



Recurrence of violence against children in the municipality of Curitiba: a look at gender*

Reincidência da violência contra crianças no Município de Curitiba: um olhar de gênero

Reincidencia de la violencia contra niños en el Municipio de Curitiba: una mirada de género

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To analyze the recurrence of child abuse in the municipality of Curitiba – Paraná and to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of gender. **Methods:** A study using a quantitative approach of the descriptive exploratory type. Among the 338 notifications of violence against children aged zero to 9 years of age by the Network for the Protection of Children and Adolescents of this city, with final notification in 2009, 300 cases were analyzed for being repeat offenders. **Results:** All the cases were domestic violence and the most frequent recidivism was neglect, with a mother as the primary aggressor. Sexual violence appeared more among girls, with recurrent cases of the same type or preceded by negligence. The manifestation of recidivist violence against children presented itself superimposed with a tendency to deteriorate with the evolution of cases. **Conclusion:** Violence against children is determined by relationships of Power, determined by the categories of gender and generation, which produce inequities potentiating the family vulnerability in relation to violence. A critical view about this issue may indicate measures to overcome it, with regard to assistance and prevention of its occurrence and recidivism in both the health sector and other sectors. **Keywords:** Child abuse, sexual; Mandatory reporting; Domestic violence; Recurrence.

RESUMO

Objetivos: Analisar a reincidência de violência infantil no Município de Curitiba – Paraná e compreender o fenômeno com base na perspectiva de gênero. **Métodos:** Estudo de abordagem quantitativa do tipo descritivo exploratório. Dentre as 338 notificações de violência contra crianças de zero a 9 anos de idade junto à Rede de Proteção à Criança e ao Adolescente dessa cidade com última notificação em 2009 foram analisados 300 casos por serem reincidentes. **Resultados:** A totalidade dos casos foi de violência intrafamiliar e a reincidência mais frequente foi a negligência, tendo com principal agressora a mãe. A violência sexual apareceu mais entre as meninas, com casos reincidentes no mesmo tipo ou com a negligência antecedendo. A manifestação da violência reincidente contra crianças apresentou-se sobreposta, recorrente, com tendência a agravar-se com a evolução dos casos. **Conclusão:** A violência contra as crianças é determinada por relações de poder determinadas pelas categorias gênero e geração, que produzem iniquidades potencializadoras da vulnerabilidade familiar em relação à violência. O olhar crítico sobre essa questão pode indicar medidas de superação no tocante à assistência e à prevenção de sua ocorrência e reincidência tanto do setor saúde como de outros setores. **Descritores:** Maus-tratos sexuais infantis; Notificação de abuso; Violência doméstica; Recidiva

RESUMEN

Objetivos: Analizar la reincidencia de la violencia infantil en el Municipio de Curitiba – Paraná y comprender el fenómeno con base en la perspectiva de género. **Métodos:** Estudio de abordaje cuantitativo de tipo descriptivo exploratorio. De las 338 notificaciones de violencia contra niños de cero a 9 años de edad, junto a la Red de Protección al Niño y Adolescente de esa ciudad con última notificación en 2009, fueron analizados 300 casos por ser reincidentes. **Resultados:** La totalidad de los casos fue de violencia intrafamiliar y la reincidencia más frecuente fue la negligencia, teniendo como principal agresora a la madre. La violencia sexual apareció más entre las niñas, con casos reincidentes en el mismo tipo o con la antecedencia de la negligencia. La manifestación de la violencia reincidente contra niños se presentó sobrepuesta, recurrente, con tendencia a agravarse con la evolución de los casos. **Conclusión:** La violencia contra los niños está definida por relaciones de poder determinadas por las categorías género y generación, que producen inequidades potencializadoras de la vulnerabilidad familiar en relación a la violencia. La mirada crítica sobre esa cuestión puede indicar medidas de superación en lo que se refiere a la asistencia y a la prevención de su ocurrencia y reincidencia tanto del sector salud como de otros sectores. **Descriptor:** Abuso sexual infantil; Notificación obligatoria; Violencia domestica; Recurrencia

* The study was conducted in the Network of Protection for Children and Adolescents of the city of Curitiba (PR).

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INTRODUCTION

The issues that involve the rights of children and adolescents have achieved greater visibility in Brazil after the enactment of the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* (Statute of the Child and of the Adolescent – ECA), which guarantees that no child or adolescent shall be subjected to any form of negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression, by action or omission, of their fundamental rights, with any attempt punishable according to the law ⁽¹⁾. In the idealized perspective, the family would have the function of guaranteeing, in partnership with the State, the well-being, protection and promotion of the healthy growth of all its children.

