

## **FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF MARITAL VIOLENCE: A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY**

Vanessa Carla Batista<sup>1</sup>   
Nadirlene Pereira Gomes<sup>2</sup>   
Elen Ferraz Teston<sup>3</sup>   
Mayckel da Silva Barreto<sup>1</sup>   
Ionara da Rocha Virgens<sup>2</sup>   
Viviane Cazetta de Lima Vieira<sup>1</sup>   
Ana Maria Nunes da Silva<sup>4</sup>   
Sonia Silva Marcon<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Universidade Estadual de Maringá, Programa de Pós-graduação em Enfermagem. Maringá, Paraná, Brasil.

<sup>2</sup>Universidade Federal da Bahia, Programa de Pós-graduação em Enfermagem. Salvador, Bahia, Brasil.

<sup>3</sup>Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul, Programa de Pós-graduação em Enfermagem. Campo Grande, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brasil.

<sup>4</sup>Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso, Programa de Pós-graduação em Enfermagem. Cuiabá, Mato Grosso, Brasil.

### **ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** to understand family relationships experienced in the context of marital violence.

**Method:** a qualitative study that used the Constructivist Grounded Theory. The participants were 23 women, three of which were daughters of women experiencing marital violence. The data were collected from March to November 2021 by means of online interviews on the *Facebook*® and *WhatsApp*® social networks. The analytical process involved constant data comparison, in addition to initial and focused coding.

**Results:** the central phenomenon, “Attributing meaning to family relationships in the context of marital violence”, and the “Distress experienced by mothers and daughters as a result of marital violence”, “Mobilizing to stop marital violence due to the daughters’ distress” and “Mothers and daughters realizing the repercussions of marital violence experienced in the family relationship” processes reveal the impact of violence beyond women, also impacting the lives of their children. The pain and distress experienced, whether directly or indirectly, lasts over time, influencing the way in which family and social relationships are understood.

**Conclusion:** marital violence was a process experienced by mothers and children, which mobilized the desire and actions to stop the problem. The meanings attributed to this experience are constructed, shared, elaborated and modified over time, but its repercussions persist with implications for the health and well-being of the victims: mothers and children.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Violence against women. Grounded Theory. Family Relationships. Nursing care. Women’s health.

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# RELAÇÕES FAMILIARES NO CONTEXTO DE VIOLÊNCIA CONJUGAL: UMA TEORIA FUNDAMENTADA NOS DADOS CONSTRUTIVISTA

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Compreender as relações familiares vivenciadas no contexto de violência conjugal.

**Método:** Estudo qualitativo que utilizou a Teoria Fundamentada nos Dados vertente construtivista. Participaram 23 mulheres, das quais três eram filhas de mulheres em situação de violência conjugal. Os dados foram coletados no período de março a novembro de 2021, mediante entrevistas *on-line* nas redes sociais *Facebook*<sup>®</sup> e *WhatsApp*<sup>®</sup>. O processo analítico envolveu a comparação constante dos dados, além da codificação inicial e focalizada.

**Resultados:** O fenômeno central “Significando as relações familiares no contexto de violência conjugal” e os processos “Sofrimento vivenciado por mães e filhas(os) a partir da violência conjugal”; “Mobilizando-se para o rompimento da violência conjugal pelo sofrimento das(os) filhas(os)”; e “Mães e filhas percebendo às repercussões da violência conjugal experienciada na relação familiar” revelam o impacto da violência para além das mulheres, repercutindo também na vida dos filhos. A dor e o sofrimento experienciados, direta ou indiretamente, perduram ao longo do tempo, influenciando no modo com que significam suas relações familiares e sociais.

**Conclusão:** A violência conjugal foi um processo vivenciado por mães e filhos, sendo estes mobilizadores do desejo e ações de rompimento do agravo. Os significados atribuídos a esta vivência são construídos, compartilhados, elaborados e modificados ao longo do tempo, mas suas repercussões perduram com implicações à saúde e bem estar das vítimas: mães e filhos.

**DESCRITORES:** Violência contra a mulher. Teoria fundamentada. Relações Familiares. Cuidados de enfermagem. Saúde da mulher.

# VÍNCULOS FAMILIARES EN EL CONTEXTO DE VIOLENCIA CONYUGAL: UNA TEORÍA CONSTRUCTIVISTA FUNDAMENTADA EN DATOS

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** comprender los vínculos familiares vivenciados en el contexto de violencia conyugal.

