

WOMEN VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of women victims of domestic violence. The study entailed phenomenological research based on the theoretical framework of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, developed with ten women who were victims of domestic violence treated at a women's healthcare center in a municipality in the interior of the Brazilian state of São Paulo. Nuclei of meanings emerged from the statements, based on the analysis of the phenomenon of violence from the interviews, and led to the following themes: living with fear; living with physical injuries; and the decision to file a report after the violence experienced. The results showed that the experience lived and contained in these women's bodies enabled each one of them to evaluate their own existence, arousing the desire to leave the situation in order to exercise their role in the world. Thus, their bodies instrumentalized their beings, and allowed them to break the cycle of domestic violence.

DESCRIPTORS: Domestic violence. Violence against women. Women's health. Qualitative research.

MULHERES VÍTIMAS DE VIOLÊNCIA DOMÉSTICA: UMA ABORDAGEM FENOMENOLÓGICA

RESUMO: Este estudo objetivou apreender a vivência de mulheres vítimas de violência doméstica. Pesquisa fenomenológica, fundamentada no referencial de Maurice Merleau-Ponty, desenvolvida junto a dez mulheres vítimas de violência doméstica, atendidas em um Centro de Referência de Atendimento à Mulher de um município do interior de São Paulo. A partir da análise do fenômeno violência, oriundo das entrevistas, emergiram dos depoimentos os núcleos de sentidos, que originaram os seguintes temas: conviver com o medo, a convivência com as lesões físicas e a decisão de denunciar após a violência vivida. Os resultados demonstraram que a experiência vivida e contida no corpo dessas mulheres possibilitou a cada uma delas uma avaliação sobre sua própria existência, suscitando o desejo de sair desse revolto para exercer seu papel no mundo. Destarte, seu corpo instrumentalizou seu ser e permitiu a ruptura do ciclo de violência doméstica vivenciado por essa mulher.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Violência doméstica. Violência contra a mulher. Saúde da mulher. Pesquisa qualitativa.

MUJERES VÍCTIMAS DE VIOLENCIA DOMÉSTICA: UN ENFOQUE FENOMENOLÓGICO

RESUMEN: Este estudio tuvo como objetivo comprender la experiencia de las mujeres víctimas de la violencia doméstica. La investigación fenomenológica, fundamentado en el marco de Maurice Merleau-Ponty, desarrollado con diez mujeres víctimas de violencia doméstica atendidas en un Centro de Referencia para la Asistencia a la Mujer en la ciudad de São Paulo, Brasil. A partir del análisis del fenómeno de la violencia derivada de las entrevistas, surgieron de los relatos núcleos de significados que originaron los siguientes temas: Cómo vivir con el miedo, la convivencia con lesiones físicas y la decisión de delatar después de la violencia todo lo que sufren. Los resultados mostraron que la experiencia y el contenido en el cuerpo de estas mujeres les permite una revisión de su propia existencia, despertando el deseo de salir de esetormento para desempeñar su papel en el mundo. Por lo tanto, su cuerpo y su ser se instrumentalizaron y permitió con esto romper el ciclo de La violencia doméstica experimentada por estas mujeres.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Violencia doméstica. Violencia contra la Mujer. Salud de la mujer. Investigación cualitativa.

INTRODUCTION

In its various forms, violence greatly impacts morbidity and mortality. One of the most significant forms of family and personal trauma,¹ domestic violence contributes to the loss of quality of life, and leads to an increase in health care costs and absenteeism from school and work.

Violence is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as any act of aggression or negligence to a person that produces or may produce psychological harm or physical or sexual suffering, including threats, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, both in public or private. Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.²⁻³

Violence affects all of society without distinction of race, sex, age, education, religion or socioeconomic status. Although it affects all socioeconomic classes, violence predominates in lower classes, with complaints being less frequent in middle and upper classes due to shame or fear of exposure.²⁻⁴

It is a phenomenon present in many people's lives, either as victims or perpetrators. Usually the attacks happen in the family, school or institutional setting. Violence can take many forms, the main types being physical, sexual, psychological or by negligence, with children, adolescents, women, elderly, people with disabilities and homosexuals being the most frequent victims.⁴⁻⁶

