

# Subordination of gender: reflecting on the vulnerability to domestic violence against women

*Subalternidade de gênero: refletindo sobre a vulnerabilidade para violência doméstica contra a mulher*

*Subalternidad de género: reflexionando sobre la vulnerabilidad de las mujeres que sufren violencia doméstica*

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This article has the purpose of reflecting on violence against women of gender performed in the familial spaces, especially the connection between gender subordination of inside the family environment and the vulnerability to such kind of violence. **Results:** History shows subordination of gender and violence against women interlaced and affirmed through the construction of gender in societies. The women form a group and continuously which is violated by several means, such as physical, oral, and sexual abuses and aggressions from partners or ex-partners, relatives, friends, unknown people, public institutions or by the State. **Conclusion:** For the health services to be prepared for the diseases and injuries deriving from the domestic violence is essential to understand women's vulnerability to violence an indicator of the social inequities and inequalities that surpasses the concept of risk.

**Keywords:** Violence Against Women; Domestic Violence; Gender Identity.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Este artigo tem o objetivo de refletir sobre a violência de gênero praticada contra a mulher no espaço intrafamiliar, sobretudo, a relação entre a subalternidade de gênero no âmbito familiar e a vulnerabilidade para este tipo de violência. **Resultados:** A subalternidade de gênero e a violência contra mulher apresentam-se entrelaçadas na história e, conformam-se por meio da construção de gênero nas sociedades. As mulheres formam um grupo que é violentado, constantemente, e de diversas maneiras, como, agressões e abusos físicos, verbais e sexuais cometidos por parceiros ou ex-parceiros, familiares, amigos, desconhecidos, por instituições públicas ou pelo Estado. **Conclusão:** Para que os serviços de saúde possam se antecipar às doenças e agravos decorrentes da violência doméstica é essencial compreender os aspectos relacionados à vulnerabilidade da mulher para a violência, como um indicador da iniquidade e da desigualdade social que supera o conceito probabilístico de risco.

**Palavras-chave:** Violência Contra a Mulher; Violência Doméstica; Identidade de Gênero.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Este artículo tiene el objetivo de reflexionar sobre la violencia de género ejercida contra la mujer en el espacio familiar, sobretudo, la relación entre la subalternidad de género y la vulnerabilidad para esta violencia. **Resultados:** La subalternidad de género y la violencia contra la mujer se presentan entrelazadas en la historia, y se ajustan por medio de la construcción de género en las sociedades. Las mujeres constituyen un grupo que es constantemente violentado y de varias maneras, tales como abusos físicos, verbales y sexuales cometidos por compañeros o ex compañeros, familiares, amigos, desconocidos o por las instituciones públicas. **Conclusión:** Para que los servicios de salud puedan anticiparse a las enfermedades y consecuencias resultantes de la violencia doméstica, es esencial comprender la vulnerabilidad de la mujer, como un indicador de la inequidad y de la desigualdad social que supera el concepto probabilístico de riesgo.

**Palabras-clave:** Violencia Contra la Mujer; Violencia Doméstica; Identidad de Género.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the construction process of social life, human beings establish various relationships with each other and with nature. To establish relations of production they create and re-create a social structure based on power relations<sup>1</sup>. One way to have power is through violence. Conflicts of authority, power struggles, desire to dominate, to possess and annihilate the other and their property are examples of violent demonstrations that can be approved or not, legal or not, depending on the social norms and cultural processes in a given locality in a particular timeframe. There seems never to have existed any society totally without violence, but there were always more violent ones than others. A positive step in the development of humanity was to realize various forms of violence as negative, as this perception tracks the progress of the democratic spirit in which the illegitimate use of force, be it physical, moral or political, against the will of another, becomes a form of oppression<sup>2</sup>.

