


WOMEN'S PERMANENCE IN RELATIONSHIPS MARKED BY VIOLENCE: UNVEILING MARITAL EVERYDAY LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to unveil the reasons why women stay in marital relationships marked by violence. **Method:** a qualitative study, grounded on the Oral History method, carried out with 29 women victims of marital violence monitored by a Court of Domestic and Family Violence against Women in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. The data were collected between September and December 2020 through individual interviews and analyzed in the light of the Theory of Everyday Life. **Results:** the women's Oral History points to non-perception of the abuse situation at the beginning of the relationship and reveals the belief in the possibility of controlling the episodes of violence and the impairment of psycho-emotional health. The expectation that the partner will change his position in marital everyday life is added to this. **Conclusion:** the narratives unveil the complexity involved in the repetition of everyday life, which means that many women, even though they already recognize themselves as experiencing violence, are unable to break the relationship.

DESCRIPTORS: Violence against Women; Violence by Intimate Partner; Public Health; Nursing; Qualitative Research.

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INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is considered a public health problem as a result of the high rates and effects on women's health. Many women stay in abusive marital relationships for many years and experience excessive distress as a consequence of the problem⁽¹⁾.

Global data show the magnitude of marital violence for women's life. A research study conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that more than 35% of the women in the world already experienced aggressions perpetrated by their intimate partners⁽¹⁾. In South Asian countries, marked by conservative and patriarchal rules, extreme poverty and high illiteracy rates, such as Bangladesh and India, these numbers can exceed 50% of the women⁽²⁻³⁾. In Brazil, the percentage of women in situations of violence in their relationships is also high, according to a study carried out with 1,388 women, revealing that this type of abuse affects approximately 45% of them⁽⁴⁾.

When experiencing violence, women become susceptible to the negative impacts of this problem on their health. It is known that this experience can result in physical harms such as bruises, injuries and fractures, as well as in illness due to a psychosomatic process, expressed through epigastralgia, cephalgia, dizziness and chronic diseases such as hypertension⁽⁵⁾. There is also the risk of psychological impairment, evidenced by sadness, anxiety and depressive behavior, as indicated in an Australian study carried out using data from 8,850 women, aged between 25 and 30 years old, treated at health services in different parts of the country⁽⁶⁾.

Despite the repercussions arising from the aggression, women stay in the relationships for several years. The time that a woman stays in a relationship marked by violence has been studied in international and national surveys. Research studies carried out in Brazil, analyzing 212 cases under the jurisprudence of the 1st Court of Justice for Peace at Home, in Salvador, Bahia, and in Shahroud, northeastern Iran, with 600 women who have experienced intimate partner violence, pointed out that they take approximately from seven to 10 years to decide to leave the relationship⁽⁷⁻⁸⁾. However, women often report the situation not with the intention of breaking the relationship but as an attempt to mitigate the everyday violent situations⁽⁹⁾. Because of this, some of them regret and resume the marital relationship, a decision that once again exposes them to a risk situation for experiencing the disease, as evidenced in a study carried out in Cape Town, South Africa, which heard women survivors of marital abuse and who were under governmental protection⁽¹⁰⁾.

Considering the complexity involved in marital violence, it is necessary to historicize women's daily lives in order to better understand the factors that contribute to women staying in these relationships, even in the face of the imminent risk of more abuse and even death. Given the above, the objective of the study was to unveil the reasons why women stay in marital relationships marked by violence. In this way, marital violence proves to be a problem for women's health, which requires greater understanding of the elements that make women stay in the relationship, with the aim that health professionals, especially nurses, identify them in their care appointments.

METHOD

This is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach, grounded on the Oral History method and analyzed in the light of the Theory of Everyday Life⁽¹¹⁻¹²⁾. This study, approved by the Committee of Ethics and Research with Human Beings of the Federal University of Bahia under opinion No. 877,905, is linked to the matrix research entitled "Reeducation of men and women involved in criminal proceedings: A strategy for coping with marital violence", funded by the Research Support Foundation of the State of Bahia and supported

by the Public Security Secretariat of Bahia.

