

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE UNIVERSITY SPACE

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to reveal the understanding about gender-based violence in the university scenario.

Method: a qualitative and exploratory research study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 38 participants who experienced the university context, from July to September 2016. The data were analyzed by means of Content Analysis, with the aid of the webQDA software.

Results: three empirical categories were evidenced: gender-based violence; recognition of gender-based violence in university spaces; and subjectivities of gender-based violence. It is noteworthy that the university community has difficulties in exposing its understanding of gender-based violence.

Conclusion: gender-based violence is the reproduction of power over the other, considered "inferior", a concept revealed in the scenario under study. It is necessary to evidence the phenomenon through listening that does not translate into the blaming of the individual exposed to violence.

DESCRIPTORS: Violence; Inclusive Gender Policies; Gender-Based Violence; Higher Education; Welcoming; Nursing.

VIOLENCIA DE GÉNERO EN EL ESPACIO UNIVERSITARIO

RESUMEN:

Objetivo: reconocer lo que se entiende acerca de la violencia de género en el espacio universitario. **Método:** investigación exploratoria de enfoque cualitativo. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas con 38 participantes que experimentaban el contexto universitario, en el período de julio a septiembre de 2016. Los datos se analizaron por medio del Análisis de Contenido con la asistencia del software webQDA. **Resultados:** se hicieron evidentes tres categorías empíricas: violencia de género; reconocimiento de la violencia de género en los espacios universitarios; y subjetividades de la violencia de género. Se destaca que la comunidad universitaria tiene dificultades para exponer lo que entiende acerca de la violencia de género. **Conclusión:** la violencia de género es la reproducción del poder sobre el otro, considerado "inferior", concepto revelado en el ámbito estudiado. Es necesario dar visibilidad al fenómeno, por medio de habilidades para escuchar que no se traduzcan en la culpabilización de la persona expuesta a la violencia. **DESCRIPTORES:** Violencia; Políticas Inclusivas de Género; Violencia de Género; Educación Superior; Recepción; Enfermería.

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INTRODUCTION

Situations of violence are multifaceted phenomena that follow the history of humanity. It is possible to understand them as relationships in which subjects are reduced to the condition of objects, whether through the imposition of power, physical force or coercion. These are structural phenomena, historically and socially determined. Sometimes they happen silently in social, family or institutional relationships and are characterized by the use of power to hurt and impose suffering⁽¹⁾.

These manifestations express singularities and particularities, with emphasis on gender-based violence, a phenomenon that expresses the inequality in the relationship between men and women, occurring in the realm of power relationships, in sexuality, in self-identity and in social institutions⁽²⁻³⁾. This phenomenon is the result of inequalities and is expressed by domination, oppression and cruelty, that is, actions that result in physical or emotional damage, perpetrated with abuse of power and based on asymmetries between the genders⁽⁴⁻⁵⁾.

Power is a social practice that exists in institutional and State relationships, and the university is an important part of this context⁽⁴⁻⁶⁾. In the universities, scenarios of social idealization and reproduction of objective reality, it is necessary to unveil the sexist and patriarchal culture that legitimizes and naturalizes gender-based violence. In this study, the universities are understood as spaces with a dense hierarchical structure and unequal relationships, to which women and those outside the heteronormative standard imposed by society are vulnerable^(4,6-7).

Addressing the theme of gender-based violence at the university is justified because this scenario is a space for training and production of knowledge; in addition, it represents a privileged locus for the development of proposals for coping and social transformation of complex phenomena, such as violence. Thus, it is necessary to understand the social contradictions that enable the maintenance of inequalities in the relationships established between the genders⁽¹⁻³⁾.

To this end, this study aimed to understand the following issue together with the university population: How is gender-based violence recognized in the university space?

METHOD

This is an exploratory research study with a qualitative approach, which allowed investigating a non-measurable phenomenon: gender-based violence. This method enabled approaches to this complex, intense and profound phenomenon⁽⁸⁾ and was based on the theoretical and methodological framework of the Theory of Praxis Intervention of Nursing in Collective Health (TPINCH), as a way of producing critical, emancipatory and social-transformation knowledge⁽⁹⁾.

