

Structural Characteristics and Functions of Significant Social Networks of Women Who Have Stayed in Shelters*

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ABSTRACT – The aim of this qualitative study was to understand the structural characteristics and functions of the significant social networks of women subjected to violence, after their stay in a shelter. Six women admitted to a shelter in southern Brazil participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews and Network Maps were used for data collection. Data were organized and analyzed according to *Grounded Theory*, using the *software* Atlas.ti 7.0. Medium and large networks were found, with a high degree of affective proximity and the predominance of family members. The main functions were Emotional Support, and Cognitive Guidance and Advice. Participants were considerably empowered by reactivating their significant social networks and resignifying the quality of their relational bond with them.

KEYWORDS: violence against women, social networks, shelter

Características Estruturais e Funções das Redes Sociais Significativas de Mulheres Ex-Abrigadas

RESUMO – O objetivo deste estudo qualitativo foi compreender as características estruturais e funções das redes sociais significativas de mulheres que sofreram violência, após a passagem por uma casa-abrigo. Participaram seis mulheres que haviam sido acolhidas numa casa-abrigo da região Sul do Brasil. Para coleta de dados, utilizou-se a entrevista semiestruturada e o Mapa de Redes. A organização e análise dos dados ocorreram com base na *Grounded Theory* e contou com o auxílio do *software* Atlas.ti 7.0. Observaram-se redes de tamanho médio e grande, com maior grau de proximidade afetiva e predomínio de membros da família. As principais funções foram apoio emocional e guia cognitivo e de conselhos. Destaca-se o empoderamento das participantes em reativar e ressignificar a qualidade do vínculo relacional com suas redes sociais significativas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: violência contra a mulher, redes sociais, abrigo

Violence against women is a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights, especially when perpetrated by intimate partners. It can be defined as any act of gender-based violence, including threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm (United Nations [UN], 1993).

Global estimates show that 35% of women have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime, and 38% of all murders of women are committed by intimate partners or ex-partners (World Health Organization [WHO], 2017). According to the World

Health Organization (WHO, 2017), almost one-third of women (30%) who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner. Experiencing a situation of violence harms women's life development and can cause serious problems for their physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health, in the short and long term, leading to high economic and social costs (WHO, 2017). In Brazil, estimates show that more than 12 million women were subjected to verbal abuse and/or threats in 2018, and 536 were subjected to some sort of physical violence per hour (Brasil, 2019). In the same year, 1,206 cases of femicide were registered

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in the country, 61% of them against black women, with an average age of 30 years. In 88% of the cases, perpetrators were partners or ex-partners (Brazil, 2019).

In view of global and national estimates of violence against women and the damage caused to health, the phenomenon of violence calls for the development and improvement of public policies aimed at actions and measures to prevent and confront it, in addition to the promotion of non-violent social practices. In the Brazilian context, the following actions developed throughout the historical construction of movements to fight violence against women should be mentioned: the Delegacia Especializada para o Atendimento de Mulheres (Specialized Police Stations for the Assistance of Women), the Política Nacional de Enfrentamento à Violência contra as Mulheres (National Policy to Fight Violence against Women), and the Lei Maria da Penha (Maria da Penha Law).

The Maria da Penha Law (11.340/2006) stands out among these initiatives, and is recognized by the United Nations as one of the three best laws on violence in the world. It aims to control and inhibit violence against women, and provides for the creation of a network to offer assistance, prevention, and protection to women, such as their referral to shelters (Brasil, 2006). Shelters are safe and secret places that offer protection and safety to the lives of women and their children who are at imminent risk of death. In these places, women receive psychological, social, and legal assistance, and remain sheltered until they are in adequate psychological and safety conditions to be socially reintegrated (Brasil, 2006).

Both shelters and other measures created to prevent and fight violence against women are part of social support networks. In this study, social support is understood as a set of formal institutions and organizations that develop practices aimed at providing prevention and health promotion services to individuals in their communities (Ornelas, 2008). In addition, Campos (2005) states that people who are part of a social support network can be considered significant because they perform support and protection functions that favor stress reduction and increase people's wellbeing.

Besides social support networks, women subjected to violence also seek and/or receive help from the members of their significant social network. A significant social network is a set of people who, in a given stressful situation of an individual's and/or family's life cycle, offer some kind of help, assisting in necessary decision-making, whether to face the situation or to promote life development of the individuals involved in it (Moré et al., 2014). From this perspective, for Sluzki (2003), significant social networks are perceived and named by subjects according to their relational experience and the meanings attributed to each member of their network. A network may include family, friends, coworkers or classmates, and people from the community, such as healthcare and social service professionals, neighbors, and religious groups (Sluzki, 2003).

The quality of the relationships and the dynamics of significant social networks can be understood through the structural characteristics, functions, and attributes of the bonds established between their members over time (Moré & Crepaldi, 2012). Structural characteristics refer to the properties of networks as a whole, which include: a) Size, i.e., the number of people that make up the network. Small networks consist of up to seven people, medium networks are made up of eight to 12 people, and large networks are those with 13 people or more; b) Density, which is related to the quality of the relationships and the influence members can have on the subject; c) Composition or Distribution, which indicates the position of each member according to the degree of proximity; d) Dispersion, which is related to the geographical distance between network members; e) Homogeneity or Heterogeneity, which refer to differences and similarities of gender, age, culture, and socioeconomic level, and can favor exchanges or generate tensions (Sluzki, 2003).