**Método:** estudio cualitativo en el que se utilizó la vertiente constructivista de la Teoría Fundamentada en Datos. Las participantes fueron 23 mujeres, dos de las cuales eran hijas de madres en situación de violencia conyugal. Los datos se recolectaron entre marzo y noviembre de 2021 por medio entrevistas en línea en las redes sociales *Facebook*<sup>®</sup> y *WhatsApp*<sup>®</sup>. El proceso analítico implicó una comparación constante de los datos, además de los procesos de codificación inicial y focalizada.

**Resultados:** el fenómeno central, “Atribuir significado a los vínculos familiares en el contexto de violencia conyugal”, y los procesos “Sufrimiento vivido por madres a hijas(os) a raíz de la violencia conyugal”, “Movilizarse para escapar de la violencia conyugal por el sufrimientos de las/los hijas(os)” y “Madres e hijas que perciben las repercusiones de la violencia conyugal sufrida en el vínculo familiar”, revelan el efecto de la violencia no solo en las mujeres, también con repercusiones en la vida de los hijos. El dolor y el sufrimiento vividos, ya sea directa o indirectamente, perduran en el tiempo, influenciando la forma en la atribuyen significados a sus vínculos familiares y sociales.

**Conclusión:** la violencia conyugal fue un proceso vivido por madres e hijos, en el que estos últimos fueron los agentes movilizados del deseo y las acciones para solucionar el problema. Los significados atribuidos a esta experiencia se construyen, comparten, elaboran y modifican con el transcurso del tiempo; sin embargo, sus repercusiones perduran con implicancias para la salud y el bienestar de las víctimas: madres e hijos.

**DESCRITORES:** Violencia contra la mujer. Teoría Fundamentada. Vínculos familiares. Atención de Enfermería. Salud de la mujer.

## INTRODUCTION

Violence against women in the context of marital relationships constitutes a social and public health problem that continues to occur with high frequency throughout the world and poses challenges when it comes to tackling it<sup>1</sup>. It is a phenomenon marked by historical-cultural roots arising from beliefs, traditions and values of a patriarchal society, which underlies and influences its social interpretation<sup>2</sup>.

With the aim of creating mechanisms to curb domestic and family violence against women, Law No.11,340 entitled “Maria da Penha” became part of the Brazilian Legislation in 2006. In its Article 7, this Law typifies violence against women as any and all actions that cause physical, sexual, psychological, moral or property harm or distress, even with the possibility of leading to death. However, this problem does not only have repercussions on the affected women but also on the people that live around them, especially their children<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, children, families, communities and societies are negatively impacted by violence, which imposes heavy health, economic and social demands<sup>4,5</sup>.

This is because living in a violent family environment on a daily basis has repercussions on women’s health and development<sup>6</sup>. Among the harms to physical health, we can mention fractures, burns and permanent sequelae, as well as neurological complications, cerebral anoxia and death<sup>7</sup>. Regarding the psychoemotional implications, some studies reveal psychological disorders evidenced through depressive and suicidal behaviors, with high prevalence of post-traumatic stress and depression<sup>7,8</sup>.

Considering the complexity involved in marital violence, with serious implications for society, actions aimed at identifying, preventing and confronting violence are essential<sup>9</sup>. To this end, theoretical depth regarding the phenomenon is necessary. In this sense, violence against women in the marital scenario can be understood based on the Theoretical Framework of Symbolic Interactionism (SI), which is based on the premise that human behavior emerges from the way people interpret and signify their experiences<sup>10</sup>.

Based on the assumption that the process of experiencing marital violence is permeated by complex meanings, constructed by established social relationships, the following research question was outlined: Which is the meaning of family relationships experienced in the context of marital violence? Theoretically, it is understood that statements do not reconstruct the reality of the violence experienced. However, they express what has meaning for the person, as well as their interpretations and stance regarding the phenomenon<sup>1</sup>. From this perspective, the study objective was to understand family relationships experienced in the context of marital violence.

## METHOD

This is a qualitative study based on Symbolic Interactionism (SI) and, methodologically, on the Constructivist Grounded Theory (GT)<sup>11</sup>. The Grounded Theory allows researchers to initiate the investigation with an open mind, attentive to listening to the answers given by the initial deponents, chosen intentionally, in addition to exploring the richness and diversity of their meanings and experiences to achieve the outlined objective<sup>11</sup>.

To better present this report, criteria established by the Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) support tool were used. The data were collected from March to November 2021 with women who reported a history of marital violence, living in different Brazilian regions, and who were part of support groups for women in situations of domestic violence hosted on the *Facebook*® social network, groups that are used to share stories/experiences and to provide and receive support. For the purpose of this study, the main researcher signed up for six of these groups and requested authorization from the organizers to post a message, in which she introduced herself as a nurse and researcher, informed about the study in question and invited the interested women to get in contact via *Messenger*®.

