

## The violence in everyday of prostitution of women: invisibility and ambiguities

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**Objective:** To reveal the meaning of violence in everyday female prostitution. **Method:** we used a phenomenological approach of Martin Heidegger. The survey was conducted in Teresina / Piauí / Brazil, with 11 women members of the Association of Prostitutes of Piauí. The data were produced by means of open interviews conducted by a script with questions regarding their experience as a prostitute and its relationship to violence. **Results:** The reports indicate that it is prostitution a risky activity in which gender violence is a phenomenon present. In the relational world, prostitution and violence are intertwined in the face of negotiations established between women and men with formal contracts in the dark, verbally, without witnesses, and whose object of contract is the woman herself for the purpose of providing sexual pleasure to the contractor. Through interpretative analysis was possible to understand the lived violence leads women to remain in daily life where is this fear, inauthenticity and ambiguity. **Conclusions:** violence unveils lived relations of domination and assertion of male power, manifested by violence physical, psychological, moral and sexual. The study advances in scientific knowledge by showing that violence against women, in prostitution, must be understood as a process factual as well as the suffering experienced by them.

**Descriptors:** Prostitution; Violence; Women; Nursing.

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## **A violência no cotidiano da prostituição: invisibilidades e ambiguidades**

Objetivo: desvelar o sentido da violência no cotidiano da prostituição feminina. Método: utilizou-se abordagem fenomenológica de Martin Heidegger. A pesquisa foi realizada em Teresina, Piauí, Brasil, com 11 mulheres, membros da Associação das Prostitutas do Piauí. Os dados foram produzidos por meio da entrevista aberta, conduzida por um roteiro com perguntas acerca da vivência como prostituta e sua relação com a violência. Resultados: os relatos evidenciaram ser a prostituição uma atividade de risco, na qual a violência de gênero é um fenômeno presente. Nesse mundo relacional, prostituição e violência se entrelaçam em face de negociações estabelecidas entre a mulher e o homem, com contratos formalizados às escuras, verbalmente, sem testemunhas e cujo objeto de contrato é a própria mulher, com a finalidade de proporcionar prazer sexual ao contratante. Por meio da análise interpretativa, foi possível compreender que o vivido da violência leva a mulher a permanecer nesse cotidiano no qual estão presentes o temor, a inautenticidade e a ambiguidade. Conclusões: o vivido da violência desvela relações de dominação e afirmação do poder masculino, manifestadas por violência física, psicológica, moral e sexual. O estudo avança no conhecimento científico, ao mostrar que a violência contra a mulher, em situação de prostituição, precisa ser compreendida como processo factual, assim como pelo sofrimento vivido por ela.

Descritores: Prostituição; Violência; Mulheres; Enfermagem.

## **La violencia en el cotidiano de la prostitución: invisibilidades y ambigüedades**

Objetivo: desvelar el sentido de la violencia en el cotidiano de la prostitución femenina. Método: Se utilizó abordaje fenomenológico de Martin Heidegger. La investigación fue realizada en Teresina/Piauí/Brasil, con 11 mujeres miembros de la Asociación de las Meretrices de Piauí. Los datos fueron producidos por medio de la entrevista abierta, acarreada por un guión con preguntas acerca de la vivencia como meretriz y su relación con la violencia. Resultados: los relatos evidenciaron que la prostitución es una actividad de riesgo, en la cual la violencia de género es un fenómeno presente. En ese mundo relacional, prostitución y violencia se entrelazan en faz de negociaciones establecidas entre la mujer y el hombre, con contratos formalizados a oscuras, oralmente, sin testigos y cuyo objeto de contrato es la propia mujer con la finalidad de proporcionar placer sexual al contratante. Por medio del análisis interpretativo fue posible comprender que el vivido de la violencia lleva a la mujer a permanecer en ese cotidiano en el cual está presente el temor, la inautenticidad y la ambigüedad. Conclusiones: el vivido de la violencia desvela relaciones de dominación y afirmación del poder masculino, manifestada por violencia física, psicológica, moral y sexual. El estudio avanza en el conocimiento científico al mostrar que la violencia contra la mujer, en situación de prostitución, necesita ser comprendida como proceso fáctico, así como por el sufrimiento vivido por ellas.