In terms of gender, violence against women is a major public health problem, leading to violation of human rights. Among the most widespread forms of violence against women are physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner and sexual violence.⁷ To understand domestic violence against women as a form of gender-based violence, relations of power and distinction between culturally-assigned roles for each sex, and the biological singularities of each sex, are considered in this concept.⁵⁻⁶ These relations of power rarely benefit women, which are mostly victims of gender-based violence.⁸ Studies show that current and former partners are the main perpetrators of domestic violence against women.⁹⁻¹⁰

Because it is a complex phenomenon with cultural, economic and social causes, coupled with poor visibility, illegality and impunity, domestic

violence against women is the real translation of power, male physical strength and the history of cultural inequalities between men and women who, through stereotypical roles, legitimize or exacerbate the violence.⁶

Domestic violence against women is associated with several factors, including low educational level of women victims, poor socioeconomic conditions and the use of alcohol or illicit drugs by partners, which may increase the magnitude of the problem.¹¹ Drugs help the possible aggressor to have more courage and become more aggressive. Other factors include domestic disagreements related to the family, education of children, and organization, hygiene and cleaning of the home, among others. Socioeconomic status is a determinant in disorder of the home, because lack of means leads to quarrels and conflicts that can involve all family members.

Since the phenomenon of domestic violence against women causes physical, psychological and sexual harm, in recent decades, advances have been made in developing public health policies, implementing rights by the judiciary, and in the creation of government agencies to protect women's rights and to implement laws.^{3,10-13} Among these initiatives are the creation of police stations for the defense of women, and the enactment of law no. 11.340/2006, called the Maria da Penha Law, which increases the severity of penalties for assaults against women in the home or family environment, and enables the figure of "flagrant" and the order of preventive imprisonment, in addition to increasing penalties and instituting protective measures.¹⁴⁻¹⁵ However, fear and financial dependence of women on their partner are the main reasons that police reports are not made.

Domestic violence against women should be considered in its entirety, not only in its physical dimension, but also within the scope of the family, society, law, citizenship and human rights, which today are objects of international treaties to which Brazil is a member party.

In this context, the question emerges: what is the experience of women who suffer from domestic violence?

Domestic violence can affect the woman victim in her being, in her being in the world, and in her corporeality, that is, in the expression of her body,¹⁶ and can leave real and sensitive marks. A woman's perception of domestic violence against her is constructed from the real situation and awareness¹⁶ of the physical, psychic, moral and

social abuse, considering the interrelation between aggressor and victim.

In this study, the perception of the phenomenon was understood using phenomenology based on the theoretical framework of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to assimilate the perception of women victims of domestic violence, since the understanding and synthesis of this phenomenon will take place through judicial order, actions or predication of the victims.¹⁶

The aim of this study was to understand the experience of women victims of domestic violence in the framework of Merleau-Ponty.

METHOD

This was a phenomenological study based on the framework of Merleau-Ponty, an existentialist philosopher who sought to understand the human being in its universal structure, and at the same time, in its concrete experience of living, i.e., understand the human being in its entirety, engaged in a world and a reality. The body was one of the most important themes in Merleau-Ponty's thinking, the direct experience of the body in the lived world, beneath the concepts, understood as the only one capable of giving meaning and significance. From the body, every experience and all knowledge of the world are possible by means of perception.¹⁶

The phenomenon reveals this woman as a being in the world, victimized by domestic violence with numerous existential meanings, which are made explicit in each perspective of the experience and the perception of the abused woman. Thus, the abuse is expressed by the visible, by what is learned with the eyes and through the senses.¹⁶

Perception cuts through all possible doubts to settle on full truth, which makes us know existences and problems lived, and it is present in every moment as recreation or reconstitution of the world, that is, the human being is in the world, and it is in the world that one knows oneself. Thus we perceive the world around us through our body. We are a whole: a sensitive body that thinks, speaks, communicates and interacts with the environment, with the world.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

The methodology was chosen because phenomenology enables understanding from the lived experience. This understanding is possible when analyzing and interpreting the subjectivity stored in the body through language. Thus, the interpretation of speech and understanding are

interconnected, because one does not exist without the other; they enable finding the essence of the phenomenon, and therefore unveiling it.

The study setting was a women's health-care center in a municipality in the interior of the Brazilian state of São Paulo. Data were collected between July and September 2012, and the project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of *Universidade Paulista*, as per protocol no. 42806/12. The study subjects voluntarily accepted to participate in the study, and signed a Free and Informed Consent Form.