In any phase of childhood, there is gravity in violence. The physical and emotional traumas, even if not always fatal, leave sequelae that will carry consequences into adulthood. Research reveals that adolescents who suffered family maltreatment suffer more episodes of violence at school, experience more aggression in the community and violate more social norms, thus compounding the circle of violence. They also have less social support, less capacity for resilience and extremely low self-esteem ⁽²⁾.

On the other hand, violence is also a phenomenon of intergenerational repetition. Thus, adults who experienced violence during childhood tend to repeat the behavior with their own children, mediated positively or negatively by certain determinants ⁽³⁾.

The violence that is reproduced in the intrafamilial environment, in the majority of the cases, overlaps and rarely occurs in isolation. In a family dynamic in which one detects some kind of abuse, frequently an interrelationship exists that expresses multiple manifestations of violence. This characteristic of the phenomenon should become an important indicator of vulnerability for violence within families ⁽⁴⁾.

The city of Curitiba, capital of the state of Paraná, has distinguished itself in the pursuit of health promotion and protection, with policies that aim to meet the health needs of the population, developing specific programs to focus on different social groups. The *Rede de Proteção à Criança e ao Adolescente em Situação de Risco para a Violência* (Network for the Protection of Children and Adolescents in Situations of Risk for Violence) consists of a set of integrated and intersectoral actions in this city to prevent violence, particularly intrafamilial and sexual, and to protect children and adolescents in situations of risk. The Network has the general aim of contributing in an integrated manner to the reduction of these cases of violence ⁽⁵⁾.

In 2009, a study was conducted to characterize the violence against children in Curitiba, in the period from 2004 to 2008. Overwhelmingly, the cases of violence against children reported in this city were intrafamilial, manifested through negligence, physical and sexual abuse.

The boys were the most frequently abused, suffering from neglect, physical and psychological abuse. In 2007, they represented 54.9% of the total cases and, in 2008, 54.2%. Among the cases of sexual abuse, girls were victims in 81.2% of the total cases, revealing a strong relationship of this type of violence with issues related to gender determination that is configured as a key category for the analysis of violence against women and girls ⁽⁶⁾.

The scarcity of scientific production of this nature, the severity of the reported cases and the consequences that violence brings to the health – disease process of these children justified the performance of this study, which aimed to analyze the phenomenon of recidivism in child abuse in the city of Curitiba – PR, and to understand the violence experienced by children on the basis of gender perspective.

METHODS

This was a descriptive, exploratory study, of a quantitative approach that investigated recidivist cases of child abuse in the city of Curitiba – PR, and sought to understand the relationship of the violence experienced by children based on the perspective of gender.

For the quantitative analysis, was used simple statistics. The historical construction of the social relations between the sexes was the primary focus.

At present, the contradiction of gender is one of the four major contradictions of Western society, with the other three being: of class, of race / ethnicity, and of the generation. Patriarchy was produced, with gender as a backdrop, blending with racism and, with the advent of capitalism, social classes flourished in its plenitude and valued the generations in a differentiated manner. The contradictions resulting from the production of these categories constituted a reality ruled by an equally contradictory logic. This logic is maintained by means of naturalized social interests, constituting, in actuality, a species of ideology that subverts the comprehension of the essential reality of the human being and, prohibits equality within the framework of diversity ⁽⁷⁾.

This discourse opposed the one that affirms that the humanity of the human being is socially constructed in social relations. Such an understanding of the world presupposes that all social phenomena are the product of human action and can be transformed by it. Based on this theoretical reflection, the understanding of violence in the family environment requires the articulation between multiple inter-related categories, since gender permeates all of the social fields and the relationships of power in society ⁽⁷⁾.

Gender is a constitutive element of the social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and is a primary form of signifying relationships of power ⁽⁷⁾. The gender category intends to thereby explain,

in the light of power relationships, the social manifestations of men and women, including their health-disease process. However, it cannot be viewed or utilized in an isolated fashion. In truth, what is being proposed is the comprehension of reality alchemized by different categories, highlighting one or the other or the joint of various.