Bond functions can be: a) Social Companionship, which means carrying out joint activities or simply being together; b) Emotional Support, which is characterized by exchanges with a positive emotional attitude and an atmosphere of understanding and empathy; c) Cognitive Guidance and Advice, which consists of offering personal and social information and reference models; d) Social Regulation, which reaffirms responsibilities and roles and favors conflict resolution; e) Material or Service Assistance, characterized by financial contributions or referrals to specialized services; f) Access to New Contacts, which concerns the opening of doors for new connections with people and networks that were not part of the individual's or family's network (Sluzki, 2003).

Finally, each bond established with network members has attributes, which are specific properties present in each relationship. These attributes can be classified as: a) the Main Function(s) of the bond, i.e., which functions stand out in a particular bond, b) Multidimensionality, i.e., how many functions a person performs, c) Reciprocity, i.e., if a person performs the same functions they receive from their network, d) Intensity, which characterizes the degree of commitment of a relationship, e) Frequency of Contact, referring to the number of times people get in touch with each other, and f) Relationship History, which refers to how long people have known each other and what encourages them to continue with the relationship (Sluzki, 2003).

Studies on significant social networks conducted with women subjected to violence show that family and friends are the people most sought after for help, and the main functions performed are Emotional Support and Material and Service Help (Alencar- Rodriguez & Cantera, 2014; Gomes et al., 2015; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014; Taket et al., 2014; Vieira et al., 2015). For the women who participated in the study by Carneiro et al. (2020), family support contributes to breaking the cycle of violence. In the studies of Katerndahl et al. (2013), Sylaska and Edwards (2014), and Rocha et al.

(2019), friends were the most sought-after people, mostly women, and the main functions were Social Companionship and Emotional Support. In turn, in the study by Krenkel et al. (2015), people from the community, especially shelter professionals, were the most mentioned, offering women Emotional Support and Material and Service Assistance.

One of the characteristics present in situations of violence against women is social isolation or distance from networks, which can be both affective and geographical. Fear, guilt, shame, and strict family boundaries are some of the factors involved in this behavior, which contribute to the situation of vulnerability (Netto et al., 2017; Terra et al., 2015; Vieira, et al., 2015). According to Sluzki (2003), the support received from people in a network makes the individual feel that they belong to a group, strengthens their self-esteem, gives meaning to their lives, and improves the quality of their relationships and adaptability (Sluzki, 2003). In this sense, understanding the quality of the bonds present in the

relationships established between women and the people in their significant social network contributes to understand how networks interfere and/or help in coping with violence.

Given the above, and considering the scarce scientific production addressing the configurations of women's networks years after the experience of being subjected to violence and staying in a shelter, the aim of this study was to understand the structural characteristics and functions of the significant social networks of women subjected to violence, after their stay in a shelter. The results are expected to support professional practice in terms of knowledge about affective bonds and the functions performed by members of significant social networks of women who have resided in shelters. In addition, results should also contribute to the use of networks as a resource in the set of intervention strategies, in order to assist in coping with violence and promoting health and individual, family, and relational development of those involved in situations of violence.

METHOD

Participants

This was a qualitative study in which six women subjected to intimate partner violence and admitted to a shelter in the South Region of Brazil participated. The inclusion criteria were: a) being over 18 years old; b) having experienced family violence; c) having been admitted to the shelter in 2012 or 2013; d) having stayed in the shelter for at least 10 days; e) residing in the municipality where the shelter is located; f) having participated in a previous research project on networks of women subjected to violence, linked to the laboratory to which the authors of this article belong.

Participants were between 23 and 45 years old, three of them were married to the perpetrator of the abuse, two were single (dating) and one was in a stable relationship with a new partner. Two participants had high school diplomas, two had completed elementary school and two had an incomplete elementary education. In regard to their employment status, three women were working, two were unemployed and one was retired due to disability. All of them had children and the average monthly family income was R\$ 2,300.00. All six participants mentioned having spiritual or religious beliefs: three of them mentioned Evangelicalism, two Catholicism, and one claimed to believe in Spiritism.

When they were admitted to the shelter (2012/2013), the abuse had been perpetrated by their intimate partners, with whom they were in relationships that lasted from 1.5 to 14.6 years. Participants reported experiencing physical, psychological, sexual, and financial violence, with emphasis on psychological violence. The length of their stay in the shelter ranged between 12 and 117 days. Participants had

been out of the shelter for three years when data collection took place. This timeframe was chosen to help visualize the relationship network built by the participants, to which they could resort in search of help, considering their experience of having stayed in a shelter.