The following stages were developed: Capture and interpretation of the Objective Reality. The analytical categories were the following: structural, particular and singular dimensions, which allowed clarifying the phenomenal object, exposing the dialectic between the parts and the totality⁽⁸⁾. The structural dimension refers to the development processes of the productive forces, relationships of production, economic and social formation and derived political-ideological formats, and the social scenario in which Brazilian universities are located. The particular dimension refers to the processes of social reproduction expressed in the epidemiological profiles and fractions of class, gender, ethnicity and generation, herein being interpreted as a process of wear and protection for gender-based

violence found in the university community. The singular dimension was perceived in the processes that are closest to the individual, resulting in falling ill and dying within a society, herein represented by the feelings expressed by the participants in relation to the theme.

The study scenarios were two Health Care Centers (*Centros de Atendimento à Saúde, CASAs*) of a public university in the South of Brazil, chosen for representing the university community in an expanded manner, since they encompass civil servants and their dependents, as well as university students. As an inclusion criterion for the group of workers, it was considered working in the services selected and, for the group of users, being older than 18 years old. The exclusion criterion was being under 18 years old. The invitation was extended to all CASA employees, and no one refused to participate. The users were invited while they were in the waiting room, and there was only one refusal.

Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews in two stages: the first was to identify the participants and the second had a specific approach about gender-based violence. Data was collected in the physical spaces of the services selected, in the period between July and September 2016. The content was audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed. The participants were identified sequentially, with the letter E for interview ("Entrevista" in Portuguese), followed by the letter S for server or the letter U for user, and an Arabic number for each group (ES1 to ES19; EU1 to EU19).

An intentional sample was defined, and data collection ended after data saturation⁽⁹⁾. The ethical and legal aspects were observed according to Resolution 466/12 of the National Health Council, and the research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Paraná under opinion number 1,618,255. All the COREQ (Consolidated criteria for qualitative research reports) precepts were observed⁽¹⁰⁾.

Data analysis was based on the Content Analysis (CA) theme⁽¹¹⁾. To identify the empirical categories, the material was organized in the webQDA® software⁽¹²⁾. In this article, the following questions from the analytical categories were selected through the speech coding system: "What do you understand by gender-based violence?" and "Have you already experienced/witnessed any type of violence within the university space that you recognized as gender-based violence?"

RESULTS

A total of 38 interviewees participated in this study, divided into two groups: 19 health practitioners working in the services and 19 users (15 students, one dependent and three civil servants). As characterization of the participants, a greater representation of women was identified. As for the age group, there was greater concentration in the group of workers between 40 and 60 years old and, in the group of users, between 20 and 30 years old. Among the service workers, the majority were from the Nursing field and, among the users, the majority were students, distributed in a similar way between undergraduate and graduate courses.

The results were divided into the Analytical Categories related to the classifications in the Dimensions of Objective Reality (structural, particular and singular), and the Empirical Categories were identified through the codifications of the empirical material in the software: Tree Codes and Node. The interpretation of the phenomenon is outlined in Figure 1.