The study setting was the city of Curitiba – PR, and the Network for the Protection of Children and Adolescents in Situations of Risk for Violence, which records all the notifications that refer to child abuse, performed by different notifying agencies (schools, hospitals, units of health, among others), and execute other actions of prevention and protection of children and adolescents at risk. Curitiba has been striving to put attention onto children’s health, and this fact can be evidenced by rates of infant mortality that have been decreasing in recent years ⁽⁸⁾.

Data collection was conducted together with the notification forms of violence committed against children 0-9 years of age who suffered recidivist violence, with the final notification in 2009. In this year, there were 4,190 notifications of violence against children and adolescents, with 2,428 against children in the age range covered in this study. The recidivist cases, in 2009, totaled 338 notifications, corresponding to 300 children. This difference occurred due to the fact that some children had more than one report during the year of 2009. Quantitative data were stored in *Excel*® tables, and, subsequently, analyzed by the *Epiinfo*® program.

For qualitative analysis, among the 300 children who were victims of recidivist violence, was selected a sample of 25% that resulted in a total of 75 children. From this sample, were analyzed all 201 notifications over the years that the Network of Protection monitored the cases.

The selected sample had a description of the occurrence contained in the notification form transcribed into

records within *MS Word*. The notifications of each of the 75 children who comprised the sample were analyzed, and the characteristics of violence and the accounts of the notifiers were transcribed. After each transcription, an exhaustive reading of each file was completed, indicating the principal themes, the recurrences, repetitions and differentiations. A table was designed containing the themes and phrases and their relationships and, subsequently, these markings served as a guide for the emergence of the issues of gender determinants of child abuse.

The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee in Research of the School of Nursing, University of São Paulo (Case No. 819/2009) and by the Ethics Committee of the Municipal Secretary of Health of Curitiba (Case No. 69/2009), according to Resolution No. 196/96 of the National Health Council. Therefore, any identification of the subjects from the notification forms was maintained confidentially and anonymously in the research.

RESULTS

Characterization of child victims of recidivist violence

For quantitative analysis of the data, was considered the sample of 338 notifications occurring in 2009.

Almost all of the occurrences were intrafamilial (332 – 98.2%), the mother appeared as the principal aggressor (148 – 44.8%) and the father was the perpetrator in 12.7% of the cases.

Regarding the gender of the victim, 177 (59%) were boys and 123 (41%) were girls. Negligence accounted for the highest incidence of violence against children (239 – 70.3%). Following this was physical abuse (62 – 18.3%), sexual abuse (24 – 7.1%), psychological abuse (12 – 3.6%), and, abandonment (1 – 0.3%) – see Figure 1.

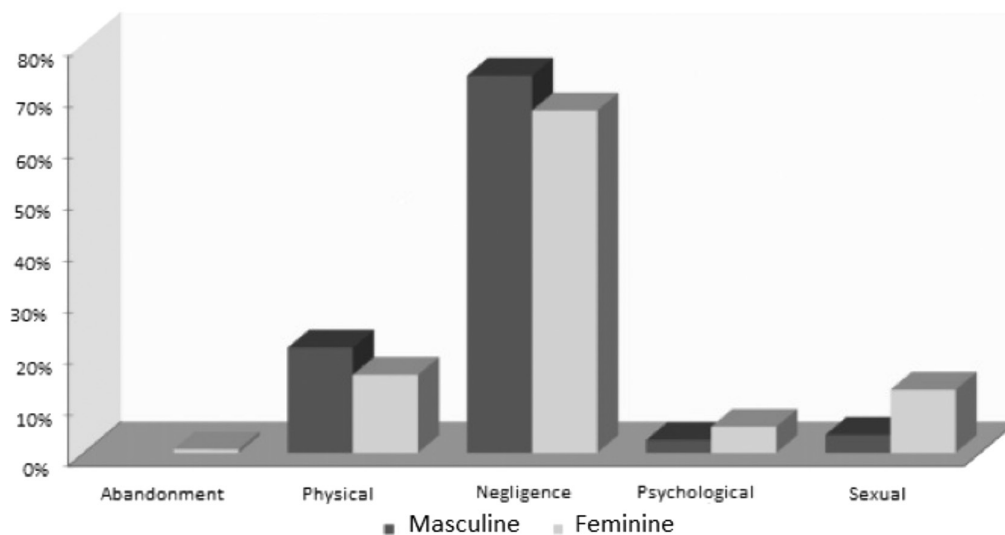


Figure 1 – Nature of the cases of violence, according to the gender of the victim, reported in Curitiba – PR, 2009.