Violence can be characterized according to the agents who exercise: police, institutional, social, economic, political, among others; or as to the population it reaches (ethnic or racial violence). It can also be predicated in accordance with the location at which it happens. Violation refers to embarrass, coerce, use physical superiority over the other, or prevent another from expressing his desire or will, under threat of punishment, injury, or annihilate the other or its possessions<sup>2</sup>. Women form a group that constantly experiences various types of aggression and physical, verbal and sexual abuse by partners or ex-partners, family, friends, strangers, public institutions and even by the state.

Early studies of violence in 1960, discussing domestic violence focusing primarily on the assaulted child. The mother often appeared as an aggressor without contextualizing the situation in which the woman lived. Gender issues were not taken into account. A decade after the international feminist movement coined the term violence against women and, from that moment, studies are pointing to violence as a violation of human rights, gaining greater visibility in the judicial and police affairs. In the 1980s, the field of health adopted the terminology domestic violence, pointing to the interfamily violence and that against women. Currently, the term gender violence, which emerged in the 1990s, is used to designate assaults and abuses arising from gender conflicts and how to deal with them, expressing the radicalization of existing inequalities between men and women<sup>3</sup>.

In the health agenda, addressing violence against women occurred under protagonism of the feminist movement. "With strategies for creating gender awareness in many different environments and institutions, this move pushed and continues to push the health sector to actively act and give concrete answers not only for treatment of injuries from violence, but to act on the causes, through a positive agenda"<sup>2:48</sup>.

Specifically on violence against women, the Ministry of Health recognizes that:

Social, economic and political structural inequalities between men and women, the rigid differentiation of roles, notions of manhood linked to the domain and male honor (...) are factors of gender violence. Its impact is not observed only at the individual level, but also implies losses for the welfare, the safety of the community and human rights<sup>4:17</sup>.

As to what refers to the impact of the phenomenon, 25% of working days lost by women tend to be caused by the violence, which reduces their financial gains between 3% and 20%. Sons and daughters of mothers who experience violence are three times more likely to become ill and 63% of these children repeat at least one year in school, abandoning their studies, on average, when nine years old. The violence that occurred within households is almost a lost year of healthy life for one in five women aged 15-44 years, holding a weight similar to tuberculosis, HIV, the various types of cancer and cardiovascular disease<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, it is understood that working in view of women's vulnerability to domestic violence is fundamental to health services, to be able to anticipate the diseases and injuries resulting from violence. The vulnerability is an indicator of iniquity and social inequality that overcomes the individualizing and probabilistic character of the classic concept of risk, by pointing to a number of aspects that go beyond the individual, encompassing collective and contextual aspects that lead to susceptibility to diseases or injuries well as to aspects concerning the availability or lack of resources for the protection of these people<sup>5</sup>.

The vulnerability aims to bring the associated abstract and assignable elements to processes of illness for more concrete and particularized theoretical development plans, in which the connections and mediations between these processes are the object of knowledge. Unlike risk studies, investigations conducted on the theoretical vulnerability claim universality and not the expanded reproducibility in its phenomenology and inference<sup>6:1327</sup>.

In view of this, the focus of this reflection is gender violence practiced against women within the family space - domestic violence against women - more specifically, the relationship between gender subordination within the family and the vulnerability to this type of violence.

### **Subordinate gender and violence against women - intertwined in history**

The construction of masculinity and femininity takes on men and women, on male or female biological bodies that are

immersed in a transforming social environment, and that are transformed by these people, therefore the social relations among them, including personal relationships, will be conforming in a socially and historically legitimized way<sup>7</sup>.

This social construction of male and female roles, researchers recognize records female subordinate and domestic violence in Brazil since colonial times. At the time

... the husbands should prove themselves dominant, willfully exercising patriarchal, insensitive and selfish desire. Women, in turn, presented themselves as faithfully submissive and retracted. Her most important task was procreation. It is likely that men treat their women as children making machines, subjected to mechanical sex and deprived of expressions of affection<sup>8:45</sup>.