Descriptores: Prostitución; Violencia; Mujer; Enfermería.

## **Introduction**

Violence is a phenomenon that has been present throughout human history. It is a social issue that affects people's health, being one of the leading causes

of death worldwide in the age group of 15 to 44 year. The economic losses, lost work days, mental health damage, pain and the suffering of the victims and

family are incalculable<sup>(1)</sup>. Violence does not exclude social classes, races, ethnicities. It is considered a growing phenomenon throughout society, presenting a multifaceted form. It represents one of the main causes of morbidity and mortality, especially among the young population. Regarding the occurrence scenario, men are more affected in the public sphere, while women are more abused in the private space, with the abuser usually being someone who is close, where the relationship is one of submission and power. In this sense, gender violence is focused on these women<sup>(2-3)</sup>.

This type of violence presents the social relationships as constitutional elements, based on the differences between the sexes and, in a primordial way, on the power relationships. Gender violence is considered a public health problem by the World Health Organization and defined as any act that results or could result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to the woman, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty in public or in the private life, as well as punishment, ill treatment, pornography, sexual aggression and incest<sup>(1)</sup>. This relationship established between men and women, which has inequality of power as its mechanism, is a violation of human rights and creates problems of a social order, as well as public health and women's health problems, putting them at the mercy of other types of violence, such as prostitution, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases<sup>(4)</sup>.

In the case of prostitution, it may result from violence, but can also be the scenario for it. The woman, being a prostitute, does not escape the historically constructed context of violence. For society, the activity that she performs is illegal and morally reprehensible, exposing her to even greater violence. The type of environment in which she operates also makes her more vulnerable, as in the street she is subject to arbitrary abuse from the police, pimps and clients, especially in relation to the price of the "service" and the use of condoms. These attacks are still not registered in the healthcare services<sup>(2)</sup>.

In this activity, the women offer sexual gratification in exchange for remuneration and will gradually lose their 'body' and their 'destiny', as they start to deconstruct the relationships of protection and individual and collective rights, with the risk factors emerging in this scenario<sup>(5)</sup>. Among the various risks are those related to aggression, because women do not choose the clients and violence is constant in this scenario, including physical and sexual abuse, trafficking of women, rapes, robberies, insults,

curses and others, manifested as humiliation, verbal and moral offenses. Another risk that the prostitute takes, regarding public health issues, is related to the vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), by having unprotected sex. There is also the risk of the breach of the confidentiality of her activity, since many prostitutes hide this from their family members<sup>(6)</sup>. Research conducted with prostitutes in Leeds, England, and Edinburgh and Glasgow in Scotland, revealed that 30% were punched or kicked by a client, 11% were raped and 22% suffered attempted rape, only 34% of these reported this to the police<sup>(1)</sup>.

Following this risky route, women prostitutes continue to be targets of violence by the clients, by those who understand that the payment gives them power to physically, sexually and psychologically abuse the woman, as well as by the interpretation of the image of the prostitute, which still suffers influences from the past. Thus, it is comprehended that violence against women is part of the gender issue and that it has important intersections with other women's health determinants, notably drug use, low self-esteem and ways of living and working<sup>(7)</sup>.

It is necessary to give visibility to this violence, to give voice to this risk group, in order to comprehend how the violence is experienced, what these women feel and how public policies and the healthcare service can come closer to develop projects related to health promotion and the prevention of violence in the quotidian of this activity. The complexity of the subject and of the study group prompted us to search for the phenomenon in the subjective dimension, based on the experience, and what it means for those who experience it. Therefore, the guiding question was: what is the experience of violence in the quotidian of female prostitution? From this question, the aim of this study is to reveal the meaning of the violence in the quotidian of female prostitution.