Assessing the cases of violence that occurred with children between 0 and 9 complete years of age, those who were between 7 and 9 years old were the ones who suffered the most (146 – 48.6%), followed by those between 4 and 6 years (81 – 27.0%) and those 1 to 3 years (57 – 19.0%). Children under one year old experienced the least violence in absolute numbers (16 – 5.3%). However, they represented a substantial number, given that these were notifications of the occurrence of recidivist violence, with the last record in 2009. Therefore, this data demonstrated that children who were less than one year had already suffered repeated violence, despite being more dependent and having no possibility of defense.

Among the abused children comprising the sample of this study, more than half were in elementary school (58.1%) in 2009. This data is related to the age of the children who suffered most from violence, between 7 and 9 years. The group that was the next most affected was the children of daycare / preschool age (21.3%), followed by those who had no schooling (16.9%), probably due to their young age.

The evolution of the cases of recidivist violence

To verify this item, a sample of 25% of the 300 children who suffered recidivist violence was randomly selected, totaling 75 children (42 girls and 33 boys); each of the notification forms of these children was analyzed, between 2005 and 2009, which resulted in 201 notifications.

In regard to the evolution of these situations, was observed that in 37 cases (49.4%), the nature of violence remained constant for all notifications. For the others, the notifications related different types of violence. Also with regard to the number of notifications, 48 children (64%) had two notifications during the study period; 17 children (22.6%) had three reports; three children (4%) had four notifications; four children (5.3%) had five notifications; two (2.6%) had seven notifications; and, one child (1.3%) had eight notifications within the Network of Protection.

Considering always the last notification as the criteria for grouping and analysis of the notifications, eight cases of sexual abuse were found, and five of these cases reported were girls; in four cases, the perpetrator was a male who was in close proximity to the victim (stepfather, uncle or brother) and in one case the gender of the offender was not described. In two of the three cases of sexual violence against boys, the perpetrator was also male (grandfather and known perpetrator), while in one case the perpetrator was unknown.

There was a total of 13 cases in which the last notification was related to physical abuse. Of these, eight were against girls, four severe cases and the other four moderate; five had been reported previously for physical

violence and three cases had been reported for sexual abuse. We draw attention to a case that was reported seven times during the study period, varying between psychological and physical abuse and neglect. In physical abuse reported against boys, in all five cases negligence had been reported previously.

In relation to psychological abuse, the girls were the victims in four of these cases, and males predominated as the aggressor. Two cases of such violence had been reported previously for sexual abuse, and the two others for negligence.

The largest number of cases reported in 2009, that comprised the sample for this analysis were notifications of neglect, with 49 (65.3%) cases. Of these, 25 (33.3%) were against girls, nine of which were considered severe. In relation to previous notifications, six cases with sexual abuse had been reported, and the others varied between the other types of violence. Against the boys, there were 24 cases, two previously reported for sexual violence and the others for negligence, physical and psychological abuse. In all cases of negligence (49 – 65.3%), women were identified as the main aggressor in 30 cases, men in five cases, and both parents in 12 cases.

In regard to notifying facilities, the municipal schools and early childhood education centers reported the most (43 cases) for all types of violence, predominantly negligence. Health facilities reported 12 cases of negligence and the hospitals had only three cases among the study sample. Also within the sample, 14 notifications were of children who were not in school and these were mostly identified by health facilities.

DISCUSSION

In the family context, violence constitutes a complex phenomenon that involves issues such as social inequality and impairments in quality of life that affect families with compromised intra-family relationships, as evidenced by the abuse of power by one of its members. Violence always involves the use of force to cause harm, which is synonymous with abuse of power. It therefore implies a power hierarchy, involving one *above* – stronger and more powerful – and one *below* – weaker, actually or symbolically, that adopts the usual form of complementary pairs, e.g., parent-child, husband-wife⁽⁹⁾.

This type of violence can be characterized by actions or omission which negatively affect the well-being, freedom of expression, the physical and psychological integrity, or the right to defense and full development of one or more family members.

In childhood, violence has a complex determination. Culturally, what can favor the situations is the fact that the child is seen as the property of the parents, and corporal punishment is a pedagogical tool. The adults,

more specifically the parents, often exhibit continuous behaviors that reflect the absence or insufficiency of care they had when they were children⁽¹⁰⁾.