An interview was the primary instrument for data collection. Initial questions were asked regarding sociodemographic conditions, followed by the guiding questions: "Tell me about your experience suffering from domestic violence," and "Tell me how you feel after suffering from violence". In phenomenological research, the interview is used to explore experiences, narrated in depth, in order to understand the phenomenon being studied.¹⁸ The synthesis of reality enabled revealing the fact lived by the experience narrated in the perception of victims of domestic violence.

The interviews were scheduled in advance by telephone, performed at the victims' homes, recorded with permission from the victims, and lasted an average of 60 minutes. The study was formally presented, as per ethical criteria. The study subjects were informed about the purpose of the study, its confidentiality, and that they could cease to participate at any time without detriment.

The study participants were ten women who had been victims of domestic violence at some point in their life. These women were guaranteed confidentiality of information and anonymity by being identified with the letter E followed by the sequential number of the interview.

The number of participants was considered adequate when there was recurrence of information, while considering unique information taken into account in the search for the essence of the phenomenon in each of the interviews, conferring data saturation.¹⁹

According to the methodological approach, data analysis consisted of three parts: description of the phenomenon, reduction and phenomenological understanding. In a phenomenological study, the description is the exposure of the lived phenomenon through language, and takes the form of a text waiting for analysis, interpretation and understanding.¹⁶

At first, several readings of each interview was undertaken, in order to get acquainted with the experience lived, at which point proceeded the reduction. The reduction is when the essential parts of the description of the subject studied are selected by means of imaginative variation. The researcher imagines each part of the description as being present or absent in the experience, until it is reduced to the essentials for the existence of the conscious experience. The reduction aims to determine and select parts of the description considered essential.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

The phenomenological understanding occurs simultaneously to interpretation. It is the moment that aims to obtain the essential meaning in the description and reduction. The researcher assumes the result of the reduction as a set of units of meaning that are shown to be important, pointing also to the subject's experience, to the consciousness that the subject has of the phenomenon.¹⁶

The results showed nuclei of meanings that generated the themes, which were analyzed and interpreted based on the theoretical-philosophical framework of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: living with fear; living with physical injuries; and the decision to file a report after the violence experienced.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Considering that phenomenology has the task of uncovering phenomena implicit in the intentional relationships that a human being lives with others in their daily life, the study participants entwined in their statements moments of violence experienced with meanings associated with the phenomenon of domestic violence against women.

The study participants were young and mature adult women between 18 and 57 years, most of whom were married or separated/divorced. Six women had more than 12 years of schooling. Four participants declared their monthly income to be more than six minimum wages, five earned between one and two minimum wages, and only one declared that she had no monthly income. With regard to skin color, most identified themselves as white.

As regards the nature of the abuser, eight of the women were assaulted by an intimate partner. The number of assaults suffered varied from one to four (five respondents); five to nine assaults (two respondents), and more than ten (three respondents). Only two respondents had no children.

Consistent with other studies, these features fit the profile of women victims of violence in Brazil. Most were young, white, adult educated women who were married or in a stable relationship. The attackers were predominantly male and the victim's spouse. Most victims suffered from repeated acts of violence.²⁰⁻²¹

From data analysis, the demonstration of violence and women's perception of this phenomenon emerge, which appear in the meanings expressed and themed: living with fear; living with physical injuries; the decision to file a police report after the violence experienced.

On the first theme "living with fear," the participants externalized fear of the aggressor, which led the individuals involved to modify their relationships and ways of being in individual and collective space: *I get nervous, anxious, very afraid all the time, because the offender has threatened to kill me. I have to continue to work for my living, but when I go out on the street I'm afraid I'm going to die, as he promised (E4); deep down I'm afraid of him [...] afraid that it will happen again (E5).*

For these women, the abuser was an evil manipulator that entirely consumed them by imposing intimidation, humiliation and thus the feeling of fear. Threatening, the abuser provoked in the victim attitudes of subordination, numbness or even aggression. That depended, however, on the set of standards and rules woven into these contexts, and the meanings seized and internalized by the individuals involved.²⁰

Fear often paralyzed actions, preventing the women from transforming their experiences. It appears to transform the victims into constant hostages of the violence. The day-to-day obligations continued, but uncertainty prevailed, because the violence often returned, despite longing to change the situation, as emphasized in hope, which was cited by one of the study participants: *fear, constant fear. I didn't separate from him with the hope that he would change (E3).* The fear of suffering from retaliations by the abuser influenced the decision to break with the everyday, with his manipulation. The fear generated submission to a cycle of violence due to economic insecurity, as confirmed in the following statements: *he always made it clear that if I reported him, he'd kill me (E10); he said he would disappear with my daughter if I separated from him (E2); he threatened to kill me and kill my daughter, but there is another reason: I don't work (E7).*