The research was conducted between September and December 2020 in two Courts of Domestic and Family Violence against Women in the city of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. The study participants were 29 women who met the inclusion criterion: legal representation due to marital violence. Women whose emotional state represented a contraindication to participate in the study according to the Courts' psychosocial service discretion were excluded. The participants were invited to take part in the research via telephone calls and, upon acceptance, consent was obtained by signing the Free and Informed Consent Form.

The life narratives were obtained through individual interviews, which took place in private rooms of the Courts of Violence, directed with the support of a semi-structured script and guided by the following question: "Tell me the story of your relationship with your partner". Conduction of the interview was based on the methodological framework of Life History by Daniel Bertaux, having as a central focus the in-depth look at the everyday life of women with a history of conjugal violence⁽¹³⁾. As it allows the other person to speak freely about their experience, the method recommends the inclusion of necessary questions to reach data deepening.

It is worth noting that the interviews were conducted by master's and PhD female students with expertise in qualitative studies and in the theme of violence. The conversations were recorded with the aid of a digital voice recorder and later transcribed in full and stored in virtual folders of the Laboratory of Studies on Violence, Health and Quality of Life, with their destruction allowed after five years from data collection. It is worth mentioning that theoretical data saturation was attained based on data repetition and absence of new relevant information to be explored. In order to preserve the participants' anonymity, they were identified with the letter "W", followed by an Arabic number representing the order of the interviews and by their age.

In order to unveil the reasons why women stay in relationships marked by everyday marital violence, based on their life history, the reports were systematized through Categorical Thematic Content Analysis. Considering the rigor of the scientific research, this organization respected fulfillment of the pre-analysis stages, with perception of the analysis units obtained after a floating and exhaustive reading of the interviews, followed by exploration of the material, in which the raw data were grouped by content similarity, giving rise to the categories⁽¹⁴⁾. After organizing and analyzing the data, they were validated by the research participants.

Interpretation of the narratives was based on the Theory of Everyday Life, which allows new elements to be brought to the scene and, thus, unveiling the reality that is disguised in habituality and deciphering the enigmas that hide everyday life⁽¹²⁾. Choice of this contribution is also guided by the premise that, from situations experienced by singular, individual and particular subjects, we can have an understanding of the generic, social being. In this sense, this theoretical framework helped us unveil the everyday routine of each woman in conjugality and to reveal what is unusual in the recurrent day-to-day.

RESULTS

When drawing the profile of the 29 participants, it can be asserted that they belonged to the age group from 25 to 71 years old, with a mean age of 41. Regarding ethnicity, 19 of them self-declared as black-skinned. All lived in neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city and, although 22 reported having a paid job, the majority (23 women) had low family incomes, not reaching two minimum wages. In relation to the marital relationship, 12 women stated that they were married to the aggressor, 15 mentioned stable unions and two reported being divorced at the time of the interview.

The life narratives of these women portray the marital routine, making it possible to reveal elements linked to the female permanence in abusive relationships, expressed through the following categories.

They do not recognize themselves in a situation of violence at the beginning of the relationship

The narratives indicate the women's difficulty recognizing the abuse experience at the beginning of the marital relationship. This is explained by the subtle nuances that differentiate love from violence. Thus, controlling and oppressive behaviors, even if alerted by family members, are interpreted as manifestations of zeal and proof of love, hiding the perception of the beginning of the hostile relationship, as illustrated by the following statements:

"At the beginning he was really jealous, he wanted me exclusively for him, he didn't let me talk to my relatives. I thought it was love. I was excited to get married. [...] my mother said he was no good, but it took me a while to realize that!" (W4, 32 years old)

"At the beginning, he complained about the makeup, the short clothes. I thought it was protection and that I had to respect him. [...] I realized that I was trying to mask the violence to myself because I dreamed of a house and a family." (W7, 43 years old)

They believe that they can control the episodes of violence

The stories also reveal that, when they perceive themselves in a situation of everyday violence, women remain in the relationship believing they are able to control it, in order to preserve their marriage/family. A priori, this phase reveals itself as a more obscure aggression, with veiled behaviors such as offenses, control and prohibitions; a posteriori, the manifestations become increasingly clear and emerge from physical aggression to death threats, which favors recognition of being experiencing the phenomenon. It is important to note that, over time and as the relationship progresses, some women tend to present resistance to giving up marriage.