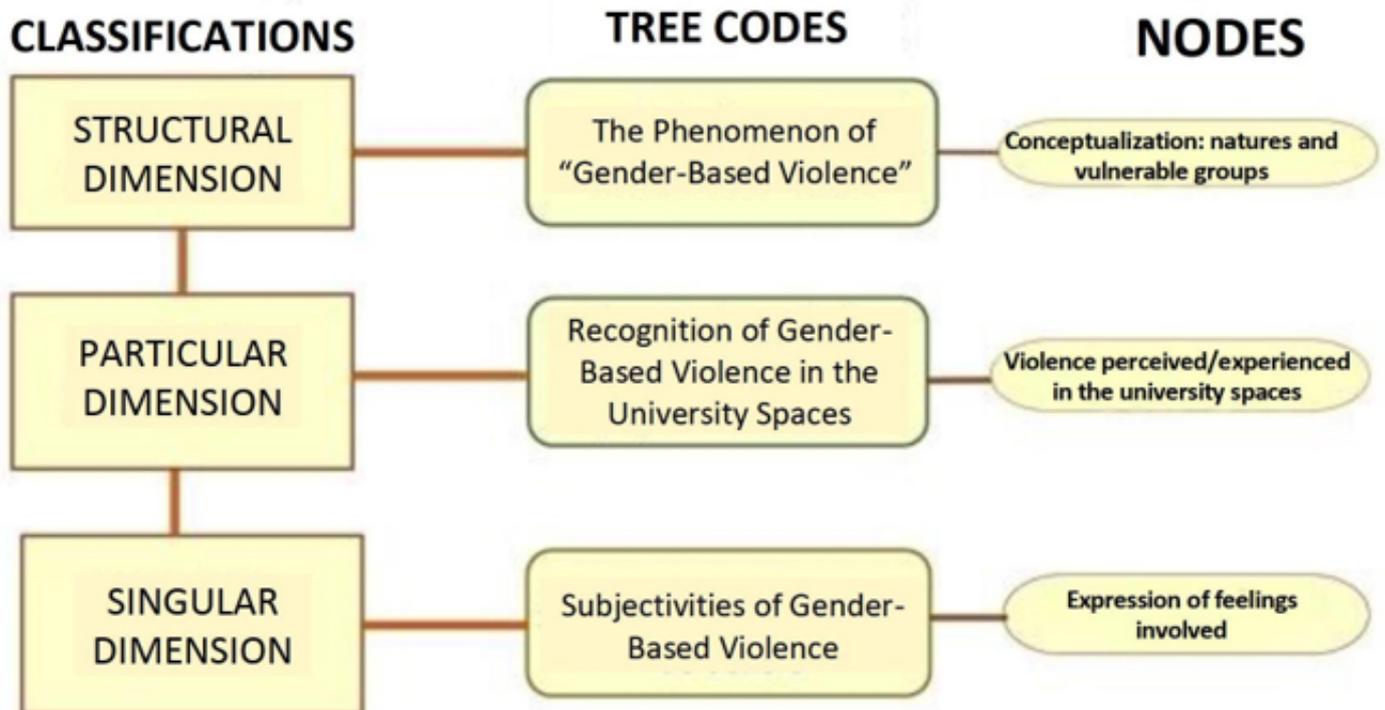


Figure 1 – Categorization of the results with the aid of webqda®. Curitiba, PR, Brazil, 2019
Source: Authors (2019)

Structural Dimension: The phenomenon of "Gender-Based Violence"

In the Structural Dimension, the Gender-Based Violence Phenomenon was considered as Tree Code, originating the Node: Conceptualization: natures and vulnerable groups.

Most of the narratives recognized the term Gender-Based Violence partially and superficially. Some of these excerpts are transcribed below:

Gender-based violence would be sexual violence for being homosexual [...]. (EU6)

[...] belittle or violate a person physically or with words just because she is a woman or has a gender unit different from yours. (EU12)

Gender-based violence I think is people who suffer discrimination [...] not being accepted as they are. (ES6)

[...] it is the violation of the rights of people who choose to have or follow a lifestyle, or a desire [...]. (ES18)

The Node emerged from the understanding that, when exposing what they understood about Gender-Based Violence, the interviewees highlighted the nature of the phenomenon and the vulnerable groups.

The natures are described according to the interviewees' quotes, and one interviewee may have mentioned more than one nature: physical violence (13), sexual violence (8), psychological violence (6), verbal violence (5), racial violence (4), moral harassment (4), and financial violence (1).

As well as in the natures, it was possible to list groups vulnerable to Gender-Based Violence: women (21), LGBTQI+ (9), men (7), children (3), people with some disease or disability (2). Only 1 (one) interviewee from the user group reported not knowing anything

about the theme. It is noteworthy that one respondent may have mentioned more than one vulnerable group.