The attacker proved persuasive and manipulative, and the women victims of violence

perceived themselves as cornered. Oftentimes, the women adopted a way of being and coexisting that did not permit any type of confrontation.²¹ This view of confrontation involves awareness of the lived phenomenon. Above all, this being, a victim of violence in the world, is willing to coexist around itself and the aggressor.¹⁶

The relationship established between the victims and offenders in daily life leaves emotional and physical consequences, as stated in the threats made to the life of the women or their children, a confrontation with the possibility of finitude, with individual values, with their feelings and, finally, with the human condition of submission.²²⁻²³

It was possible to perceive the vulnerability of these women in the face of the violence they experienced, which leads to the discussion of the second theme, "living with physical injuries," as identified in the following statements: *after several surgeries to recover from the damages caused by the cuts, I had irreversible physical damage. One of the bullets took out my left eye and I cannot move my left arm (E8); the last time he beat me, he left this mark. He threw me out of the window. I will limp on this leg forever (E1); I lost my first child, I was eight months pregnant. It was because of his punches in my belly [...] I have these fingers that are crippled. He didn't let me go to the hospital for setting (E7).*

The statements reveal the marks on the body, always accompanied by great moral suffering, as evidenced by the vulnerable condition of the victims. These respondents show the body as a marker, and show symptoms that are also part of everyday life.⁶ These meanings refer to abortion, mutilation and deformation of body parts.

Through the violence phenomenon and the mutilations cited above, these women tend to remove themselves from society, their right to come and go, and are deprived of their liberty: *I am ashamed to go out with these marks on my body. If someone asks, I say that it was a car accident. I even changed my job, and today work only with internal services in order to have contact with fewer people (E8); I avoid leaving home, since I limp (E1).*

The body is a mediating instrument between the person and the world. It is the space where the phenomenon occurs and cannot be considered only as a collection of organs juxtaposed in space. It must be recognized by a body schema in which its organs are involved. This body schema is not simply the result of associations established during the lived experience. It is "dynamic [...] the body schema is a way to express that my body is in the world".^{16:144-7}

To exercise its role in the world, the body needs to equip its being and be allowed to carry out its purposes. When the body's state of readiness ceases to exist, the individual sees their purpose of remaining an active, productive participant in their world become unviable.¹⁶ This was denoted in the results above.

The marks on the body and the perception of human finitude experienced by these women victims of domestic violence made them realize that they were trapped in an evil and dangerous vicious cycle that left visible and irreversible consequences.

From the moment in which these women realized that they were in a situation of possible death, despite being financially or emotionally dependent with the destructuring of their life and that of their family's, the ability to confront the situation emerged. The women made "the decision to file a report after the violence experienced," the third thematic, an attitude of internal mobilization that led them to seek external resources such as police services for women and the women's health-care center, as shown in the following statements: *the last attack was very serious, I almost died inside my house. The neighbors called the police. Me, my children and husband were referred to Police Precinct for Defense of Women, and the officer referred me to a shelter with my children (E9); I sought out the Women's Healthcare Center [...], I received guidance and filed a police report at the Police Precinct for Defense of Women, did the corpus delicti exam and opened a criminal process (E6); my mother took me to a police station where I filed a police report (E3); after coming close to death, I went to the Police Precinct for Defense of Women (E10). It was after the injuries that I opened a police report at the police station, and then the process (E8).*

The experience lived and contained in the victims' bodies allowed for an assessment of the existence of these women, reviving in them the desire to get out of the situation, in which were present fear, anguish, pain and suffering that transcends concrete existence - the body, the vehicle of being in the world.¹⁶

The reasons that bring women to file complaints against their partners generally occur due to fear of further violence or threats, or the need to take some action to punish the partner and secure their rights.²³ It is worth mentioning that the search for this resource is due to the effect produced within the family of the victim, that is, the intervention enables self-protection and reproach of the partner's conduct.⁶

In this context, support services for victims of violence first seek to understand their daily lives, in order to establish referrals to legal and health sectors. Another resource is the support of family and/or friends, because sharing the suffering provides greater pain relief.^{6,12,17} Thus, the time between the physical aggression or threat until the decision to file a police report varies and involves several reactions and behaviors, based on the perception of each person involved.