Those who expressed interest in participating were explained the inclusion criteria for the study: being at least 18 years old; having experienced marital violence; and having Internet access, regardless of where they lived. Women who shared their home with their former partner were not included since, due to the pandemic period, the former partner might be present in the house. During data collection, none of the participants reported any situation of domestic violence with their current partner.

The theoretical sampling of this study was made up of 23 participants distributed into four sample groups, arranged according to Chart 1.

**Chart 1 – Sample group.**

<b>Sample group</b>	<b>Composition</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> Sample group	Seven women with a history of marital violence
2 <sup>nd</sup> Sample group	Six women with a history of marital violence who had children with the perpetrator of the assault
3 <sup>rd</sup> Sample group	Four daughters of women with a history of marital violence
4 <sup>th</sup> Sample group	Seven women with a history of marital and domestic violence in childhood

The first group, aiming to broadly explore women’s experiences and perceptions regarding marital violence, was intentionally comprised by women who had experienced the phenomenon, totaling seven interviews. During the constant data collection and comparative analysis, it was possible to understand the relationship between facing marital violence and having children with the perpetrator of the aggression. Anchored in the Grounded Theory method, this context led to elaborating the hypothesis that women’s intention to stop the cycle of violence could be modulated by the presence or absence of the aggressor’s children.

Thus, the second sample group was intentionally constituted by women who had children with the perpetrator, selected based on the answer to the new invitation posted on the social network, where the researcher specified the desire to interview women who had children with their former partner. The data obtained from this group, made up of six women, showed that children played an important role in the way in which marital violence was experienced and faced by women since, in many situations, they constituted the main motivation for abandoning the violent scenario. The data led to the need to know, from the children’s perspective, how they perceived the situation of domestic violence against their mother.

In this sense, the third sample group consisted of the daughters of three women from the second sample group and the daughter of a femicide victim, who was known while assembling the first sample group. It is worth noting that there were three refusals on the part of the mothers, who preferred not to expose their children to the interview, with the group only consisting of female children, all over 18 years old. Due to the early and daily experience of situations of marital violence, the daughters reported intense distress since childhood, and how this influences their lives and family, interpersonal and social relationships.

The data constructed pointed to the need to understand a new perspective on marital violence. Therefore, the last sample group was made up of seven women who, in addition to experiencing marital violence, reported a history of domestic violence in childhood. To this end, once again, a specific invitation was posted in the groups hosted on the social network and the women who responded to this invitation were included in the study.

The researcher's telephone number was provided to all interested parties to schedule the interview, on a day and time of their preference. Once scheduled, the Free and Informed Consent Form was sent via *WhatsApp*®, and the interview was carried out only after formal consent to participate in the study.

The interviews lasted a mean of 60 minutes and took place via audio-recorded video calls on the *Facebook*® and *WhatsApp*® social networks, considering the women's preference and authorization. The initial question that guided the interviews was as follows: How do you understand your family relationships in the context of the marital violence experienced? It is worth noting that all interviews were developed by the main researcher of this study, who is a woman, white-skinned, nurse, PhD student in Nursing, experienced in qualitative data collection and without any previous connection with the participants.

Memos and diagrams were used as recording and analysis strategies, which started with the first analyses and evolved throughout the research process. The memos were made up of records about the research process and through insights and hypotheses raised by the researcher and the diagrams as alternative visual mechanisms for implementing ideas, scope, direction and existing connections between the categories<sup>11</sup>.

The statements were transcribed in full and manually coded in two stages, as proposed by the Constructivist Grounded Theory: Initial coding, when the data were fragmented and analyzed with the objective of conceptualizing ideas and/or meanings expressed by the participants, transforming them into codes; and Focused coding, when the codes created were more targeted, selective and conceptual, based on the researcher's definition of which initial codes enabled better analytical understanding of the data. As certain concepts emerged more frequently and prominently, subcategories and categories were assembled, which in turn revealed the research central phenomenon<sup>11</sup>.