Data Collection Instruments and Techniques

The following instruments and techniques were used for data collection:

- Semi-structured interviews: The guiding items of semi-structured interviews were: a) Demographics, b) Coping Strategies used by participants after leaving the shelter, c) People from significant social networks who helped in coping with the situation of violence. The semi-structured interviews supported the development of Network Maps.
- Network Map (Sluzki, 2003): This instrument allows the identification of the degree of intimacy and relational commitment between a person and the members of their significant social network at a specific moment of their lives. It consists of three concentric circles and four quadrants. The *inner circle* refers to intimate or everyday relationships, the *intermediate circle* to relationships with a lower degree of intimacy and personal/social contact, and the *outer circle* represents occasional relationships or relationships with acquaintances. The quadrants correspond to Family members, Friends, Community (neighbors, clubs, church, healthcare and social services), and Work and/or Study Relationships (Sluzki, 2003).

Considering participants' relationships with the people from the shelter where they stayed (women who have resided in shelters and professionals), a subdivision was inserted in the Community quadrant, to include the item "Shelter", as shown in Figure 1. The slogan used

to prepare the Map was: "When you think about your life today, who are the people that help you and give you support to face the difficult moments in your life since you left the shelter?".

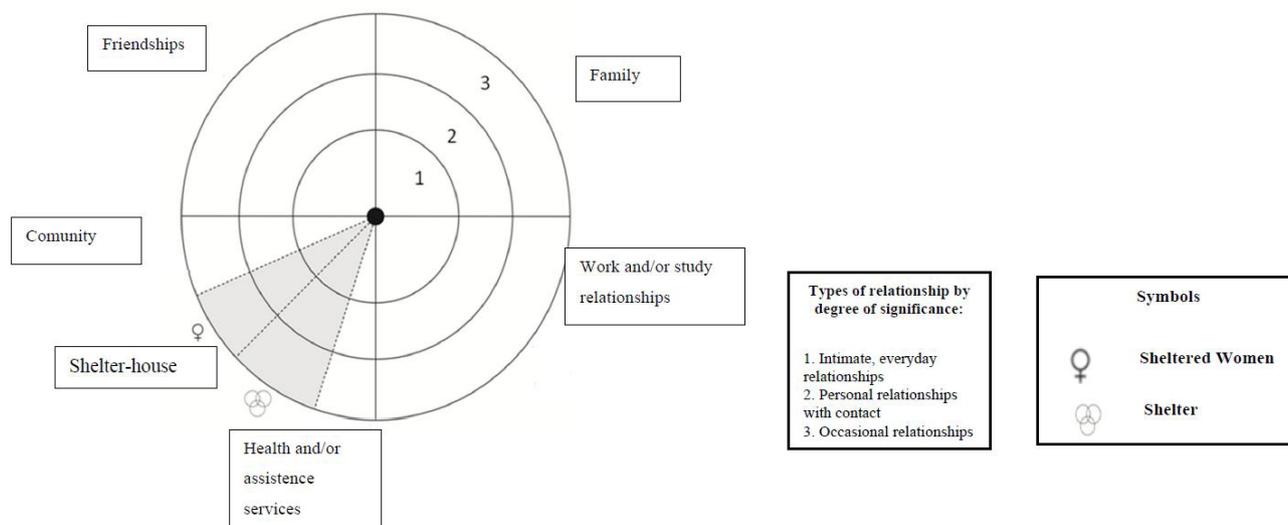


Figure 1. Network Map Model proposed by Sluzki (2003), adapted with the addition of the item "Shelter".

Procedures

Data Collection. Data collection began with a survey of the names and contacts of the 12 women who had participated in the research project prior to this one. In order to meet ethical aspects, the initial contact was made by phone by the shelter coordinator, in the presence of the researcher. It was possible to contact 10 out of the 12 women. Of these ten, two had moved to another city and two decided not to participate in the research one day before the interview, leaving a total of six participants. Data collection was scheduled according to the women's availability and took place at the Secretaria de Assistência Social (Department of Social Services - four participants), Centro de Referência Especializado de Assistência Social - CREAS (Specialized Reference Center for Social Services - one participant) and at one of the Universities in the municipality where the study was conducted (one participant). The interviews and the development of the Network Map were recorded, transcribed, and later analyzed.

Data Organization and Analysis. The process of organizing and analyzing the data was based on *Grounded Theory* (Theory Based on Data), proposed by Strauss and Corbin (2008), which allows comparing, systematizing, and categorizing data from different instruments. Considering that in the current scenario of qualitative research *Grounded Theory* is used both to create a theory and for data analysis, in this study, the use of this methodological perspective was based on the analysis of data using an inductive proposal, through which information and meanings emerge from the data (Cho & Lee, 2014). Thus, this research followed the framework of systematic analysis through three interdependent coding stages: open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). This procedure was aided by the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti 7.0, and five key categories of analysis emerged from it: a) Structural Characteristics of Significant Social Networks, b) Family Network, c) Friendship Network, d) Community Network, e) Work and/or Study Network. The naming of the categories was based on the literature

on the subject and on the quadrants of the Network Map, as proposed by Moré and Crepaldi (2012).

