled out.

At the end of each month, the Programmatic Area Coordination 1.0 (CAP 1.0) analyzes all collected data to prepare statistical reports and send them to the Court of Justice of Rio de Janeiro. The violence notification forms are then sent to the Health Surveillance Division (DVS) of CAP 1.0.

Notification forms are documents of fundamental value for health surveillance and essential for gathering epidemiological data. This information, duly collected and consolidated into databases, provides empirical support for planning, monitoring, evaluating, and implementing public policies intended to reduce morbimortality caused by violence, promote health, and ensure an equitable quality of life, as described in the 2016 violence notification instructions⁶.

Cases classified as physical violence are framed within the protective measures established by Maria da Penha Law, which includes guarantees for the safety and well-being of abused women, reinforcing the role of protective measures in safeguarding their lives.

Material and methods

This study was based on qualitative research. Its general aim was to understand the factors influencing the decision-making process of women assisted at the Lilac Room Project IML Center, RJ, to break away from the cycle of violence. It was conducted by analyzing the content of documents³, a literature review, and questionnaires answered by these women. The research explored their sociodemographic

profile and motivations for reporting the occurrence to a police station.

Data collection was carried out through interviews with 15 women selected according to the following inclusion criteria: i) adult women, i.e., aged between 18 and 59; ii) residents of the municipality of Rio de Janeiro; iii) in situations of domestic violence by physical aggression, who underwent a forensic examination and were seen at the Lilac Room Project IML Center, RJ. The following were excluded from the study: children, adolescents, older women, men of all ages, women living in other municipalities, and those in situations of sexual violence. Data collection took place in July 2022, shortly after the project was approved by the Research Ethics Committees of the Sergio Arouca National School of Public Health of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (ENSP/FIOCRUZ), Certificate of Ethical Presentation (CAAE) 55456022.4.0000.5240, Opinion No. 5,305.282, and the Municipal Health Department of Rio de Janeiro, CAAE 55456022.4.3001.5279, Opinion No. 5,397.376.

Once the welcoming phase was over, the assaulted women were invited to participate in the research. Fifteen of them agreed to participate voluntarily. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants through the Informed Consent Form (ICF). The researcher administered fifteen semi-structured questionnaires to the selected women according to the eligibility criteria. They were approached and recruited immediately after their reception in the Lilac Room had finished, voluntarily, without any prejudice to their healthcare needs.

The interviews took place in a private space, safeguarding the secrecy and confidentiality of the information provided. In addition to the statements recorded in the interviews, data was extracted from the violence notification form filled out during the consultation. Thus, it was possible to reduce the time taken from the interviewee and avoid redundant questions.

The information was then systematized and coded according to the points in the

questionnaire regarding the sociodemographic profile (color/race, age, schooling, income, housing, etc.) and the reasons given in the interviewees' statements. A database and graphs were produced to analyze these variables. In addition, the interviewees' life history, difficulties, and the factors that influenced their decision to seek help from the police were investigated.

The participants' names have been kept anonymous and replaced by flower names as a reference to the poem 'Today I received flowers' by an unknown author. It warns of the danger of femicide and draws attention to the vulnerability of women's lives in the face of the worsening cycles of violence.

Results and discussion

The findings will be analyzed in two stages: a) the sociodemographic profile of the interviewees and b) the identification and analysis of the reasons for breaking the cycle of violence. The first step is to outline the profile of the women welcomed in the Lilac Room to understand the motives and conditioning factors behind their decisions.

In summary, the survey revealed that eleven of the fifteen respondents were 20-39 years old. At that stage of their life cycle, women are in their prime reproductive and are economically active, and severe aggression will likely prevent them from pursuing their productive activities and will require medical care.