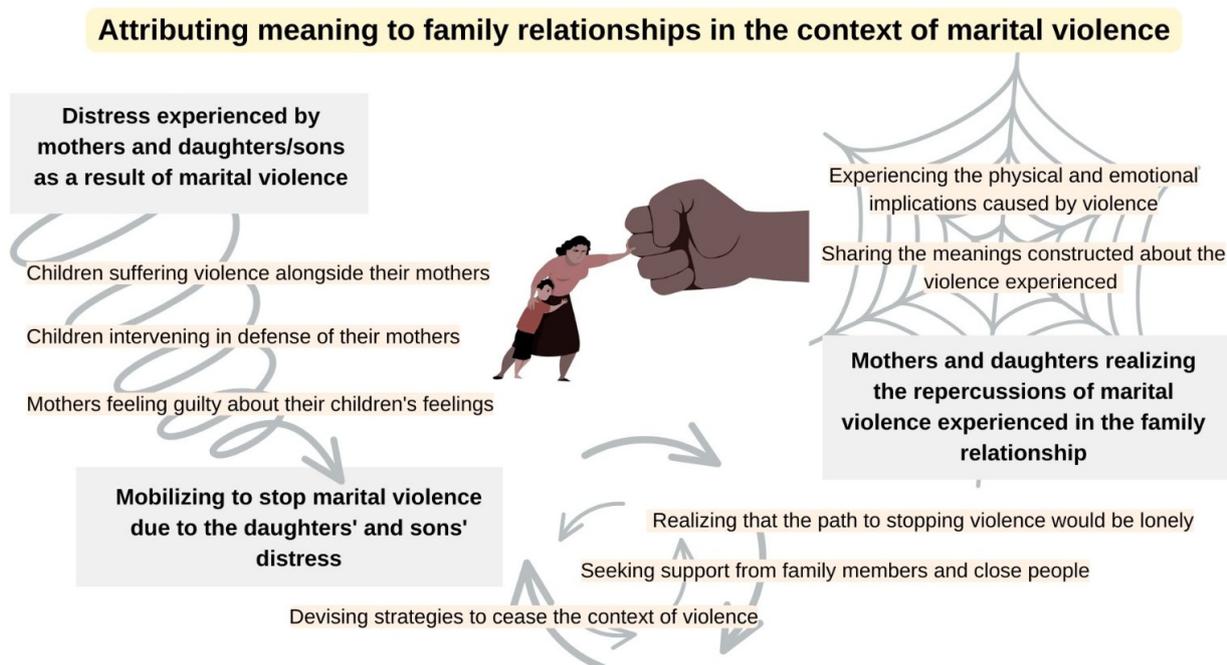
The research project was approved by the Permanent Ethics Committee on Research with Human Beings belonging to *Universidade Estadual de Maringá*. The participants' consent was obtained by signing the Free and Informed Consent Form, made available via *WhatsApp*®. To preserve the participants' anonymity, they were named with the letter W (Woman) and an identifying number, followed by their age and sample group to which they belong (e.g.: W2, 55 years old, SG2).

## RESULTS

All 23 interviewees were aged from 21 to 61 years old and three were in a new relationship. As for religion, 13 declare themselves Catholics, nine Evangelicals and one Spiritist. Regarding schooling, six had Elementary School, four had Complete Higher Education and two had Incomplete Higher Education, nine had studied up to High School and two of them had learned to read and write. Of the total number of participants, 16 had a paid job but only three earned family incomes greater than two minimum wages.

Data analysis allowed elaborating the central phenomenon entitled "Attributing meaning to family relationships in the context of marital violence", consisting of three interconnected processes, namely: Process 1 – "Distress experienced by mothers and daughters as a result of marital violence", which shows that women's distress is heightened when their children also experience the abuse practiced by their spouses; Process 2 – "Mobilizing to stop marital violence due to the daughters' distress" demonstrates the circularity experienced between attempts to abandon the violent context and the perception of lack of support for this attempt to come to fruition, mainly arising from the experience of dependence experienced in relation to different contexts; and Process 3 – "Mothers and daughters realizing the repercussions of marital violence experienced in the family relationship" in which women and their daughters perceive themselves, even after violence has ended, trapped in a kind of "spider

web” because the situations experienced daily and repeatedly become deep and permanent marks in their lives. Figure 1 shows the graphic representation of these experiences and processes.



**Figure 1** – Representation of the central phenomenon, Maringá, Paraná, Brazil, 2023.

## Distress experienced by mothers and daughters as a result of marital violence

In addition to the pain of experiencing marital violence, the women interviewed report a daily routine of abuse against their children also perpetrated by their spouses. *In addition to attacking me, he [the aggressor] set fire to the house with our daughter inside. He threatened me, hit me in front of them [daughters], so much so that my five-year-old daughter told me: “Mom, will my dad kill you today or tomorrow?” [cry and sigh] (W1, 39 years old, SG2). They [children] suffered with me because their father beat them a lot. The eldest almost died because he [the aggressor] destroyed that part [showing the left side] of the boy’s face when he threw him into the river when he was seven or eight years old. The eldest was whipped and still has the mark on his legs to this day. (W2, 55 years old, SG2).*

Her expression and choked voice carry memories of the violent episodes against the children that demanded intervention so that they did not turn into a tragic outcome. *Material goods disappeared, but I would have lost my daughter [...] if I hadn’t arrived in time! [deep breathing and crying] (W1, 39 years old, SG2). He started hitting her a lot: he punched her in the face and when I intervened he slapped me in the chest (W3, 36 years old, SG4).*