"First it was verbally, but the next thing I knew is that I was being beaten and threatened with death. I knew that I was a victim of violence, but I didn't want to renounce on marriage. I did everything possible to avoid quarrels: I paid the bills, cooked, tried to talk. I thought that there might be some change that way!" (W3, 71 years old)

"[...] he started forbidding me to study [...] physical aggressions also became a routine, even when I was pregnant. I fought not to destroy our family. [...] I did everything to please him and keep him from getting bored. I thought that this way I'd be able to change him and that it was up to me to avoid the aggressions. I didn't want to lose my family." (W28, 37 years old)

They present psycho-emotional impairments

The life stories signal the women's psycho-emotional impairments, such as reduced self-esteem and depressive behavior symptoms. These changes in psychological health favor the triggering of ambiguous feelings nourished by the spouse, as well as the acceptance of a violent marital routine, making them even more vulnerable to the continuation of abusive conjugality.

"[...] he tried to make me believe that I was ugly, fat and old. [...] I felt oppressed, really sad, as if I was nothing! I liked him and hated him at the same time. [...] I gradually accepted that I was born to suffer and that there was nothing to do about it." (W18, 34 years old)

"It was a slap and an excuse; a punch and an apology. When he hit me, I was very angry, but I didn't want to leave him because I loved him. [...] I felt sad, humiliated. [...] I was depressed, lost the will to live and couldn't do a single thing." (W23, 38 years old)

They trust in the promise that their spouses will change

The study reveals that, in the daily life of marital relationships, women, although emotionally fragile, decide at various times to end the abusive relationship, which is resumed shortly after the increasingly original apologies made by the spouse. This female behavior, once more grounded on the value of marriage and family, predisposes women to stay in the situation of marital violence, which is intensified as the relationships progress.

"I decided to get a divorce. [...] I made several complaints, but he came up with that story that it would never happen again and something inside me told me that it was true. I came back because I wanted that family, raise my son with that person. [...] no quarrels for some time, but it all started again the following week." (W11, 31 years old)

"The first time I decided to have enough, he asked for a chance. [...] again, he apologized with a caress. [...] he already slept at the front door of my house insisting that I went back. [...] I couldn't resist it when he said that he loved me and the children and that he was going to change for the better. [...] I kept hoping he would change, but he got worse and worse." (W5, 57 years old)

DISCUSSION

The study warns about women's difficulty perceiving themselves in a situation of violence at the beginning of the marital relationship, despite the spouses' habitual imposition regarding the limitation of living with family members and friends, as well as in the way of dressing and using makeup. A national survey carried out with 19 men and women maintains that marital relationships are permeated by the process of male power interference, with controlling attitudes, behavior conditioning and constant surveillance being a routine from the inspection of their actions, such as checking telephone devices⁽¹⁵⁾.

Given the above, in the female perception, such everyday behaviors represent a proof of love and protection. Corroborating this, a Brazilian research study points out that it is common for the partner to control the woman's behavior and way of dressing, considered a way of showing seriousness in the relationship. It is also frequent that women associate oppressive behaviors as a proof of love and care⁽¹⁶⁾. Such a context is extremely common in the marital scenario, mainly sustained on the belief of jealousy as a "proof of love"⁽¹⁰⁾. However, excessive jealousy is not grounded on love, but on a relationship of insecurity, control and possession.