Particular Dimension: Recognition of Gender-Based Violence in the university spaces

In this analytical category, the Tree Code listed was: Recognition of the existing gender-based violence in the university spaces. The node that emerged was: gender-based violence perceived/experienced in the university spaces.

It is noticed that, in the group of civil servants, 63.16% (12) reported having experienced and/or witnessed cases of gender-based violence at the university and 36.84% (7) denied experiencing or witnessing. Among the group of users, 52.63% (10) declared that they had experienced and/or witnessed gender-based violence at the university, and 47.37% (9) declared that they had not experienced or witnessed this type of violence in the university spaces. The following reports were identified:

I think it is the sexist culture of the university, so it appears during an appointment [...]. (ES2)

[...] professors who are nicer, let's put it this way, to women and not so nice to men. (EU5)

[...] we are tired of seeing sexist, misogynist statements on the university walls and they are only erased and not discussed by the centers, by the university administration [...] what I have observed most in my daily life is the submission that some professionals impose to the prejudice of others, especially in the medical field, with respect to mostly female professions [...]. (EU18)

The narratives representative of gender-based violence refer to violence that affects women. In both groups, servants and users, 55.26% (21) recognized in their statements that women are more vulnerable to this violence.

In the context of women subjected to gender-based violence, the concern with college hazing and university parties was identified in two statements of public servants, as follows:

[...] since university parties, where there is consumption of alcoholic beverages and all, then it happens that infamous consensual/drunk sexual relationship, for me this is sexual violence [...]. (ES3)

College hazing for me is general violence for those who are entering university, but I think it is worse for the girls. I've seen girls who told me things they were forced to do that I thought were extremely violent. Drinking alcohol, doing things like that, kissing someone they do not want to kiss, taking something from someone else's mouth. (ES15)

Singular Dimension: Subjectivities of Gender-Based Violence

In this analytical category, the Tree Code listed was: Subjectivities of gender-based violence. The Node that emerged was the following: expression of feelings involved.

In this Node, subjective expressions of feelings were also listed as a way to externalize a personal interpretation and that contemplate both the worker who welcomes and the person who suffered the act of violence. These statements are transcribed below:

[...] what they will think of me, what they will say, they will say that he harassed me because I encouraged, because I stimulated [...]. (EU3)

[...] we often feel powerless to help. (ES5)

[...] the appointment happens because they feel discriminated, they feel offended [...]. (ES6)

[...] she feels ashamed, she doesn't look for anything, because the victim always feels guilty [...]. (ES10)

DISCUSSION

Gender-based violence manifests itself through ideological language that represents the way of being, communicating, experiencing, apprehending and interpreting the world. This understanding is represented by social, cultural and economic relationships reproduced in all areas of society, including in the idealized university institutions⁽¹³⁾.

There is historicity in this phenomenon, diversity of identities and experiences that articulate the gender category with other axes (class, sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, generation, territoriality, etc.), characterizing exclusive social discourses and practices that support inequalities and trigger violence that affects vulnerable groups⁽⁶⁾.

The university is a space for social reproduction, even though it is considered a scenario of plurality of thoughts, where violent manifestations of discrimination and intolerance multiply⁽⁴⁻⁶⁾.

The structural dimension of the phenomenon was highlighted by the interviewees who identified gender-based violence in a variety of ways, evidencing different natures and vulnerable groups. The limits of what is or is not considered a violent action in the university spaces end up blurred^(7,14).

Gender-based violence is the representation of power asymmetries between men and women, which is expressed through domination and submission, and the physical, sexual and psychological manifestations are recognized, as happened in the study⁽¹³⁻¹⁴⁾.

The results showed a range of understandings about which population groups are considered vulnerable to gender-based violence. Women, men, children, people with a disability or disease and the LGBTQI+ group were mentioned.

In the universe of violence in general, men are the group most affected by violent deaths. With regard to gender-based violence, some groups are more exposed due to historically constructed inequalities, which are women and individuals who escape the heteronormative standard imposed by society⁽¹⁵⁻¹⁶⁾.