Witnessing the children’s distress in a situation of violence represents pain so intense that they prefer to feel it instead. *She [daughter] was just a child for him to do what he did [physical violence]. For me there’s no forgiveness and there’ll never be. It hurt me a lot and I’d rather it had been on me than to see her like that (W4, 42 years old, SG4).*

It is important to point out that the daughters were involved in the marital conflict with the aim of defending their mothers from the abuse, an event marked by pain, hopelessness and a desire for revenge. *My daughter intervened many times. These situations with the knife, the punches, she*

witnessed a lot. When she was 12 years old, she picked up the landline when he was hitting me and said: Dad, if you don't leave my mother, I'm going to call the police now. Then he looked at her and it was like he came back (W4, 42 years old, SG4). He was trying to kill me by suffocation, my daughter took him off me and the little girl was next to me screaming. She still says: "If he comes in here, I won't let him do anything to you. If he comes at you, I have the courage to kill him." She's just a teenager and has to carry this with her throughout her life. It's very unfair (W1, 39 years old, SG2). My son still says he'll kill him when he gets the chance. He says he's going to buy a gun to kill him (W5, 32 years old, SG1).

### **Mobilizing to stop marital violence due to the daughters' distress**

The study reveals that women's distress is intensified when they look at their children: they blame themselves for the suffering and feel responsible for the situations they experience. *I blamed myself for getting carried away, for exposing my daughter to this. If I were with him today, what would the life I would be having and giving to my daughters be like? (W6, 43 years old, SG2). I thought: if I continue with this fear of him, he'll hurt her a lot and she'll have nowhere to go, and then I'll feel guilty for accepting a man who is an adult and letting my daughter go through all this. I get upset because I put my children in a position they shouldn't live in (W3, 36 years old, SG4).*

Those who experienced violence in childhood, understanding how their lives were and are compromised, report that they would not want their children to experience the same process. *It hurts me to know that the damage [violence] I experienced in my childhood made him feel the same thing (W5, 32 years old, SG1). I had already been through this [violence] in my life and I knew it wouldn't be a good thing for her (W4, 42 years old, SG4).*

There is also concern about the reproduction of violent actions in the future, due to constant exposure to the context. *I thought about my children seeing that whole situation [violence]. What would become of them in the future when they grew up? Because I have a son, he might think that it's normal and later also be violent (W7, 42 years old, SG2).*

Faced with their experiences, women start to think about strategies, possibilities and means to seek to break away from the daily scenario of DV, sometimes becoming aware of possible difficulties. *I thought: I need to get out of this relationship, but I didn't know how. I was very young, I had no academic training, job or perspective in life. Unfortunately, I felt financially tied to him and I always thought a lot about my daughter (W4, 42 years old, SG4). I could no longer see my son cry and I started planning my escape. I said: I have to do something (W8, 44 years old, SG4). When you're alone, any place suits you, now with two daughters I was wondering where am I going? What I'll do? (W1, 39 years old, SG2). I'll be real with you, no one wants to put you up in their house with three kids (W7, 42 years old, SG2).*

The context experienced was accompanied by lack of family support. In some cases there was even an incentive to remain in the violent cycle, leading to the perception that the battle would be much more difficult and lonely. *I had no support: my father didn't support me, people said I had to stay with him, that I had to pray a little more for him to change. My mother said: go back with him, so he can help you raise your children (W3, 36 years old, SG4). It felt as if she [mother] and I were in an isolated world, that inside our house it was one situation, one life, and outside it was different, everyone was happy. We felt alone (W9, 23 years old, daughter, SG3).*

Imagining that their children could experience situations of violence similar to those they underwent in their families of origin, in addition to knowing the repercussions of these experiences, triggers in women the need to seek changes. *It's a question of a dysfunctional family. I didn't have this family support [pause] and today I'll never leave my daughter aside to enter into a relationship seeking refuge or to get rid of this situation (W4, 42 years old, SG4). History repeated itself [cycle*

of violence experienced in childhood and later as an adult] *with the difference that I didn't leave my children because of him* [the aggressor] (W3, 36 years old, SG4).

Thus, the turning point for abandoning the context of violence was, above all, caused by the desire to provide their children with what they did not have: a future with safety, protection and well-being. In this way, the children were the necessary support for making the decision, even in the face of all the obstacles to leaving the abusive family relationship.