## Method

A qualitative study was carried out, supported by the phenomenological method<sup>(8)</sup> to apprehend, to describe and to comprehensively analyze the meaning of the experience of violence and the understanding that emanates from it. The phenomenological method was used in three steps: the description, when the subject was questioned about the phenomenon studied; the reduction, when it was sought to move away from judgments concerning the pre-established concepts about the topic under investigation, in order to begin the

reading of the descriptions and to select the essential parts with the aim of constituting the units of meaning. After this step, a comprehensive analysis was carried out, in which analytical and hermeneutic interpretation was based on the philosophical reference concepts of Martin Heidegger<sup>(9)</sup>.

The study was conducted in Teresina/Piauí, located in the Northeastern region of Brazil. A total of 11 women were investigated who perform or have performed prostitution activities. The inclusion criteria were, to be a member of the Association of Prostitutes of Piauí State (APROSPI) and to agree to participate voluntarily. The number of interviewees was obtained through the saturation of information obtained in the reports. For the data production, open interviews were used which were guided by a script containing questions regarding the woman's experience as a prostitute and her relationship with violence. Such questions made it possible to apprehend the ontological knowledge of the phenomenon, which originates from the consciousness and from the experience in relation to that studied.

The project and the aims were presented to the participants, and the interviews were recorded after the subjects read and signed the Terms of Free Prior Informed Consent. The interviews were conducted from April to May 2009. Considering the formal requirements contained in Resolution 196/96, the project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Piauí (No. 0007. 0.045.000-09).

## Results and Discussion

In the first unit of meaning, it was possible to group essential terms that highlighted a quotidian of assaults and demands to break agreements, which led the interviewees to describe the world of prostitution as one of risk that generates fear. The world is constituted as more than a geographical space, it is the entire context in which the woman is inserted, in which the relations established between human beings permeate, and which is found in the quotidian, involving situations which are sometimes predictable and sometimes unexpected<sup>(9)</sup>. *[...] if you are going to be a prostitute there are three dangers: the guy killing us, being raped and being robbed (D 7). Once, when he wanted me to do everything, I didn't do it and he punched me twice and even stole my money (D 11). I'm going out with a boy for necessity, but he wants to have sex in which the person hits the other, beating, hurting (D 8).*

In this world of prostitution, violence occurs in a reality in which the woman is, which has become

intertwined, characterizing the world itself from this experience. *[...] some of them want to even hit us in the face, but there are those that ask how much it costs to beat us, although I never accepted this, but I've been beaten in several ways, with a belt, slapped on the butt (laughs), bitten on the vagina, on the leg, I just have not been violated, just not raped [...]* (D 1).

In this quotidian, though not being accepted, but predictable, the woman is in a situation of prostitution and violence. The world of prostitution is a relational world, in which, because it consists of an exchange of sexual satisfaction and fantasies for money, without a formal contract, it is predictable that there will be breaks in this business relationship. In this break, violence can arise<sup>(9)</sup>, leading the man to the practice of aggressive acts to satisfy his most intimate desires. *[...] There are many who only want to pay 10 reais, then they say: ah, I'm paying, you have to do what I want. It is humiliating, you must be brave to go with these men. [...]* (D 5).

The prostitute-client relationship is expressed as a meeting permeated by humiliation, repulsion and aversion, because, in addition to being assaulted, they are required to do "things" against their will and to accept any client. *We do this for the money, some want to kiss on the mouth, grab or kiss, I try to make it finish quickly, I put the pillow on his face [...]* (D 2).