There are understandings that women and the LGBTQI+ group are more vulnerable to sexual violence⁽⁴⁻⁶⁾. Discriminatory and violent actions are transmitted through opinions that curb or mistreat diversity in the university spaces, underestimating races, cultures, genders and sexualities, which compromises the right to diversity in the collective space^(6,17).

Gender issues, combined with social inequalities, are central elements in the (re) production of violence, and the issues of social and gender inequality are present within the asymmetries of power⁽¹⁵⁻¹⁷⁾ between men and women, rich and poor, heterosexual and non-heterosexual, people with and without disabilities.

Each society organizes itself for the production of its existence in classes and social fractions that determine the processes of social reproduction, resulting in different qualities of life and health-disease profiles, recognized in this study as a particular dimension: a space of contradictions between classes and ways of living⁽⁷⁾.

In the context of gender-based violence, the universities characterize scenarios in which gender relations are reproduced, which may lead to disastrous learning that is perpetuated in future generations⁽¹⁷⁻¹⁸⁾. In the universities, there is the same socialization

of gender relations present outside their walls; in addition, these spaces retain a strong hierarchical structure that favors this type of unequal relation⁽¹⁸⁾.

This perspective is in line with a study published in 2015, carried out with 1,823 undergraduate and graduate students from two universities in the state of São Paulo, in which it was identified that male students frequently did not recognize some attitudes as violent. Regarding the interviewed female students, 67% admitted having suffered some type of aggression in the university environment⁽¹⁹⁾.

This understanding is confirmed by studies in which more than half of the people subjected to sexual violence in a university environment did not report the event because they did not consider it serious enough^(7,18).

Gender-based violence present in the university environment is sometimes not recognized due to the idealized vision of the higher education institution. This environment, which should promote a vanguard environment ahead of the patriarchal society, guiding peace, does not always do so, since gender inequality and discrimination appear in Brazilian higher education in different ways, explicit or not⁽⁶⁾.

A research study carried out in São Paulo identified the concern of students with college hazing and university parties, in which there is usually high consumption of alcoholic beverages, identified as one of the triggers of violence. Among the São Paulo university students interviewed, 27% do not believe that sexually abusing another student under the exaggerated effect of alcoholic beverages is a form of violence. The results also described that 46% of the interviewees knew cases of students who suffered sexual violence at parties, competitions, hazing and university facilities, 56% suffered harassment in the university environment, 36% stopped doing some activity out of fear of violence, and 11% suffered attempted abuse under the influence of alcohol⁽¹⁹⁾.

The vulnerability to non-consensual sexual contact aggravated by the use of alcohol and drugs is corroborated by an American study. It identified that university female students suffered some type of sexual abuse while under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs, 5.4% reported having been raped due to disability, and 6.6% reported having experienced sexual touch without consent⁽⁷⁾.

In general, college hazing has been permeated by violence, with the imposition of old and traditional hierarchical structures between genders and races, linked to privileges of certain groups^(6,20). Over the last few years in Brazil, there has been an increase in reports of college hazing that, through sexist, homophobic and racist practices, harass freshmen subjecting them to aggressive activities at parties and in student residences. This violation is mostly carried out by a group of white-skinned, upper-middle class men, who reproduce in the university spaces the models of social domination and masculinity present in society, associated with virility and violence, which are structuring processes of gender-based violence⁽²⁰⁾.

Reality is even more aggravated when university administrators collude with violent and discriminating hazing. This negligent posture denotes comfortable acceptance, which is only reversed in cases of death, because a phenomenon with such a consequence directly affects the image of the institution and the career of the aggressors^(7,20).

In this understanding, it is noteworthy that a significant percentage of students declared that, despite having witnessed a violent sexual act, they did not report the incident, because they believed that nothing would be done about it⁽⁷⁾. It is important to understand that, in cases of sexual harassment and violence within universities, sex is being experienced as an instrument of domination, although it may be masked in a discursive context of sexual freedom⁽⁴⁻⁶⁾.

Universities have historically been a place of fear for women, where violence can be perpetrated by strangers, classmates, professors and acquaintances. The types of violence

identified range from intellectual disqualification to rape⁽¹⁹⁾.