The context of domestic violence remained imbricated in Brazilian society. As you can see in the later entries in the nineteenth century, the treatment of women was still referring to the treatment of an object:

There was a high level of violence in marital relationships. Not only physical violence, in the form of beatings and whippings, but the violence of abandonment, of contempt, of evil will. Economic and political factors that were involved in marital choice left little space for sexual affinity or affection to have a great weight in this decision<sup>8:65</sup>.

And other records you could see that in imperial Brazil, under the pretext of adultery, the murder of women was legitimate. Only in 1916 the new Civil Code has considered adultery of both spouses reason for divorcement. However, the change in the law did not change the custom of killing the wife or (female) partner<sup>9</sup>.

The crime of passion before, was pardoned on the basis of superior rights of man over woman. The killer of women was viewed with complacency, compassion, and some were acquitted to be tried by jury, based on these superior rights. When men discover the betrayal by his companion, they turn into judges and executioners<sup>9:88</sup>.

And reports of violence continue in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1950s:

... men had authority and power over women and were responsible for the livelihood of his wife and children. The ideal woman was defined from the traditional female models - domestic work and care of children and husband - of the characteristics of 'femininity' as maternal instinct, purity, sweetness and resignation (...). Extramarital adventures of women were severely punished<sup>8:161</sup>.

The process of urbanization experienced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and access to paid work by women brought a big change in female behavior. But despite the change of behavior on the part of society toward non acceptance of violence that was previously naturalized, crimes committed by husbands against their wives continued to be justified as legitimate defense of honor. "Smoking, wear a bikini and watch "*Malu Mulher*" in those days could end in death"<sup>8:209</sup>.

### Deconstructing the trivialization of domestic violence against women

The period extending from the late 1970s to the early years of the 1980s marked the transformation in the way the Brazilian society looked at violence against women.

In a period of transition to democracy after 20 years of military rule, the rights to citizenship began to be recognized, however, a speech that spoke in equal rights for men and women showed to be insufficient to sensitize all - society and government - in the fight to end discrimination against women. Therefore, initially, the speech was articulated around the murders, but soon went on to reveal other forms of violence that were committed against women. The women's movement warned that the murders were not isolated acts, motivated by uncontrolled passion, but the final act of relationship-based assaults, frequent threats and humiliations and that ends in murder. That way, attacks that were socially accepted and even justified (sexual violence and violence in marital relationships, especially beatings, ill-treatment and threats), from a given time, could be denounced and fought<sup>10</sup>.

The theme was gaining body and became the object of complaints and campaigns for the prevention and punishment, reaching status of public problem stimulating the formulation of policies for the care of victims, in the areas of health, security and justice, as well as the proposition of legislation that criminalizes sexual harassment, feeding attempts of criminal definition of domestic violence against women<sup>10</sup>. By giving visibility to the struggle for conviction of violent husbands, the feminist movement started to fight for equality and an end to discrimination against women.

The creation of a specialized police department for attending of women was formed in the 1980s, the most important answer to claims of groups of individual women or articulated to the Church, trade unions or political parties that, favored by the movement of political democratization that had settled in Brazilian society, began to establish a dialogue with the state, demanding the urgency of policies that could give institutional responses to prevent and punish violence against women<sup>10</sup>.

In the international context, the historical construction of women's rights that had begun with the Women's Decade (1975-1985) saw great advances in the 1990s. The conference in Vienna (1993) emphasized women's rights as human rights - universal, inalienable, indivisible - and recognized violence against women as a human rights violation. Other conferences -

Cairo (1994), Beijing (1995) and Durban (2001) also contributed to advances in the recognition of these rights. UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women), mobilized by the decisions of Beijing, sparked widespread international campaign for national governments to draw up plans with the adoption of effective measures to eradicate violence against women<sup>10</sup>.