Regarding color/race, the group of fifteen interviewees consisted of nine dark-skinned women and four black women, totaling thirteen black and two white women. The attribution of color/race followed the pattern of self-declaration based on the classification established by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). According to Sueli Carneiro⁷, domestic and sexual violence affects all women and is a phenomenon that crosses all social classes and racial groups. The author also points out that black women,

exposed to racial prejudice, are generally more likely to suffer all types of violence than white women as a result of the social imaginary colonized by the past of objectification (slavery, subalternity) of black bodies⁷.

Among the fifteen women interviewed, ten had started high school, five had yet to complete it, three had completed it, and two had managed to start university, but only one had completed higher education. This suggests that education and effective access to the school system can offer women better conditions for developing their critical sense and recognizing their rights and citizenship.

Regarding work/employment, thirteen respondents reported being employed – seven formally and six informally – and the other two reported being unemployed. Women with employment relationships, as well as the self-employed contributing to the National Social Security Institute (INSS), are formally protected by labor rights, which allow them, for instance, to request medical leave to take care of their physical or mental health in the face of violence, without compromising their family income. However, the frequency of absences or impaired performance due to violence can, at some point, lead to their dismissal. In contrast, the six (black) women who work informally are much less protected. From the point of view of financial vulnerability, the worst situation is that of unemployed women. The pay gap has a racialized profile since the lowest incomes corresponded to black women: of the two women who said they earned between three and five minimum wages, one declared herself white and the other dark-skinned, both of whom work in the informal sector.

As for income and possibilities for survival, of the fifteen women interviewed, nine stated they did not receive any social benefit, six of whom were dark-skinned, one black, and two white. On the other hand, six black women reported receiving Auxílio Brasil, including three dark-skinned and three black women.

The housing situation profile revealed a predominance of housing in the regular area

of the city, in rented accommodation (eight out of fifteen); five respondents lived in their own homes, one with her aggressor, while the other with her own family.

On this question, most of the respondents (twelve out of fifteen) found themselves in a vulnerable situation, given that dependence on rent often compromises the means of survival and weakens the woman's financial autonomy if she wants to break off the relationship with her aggressor. The situation of 'having nowhere to go' that forces abused women to live with their aggressor gets worse in cases of property violence, i.e., when women try to break the cycle of violence with their partners and the latter, as a form of coercion, destroy their belongings, change their bank passwords and deprive them of access to their documents⁴.

Regarding religiosity, among the fifteen participants, seven said they were Christian (six Evangelical and one Catholic), three declared themselves to be Spiritists, one said she was Umbandist, and four said they did not follow any faith. It is important to remember that Semitic monotheisms (Christianity, Judaism, and Islamism) preach the preservation of marriage ties, influencing women to remain submissive in their relationship and giving new opportunities to the aggressor in the faith that he will change his behavior.

Out of the fifteen women interviewed, eleven lived with their children. One of them was pregnant (last trimester) and reported her sister, with whom she lived, as the perpetrator of the physical abuse she faced. Eight women reported having children with the aggressor. Children caught up in conflicts between their mother and father can be reduced to dispute situations. They may suffer from parental alienation, i.e., when one of the parents damages the child's image of the other. For Joan Scott, violence has a relational character; in this case, it can also occur on a two-way street⁸.

From the viewpoint of Marxist feminism, Heleieth Saffioti⁹ argues that the context of domestic and intra-family violence is permeated

by social issues making violence worse, such as a macho and patriarchal culture, which determines social roles legitimizing authoritarian behavior by men, subjugating women to conditions of inferiority⁹. This perspective finds its genesis in Friedrich Engels' essay 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State', written in 1884. For Engels, the construction of the family unit is a primordial form of class exploitation, in which the husband represents the bourgeoisie and the wife the proletariat¹⁰. In line with this point of view, for Saffioti, women are submitted to a sexual contract with their husbands in the name of the production and reproduction of society¹⁰. This is how the patriarchal oppressions imposed by men on women come about.

Of the fifteen women interviewed, eight said their partners had assaulted them; four reported having been assaulted by their ex-partners and one by her boyfriend, making a total of thirteen women whom intimate partners had abused. The remaining two reported having been assaulted by their sisters.