There is no procedure in university environments to face violence and to address which definitions must be used, as well as administrative guidelines for the protection of people exposed to violence; there are few guidelines that establish punishment to possible aggressors and, consequently, promote their removal from institutional activities⁽¹⁸⁾.

This study emphasizes that the daily life of the universities can be understood as a space of transition and conflict, in which discourses and practices are reproduced, increasing inequalities and hierarchies, thereby excluding and marginalizing desires, genders and sexualities. This exclusion and marginalization form the basis of the homophobic practices that have occurred frequently in these environments⁽²¹⁾.

An American research study states that 27% of the university students who do not fit into the heteronormative standard suffered violent sexual acts involving physical strength or disability after entering university⁽⁷⁾. Violence against homosexuals, especially transvestites and transgender people, often leads to death, undoubtedly one of the most tragic facets of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In this context, all forms of discrimination and homophobia should be considered as situations that produce disease and suffering⁽²¹⁻²²⁾.

It is necessary to understand that these forms of prejudice do not occur in isolation from other forms of social discrimination. They go hand in hand and are reinforced by sexism, racism, misogyny and all related forms of discrimination⁽²²⁾.

Universities have the same material basis as society, and it is possible to assert that violence in higher education is part of its organization, appearing in an open and blatant way, or subtle and disguised⁽⁴⁾. The situations of violence are the representation of historically constructed beliefs, which serve as the foundation of relationships of domination⁽²³⁻²⁴⁾. In the university environment, they present themselves in different ways: sexuality, physical appearance, alleged cognitive differences between men and women, status of the future career, and attitudes of teachers^(4,6,13).

The singular dimension does not exist independently from the other dimensions and represents the totality closest to the object⁽⁸⁾. In this dimension, the subjectivities were considered, which are understood as the articulation of the social and individual, forming a structure that shapes the subjects and is expressed in their relationships, that is, in the praxis⁽²³⁾. In the narratives, the interviewees used terms describing feelings that reflect the perception with which each individual reacts to aggression and suffering, resulting in signs and symptoms that camouflage a silence that shows feelings of humiliation, shame and outrage⁽²⁴⁾.

Also highlighted in the results were feelings that translate impotence, anguish, insecurity, disorientation and sadness of the health workers when faced with the investigated phenomenon. A study carried out in Bahia on violence against women by intimate partners concluded that the health space must enable reflections about the social construction of gender and the beliefs of male domination over women⁽²⁵⁾.

The limitations of this research included narratives that reflect the participants' subjectivities and personal interpretations; therefore, it is not possible to generate definite answers to the theme. However, it outlined ways of intervention in which the role of Nursing is the protagonist.

CONCLUSION

Gender-based violence is the reproduction of power over someone considered “inferior”, a concept perceived in the studied scenario. Therefore, it is the universities’ responsibility to promote discussions about the inclusion of new and different subjects in their spaces.

Gender-based violence becomes invisible when the listening/reporting/notification services are not prepared for dealing with this reality. This visibility needs to be done through listening that does not translate into blaming the person subjected to the phenomenon.

There was recognition of gender-based violence in the studied spaces but in a partial and superficial way. The daily confrontation of the invisibility of this phenomenon in the university environment will depend on the development of debates and discussions and on the proposal of strategies that guarantee the equal rights of men and women. In addition, there is a need to address the theme in depth in the different spaces of academic reality, through institutional teaching, research and extension projects.

Unveiling gender-based violence within the universities is necessary to recognize and face the phenomenon in its structural, particular and singular dimensions, aiming at reducing the invisibility to which the vulnerable groups are exposed. This study highlights as an important contradiction the idealized view of the university, which is entirely different from the space of reproduction of violence, especially gender-based violence.

The paths to achieve these objectives include organizing and expanding debates that stimulate changes, through reflection, visibility, reports and creation of public policies capable of reducing the social inequalities that structure violence. Universities are at the forefront of this process, seeking to promote actions that minimize the impacts of historically and socially constructed inequalities.

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