In this commercial relationship, the women establish rules between the professional activity and the private life, differentiating the relationships with customers and partners. With clients or unknown people they always use condoms, they do not allow themselves to orgasm, to kiss on the mouth or maintain feelings of affection. The relationship is constituted by only the exchange of sex for money<sup>(10)</sup>. The relationship that is established between the prostitute and the client is commercial. It is characterized by the sale of the body and/or pleasure for money, in which the woman becomes seen as a commodity due to the services rendered. In this negotiation, a derogatory image of the prostitute is constructed, in which the reference of wife, mother, daughter, and citizen is lost, thus favoring discriminatory practices in their quotidian, expressed by symbolic violence, physical abuse and even murder<sup>(11)</sup>.

In the comprehensive analysis, fear arises in this so called commercial relationship. The assaults that prostitutes experience are threats to the physical and psychological integrity, so that this fear sometimes turns into dread. The dread is present for these women from three Heideggerian perspectives: what is dreaded, the dread itself and why it is dreaded. What

is dreaded is always something that is faced within the world<sup>(9)</sup>. The dread shows itself for the prostitutes as something unexpected, for example: to be raped and/or killed. However, when what is dreaded possesses an unfamiliar character, the dread starts to form into horror<sup>(9)</sup>. For the women in this study, the horror is present when the aggressions come from the clients; the clients are therefore not configured in the same way as family members. The women in this study highlighted meanings of the violence in ways of experiencing fear<sup>(9)</sup>.

It is also comprehended that this activity opens possibilities for various forms of being experienced with the violence. The client imposes the type of sexual practice that they want to perform. In this issue, it is considered that the prostitute was paid to have sexual relations and that this contract must be fulfilled. Her self is not considered, thus, she becomes an object of imposition, submission and exploitation by the client. *[...] he had sex with me and when he finished he took my money that I had already received from another client, took what he had given me, pushed me, hurt me, called me a slut [...]* (D 3).

Failure to pay for the services provided is considered, in some studies, the same as violence and devaluation of the work of the prostitute. Not receiving the money for the services is compared to a rape. Breaking the agreement means that the clients use physical force and the imposition of fear and humiliation so that their desires are met<sup>(11)</sup>. In this scenario, unequal and asymmetrical relationships of devaluation are observed, which are permeated by male superiority and discrimination due to the prostitute being female, poor and performing such activity. In the context of this relationship gender violence is configured, the results of which affect the biopsychosocial integrity, with manifestations ranging from diseases in the digestive and circulatory systems to anxiety, depression, use of drugs, as well as the emergence of physical injuries<sup>(12)</sup>.

A study of the nursing area has shown that during the nursing consultation, and through listening and the discussion of sensitive issues such as sexuality, self-image and others, strategies are constituted to reduce gender violence. These are actions that should be shared with other areas of care for women, facilitating the prevention of injuries to the physical and mental health resulting from violent acts<sup>(13)</sup>. However, some reflections have demonstrated that the comprehension of the health practices aimed at women in situations of violence do not take into account a gender perspective, and thus do not always consider the asymmetry of power in the relationships between men and women, originating from

wider social processes. Therefore, for a health practice that addresses this situation effectively, it is necessary that the professionals go through a comprehension process regarding the social construction of gender identity and gender violence<sup>(14)</sup>.

In the second unit of meaning, the women reported a quotidian of scorn, discrimination and accusations from society, the police authorities and others. *Society also commits violence against us from the moment it discriminates against us. There are many people who pass by in a car, they are university students, all spoiled rich children, throwing urine on us.* (D 10).

Difficulties were reported in exercising this practice due to aggression, disrespect and humiliation by university students, reinforcing that this life choice is influenced by the historical construction of prostitution, already present in the symbolism of the youths.

To perform the activity of prostitution puts the woman in a position vulnerable to attacks that come from society as a whole. In this context, the population discriminates and devalues the woman who performs this practice. This behavior of society seems to be reinforced by the biased representations that common sense holds of the image of the prostitute and is related to behavior considered immoral by society, as shown by the respondents: *[...] everyone, from the highest to the lowest, knows what we do, there are many that do not like us, do not speak, do not stop near, think that we'll rob them, say that we have HIV, that we are sick [...]* (D 6).