In relation to the largest number of notifications having the mother as the aggressor, when observing the woman's family situation, one realizes the importance of her participation in the family organization, historically, as caregiver. In general, it is she who is physically closest to the child. This appears to favor the occurrence of situations of violence and to explain the data regarding the prevalence of women, subjects who have the function to protect, also being the main aggressor in the domestic environment. Low education and poverty, added to issues of gender and family, compose the social matrix of violence, which is also due to their precarious insertion in the labor market, low pay, suffering and stress⁽¹¹⁾.

Gender inequality has as one of its extreme forms of manifestation the violence against women, which is the result of an asymmetry of power, which translates into relations of force and domination. Gender-based violence experienced by them may be reproduced in their relationship with the children that, within the family context, constitute the disadvantaged participant of the intergenerational power relationship. "Violence configures itself as a process of domination and a demonstration of power that emerges from family dynamics, bringing repercussions for the whole family to share"⁽¹²⁾. All of these aspects are part of women's lives and are also related with the determination of the violence of women against children. This explains why the mother appeared as the principal aggressor, since, in most cases, she is responsible for providing care to the children.

In the socio-historical context of violence that affects children, a culture of domination and social, economic, gender, generational and racial / ethnic discrimination prevails, which exposes such social subjects to situations of violence in the streets, schools and at home. The gender differentiation involves different forms of violence. So, the boys have imposed social standards of gender linked to strength and the expression of power by domination; the girls carry conditions of subordination.

If, on the one hand, boys are the most common victims of maltreatment, of the repeated beatings, abandonment and neglect; on the other hand, girls are the most common victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. Great difficulty in facing such situations occurs because "the concealment of incestuous relationships causes the relationships to be perpetuated for many years, aggravating their deleterious effects. This eventually compromises the psychosexual development of the child or adolescent and the treatment of the aggressor

and the family"⁽¹³⁾. Therefore, sexual abuse causes damage and complications for the entire life of the child. "To live with violence imposed by an unequal and sexist socialization of gender from an early age makes abusive practices seem naturalized and trivialized."⁽¹⁴⁾.

However, for unknown reasons, the actions committed against boys are in some way omitted, as being more humiliating than with the girls. The general surveys tend to show lower rates of male sexual abuse than the clinical studies, which points to a social invisibility⁽¹⁵⁾. Nevertheless, the results pointed to occurrences of sexual abuse against boys, perpetrated by men.

The sexual abuse against girls constitutes a privileged form of violence determined by gender because, generally, it is enacted by an older, more experienced man, who has a high degree of confidence in relation to the victim. In the case of intrafamilial violence, gender relations are permeated by a context of relations of domination with frequent naturalization of subordination of women and girls. Thus, similar to what occurs with violence against women, the family environment is the privileged *locus* of violence against children⁽¹⁶⁾.

In this sample, it was not possible to identify a rigid pattern of repetition or evolution of the cases of violence. However, it is possible to perceive some regularity in the occurrences, such as the repetition of the same type of violence in nearly half of the cases and, in cases in which the last occurrence was more severe (especially sexual and physical abuse), there were previous instances of negligence or other less severe forms. This indicates a path that violence tends to follow. This trajectory can begin with mild aggression, such as in some cases of negligence, and evolve into much more serious situations. Therefore, the interventions of the State, educational institutions, health systems, society and of the family in defense of the children become more urgent. On the other hand, it was verified that the occurrence of one report of serious violence was insufficient to modify the context in which the child is inserted, whereas severe cases had other types of violence notified later, such as the recurrence of sexual violence or the occurrence of negligence, after previous notifications of physical and sexual violence.

The notifying agencies play a fundamental role in regard to this theme. The school, as a space of observation and direct contact with children, represents an important ally in the identification and referral of cases of violence. The lack of insertion of the child in the school world may represent a vulnerability for her, whereas in other spaces such as public health units, visits are sporadic and occurrences can escape the perception of professionals.

In the analysis of violence against children, this study revealed the family space as a privileged *locus* of

aggression involving children, a characteristic similar to the violence committed against women. In this sense, considering that the nuclear family is permeated by unequal power relations, one can consider it a determinant of intrafamilial violence, in that when one talks about violence against children, he is talking about a phenomenon determined by unequal relations of generation imbued by the construction of gender that conforms standards of femininity and masculinity related to submission and domination, since childhood.

