

The vulnerability of the family: reflections about human condition

A vulnerabilidade da família: reflexões acerca da condição humana

La vulnerabilidad de la familia: reflexiones acerca de la condición humana

Jacqueline Flores de Oliveira¹

ORCID: 0000-0002-0598-3881

Adriane Maria Netto de Oliveira¹

ORCID: 0000-0001-9422-423X

Edison Luiz Devos Barlem¹

ORCID: 0000-0001-6239-8657

Luciano Garcia Lourenção¹

ORCID: 0000-0002-1240-4702

¹Universidade Federal do Rio Grande. Rio Grande,
Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

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Corresponding author:

Jacqueline Flores de Oliveira

E-mail: jacqueoliveira.enf@hotmail.com



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: to reflect about the vulnerability of the family, using the book The Human Condition by Hannah Arendt as reference, to better understand how this institution has been structured in today's world. **Results:** the rupture of assistance relations among family members represents a situation of vulnerability that weakens the family institution, leading to the loss of the assertiveness in the society. Support for the development of human capabilities in families and in the territory provides the benefit of strengthening them to face of vulnerabilities. **Conclusions:** the vulnerability of the family presents itself as a historic milestone, condition on which the family institution was built and organized as a public and private property, putting in evidence the importance to develop a more holistic and integrate care to the people, based on health public policies and social assistance.

Descriptors: Family; Vulnerability; Social Conditions; Health Promotion; Culturally Competent Care.

RESUMO

Objetivos: refletir sobre a vulnerabilidade da família, utilizando como referência a obra Condição Humana, de Hannah Arendt, para melhor compreender a maneira como essa instituição tem sido estruturada no mundo atual. **Resultados:** a ruptura das relações assistenciais entre os membros da família representa uma situação de vulnerabilidade, que fragiliza a instituição familiar, levando à perda de sua capacidade de afirmação na sociedade. O apoio ao desenvolvimento de capacidades humanas nas famílias e no território proporciona o benefício de fortalecê-los para o enfrentamento das vulnerabilidades. **Conclusões:** a vulnerabilidade da família apresenta-se como um marco histórico, uma condição sobre a qual a instituição familiar foi construída e organizada enquanto propriedade de caráter público e privado, evidenciando a importância do desenvolvimento de um cuidado mais holístico e integral às pessoas, fundamentado em políticas públicas de saúde e assistência social.

Descritores: Família; Vulnerabilidade; Condições Sociais; Promoção da Saúde; Assistência à Saúde Culturalmente Competente.

RESUMEN

Objetivos: reflejar sobre la vulnerabilidad de la familia, utilizando como referencia la obra Condición Humana, de Hannah Arendt, para mejor comprender la manera como esa institución ha sido estructurada en el mundo actual. **Resultados:** la ruptura de las relaciones asistenciales entre los miembros de la familia representa una situación de vulnerabilidad, que debilita la institución familiar, llevando a la pérdida de su capacidad de afirmación en la sociedad. El apoyo al desarrollo de capacidades humanas en las familias y en el territorio proporciona el beneficio de fortalecerlos para el enfrentamiento de las vulnerabilidades. **Conclusiones:** la vulnerabilidad de la familia se presenta como un marco histórico, una condición sobre la cual la institución familiar ha construida y organizada mientras propiedad de carácter público y privado, evidenciando la importancia del desarrollo de un cuidado más holístico e integral a las personas, fundamentado en políticas públicas de salud y asistencia social.

Descriptorios: Familia; Vulnerabilidad; Condiciones Sociales; Promoción de la Salud; Asistencia Sanitaria Culturalmente Competente.

INTRODUCTION

The family obligation reflects a sense of duty to support, respect and assist family members. The implicit and explicit expectations about these obligations generally serve as guidelines for the way in which relationships are established in the family environment⁽¹⁾.

Families policies had a higher visibility in the last decade due to big contemporaneous transformations related to the forms of work organization and family constitution, social, economic transitions, and urbanization, that directly reflected in the way how the relationships happen in the family environment presently⁽²⁾.

Although many world advances related to the policies of social protection, these public policies, in Brazil, in family environment, still are turned to social insurance and based on the role of the men being the breadwinner and the woman as the caregiver, reproducing the "traditional family" model of the patriarchal system, which generates several ways of vulnerability inside the family environment. This archaic model of organization has threatened the structure and the quality of familiar relationships, contributing to disagreements, abandonment, violence and threats.

In addition, there were few social advances in relation to the forms of family constitution, prevailing the development of policies based on a family model formed by biological, heterosexual and marital coexistence parents, without considering other aspects for the planning of health and social policies. It is also noticed that there is more responsibility of the family for individual problems - based on archaic moral and social values and reflected in society - than their actual⁽³⁻⁴⁾.