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics and Research with Human Beings Committee of the University and followed the

provisions of National Health Council Resolution 466/2012. In order to keep the confidentiality of personal information, each participant was identified by the letter P, followed by the number established by the order of interviews, age, and length of stay in the shelter (For example, P1, 45 years old, sheltered for 53 days).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before being admitted to the shelter, participants suffered life threats and/or attempted murder by their intimate partners, were socially isolated and their work and study activities were controlled by their partners. Faced with the risk of death after the violence reached extreme levels, participants came forward against perpetrators and were admitted to a shelter to preserve their physical integrity. The categories that make up this article show the significant social networks of the women in terms of structural characteristics and functions, three years after their stay in a shelter.

Structural Characteristics of the Network

This category addresses the structural characteristics that correspond to the properties of the network as a whole: size, composition, dispersion, functions, and bond multidimensionality (Sluzki, 2003). The nomenclature network “member/person/integrant” was used when referring to a person mentioned by the participants in a specific way, and “group” for people alluded together, such as a group of neighbors and a church group.

As for the *size* of the network, three participants had large networks (P1, P2, and P6), consisting of 22 to 28 people. The others (P3, P4, and P5) had medium-sized networks, consisting of eight to 12 people. The results presented in this study differ from those found in the study by Vieira et al. (2015), in which the women who reported the abuse had medium or small networks. A comparative study (Katherndahl et al., 2013) showed that women subjected to violence have smaller networks than those who did not experience such situations. From this perspective, the difference found in the size of the networks between the studies conducted with women subjected to violence may be related to the moment when the abuse was revealed, and/or whether they had stayed in a shelter or not. Through the reports of the participants, it was found that having stayed in a shelter favored the recovery and re-articulation of their significant social networks.

For Sluzki (2003), medium networks are more effective in terms of help than large or small networks. The author points out that large networks may be ineffective because people might assume that someone else is taking care of the problem. In small networks, in turn, people may get overloaded and the person going through a crisis might withdraw. Thus, medium-sized networks favor dialogue and the performance of different functions by their members, in search of problem-solving strategies (Sluzki, 2003).

With respect to *composition*, most people were from the Family Network (50 members), followed by the Community (29 members and two groups), Friendship (15 members), and Work or Study (10 members), totaling 104 members and two groups (neighbors and church). The search for family members, friends, neighbors, and co-workers in the face of a situation of violence also occurred in other studies (Taket et al., 2014; Vieira et al., 2015), with family members being the most sought-after people. Participants expected to be heard, understood, respected, and not judged by these members (Taket et al., 2014).

As for *dispersion*, which is the degree of relational commitment, most people (55 individuals and one group) were distributed in the first circle, the most intimate one, in all quadrants, as shown in Figure 2. There were 36 members in intermediary relationships, and 13 people and one group in occasional relationships. This finding indicates that most members of the network are people with whom participants have intimate relationships. The greater the degree of intimacy, the easier is the person's access to the members of their network and the faster the response to requests for help. An intermediary network or a network with many occasional relationships makes it difficult to seek help and respond effectively (Sluzki, 2003). The results of this study showed that having a greater number of people in the first circle favors access to members as resources to be used in critical situations.