Therefore, regarding the behaviors being understood as acts of love, protection and care, they can in fact be configured in a position of domination towards women, as illustrated by the narratives, which make clear the female misunderstanding about the impressions about their spouses controlling and oppressive attitudes and violence. This ablesia is related to the difficulty differentiating attitudes that denote love from those that configure violence, so that there is confusion between the warmth-affection-protection-care behavior and the domination-control-power behavior. This can explain the fact that women do not perceive themselves in situations of violence, or take a long time to realize this reality, even if it is signaled by people close to them, such as W4's mother.

The findings also warn that the difficulty women find to recognize themselves in a situation of violence is more common at the beginning of the relationships. This is because these moments, generally regarded as a phase of conquest, are marked by the

strengthening of the affective bonds and passion between the couple⁽¹⁶⁾. In this stage, women tend to feed expectations of being the center of their partners' universe, that they will love them unconditionally and that they will raise a perfect family together⁽¹⁰⁾. This valuation of marriage and family, also present in the participants' reports, may be compromising the women's ability not to perceive situations of violence experienced in everyday life, or even interfering in the decision not to renounce the idealized marriage, to submit to such situation, given that only two of the 29 women interviewed were divorced.

It is important to point out that, despite the difficulty recognizing the spouse's actions as violence, precisely due to the fine line that differentiates love from oppression permeated by the social value of marriage, at some point, women tend to realize that they were experiencing abusive marital histories. This is because these aggressions, with the day-to-day of the relationship, gradually intensify to the point of becoming less and less veiled and with greater severity, as indicated in the statements. A number of Brazilian research studies carried out in Espírito Santo and Bahia agree with the initial subtlety of violence in conjugality, usually expressed in a psychological way, which gradually progresses in intensity and severity, leading to more critical events, such as those of a physical nature, manifested by punches in the face, mainly chin and eyes⁽⁵⁾, which make the everyday life of marital violence being revealed very slowly.

Due to its gradual nature, as soon as they realize that they are experiencing marital violence, women tend to believe, in vain, that they can control the situation, through a change in their behavior or in their spouse's. Similarly, a number of studies carried out with women with a history of marital violence in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and in the metropolitan region of Cape Town, South Africa, have identified that, over time, women tend to minimize the acts perpetrated by their spouses, believing they are capable of modifying the aggressor's behavior^(10,17).

However, as they experience the recurrence of violence in the everyday life of conjugality, it is clear in the narratives that the disrespectful and aggressive behaviors gradually get worse and that emotional distress also intensifies, which imprisons them even more in the relationship. Suffering violence in the everyday life of an intimate relationship, expressed in its various forms such as ridicule and humiliation, leads to mental health impairment, so that women's self-esteem declines, as indicated by national and international studies⁽¹⁷⁻¹⁸⁾. Individuals with low self-esteem tend to experience a variety of difficulties that include feelings of anxiety, low connection with people, reluctance to assert themselves and need to please the others⁽¹⁹⁾, situations similar to those reported by the participants of this study.

In association, another sign of emotional impairment revealed in our research refers to the love-hate duality. However, even in the face of the ambiguity of feelings and actions, typical of this illness process, this situation ends up postponing the rupture of the abusive relationship, as it culminates in a process of naturalization and acceptance of the partner's attitudes, making the rupture difficult⁽¹⁰⁾. Staying in the relationship can be understood as alienation from everyday life⁽²⁰⁾, which precludes the woman to imagine her daily routine without the presence of the aggressor. This context leads women to accept this life condition, as they feel unable to react to the situations of violence.

In addition to the feeling of acceptance and impotence, some women even start to believe that they deserve those aggressions. This reality could be identified in a research study carried out with women who have experienced violent intimate relationships, who reported that they understand that their spouses are allowed to infringe violent acts on them, if they deem it necessary⁽¹⁰⁾. In agreement, a study conducted with 384 women treated at a university hospital in the southern region of Nigeria shows that those with life stories marked by situations of violence tend to adopt a withdrawn stance in the face of conflicting situations, in order to avoid new violent episodes⁽²¹⁾.