Principles and guidelines related to assistance and promotion of health care policies, which include the concern to have the family as the focus of professional performance, result from a long accumulation of experiences aimed at the family institution. However, the problems related to the vulnerability of the family present several historic milestones related to the way how the family and the society were structured and organized, since ancient Rome.

In the light of the foregoing, this theoretical essay aims to reflect on the vulnerability of the family, using as reference the book *Human Condition*, by Hannah Arendt, to better understand the way in which this institution has been structured in the today's world.

Conceptualizing vulnerability

The etymological origin of the word "vulnerability" comes from the Latin term *vulnerabilis*, derived from *vulnerare* (to hurt, harm, damage) and from *-bilis* (susceptible to)⁽⁵⁾.

Vulnerability comprises a dynamic relation of interdependencies between people and environments/social contexts, in which biologic, social and existential are expressed⁽⁶⁾. It is a condition that accompanies the appearance of the spheres of private and public life, whose distinction, according to Arendt, corresponds to the existence and preservation of familiar institution as a private space that ensured man's condition of belonging and allowed him to participate in the world's businesses⁽⁷⁾.

Obligation was what differentiated the coexistence between the family and public spheres, because in the family sphere coexistence was imposed by the dependence on human relationships,

necessary for the survival of the species. In this scenario, the rupture of assistance relationships among the family members represents a vulnerable situation that weaken the familiar institution, leading to the loss of its capacity for affirmation in society⁽⁶⁻⁷⁾, because someone who is not able to manage their own home, work and resources, with the requirements of self-ownership (promotion, management and protection), is seen socially as an impaired individual⁽⁵⁾.

This condition brings suffering to several individuals due to the characterizations by which society tries to define them and the way in which they have interpreted them, showing to be limiting in the search for personal conquests. According to Marc-Henry Soulet⁽⁵⁾, the individual suffers in his social condition for being a limited person, uncomfortable with the possibilities offered to him.

On the other hand, the vulnerable human being will not necessarily suffer damages, but he will be more susceptible to it due to the disadvantage for social mobility, which will prevent reaching higher levels of life quality because of his weakened citizenship. However, this person may receive support to be capable to promote changes in his condition⁽⁵⁾.

Family as public and private institution

According to Hannah Arendt, in the ancient Greek cities (polis), two types of spheres for the human existence were consolidated: public and private.

The term "public" refers to two distinct phenomena. Firstly, it centers in the idea of accessibility: all that is public is accessible to everybody or may be seen and heard by everybody. However, there are feelings/ sensations that cannot be entirely exposed in public spaces, like physical pain, and the love, which are not interests to public sphere and soon, become private subject⁽⁷⁾.

Living in the private sphere, according to Arendt, it implied depriving oneself of being seen and heard, in a political community in which individuals share political action in a common space, the polis. Thus, the private is limited to personal interest, which is restricted to the preservation of biological, family and home survival⁽⁷⁾.

Not only in ancient Rome, but in all Western Antiquity, the called *pater familias* (family man) reigned in the house that the family lived, wielding the absolute power over the woman, children, and slaves. Family was guided by the principle of authority, and the chief of the family environment governed, with unchallenged and despotic powers⁽⁷⁾.

The individual maintenance of life was the man task, and the species survival was up to the woman, duties considered natural. Thus, man's work to supply food and women's work in procreation were submitted to the same urgency as life. Therefore, the natural home community was born out of need. The organizational principle of division of labor belonged to the public sphere and could never occur in the privacy of the home⁽⁷⁾.

Home was considered a sacred place. Thus, what prevented the polis from violating the private lives of its citizens was the belief that, if he were not the owner of his home, man could not participate in the businesses of the world, because there was no place that belonged to him⁽⁷⁾.

The vulnerability of the family in the light of human condition

The individual needs of survival and continuity of the human species were met in the private sphere of the family and, despite not transforming its nature, the emergence of society changed the perception about the private spectrum.

The way in which the family has been organized and constituted over time has influenced the way in which this institution has historically acquired meaning, as a place of protection and care, being considered the “center for structuring society”⁽⁷⁻⁸⁾.

However, when families escape from this model, historically considered standard, and fail in performing the functions of protection and care of their members, carrying inside failures such as violence, alcoholism and abandonment, they are socially qualified as “dysfunctional families”; for, in contemporary times, the family is responsible for the protection and role of care of its members, abstaining from the state of their responsibility⁽³⁾.

In Western Antiquity, family was considered an institution belonged to public sphere. However, currently, issues that do not seem to be interest of the State prevail in home private sphere. Although we recognize that there are advances in the fight for gender equality, through social movements, we still witness several practices arising from patriarchy, under which prejudice and the practice of violence are rooted.