The moral degradation of this activity can be attributed to the sexual practices, which come to emphasize a kind of 'criminal sexuality', with the quotidian of this activity favoring the discrimination of this segment. The oppression to which this group is subject trivializes the violence against the women, on the grounds that these assaults are inherent to the activity of prostitution<sup>(15)</sup>. In the discourses, the women consider the street a bad space and express that everyone knows of their activities. Daily, they are called sluts and lazy, which shows clearly, in the discourse, the discrimination and prejudice in the relationships experienced by them in the practice of prostitution. *[...] the police are the most prejudiced, often I do not want to have sex, they think the woman who is a prostitute is a slut, [...]* (D 4).

The repression by the police authorities is also part of their quotidian. In their statements, physical assaults, threats of arrest and being sworn at are revealed, denoting the contradiction that: those who should protect them are also perpetrators of violence. In this segment of society, the clients, police and society

itself view these women as a threat to the nuclear family and thus perpetrate violence against the group. This psychological and social violence leaves invisible marks, as proved by this group routinely being the target of prejudice, stigma and discrimination by society<sup>(15)</sup>.

With regard to the aggression that comes from these agents, the prostitutes consider the arbitrary actions, death threats with firearms, and even being taken from the prostitution points of the street in which they do their work, as violence. *The police also practiced violence against us because they want to put a gun to our heads so we go away, they do not want us to be on the street. I've been assaulted by the police in broad daylight because he said there was an occurrence in the square.* (D 9).

This activity is perceived as a space of suffering and verbalized by the majority as a dangerous practice to perform. Some make it clear that in the face of the difficulties, aggression and disrespect experienced in the surrounding world, they would like to pursue another activity, but due to the lack of qualification cannot visualize possibilities, being forced to remain in prostitution. *We suffer, really suffer. If I could leave this life I would. Here it is like a snowball. We did not choose this path* (D 8) [...] *when I get a job, something I know how to do, I'll leave and will not even want to remember that this exists.* (D 11).

Therefore, in this quotidian, violence for the prostitute is the result of the relationships they experience with the clients, with society and with the police. These women show constant conflicts in the quotidian coexistence with others. The quotidian is comprehended as a way of being is immersed in the concerns of daily life and without the possibility of choices. In this comprehension, these women forget themselves, not realizing that it is others who are determining their possibilities. Inauthenticity appears here<sup>(9)</sup>, distancing them from themselves and leading to fear and ambiguity. Ambiguity is always present<sup>(9)</sup>. They say they did not choose this path, however, they do not seek alternatives. This also occurs with the violence. They say they do not accept the beatings, kicks, pinches and bites, however, do not denounce their aggressors. It will depend on luck. The aggressors will either return or not.

## Conclusions

In this study, the use of the phenomenological method enabled the meanings of violence in the quotidian of female prostitution to be uncovered through the experiences of the women who carry out this activity.

The discourse conveys the meanings of the violence as dread, inauthenticity and ambiguity. The violence expressed by the respondents indicates a movement that meets with a quotidian, which is ontically shown by beatings, insults, humiliations, robbery, breach of agreement, death threats, accusations of being a carrier of sexually transmitted diseases, and many other situations that portray the presence of gender violence in its physical, sexual, psychological and moral forms.

Finally, the difficulties that the women prostitutes face in their existential quotidian must be attended to. In this study, the women were from the suburbs, with low education and low income, which limits the study, making expanded studies necessary with groups of women engaged in prostitution in other contexts. Regarding the issue of health, the study reveals the need for gender violence prevention programs, which should be structured in universities, schools, primary healthcare institutions, health units and by social movements, and that programs should also be created focused toward the denaturalization of prejudiced attitudes.

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