Six out of fifteen respondents said they had been in a relationship for one to five years, five for between six and ten years, and two for between eleven and fifteen years. Scott points out that aggression by a partner against his wife takes place in a space where power is articulated, in which women create strategies of resistance to live with male violence⁸. The two remaining interviewees, who reported violence against their sisters, had lived with their aggressors for more than sixteen years.

The residence was the predominant location of aggression. Only one of the interviewees was beaten in public. According to Saffioti¹⁰, the domestic space is considered a private place, a territory both physical and symbolic, that gives men oppressive power over women, even if they are separated. As mentioned before, home confinement during the pandemic caused overexposure to domestic violence⁴. Moreover, nine of the interviewed women said that at the time of the violence, the aggressor had not abused alcohol or other

drugs. However, five of them reported abusing alcohol, and the remaining one reported using other drugs.

Finally, the survey revealed that eight out of fifteen women filed the complaints at a regular police station and the other seven at specialized police stations, such as the Women's Police Station (Delegacia de Atendimento à Mulher – DEAM). Furthermore, they all reported that the physical aggression they suffered was not their first and that the aggressor was a repeat offender.

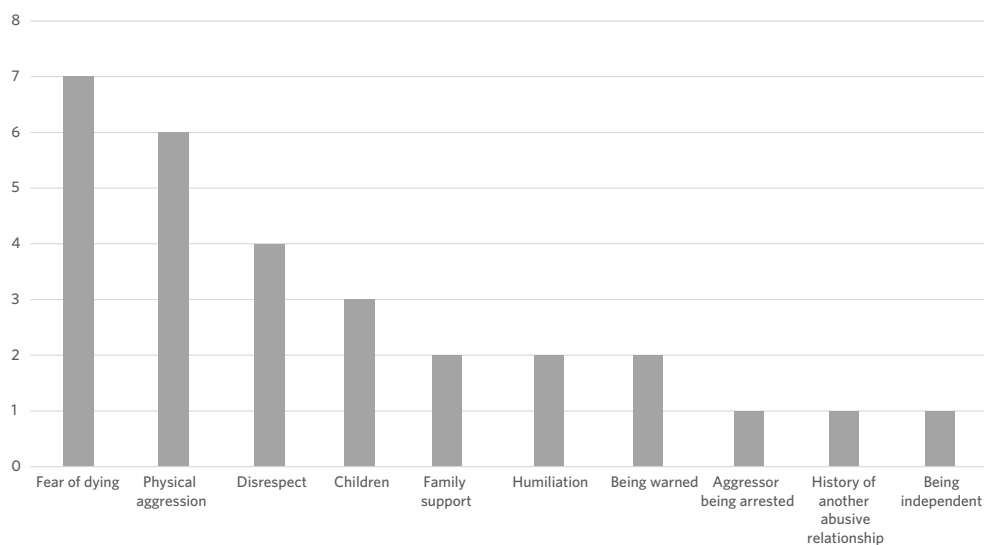
For nine respondents, this was their first abusive relationship, and the remaining six

reported having experienced violence in previous relationships. Eleven of them said it was the first time they had been to a police station to report being physically assaulted, and four women stated it was the second time.

In all fifteen cases, the women decided to break the cycle of violence for some reason. What were these reasons?

Graph 1 displays the results of the research inquiry into the motivations behind the women's decision to file a police report. It shows the most recurrent discursive categories in the interviewees' statements.

Graph 1. Motivations for breaking away from violence



Source: Own elaboration.

In the graph, the predominant motivation is fear of dying, with seven reports. Six women mentioned the saturation of enduring physical aggression due to its intensity and frequency, as they felt tired and could no longer stand it. Four women reported issues relating to disrespect. Concerning the children, three cases were identified in which the women described their concern for protecting them, preventing them from witnessing further assaults at home,

and for fear of losing custody of them. Two narratives stand out for each of the motivations involving family support, humiliation, and the aggressor being judicially warned to be held accountable for the seriousness of the violent act.