According to the Institute of Economic and Applied Research (*Instituto de Pesquisa Economica e Aplicada - IPEA*), between the years of 2007 and 2017, femicide rate in Brazil has raised 20.7%, passing from 3.9 to 4.7 the number of murdered women per group of 100 thousand women⁽⁹⁾. In addition, in 39.1% of the cases of violence against children and teenagers, parents are identified as the main aggressors⁽¹⁰⁾. This scenario demonstrates: the existence of a familiar culture of oppression, submission, and violence in contemporaneous society; and insufficiency of laws and public policies to prevent that the families are tragically attacked by such vulnerabilities.

However, although intrafamily violence is a serious public health problem, generating negative impacts in the life and health of thousands of people all around the world, there are underreporting of cases, which represent a challenge, since violence practiced in home environment is still justified by unique and unacceptable aspects, such as the use of violence to educate children.

When we think of the family in the private sphere of the home, we come across with marriage issues who subject thousands of women to humiliation or any kind of moral, sexual or psychological violence. Furthermore, we daily see the occurrence of hundreds of women deaths, victims of possession and power relationships, who could be protected by policies and laws that are often not effective in view of the magnitude of this problem.

When we reflect on family social policies, we observe that there is still a division of gender roles, in which the man has the function of providing for the home and the woman is responsible for the domestic environment⁽³⁻⁴⁾. Despite that, in the last decades, woman has occupied new spaces, becoming a representative and active in Politics, society, and labor market, as well as starring in the fight for personal accomplishes, which helps the emergence of new forms of familiar organization, such as families headed by women and single parents.

Although it's the responsibility of the State to guarantee rights and provide conditions for the family to take care of children, the use of public resources in social assistance is strongly linked to economic development, falling exclusively on family members the responsibility to face family vulnerabilities and its adversities, generating feelings of overcharge, incapacity, and impotence⁽³⁻⁴⁾.

In this context, family life depends on conditions that are satisfactory for sustaining and maintenance of bonds, since situations of vulnerability can surface whenever the family encounters difficulties to socialize and support its members. In addition, daily faced difficulties, such as unemployment, lack of social protection, lack of education, health and housing, violence, social exclusion, abandonment, and lack of sanitation, generates family ruptures and disconnection, and cause individual and social suffering^(3-4,6).

According to Arendt, what makes socializing hard to tolerate is not the number of people that lives on it, but the difficulty of keeping them together, relating, or separating them. However, finding a bond enough strong among men to substitute the world was a strategy used by Saint Augustine in the ancient Christian philosophy, in order to build charity and love over all human relations⁽⁷⁾. And this strategy has been used for many families, up to the present, to be able to face innumerable vulnerability situations, laying in themselves all the responsibility and carrying the weight of their frustrations, when they cannot respond, in a positive way, to the requirements that are put over them.

According to Mioto, the assistance to be provided to the families must assume that they are not spaces of care but, yes, spaces to be cared⁽³⁾. In this sense, it is necessary to problematize and reformulate the programs and policies provided to families, so that they promote their autonomy as an institution and guarantee their constitutional rights, having the State responsible for privileging social protection, promoting community and family health, as well as ensure the access to basic services.

It is worth mentioning that, according to Arendt, the biological process of human body is associated to labor activity, whose development or eventual decline is linked to the vital needs related to work practice. Therefore, the biologic process is not related to the family survivor, but to the individual⁽⁷⁾.

Thus, for characterization of the health-disease process, the conception of social determinants of health related to vulnerability and to labor is opposed to the biologic paradigm and provides a wider vision of the health actions and policies, which affect in everyday lives of the families and contribute for promotion of health. In this context, it is established that supporting the development of human capacities in the families and in the territory provides the benefit to strength them to face vulnerable situations⁽⁷⁻⁸⁾.

Said that, it is considered urgent the development of a model in public health care that encompass promotional, prevention, and intervention actions in family environment, within territories or communities, aiming the promotion of a greater social participation, gender equality, and violence prevention. That is, it is crucial to surpass assistance spaces, aiming at the scope of care to communities, beyond the dimensions of health, encompassing social issues and the difficulties experienced by families.

This approach may be accomplished by healthcare professionals to stimulate the creation of support spaces to families in vulnerabilities, guarantying autonomy, stablishing trust bonds, and building changing agents capable to contributing to the improvement of assistance and modification of the current paradigm.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The vulnerability of the family presents itself as a historic milestone, a condition on which family institution was built and organized while public and private property, as defined by Arendt.

The private character of the sphere of the home and family that originated this vulnerability, despite perpetuated until today, cannot continue exempting the State's duty to protect

and promote a greater gender equality, in addition to guarantee social duties of the families.

Faced with contexts of vulnerability caused by the rupture of assistance relationships among members of the family, family institution is weakened, losing its assertiveness in the society. Therefore, vulnerability of the family emphasizes the importance of a more holistic and comprehensive care for people, based on public health and social assistance policies.

Thus, it is needed to develop public policies and intervention models that strengthen organization practices in the family environment, and that do not aim only the economic and educational development, but ensure social protection of the families, stimulate human potentialities, and strengthen familiar and communities bonds.

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