When recalling the context they experienced, women recognize that the desire to provide their children with a story different from what they had experienced awakened the strength to seek to prevent them from remaining in the context of violence. For them, their children were the driving force to stop the cycle of violence. *What I didn't have the courage to do for myself, I did for my daughter, for fear of him* [the aggressor] *hurting her, bullying her.* (W6, 43 years old, SG2). *My son gave me the courage to fight. He was the one who saved my life. With him I had the courage to resume my life.* (W8, 44 years old, SG4). *If it weren't for her* [daughter] *insisting and showing this to my family, maybe I'd still be in that relationship. One day she said to me: Mom, I don't want you to be with my father because he's not a good husband and you're not living in a healthy relationship. She was the one who taught me that! I didn't understand, maybe because of the way I was raised or the situation I experienced* (violence in childhood) (W4, 42 years old, SG4).

### **Mothers and daughters realizing the repercussions of marital violence experienced in the family relationship**

Having lived with violence, regardless of the time elapsed, had implications for quality of life: *I'll show you all the medication I take* [sigh]. *It hasn't been easy to face life until today. I attempted suicide several times to stop suffering* (W2, 55 years old, SG2). I have very deep anxiety attacks, like not being able to breathe, starting to cry, my heart racing too much. That's why I cry, I don't want to be alone, I can't sleep. They're reflections. I'm diagnosed with chronic depression, generalized anxiety and *obsessive compulsive disorder* (OCD). *Sometimes my hands hurt because I wash them so much* (W4, 42 years old, SG4).

The children who share these experiences with their mothers elaborate with them the meanings surrounding the phenomenon and also bear its marks, frequently deep, forceful and with serious repercussions, mainly of an emotional and behavioral nature. *I was trying to take it out on myself! The first suicide I attempted was when I was 11 years old. I started self-mutilating, I burned myself, I have cut marks on my hand, I punished myself. I developed an eating disorder, anorexia nervosa. The woman ends up accepting that situation so that her children don't go hungry, but today, looking at everything, I'd rather have gone hungry because it wouldn't hurt so much* (W10, 25 years old, daughter, SG3). *The violence not only affected me, but also my two daughters. The eldest one even set fire to her room. I've had problems with her cutting herself, which is why she's full of marks. She often says she can't take this life anymore* (W1, 39 years old, SG2). *Everything my mother went through I went through with her and, because of that, I see that I have a very strong barrier in my relationships* (W9, 23 years old, daughter, SG3).

For the mothers, the consequences of the violence experienced become a diversity of negative feelings, in addition to marks and traumas that remain in the family dynamics, reflecting a childhood marked by abusive relationships. *It's a mix of feelings. There's no way I can say that I'm fine because I feel anguish, fear, despair. This didn't just affect me, but my daughters too* (W1, 39 years old, SG2). *My children are rebellious, three of them take prescription medications and can't forget. They have resentment and anger because their father tried to kill them. The oldest one always tells me: "I didn't live the life I had to live". So, the revolt is very big!* (W2, 55 years old, SG2).

The daughters also understand that the repercussions of violence are not restricted to the women, affecting the entire family, especially children who tend to perpetuate the cycle in adult relationships. *It's a situation that affects the family as a whole, especially the children. When you grow up in an environment that experiences this since childhood, it ends up being very complicated. It leaves very deep marks, and ends up carrying it into adulthood, which is really very difficult* (W9, 23 years old, daughter, SG3). *Violence affects everyone who loves you and is around you. You don't suffer alone* (W10, 25 years old, daughter, SG3).

Thus, the entire experiential path regarding violence is undergone, witnessed and shared between the women and their children. Women find in their children the necessary strength to desire and mobilize to stop the context of violence, so that the meanings surrounding this family experience were constructed, shared, elaborated and modified over time. However, despite stopping the cycle, the consequences of violence are felt and marked in their lives.

## DISCUSSION

In the interaction process in the family environment, violence surpassed the conjugality barrier in such a way that, in addition to frequently being spectators, the children were direct victims of the abuse. Threat to life, physical aggression (punches, slaps) and damage to property (setting fire to the house) were some of the types of violence reported.

It is inferred that violence in marital relationships is due to the reproduction of power relations that perpetuate women's submission in relation to men, although the asymmetry does not only take place between husband and wife, but also between parents and children in the context of relationships permeated by intra-family abuse. Corroborating this, some studies show that in scenarios of domestic violence, the victims are mostly women, children and adolescents<sup>12,13</sup>. It is worth noting that this aggressive behavior pattern is more frequent if the other is perceived as inferior or weak<sup>14</sup>. In this sense, a study carried out in Sub-Saharan Africa pointed out that acceptance of physical violence by women is greater when men are home providers.