It was noteworthy that there was no opportunity to interview trans women during the services provided at the Lilac Room, despite the high number of hate crimes committed

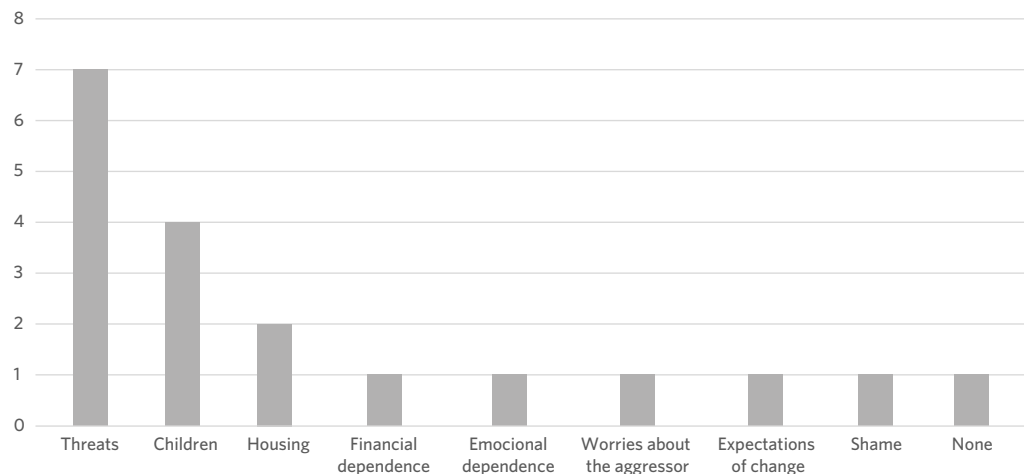
against the trans population in Brazil¹¹. A possible explanation for this situation is given by Prado et al.¹², who points out that these social groups often face vexatious and degrading situations, embarrassments known as institutional violence. Through these discriminatory actions, their demands are delegitimized, and access to their rights is denied¹¹. The absence of a social section in the services results in statistical underreporting. Prado et al.¹² explain that recurring humiliation and mistreatment have physical and psychological effects, causing these individuals to give up on seeking care, advocating for their rights, or reporting their situation of abandonment.

Once the decision to report their aggressor has been made, what difficulties do women

encounter in deciding to break the cycle of violence?

Many reasons make it difficult for women to break the cycle of violence. The following difficulties were categorized using Bardin's method³: children; death threats; scandals at the women's work; hope for a change in his behavior; financial dependence; homelessness; not wanting to do any harm to the aggressor; shame; blackmail; manipulation by the aggressor (control of the women's actions); their relationships. One of the interviewees said she no longer faced any difficulties because she had experienced a previous violent relationship. *Graph 2* outlines the frequency of the mentioned categories.

Graph 2. Difficulties in taking the decision to report the aggressor



Source: Own elaboration.

The narratives on the difficulties they face with death threats are significant and require careful attention to women's safety to safeguard their lives. The moment the victim decides to break free from violence is the most delicate as the aggressor feels like he is losing control and acts more violently, as can be seen in the following quotes:

He always said that if I went to the police, he would kill me, cripple me. He was always very aggressive. This is the first time I have dared to do so. (Lavander).

He said that if I didn't stay with him, I wouldn't stay with anyone else. It was always the same thing... If I did not accept him the way he was, be ready because I will shoot you in the face. (Gardenia).

As Saffioti⁹ points out, in the patriarchal structure of society, the men's role is to provide for the family to guarantee security and sustenance. The patriarchal structure legitimizes acts of control and oppressive power over women. Therefore, masculinity is considered flawed when it fails to meet these expectations. Consequently, there are no calls for changes to men's aggressive behavior for the family's sake. Instead, there are demands on women to put up with male aggression to preserve family ties.