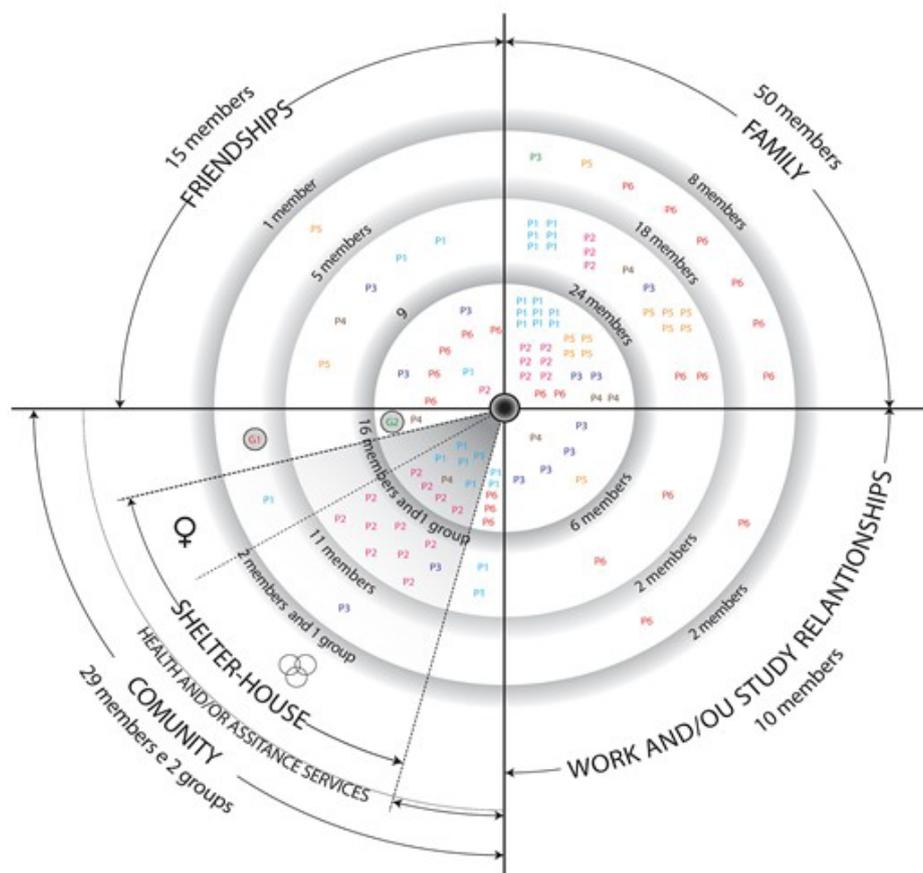


Figure 2. General Network Map

Note: “P” refers to each participant’s network member identified in the interview by order number and a color. “G” refers to the groups of people mentioned by the participants (neighbors and church).

Emotional Support was the main *function* performed by network members, which was attributed by participants to 80 members and described as having someone to vent, feel heard, and establish affective relationships. Cognitive Guidance and Advice (42 members) was the second most mentioned function, characterized by helping in decision-making regarding children and/or other personal situations, and advising not to tolerate violence again, coming forward against the perpetrator if necessary, and seek help from the department of social services. Material and Service Assistance was performed by 28 members and mainly related to childcare and financial aid. Social Companionship, Social Regulation, and Access to New Contacts were offered by 39 members and will be described in other categories.

In relation to *multidimensionality*, 61 people and two groups performed more than one function. This means that more than one function was assigned to a third of the total of people in participants’ networks, promoting bond versatility. This result shows that the women identified the specific qualities of each relationship that could be accessed as resources to face situations of abuse and other critical

circumstances. The network members and functions indicated in the Map are a personal choice, based on life experience, relationship history, and the quality of the bonds established between the person and the members of their network, according to their moment of life.

Given the above, the results show that, if on the one hand it is positive for a member of a network to perform more than one function, on the other hand, in terms of professional intervention, it is necessary to make sure members are not overloaded with multiple functions. In this sense, professionals can help women subjected to violence to recognize the functions to be performed by other people in their networks, thus promoting bond multidimensionality and avoiding overloading some members.

Family Network

This category presents elements related to the bond established between the women who have resided in shelters and the people in their family network, as well as the functions performed by the members of this network

since participants left the shelter. In the set of quadrants of the Network Map, the family was the group with the highest number of members, according to the Individual Maps of all participants, except for Participant 2, who mentioned more people from the shelter than from their family.

The contact between participants and some of the people in their family network was made mainly by phone, *WhatsApp*, and *Facebook*, through which they received Emotional Support and Advice from family members who lived in other cities. Although the physical distance from a network affects the effectiveness and time of response to an experienced problem (Sluzki, 2003), the means of communication used to contact their families allowed the women to interact with people and receive support. During the development of the Network Maps, participants mentioned the members of their networks according to the degree of affective proximity, not necessarily physical proximity.

Children, siblings, mothers, and fathers stood out among the people mentioned by the participants. The main function performed by these members was Emotional Support through listening, acceptance, and words of encouragement. The extended family was represented by uncles, nephews, grandchildren, and grandparents, placed in the last two circles of the Map. Family members performed the functions of Emotional Support, Social Companionship, and Material and Service Assistance, as in the studies by Gomes et al. (2015) and Sylaska and Edwards (2014). As pointed out by Gomes et al. (2015), the participation of family members in the network of women subjected to violence makes them feel well, alleviates suffering, and empowers them to seek solutions to the problem. Lack of family support, on the other hand, makes the process of breaking up and coping with violence more difficult.

After leaving the shelter, fathers, mothers, siblings, and grandparents were also considered important for offering advice to the participants when they needed to make decisions regarding changing jobs and moving to a new home. The origin family also helped with Material and Service Assistance, by receiving the women in their homes until they were able to reorganize themselves financially. These results show that the Family Network was a successful strategy for coping with violence used by women in search of Emotional Support and Material Assistance, as in the study by Alencar-Rodriguez and Cantera (2014).

Five participants placed their current partners in their Individual Network Maps, either new partners or the same ones they were with when they were admitted to the shelter (violence perpetrators). The functions assigned to them were Emotional Support, Social Companionship, and Material and Service Assistance, especially in relation to childcare (feeding, bathing, and taking to school), in addition to Social Regulation, as illustrated by the following report:

He [new boyfriend] is my spouse, my partner, he's with me like, how can I say... I know he wants my well-being, he wants to see me well, he wants to see me grow, he supports me, he also picks on me when I'm wrong. I changed a lot after I met him, even in relation to myself, to see myself differently and really value myself (P5, 34 years, sheltered for 12 days).

Social Companionship was rarely mentioned in the family network and participants referred to this function as being performed by their children, grandchildren, nephews, and nieces as a form of distraction, which helped them forget about any problems they might be experiencing. Social Regulation was also scarcely mentioned by participants. They referred to it when their behavior was questioned by the advice given by their partners, mothers, and children. These results show that the conversations that happened between the women and their families generated reflections and problematizations that favored some sort of behavior change and the search for strategies to deal with difficult situations experienced in their daily lives. The fact that Social Regulation was rarely mentioned indicates that the functions that are more related to affection are prioritized in the relationships of the participants with the members of their networks, to the detriment of social regulation. This shows professionals that there is a gap that needs to be filled by these women, by identifying people in their relationship network who could perform this function in order to help them with their daily problems.