At the same time as they experienced the violence process, distress, frustration and blame surrounding the violence suffered by their children were added to the mothers. In turn, in addition to the physical marks, the children also presented feelings of fear that their mother might become a femicide victim, in addition to the desire for revenge/death against the aggressor, thus triggering more violence. In a complementary way, a study carried out in the Brazilian Northeast region with 50 women with a history of marital violence identified that children who witness violence against their mother tend to present conflicting interpersonal relationships, inappropriate feelings and actions, violent behaviors and vulnerability to experiencing the problem in their adult phase<sup>16</sup>.

In this scenario, when witnessing violence between their parents, children learn symbols and meanings inherent to family dynamics as a way of being and living. Raising children according to patriarchal precepts contributes to maintaining asymmetrical intra-family relationships. In adulthood, these models can be reproduced based on the way in which meanings were attributed to social roles<sup>12</sup> and, thus, family components remain equally based on disrespectful and violent relationships<sup>17</sup>. In this sense, a study carried out in the state of Queensland, Australia, investigated the perpetrators of child abuse in a cohort of children born in 1983 and 1984, finding that 45% of them had been victims of domestic violence during childhood<sup>18</sup>.

In the case of women in situations of domestic violence and their children, this interaction model can be interpreted based on the concept of *Self*, defined by Symbolic Interactionism as a social process that takes place within a person and involves two different phases: the "I" and the "me". The former represents the individual's unpredictable tendency to react to the attitudes of others<sup>10</sup>. It is as if the "I", impulsively, directed the instinctive protective behaviors of the woman and her child at the

time of violence. In turn, the “me” represents the organized and self-conscious attitudes adopted by the individual<sup>10</sup>. It therefore reflects the conception of seeking safety and breaking away from the scenario of violence.

In the context of Symbolic Interactionism, it is understood that the agents transform the meanings about the situation in which they are and from there, work to devise actions<sup>10</sup>. When they recognized violence and its consequences for them and their children, in addition to the manifestation of the continued distress experience, oftentimes undergone to the limit, the need arose to break away with this scenario so that their children, in the future, would not experience a similar situation. Thus, for women, breaking away with the situation of marital violence represents safety, protection and well-being for their children in the future and the possibility of rewriting their own history of childhood violence<sup>1,19</sup>.

Protecting children, with a view to stopping tragic aggressions, was one of the main motivators for confronting marital violence. In a similar way, the children positioned themselves in defense of their mothers, referring to the understanding of mutual protection. Thus, they played an important role by emotionally supporting their mothers, consoling them, advising them and encouraging them to stop the situation of marital violence experienced and/or abandon the unhealthy romantic relationship in which they were.

In this sense, the experiences that emerged from the women’s narratives favor the understanding of the multiple aspects involved in marital violence. Faced with the desire to leave the violent scenario, for example, it was common for them to find themselves without any type of support. A study carried out with women in inland Paraná revealed that, faced with the need to stop the cycle of violence, women felt helpless, not recognizing social support instances or resources, attributing only to themselves the efforts and attitudes to abandon this scenario<sup>1</sup>.

In some cases, there was even an incentive to remain in the abusive context under the justification that this would guarantee financial security for the woman and her children. These results corroborate findings from studies carried out with women in situations of violence, which highlighted, among the difficulties stopping the cycle of violence, economic dependence on the partner, lack of family and/or financial support and concern about maintaining stability for the children<sup>20,21</sup>. Therefore, reflecting on this stability underpins women’s decision to remain with the aggressors and in the situations of marital violence, requiring concrete actions that support them in this decision.

Regarding this aspect, the need for strategies to combat marital violence stands out. In this research, the family of origin was the main source of search for coping with situations of violence. However, the majority did not receive the expected support, pointing out that social and health institutions are sometimes presented as the only support tools for these women and their children. However, a review study highlights that the lack of prepared professionals combined with the ineffectiveness of protective measures causes fear and insecurity in the victims, influencing the decision to adopt coping actions. The professionals admit to understanding the negative consequences caused by the phenomenon of violence, but they are not prepared to identify women in situations of violence and intervene in their difficulties<sup>9</sup>. Superimposed on this situation, the Law for the Protection of Women Victims of Violence ensures full protection of the victims, but the system does not have the necessary resources to guarantee attention, care and protection<sup>19</sup>, thus weakening the coping strategies.

It is known that stopping the cycle of marital violence does not negate the repercussions caused throughout life for the people involved<sup>22</sup>. The emotional scars of the context experienced still reverberate in the testimonies, through images and words that remained marked in their memories over time and from which they recognize the difficulty managing what was experienced. Suicide, social isolation, self-mutilation, eating disorders and difficulty relating were some of the problems

faced by the women and their children, even after separating from the aggressor. There was certain understanding that the “marks” of violence are deep and not limited to the violent episodes themselves.