The perception occurs between objective and subjective interrelationships through the experiences and the worldview of the individuals. Perception cuts through all possible doubts to settle on the full truth, which makes us know existences and problems lived, and is present in each moment as a recreation or reconstitution of the world. Perception is the mode of access to the world, things and knowledge; it takes place and is built with states of consciousness from the real that shows and aims human intentions.¹⁷

Thus, when perceiving the submissive condition to the violence, the woman seeks locations of support, which represents an attempt to break with the marital or family context, and the self-image as an abused woman. When the woman is able to talk about what she experienced and expose her subjectivity, this experience gives her a new sense of being able to change the meaning of her suffering, and thus overcome it.

Thus, in the present - configured by the violence suffered, time temporalizes a past retained and a future outlined by the ability to report the crime. But it is thanks to the perception of the violated body that the woman manages to transcend the phenomenon, because "I am the one who gives meaning and future to my life. This does not mean that the direction and future are designed; they come out of my present and my past and, in particular, my mode of coexistence".^{16:440}

In this sense, the women gain strength to retake control of their lives, often enabling the momentary reversal of the asymmetrical relationship between genders. For the woman, the complaint to the police means breaking with family reciprocity, in response to the ruptures caused by the man in this context which, in turn, refer to the preeminence of the family group in relation to the position of the woman.²⁴

Thus, this woman relearns to see the world despite the violence experienced, because at the moment of exposure of the phenomenon, and the decision to report the violence suffered, the

woman leaves the suffering from the foreign matter - physical aggression - for consciousness, that is, to the attitude of seeing how to be suffering internally with this condition/situation, and to perceive a possible change of the state of inertia and submission to aggression.

Merleau-Ponty is cited here,¹⁶ with this expression: "The body is a knot of living meanings. Materiality is expressed by how the body interacts with the world, is a way of saying that I can be seen as an object, and that I seek to be seen as a subject, the other can be my master or my slave".^{16:244}

Thus, the fear, the physical and emotional abuse, and the reprisals of the abuser influenced the woman to not perceive herself in the world as a complete being, often blocking the decision to break with the everyday violence through manipulation by the abuser, submitting to a cycle of violence, which led to the ignorance of her rights and lack of information. Yet, these women often received support from family and/or friends, and this assistance was configured, in most cases, in the decision to report the offender and seek support, despite the marks prevailing and configuring a body suffering in a daily life of renunciations and uncertainties.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

By understanding the experience of these women victims of domestic violence, it was possible to reveal the phenomenon and understand that the violence suffered by the women, in its multiple forms of expression, made their lives full of setbacks and suffering, as a result of the relationship of subservience, with the absolute domination of the abuser, which triggered disintegration of their lives and that of their families.

The fear of reporting the abuser became a barrier for many women, regardless of their social status. Emotional fragility also impeded the decision to report the violence. The threat to their life sharpened, in the women participating in the study, a deep desire to break the chains of the vicious cycle of domestic violence, to free themselves from their abuser, and thus leave the state of inertia.

Care to women victims of violence should involve intersectoral actions for comprehensive care, involving various sectors such as legal, health, family and non-governmental organizations in a humanized approach.

Comprehensive care is only possible if there is embracement, qualified listening and follow-up for these victimized women and their abusers,

thus facilitating empowerment and decreasing the occurrences and impacts of the violence on the health and life of the women.

This study sought to provide a contribution to knowledge about violence against women, by understanding the experience of women victims of domestic violence in their psychosocial and physical aspects, considering the body as a vehicle of possession of the abuser, which may enable expansion of debates on the subject and improvement of care to these women, in a comprehensive and humane manner.

Thus, more studies on the subject are necessary so that healthcare providers have a holistic and empathetic view. This view allows for understanding experiences and problems lived, which may be present and appear veiled or not in the everyday healthcare routine. It is worth noting the limitations of the study because, although covering the experiences of women victims of domestic violence, this is not an absolute reality for all of those who are living with violence. The unpredictability of the course of violence can bring other charges and conflicts, which should be considered and evaluated by healthcare professionals when assisting women victims and their families, in directing the actions to be implemented and support to overcome the situation and restructure the family.

In this sense, the article encourages a reflection on the phenomenon of domestic violence and perception of women in a phenomenological view of the existence of this woman in the undignified condition of victim.

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