However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cases and more cases of domestic violence against women accumulate on report forms, such as:

*"She maintains a stable relationship for 16 years, having suffered aggression since the first year of marriage. Besides verbally assaulting the daughters he has an extramarital relationship for three years"*

*"Immediately upon waking, the baby cried. The partner took the bottle that was on the floor. He became nervous and started beating her for thinking that she was not taking good care of the child"*

*"After becoming pregnant the partner sent her away from home, took his health plan away and said he will hurt her very much for getting pregnant"*

*"Stable union for eight years, has two children of this relationship. He is an alcoholic, crack user and assaults verbally and physically. At the last suffered aggression she received punches, kicks and an attempted suffocation"<sup>11</sup>.*

Asked about the reasons led them to commit violent acts against their partners, the aggressors recognize that the reasons are related to the women (presence of inappropriate actions or attitudes of the companion, dominion of the women on the companion and in response to physical, verbal or psychological aggression by the companion) related to them (use of substances, financial situation) or other persons (interference from people unrelated to marital relationship). From their point of view, they alternate the roles of aggressor (as protagonist in aggressive action) and victim (to blame the woman as to the motivation for aggressive behavior). Regarding the causes, these mingle in the day-to-day life, accumulate in the form of conflicts and come in acts that constitute marital violence of man against companion<sup>12</sup>.

The framework can be even more serious because:

Despite the growth in research on violence against women and the statistics already presented, there is still the difficulty of specifying the actual magnitude of violence, since conjugal family relationships and the home environment are still considered private and particular aspects, naturalizing and trivializing this social phenomenon everyday<sup>12:156</sup>.

### **There is still much to be done...**

Keeping stereotypes and conception of gender naturalizes inequalities between human beings of different sexes, as well as the subordination between them<sup>13</sup>. These stereotypes are a set of beliefs about the behaviors and characteristics of man and woman that serve as cognitive schemes, controlling the treatment of incoming information and its organization, the interpretation made of it and the behaviors to be adopted. There are two kinds: gender roles and gender traits. The roles label the activities that would be appropriate to men and that would be appropriate to women; and of gender traits refer to psychological characteristics attributed distinctly to each of the genders. According to these stereotypes the man assumes tasks related to the public sphere activities and paid work, as well as decisions making concerning socioeconomic family maintenance; the woman assumes the private sphere of the family, being responsible for organizing the family dynamic, household chores, care for the children, health and education<sup>14</sup>.

A closer look at statistical data points by way of numbers to social production and reproduction of social inequalities between the sexes which as a result has as one of its consequences the social production and reproduction of female inferiority, subservience that this contributes to the fact that women are more vulnerable to domestic violence.

The National Household Sample Survey<sup>15</sup> reveals that there are differences in entering the labor market between the two genders, expressed by differences in the activity rate and unemployment: the economically active population (EAP) is composed of 56.1% of men and 43.9% of women, considering the existing adult population in the country 72.3% of males are included in the PEA, while 52.7% of those females are part of the EAP. Despite struggling to enter the world of paid work, increasing their education and having fewer children, in the national labor market, women still have a lower level of occupation than men. The historical rate of unemployment remains higher for women, and they continue to earn less than men.

The difference in income between working men and women remains evident, with men accounting for 80% of the total of Brazilians with more than 20 minimum monthly wages. Female Brazilian citizens have twice the participation among people with no income in Brazil. One of the consequences of inequality is that they lesser possibilities to the consumption of goods and services and the positive relationship between women and poverty continues<sup>15</sup>.

The portrayal of women as heads of households shows that from 2001 to 2009, the proportion of households headed by them in Brazil rose from approximately 27% to 35% of the total. They are single, separated or widows who have children, unmarried with no children, living alone, among others. One of the causes of the rise of female-headed households, besides the increase in the number of broken marital relationships, and their own initiative to compose a single parent family, is that more men die

from violent causes in the age at which they constitute family. In 2008, this mark continued unchanged at 92% of masculinity in homicide victims and at 82% in transport. Violence against men forces women to account for the families alone, and affecting them, even indirectly. This also calls attention to the amount of married women leading the family despite having a husband or partner at home, with or without children<sup>15</sup>.