So, the moment a woman decides to break her silence and report the violence against her, she needs all possible support to stop the aggression. Situations of structural and symbolic violence cross this decision-making process: lack of housing policies, low wages, financial dependence, children's survival and well-being, and lack of family and institutional support, among many other factors that influence the process of breaking away from violence. These factors can be observed both in the words of one interviewee – *“Fear of what others would say”* (Hydrangea) – and another – *“I have always been frightened and ashamed to tell, despite seeing many cases on TV”* (Rose).

In summary, the motivations to break free from violence stem from various experiences and life events of the abused woman through successive acts of violence. The violence begins with psychological and moral aggression, through words of disqualification, insults, cursing, and threats, in a sequence of acts of humiliation, intensified by cyclical physical aggression that will only end if the woman decides to break the bond that ties her to her aggressor, and if she can count on a support network to make her decision a reality.

Final considerations

Very often, women in situations of domestic violence feel guilty for having been abused and are afraid to expose their stories and pain for fear of criticism, moral judgment, and what others will say and think about them.

Most feel alone and trapped, as if falling into a dark, never-ending hole. Their strength is compromised by mental deterioration due to manipulation, humiliation, and inferiorization suffered throughout the relationship. It is, therefore, essential for battered women to be able to count on family, social, community, and institutional support to help them effectively break the cycles of violence.

Culturally, women are subordinate to the controlling and dominating actions of the man who manipulates and assaults them. The naturalization of relationships is made up of acts of psychological and moral violence, as well as religious influences that guide women to endure as much as possible the aggression they suffer, perpetuating the cycle of violence. These conditioning factors make it difficult for women to confront the violence that oppresses them, leading them to submit and conform for the sake of family well-being, fostering expectations for changes in the aggressor's behavior.

The moment a woman decides to file a police report follows a trajectory of worsening successive situations of domestic violence, such as psychological, moral, physical, and property abuse. The woman is engulfed by a mixture of feelings: hurt, frightened, ashamed, frustrated, disappointed, and dissatisfied, among other possible situations. In many circumstances, she may say that she no longer wants the relationship that is oppressing her because of the severity of violence inflicted on her, the fear that she will die, or that something terrible will happen to her children.

By breaking the cycle of violence, a woman breaks the silence of an oppressive relationship. In this way, it is crucial that she can count on family, community, and institutional support for support, care, and safety.

The Lilac Room Project is an essential facility for welcoming women in situations of violence as it provides them with a place to express themselves and be heard in a confidential and private environment. The woman who leaves home to report her aggressor finds

herself at the height of the violence. The interviews confirmed that the feelings of agony and the intolerable nature of their situation are motivations for breaking the cycle of violence. Qualified listening, such as that women can find in the Lilac Room, is considered to be one of the factors that promote a space for them to externalize their anger and sorrows, to reflect on the submission to which they have been subjected for years; on the types of violence they have suffered, on the relationship of oppression that has kept them manipulated on the side of their aggressor.

In the course of the research, some limitations were identified. The research was unable to reach trans women. One of the challenges in the Lilac Room's interventions relates to welcoming the LGBTQIA+ population due to the difficulty this population has in accessing justice, public security, and healthcare services. It is, therefore, necessary to have a wide-ranging discussion at intersectoral meetings about strategies to ensure this population has

access to the services provided by the Network to Assist Women in Situations of Violence and the Network to Combat Violence against Women.

Ultimately, to tackle violence against women, public policies need to be consolidated to generate cultural changes for the emancipation of multiple intersecting identities placed in subordinate social positions. In addition, transversal and intersectoral public policies must be encouraged to not only deconstruct sexist and patriarchal culture but also to contribute to comprehensive care assistance for highly fragile women in situations of domestic violence.

Collaborators

Sousa F (0009-0001-8301-7208)* and Schütz G (0000-0002-1980-8558)* contributed equally to the preparation of the manuscript. ■

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