It is worth noting that women's apathetic stance towards the recurrence of violence, despite making them remain in the everyday life of marital violence, reveals itself as a

protective factor, which can prevent the triggering of a new violent episode. These strategies, characterized by remaining silent, hesitating, withdrawing and depriving themselves, developed from spontaneity in dealing with their partner, may appear to be passivity, but also be recognized as defense strategies developed and intuitively alternated by women in an attempt to stop the violence^(12,20). In addition to avoiding routine conflicts, a research study describes this behavior as a female strategy to avoid more serious violence and, above all, femicides⁽¹⁰⁾.

Even with some degree of illness and fear for their lives, the study shows that there are times when women decide to break the violent relationship, usually expressed by attempts to separate from their spouses. However, they are faced with requests for forgiveness made by the partner, another reason that contributes to the permanence of marital violence revealed by the study. In this regard, it is important to point out that the repeatability of the excuses and the peculiarity in attacking and reconquering emerge for the efficacy of the measures used by the aggressor to maintain conjugality⁽²²⁾.

Female imprisonment in an abusive relationship is supported by the illusory character of the social ideology of preserving marriage and family⁽¹⁵⁾, which in women feeds the hope of living a relationship similar to what they experienced, or even idealized, at the beginning of the relationship⁽²³⁾. This situation allows us to understand why women decide to leave the relationship, even through a Police report, but later regret it and resume the marital relationship, certainly on the same lines of disrespect and violence. This is even more evident in black-skinned women since, as they are often in a context of social vulnerability, they have greater difficulty maintaining a support network to keep themselves away from the aggressor⁽²⁴⁾.

The different situations that emerged from the narratives favor the understanding of the reasons why women are unable to envision other life perspectives beyond what is present in the marital routine. In view of the above, women's patterns of thinking, acting and feeling need to be overcome, so that they can break such abusive relationships. This rupture also represents a break from the patriarchal molds historically imposed on women, which make them remain in a position of inferiority and subordination, especially in the domestic sphere. Thus, coping with the problem does not depend only on the women's individual efforts, but also on an entire social framework that helps them overcome gender stereotypes⁽²⁵⁾.

Thus, there is an urgent need for better preparation on the part of health professionals since, if they are in such conditions, they can better articulate their actions in order to favor women's strengthening to interrupt the phenomenon. In this sense, a national study states that professionals who have received training to work in situations of violence feel safer to address the issue, identify the problem and work with women in coping with violence⁽⁵⁾, preventing them from remaining in an abusive relationship.

Given the above, the study limitation lies in the fact that it does not quantify the mean time that the women take to realize that they are in a situation of violence and/or the number of times that they resume the relationships.

CONCLUSION

The narratives show that non-perception of the situation of abuse, the belief that it is possible to control the episodes of violence, the impairment of psycho-emotional health, and trust in the spouse's promise of change constitute events that allow us to unveil the reason why women stay in a marital routine of violence. The research contributes to offering subsidies so that people can approach the abusive relationship that alienates women and that is difficult to break.

From this perspective, by revealing the situations that bind women to a violent marital routine, the study allows professionals, especially from the health area, to understand abuse as a relational and complex event, which makes many women, even though they already recognize themselves experiencing the phenomenon, unable to break the relationship. Given this context, there is a perceived need to raise awareness and educate the professionals about the problem, favoring the approach to the theme in their work routines, promoting greater bonding and a more welcoming service that permeate prevention, diagnosis, intervention and coping actions regarding the disease, providing guidelines and support and favoring women's strengthening and empowerment.

Such actions can take place in any care and welcoming space for women, such as consultations and reflexive groups, this latter for being a space that favors the sharing of experiences with the purpose of strengthening women for them to get out of a violent relationship. In the context of Primary Health Care, especially in the Saúde na Escola (Health at School) Program, these professionals, together with the educators, will be able to alert boys and girls about the fine line that separates the actions of affection from those that are configured as oppression and violence, favoring recognition of the experience.

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