The contextualized poverty articulated to the gender relations shows that women constitute a growing group among the poor of the Latin American societies, not being different in the Brazilian society. In this logic, the precarious social status of women has been considered as resulting from the sexual division of labor, fewer opportunities in education, unstable and lower-paid work situations, lower levels of health and well-being, reduced participation in decision making (both in private and in public, but especially in this) and limited personal autonomy. They have more years of study, are divided between work and home care, earn less and work more<sup>14</sup>.

Gender stereotypes also influence the way how men live with violence, experiencing it or perpetrating it. With regard to the violence suffered by them as a rule, they are assaulted by other men, but usually a stranger or a non-intimate. Males are the aggressors in more than 80% of all situations; they are about 90% of the prison contingent; have lower expectations of life than women; die from external causes like traffic accidents, homicides, suicides and intake of alcohol and other drugs<sup>3</sup>.

So it is agreed that:

... Important gaps and questions regarding the domestic violence issue still exist. Investigations from the perspective of the offending person is still scarce, however, they can contribute substantially to a better understanding of this phenomenon and to unveil in this universe the perception that aggression requires more than the punishment provided by law, i.e., it is important that a manipulation of public policies that include this man occurs and that this action can minimize violence against women. (...). The solution of aggression involves complex issues that go beyond the penalty, since it affects not only the individual and the direct victims, but also the family and society as a whole<sup>12:154</sup>.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Summarizing the foregoing, in postmodernity various destructive processes of women's lives have been detected, such as the increase in the proportion of female heads of household with no legal equalization of wages and supports as are offered to men; the process of undervaluation of women's work, social devaluation of occupations pursued mostly by women, besides the triple workday to allow family survival and the greater difficulty of access to consumer goods and services. Economic problems,

concern for children, emotional dependence, lack of support from family and friends and hope that the man will change make women choose to stay in abusive relationships. This is a picture of a reality that is written in the ink of gender stereotypes.

It is important to emphasize that in this work, we do not believe that violence is a personality trait related to male or female sex, much less that genetic traits determine that men are more violent and women more fragile and submissive, as this would reinforce a very common stereotype, still used to justify the current situation of domestic violence against women. Instead, what we want with this reflection, that is to defend the violent streak will form with the construction of gender, which in turn is linked to the way of living and surviving in each society. As already mentioned, the violence is socially and historically constructed. Naturalizing it, therefore, is to deny that there are efficient ways of intervention.

In the field of public health, which is based on the theory of social determination of health-disease process, health and disease are two sides of the same coin. One does not deny the biological ballast that each individual brings, but every social group has the potential of detrition or consequential protection from the forms of production and social reproduction, in which he lives. So we chose to work within the line of reasoning of the concept of vulnerability.

The chance of reading the needs of individuals from the broader concept of vulnerability, as discussed throughout this reflection, exposes to the Collective Health, ways to support social subjects with regard to their rights. Therefore the concept of vulnerability is an efficient tool for the development of new intervention strategies in public health, able to facilitate care for people, prioritizing by multidisciplinary and the dialogue with other sectors of society.

When looking at gender violence from the perspective of the collective, structured in an ethical-philosophical framework that seeks critical interpretation of the data, guided by the gender category, one seeks to distance, from the analysis of domestic violence against women, those being confined to individual responsibility and causation, and approach the transformation of health practices and building strategies to facilitate awareness and empowering women to deconstruct the imposed inequality and reconstruct relationships based on gender equity.

In view of this, one of the possibilities to meet women's vulnerability to violence may be by means of instruments that can identify the gender subordination, especially within the family context and affective relationships. It is believed that in this way, you can extend the analysis relating to domestic violence against women, escaping the logic of the multicausality and bringing up indicators or markers that address the health-disease process in its full dimension, enabling innovations in health care and allowing the health care needs of women that are not limited to those of physical, clinical and biological orders.

"The authors have worked together on all stages of production of the manuscript".

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