Although participants were asked to identify the functions of their networks during data collection, the function Access to New Contacts was the only one not alluded to in the family network. This function might have been present in the advice/indications for help that occurred during family conversations, but it was not identified by the participants when they were interviewed.

According to the reports, the women were distant from their families or did not receive support during the period prior to being admitted to the shelter, either because they did not talk about the situation of violence or because the family did not believe them when they talked about the abuse they experienced. The results of a study by Carneiro et al. (2020), conducted with 29 women subjected to violence seen by two Courts of Justice and Peace at Home show that the lack of family support, whether emotional and/or financial, can cause women to stay in or resume relationships with violence perpetrators. In this sense, it should be taken into account that the support received from the families of the participants in this study occurred after they had left the shelter. The fact that the women were admitted to a shelter may have contributed to expose the abuse and help family members believe in the problem experienced by them.

The availability of family members when they helped participants after the sheltering experience favored the

reconnection of the women with their families, which was previously made impossible by the estrangement caused by the situation of violence. Given the above, in terms of professional interventions, results draw attention to the importance of being aware of network dispersion and the functions performed by network members. These elements help to understand the dynamics established between women and their families, and allow professionals to identify means of making contact and people who might be able to help in difficult moments.

Friendship Network

This category brings together a set of elements related to the functions performed by participants' friends. The Friendship Network was made up of 15 members distributed in the three circles of the Map, nine of which were placed in the first circle, of greater intimacy. During the development of this network, two participants did not mention any friends, while the greatest number of friends mentioned individually was 4. Although few members were indicated in this quadrant, participants reported having had the opportunity to meet new people and make new friends since they left the shelter. Others said that only those "considered true" friends remained in their lives.

There were more women (13) than men (2) in the Friendship Network, which was also found in the study by Katerndahl et al. (2013), in which women had more female friends and considered their support as more effective. In the research conducted by Rocha et al. (2019), female friends were the ones who encouraged the women to come forward against the abuse, went to the police station with them, and accompanied them to public places to protect them from the perpetrator. The similar characteristics between the women and their friends, such as being of the same gender, having the same approximate age, and being at the same stage of their life cycles (with young children), can favor their identification with the situation experienced by the participants and result in relational proximity and offer of support (Sluzki, 2003). The competence of male friends refers to affective issues, such as sharing each other's joys and pains, keeping secrets, being loyal, and giving the other some space when deemed necessary (Gomes et al., 2015).

The two men mentioned in participants' Friendship Networks were already their friends before they were admitted to the shelter. The reduced number of male friends may be related to the social isolation experienced by the women during their relationship with perpetrators; jealousy from their partners; and/or lack of trust in men, given the violence they experienced. However, these male friends performed important functions according to the participants, such as Emotional Support, characterized as feeling heard, "having someone to vent" and "having someone to count on at all times". Social Regulation and Cognitive Guidance and Advice

were also mentioned, especially in regard to the relationship with the partner, as illustrated in the following narrative:

He [friend] is a comrade like, when I need something I go talk to him and I know he'll tell me what to do, that he'll pick on me, he'll say I'm wrong, he doesn't say "oh no, I'm gonna do that to please you", you know? He says what has to be said (P5, 34 years, sheltered for 12 days).

Members of the Friendship Network have also provided Material and Service Assistance through financial aid, by receiving the women in their homes, and by taking care of their children. Social Companionship was also attributed to members of this Network for providing moments of relaxation when they were with the women. Access to New Contacts was characterized by being introduced to new friends and receiving a referral for a new job. In this direction, the research by Sylaska and Edwards (2014) shows that, in some cases, friends are the first people sought by women to share the situation of abuse, and the functions of Emotional Support and Advice are considered to be the most useful. In line with these results, the friends mentioned by the participants in the studies by Krenkel et al. (2015) and Vieira et al. (2015) were the ones who encouraged the women the most to report the abuse and seek help in their social support networks.

In this research, in numerical terms, the Friendship Network can be considered a small network, in which there was a predominance of women, with a high degree of intimacy and relational commitment, and who mainly performed the functions of Emotional Support and Cognitive Guidance and Advice. This network stood out for the quality of its relationships in terms of proximity and the performance of the functions that were effective to face the situation the women went through. According to the participants, the small number of members is due to the fact that they value the quality of the bond and not the number of people itself. After leaving the shelter and/or separating from their partners, the women said they became more selective in establishing new friendships or romantic and work-related relationships, because it is more difficult for them to trust people.