In both categories, a founding element of biological order, gender and age is frequently deployed to justify and naturalize, ideologically, power and domination; and they have in common natural attributes with social significance, organized by privileges and inequalities. Throughout time and in many different cultures, women from the time that they are young girls are educated to respond to the needs of men and not to their own; the belief still prevails that men have strong sexual needs which they cannot control, and that should be satisfied in their entirety by women.

The present study revealed the determination of gender in the occurrence of sexual violence, since the girls were the most common victims of this type of aggression, and sexual violence is present in the lives of many of them. Paradoxically, most of the violent acts are committed by people who should be involved in the care of the child. The sexual aggressors, generally, are male. This finding confirms other studies and the reports below illustrate this fact.

"Father beat his penis in the child's face, since she was 3 years old and takes a bath with her. Dad threatens to kill the mother to the child, tells how it will be done." (Abused: girl; offender: father)

"The father was lying down and the daughter made intimate caresses. The father asked why it happened, and the child informed him that it was at the direction of the neighbor of 13 years."

The reports reveal the severity of the problems to which children are exposed, and for which they do not have the capacity or the conditions for coping, due to their age.

The analysis of the evolution of cases revealed the sexual abuse practiced against girls, in some cases by adult family members, in some cases by their brothers, revealing the determination of gender in the dynamics of child abuse, even in a relationship of intragenerational power, in that male children reproduce male domination through the abuse of another child of the female gender. Furthermore, the results indicated that violence, when committed against a child rarely occurs alone, appearing superimposed on other problems such as family violence, family dysfunction, structural violence and drug addiction.

In terms of the responsibility of women for housework, from an early age, in intrafamilial environments, girls are exposed to situations that reiterate the historic role of women in society, of caregiver of the home.

The construction of gender identity in the family starts in infancy. Therefore, the habits and the duties of women are being passed down and end up being introjected almost as an obligation. One of the reports dealt with this reality and demonstrated psychological abuse perpetrated by the father of the girl:

"Child cries and says she is fed up with staying at home with her father. She says her father beats her a lot and she has to work all the time at home, and if she does not do it the way the father orders, he hits her."

Studies reveal that in Brazil there are approximately 502,000 children and adolescents involved in domestic work, 93% of whom are female. Moreover, 83% of the mothers of these children engage in some paid domestic work, which reveals the generational and gender circularity inherent in this work. As a direct consequence, 73% of these children are in school irregularly. The results of this reality is often permeated by situations of exploitation and violence, contradicting the fundamental rights guaranteed in the Statute of the Child and of the Adolescent (ECA).⁽¹⁶⁾

Another important element is the strong association between drug use and the occurrence of aggression against children. In the vast majority of the reported cases, the assaults become repetitious and are permeated by problems of drug addiction:

"Minor lives with his mother and stepfather, both are users of drugs and alcoholic beverages, using in front of the child. Stepfather beats his mother; mother and child were also attacked with punches and kicks."

The association between the abuse of psychoactive substances was evident in the results; however, the causal relationship between the two phenomena is still controversial. In the violent relationships related to the use of alcohol and other drugs, oppression always falls on those who have the least power: women and children. Therefore, to assume the abusive use of psychoactive substances is the cause of a complex and social phenomenon such as violence would fall into the same single cause positivist reductionism that was interpreted for a long time as the determination of health – illness. Drug use, as well as violence, are complex social phenomena that have an important relationship found in the majority of studies about the theme, however, we assume a complex association whose determination involves other social, psychological and biological aspects⁽¹⁷⁾.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the phenomenon of recidivism of child abuse enabled us to understand that unequal power relations are found in the genesis of violence when perpetrated in the context of family relationships. The meanings attached to the social image of the feminine is rooted in these relationships, determining subservience

and domination also in the lives of children, whose identification as boys or girls, even in intrauterine life, can put them in a subordinate social position which, together with the subordination of their generation, makes the phenomenon even more important.

Regarding recidivism, the results pointed to the necessity for effective actions beginning with the first occurrence, in order to minimize the damage caused to children by the repetition of aggression. Hence, there is urgency for educational, preventive and protective measures for the children and families who live in situations of violence. The cyclical and repetitive character

of violence demonstrates that there are insufficient interventions focused on each occurrence, because it is a context of violence that permeates the relationships between family members.

These relationships involve a trauma, whose complexity and circularity are evidenced in the lives of women and children represented in the findings of this study. Beginning in early infancy and with the continuation of life, one can say that child abuse constitutes a phenomenon whose consequences walk a two-way street: they can determine and be determined by other forms of violence, generating destructive processes for human life and for society.

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