The results of this study also reinforce that the problem of marital violence will remain frequent as long as attention is not directed beyond the women who suffer it, as the consequences of this experience spread to all family members, mainly the children. Regarding this aspect, some studies indicate that the following stand out among the main harms for children as consequences associated with domestic violence in childhood: depression, anxiety, social isolation, exhaustion, poor school performance, attention and thinking problems, aggressive behaviors, repetition of violent patterns, delinquency and substance abuse<sup>23,24,25</sup>. In addition to the physical and psychoemotional consequences, violence affects the offspring, especially children, in their bonds with their parents, where the protective maternal function is weakened and the paternal function is not fulfilled<sup>26</sup>.

The meanings abstracted from the experiences of these women, who have witnessed family relationships based on violence since childhood, contribute to asymmetry between the genders, reinforcing constancy of the phenomenon of marital violence. A study that aimed at analyzing the meanings attributed to family dynamics by men who reproduced domestic violence, experienced in childhood, observed that family dynamics should be outlined based on the sexual division of roles, with men considered as providers and maximum authority of the house and women responsible for taking care of the children. We also note the symbolism that the interaction between father and children should be established in a rude and severe manner<sup>27</sup>.

In this sense, for children, breaking away from the violence suffered provides the opportunity to confer new meaning to what they have experienced, in order to avoid the reproduction of situations of violence in the future. To transform this reality, it is opportune to draw the managers' attention regarding their responsibility and incorporation of the strategies proposed by the Network to Combat Violence<sup>9-28</sup>.

Therefore, it is of great value to implement actions that explore the promotion of positive masculinity, particularly among young people, in order to early involve men in gender equality<sup>21</sup>. Children and adolescents, especially those with emotional or behavioral problems, should also be carefully assessed for exposure to violence within the family in order to establish specific interventions with or separately from their parents or caregivers<sup>15</sup>. These actions need to be developed in the long term, so that it is possible to envisage changes in the context of future generations, in order to avoid the reproduction of abusive behaviors<sup>29</sup>. In view of the above, it is indispensable to train health professionals to recognize situations of domestic violence, as well as to welcome and meet the needs of women and their families<sup>9-28</sup>.

A nationwide study carried out in India through interviews with 46,488 women identified as victims of violence in the National Family and Health Survey conducted by the Ministry of Health found that intimate partner violence in the country is significantly associated with the men's age, the age difference between husband and wife, the men's schooling level, religion, caste, region, number of daughters, the wife's decision-making autonomy, justifying attitudes, alcoholism and substance abuse among men<sup>30</sup>. These results, as well as those found in the current study and in many others carried out in different parts of the world, highlight the need to prioritize men's education as a way of preventing violence against women and protecting their families<sup>30</sup>.

As study limitations, the difficulty accessing this population group stands out, especially during the data collection period in the COVID-19 pandemic time, as well as the difficulty inherent to addressing a sensitive topic. The study was carried out with a population group with access to social networks, and it is not possible to assert that similar results could arise in groups with different Internet access levels.

## CONCLUSION

The process of experiencing marital violence led to the construction of meanings of distress undergone by mothers and daughters, difficulty stopping the cycle of abuse and repercussions for health. At the same time that the mothers tried to intervene, whether in defense of their children or in search of strategies to leave the context of abuse and guarantee their safety, the children also sought ways to defend their mothers from the marital violence episodes.

Although they also experienced situations of abuse, the children were oftentimes the main source of support for their mothers, occupying a space of extreme responsibility. Given this experience, deep marks took root, surrounded by meanings about family dynamics and which, thanks to the women stopping the cycle of violence, can be modified over time and cease the reproduction of symbols aimed at the reproduction of violence.

That said, it is clear that both women and their families should receive care from services to combat violence. To this end, it is necessary that health care professionals, especially nurses, are not restricted to the clinical findings, but that they also encompass the biopsychosocial dimension of women and their family.

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## NOTES

### ORIGIN OF THE ARTICLE

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### CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORITY

Study design: Batista VC, Marcon SS.

Data collection: Batista VC.

Data analysis and interpretation: Batista VC, Marcon SS.

Discussion of the results: Batista VC, Marcon SS, Silva ANM, Teston EF, Vieira VCL, Virgens IR.

Writing and/or critical review of the content: Batista VC, Marcon SS, Barreto MS, Gomes NP, Silva ANM, Teston EF, Vieira VCL, Virgens IR.

Review and final approval of the final version: Batista VC, Marcon SS, Barreto MS, Gomes NP, Silva ANM, Teston EF, Vieira VCL, Virgens IR.

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There is no conflict of interest.

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### CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Vanessa Carla Batista

vane.vcb@hotmail.com