As pointed out by Terra et al. (2015), the fear of trusting people and being betrayed is one of the barriers in the development of interpersonal relationships of women who have been subjected to intimate partner violence. An environment that provides acceptance and respect favors the opening to a trusting relationship. When women who have been subjected to violence feel understood in their life history, the degree of proximity and the quality of the bond also change. In professional terms, the results of this category indicate that the relationships established within the Friendship Network, along with the functions performed by its members, can be incorporated into a set of professional intervention strategies. Therefore, it is important to map the significant people in these women's lives and the quality of the relational bond that exists between them.

Community Network

This category combined elements related to the bond established between the participants and the people in their community, such as neighbors, religious groups, healthcare and social services, and also from the shelter. It also brings out the structural characteristics of this Network and the functions attributed to the people in the community context.

In terms of size, the Community Network was the second largest, with 29 members and two groups (neighbors and church). The people who made up this network are mainly distributed in the first two circles and only one participant did not mention anyone from the community in her Map. From the religious creed, the bishop, church attendees and leaders were mentioned, as a group that provided Emotional Support, Advice, and Assistance with clothing and food after the women left the shelter. According to Gomes et al. (2015), one of the goals of religious organizations is to provide support, which makes people feel valued and accepted by the group. The fact that the participants mentioned church members in their interviews may indicate that they see these individuals as people who bring them emotional benefits and can be accessed more easily in a difficult situation.

Neighbors were identified as significant people on the Map of only one participant who, before being admitted to the shelter, did not have a relationship with any of her neighbors because she was impeded by her ex-partner. After she left the shelter and separated from the perpetrator, her neighbors began to get closer to her. The communication between them happened in two ways: in person, for Emotional Support, and via *WhatsApp*, through which they announced when they were going to travel and asked neighbors to keep an eye on each other's homes or requested help for a specific practical/material situation. These results show that participants can build a network that did not exist before, and that neighbors can be or become a resource for emotional and material protection. This study adds new conclusions to the research conducted by Netto et al. (2017), which discusses the situation of social isolation experienced by women subjected to violence, regarding the possibility of recovering a network. The professional practices carried out in the shelter where the participants of this study stayed may have contributed to their rapprochement with the members of their networks. It may also have helped to identify people who could be contacted in the future, since they would need assistance and support when they left the shelter.

After leaving the shelter, participants were offered counseling and social assistance at CREAS, and were given the telephone numbers of the shelter and the social assistance department, in case they needed information or help at any time. Three of the six participants were seen by these professionals for approximately one year. After that, they were referred to one of the sectors of the protection network closest to their homes. The participants who were not seen said they did not think it was necessary at the

time. With reference to healthcare and social services, the women who have resided in shelters have included CREAS psychologists and social workers in their maps. The functions mentioned were Emotional Support, Access to New Contacts (by referring women to other professionals and/or CREAS), and Material Assistance, with food donations, transportation, and financial aid.

In line with these results, the study conducted by Rosa and Nascimento (2018) shows that CREAS is an important place in promoting changes for women subjected to violence, and indicates that the relationship between professionals and users of the service is positive. In this regard, the inclusion of social services and shelter professionals and their respective functions in the Maps of the participants of this study shows how much they considered these professionals as significant people who helped to strengthen them to cope with the situation of violence.

The following people from the shelter were mentioned: a formerly sheltered friend, the coordinator, the educators, the cook, and the facility driver, totaling 19 people. The contact between the women and the members of this Network was made via *Facebook*, by phone or in person, when they attended the Christmas lunch provided by the institution every year. On the Map of Participant 2, the shelter subdivision was the most numerous. It is worth mentioning that this participant, who had remained in a relationship with the perpetrator, returned to the shelter. She said she came forward because she knew she "had a place to go", which shows the effectiveness of the shelter in terms of safety and protection. The participants reported that they felt welcomed, heard, and supported by shelter professionals, in addition to receiving advice that they started to follow after leaving the facility:

When we first get there, we don't believe there's life, I didn't see a light at the end of the tunnel. Then, talking to one person and to another, everyone showed me a way. So, when I left the shelter I saw that there was a world, there was a world out there that I couldn't see before. So, it was very important to me, to my life, the fact that I stayed in the shelter. If I'm ok today, it's because of my stay there (P1, 45 years old, sheltered for 53 days).

According to participants' reports, the work developed by shelter professionals generated reflections about their lives and helped them recover their autonomy and self-esteem, in addition to reconnecting with some family members. According to Campos (2005), the quality and type of relationship between professionals and users of a service are crucial to create a feeling of protection and acceptance.

Participants mentioned social services and shelter professionals in their Maps, but did not mention any professionals linked to healthcare institutions. This fact requires reflection on the need for qualified training and interdisciplinary and intersectoral interventions, so that joint work can favor healthcare practices focused on situations of violence at different levels of social protection. It is through

an articulation between social and healthcare services that work with women subjected to violence becomes possible, in order to promote changes and help them rebuild their lives (Rosa & Nascimento, 2018).

Work and/or Study Network

This category brought together elements related to the structural characteristics and bonds established between the participants and the members of their work and/or study network, as well as the functions attributed to them. In terms of size, this was the Network with the fewest members (10). Three of the six participants (P1, P2, and P5) were not working or studying at the time of the interview. One teacher and two classmates were mentioned as study relationships. The main functions performed by them were Emotional Support, and Cognitive Guidance and Advice. Participants mentioned their bosses and coworkers as part of their work relationships and social regulation was one of the functions attributed to them.

We [coworker] talk a lot, she gives me advice and says that I should always pay attention to see if anything similar to what has already happened happens again. And she was one of the people who, instead of criticizing or pointing fingers at me, simply listened to me (P6, 23 years, sheltered for 36 days).

The small number of people in this quadrant of the Network may indicate that the women subjected to violence did not feel comfortable talking about their personal life in the workplace, due to shame or fear of being judged, as described in the research by Krenkel et al. (2015). On the other hand, the results of the research mentioned above also showed that, when they learned about the abuse, bosses and co-workers helped the women financially by paying for their vacations in advance and donating furniture, which shows the potential of the members of this Network to help women subjected to violence.

On the one hand, the results of this category showed a small-sized network in the work and/or study context. On the other hand, it showed that the relationships established in this context can configure effective bonds as current or

future resources in dealing with difficult daily situations. In terms of professional interventions, results show that the Work and/or Study Network can be an ally in care actions, since the trusting relationships established in this context can help with the emotional and financial needs of women subjected to violence.

Based on the analysis of all categories, the main functions mentioned by participants in relation to the members of their significant social networks were Emotional Support, Material and Service Assistance, and Cognitive Guidance and Advice. As for the specific types of help offered by the members of their Networks, Emotional Support was provided through listening, acceptance, support, and availability to hear, in all quadrants of the Map. When analyzing how the function of Cognitive Guidance and Advice was performed, it was found that the help provided by the family was focused on the daily lives of the women, through advice on work and housing. The advice from the Friendship and the Work and/or Study Networks, in turn, was related to the need to come forward and search for help in the face of a new episode of violence, as in the studies by Alencar-Rodriguez and Cantera (2014) and Krenkel et al. (2015).

As for the function of Material and Service Assistance, the common point is that the members of the Family and Friendship Networks contributed by taking care of participants' children and receiving the women in their homes. Community participation in regard to this type of help was aimed at offering financial resources and social services, while neighbors offered material help, mainly with the house.

Therefore, the results of this study show that the functions performed by the Family Network were more related to pragmatic issues for the reestablishment of the women in terms of housing, work and relationship with their children. The other networks (Friendship, Community and Work and/or Study) performed functions aimed at the care and protection of the women, in order to prevent current or future situations of violence. In terms of professional practices, these results show the importance of understanding the specificity of each function, i.e., the type of help that network members can offer, in order to think about different intervention strategies to meet the needs of women subjected to violence, based on the resources that their networks can provide to help them.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study sought to understand the structural characteristics and functions of the significant social networks of women subjected to violence, after their stay in a shelter. Results show that people who make up participants' networks were important resource for facing the situation of violence and for their social reintegration process. The originality and advancement of this study in the context of knowledge production are due to the fact that no research was found on the specificities of the networks of women

who have resided in shelters, years after their sheltering experience. By reapproaching and monitoring participants, it was possible to learn about and deepen the understanding of the singularities of the functions performed by the members of their networks, allowing the development of professional intervention strategies.

The study showed that participants' stay in the shelter and the interventions carried out contributed to the fact that they mentioned the shelter professionals in their maps,

even after leaving the facility. It also helped them recover and resignify the quality of their relational bond with the members of their networks, especially their families. Digital social media, such as *WhatsApp* and *Facebook*, also played an important role as communication and social interaction spaces to help participants keep in touch or resume contact with people in their networks.

The complexity of contexts of violence often makes it difficult or impossible for those involved in it to identify resources that might help them get out of the situation. Thus, in methodological terms, the Network Map favored the visualization of network members and the relational bond established with the participants, especially regarding the functions performed by them. In this sense, the Network Map can also be used as an effective professional intervention tool, as it allows the visualization of people in the networks that are capable of assisting in the care of women and families subjected to violence.

The difficulty in finding the participants three years after they had left the shelter was one of the limitations of this research. This fact is related to phone number and address changes that commonly occur so that women are able to distance themselves from violence perpetrators, which also results in the loss of contact with the municipality's Department of Social Services. The goal of public policies

is to create actions and measures aimed at preventing, confronting, and eliminating social problems. The absence of social networks can be an indication that a situation of violence continues or has been resumed. Therefore, it is necessary to improve monitoring programs for women subjected to violence, in order to offer protection and enable health promotion by articulating different sectors of their social support networks.

Since this was a qualitative study and considering that context is a generator of meaning and that there are socio-cultural and institutional differences in Brazil, further research should be conducted with women who have stayed in other shelters in different regions of the country. Likewise, longitudinal studies monitoring women subjected to situations of extreme violence can be useful both to prevent new/other episodes of violence and for professional practice. Such studies would help to understand the resources used by these women and, therefore, develop new strategies to prevent the problem. The results of this study can also support reflections on training and professional practices in terms of effectively following up with women who have resided in shelters and planning actions and measures to fight violence against women, based on identifying the members of their significant social network and the functions performed by them.

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