

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE – REASONS WHY BATTERED VICTIMS STAY WITH THE AGGRESSOR

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Abstract: *Domestic violence is a social problem that deeply affects all countries in the world. Even though most societies are against it, and even more so, condemn any act of violence against women, the reality is often hidden or simply overlooked. This type of abuse causes serious traumatic consequences for both women and children, whether they are directly involved or not. This phenomenon is both a social and a health problem. The research focused on identifying the factors that influence women that are victims of domestic violence to remain with their aggressor. The research instrument is the interview, applied to 10 subjects, female victims of domestic violence. The results confirmed the hypotheses established at the beginning of the paper: family influence, financial dependence, low level of education and children are the main factors that influence victims to remain in an abusive relationship.*

Key words: *domestic violence, victim, aggressor, abuse, children.*

1. Introduction

Violence against women has become the most widespread way in which human rights are violated. According to Law no. 174/2018 regarding the amendment and completion of Law no. 217/2003, domestic violence is any harmful act of a physical, mental, or emotional nature, by which a family member exercises intentional violent behavior against another family member. The abuser aims to establish power and control over another person. Ana Muntean (2001) quotes Stark and Flitcraft (1996) and mentions that physical or sexual violence is often accompanied by intimidation, verbal abuse, isolation, control (the telephone or financial resources). The man becomes aggressive when the victim dissatisfies him and in most cases these grievances come from trivial reasons.

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Globally, the World Health Organization (March 2021) indicates that approximately 1 in 3 (30%) of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from their partner or non-partner.

During the relationship, the abuser teaches his victim that he is the one who dominates, who has full control, she is powerless, and must follow rules strictly and without error. Women who admit that they are abused but also those who do not, for various reasons, are afraid of consequences, if they try to leave the relationship with the aggressive partner (Neal, 2019). Walker (2000) explains that due to previous experiences, due to failures, helplessness, lack of control, the victim adopts a passive position to everything that happens around her. Thus, considering that mass – media has an important role in the process of perceiving the image of certain people (Coman, 2010), in the context of domestic violence, the way women react when they are being abused might be influenced by the image they have about the situation or the person and by the messages they have previously been exposed to. In this regard, the concept of image can be defined as a “mental construct which is formed by perceiving the attributes that characterize a certain object, event or person” (Coman, 2004, p.129).

Furthermore, considering the factors which may influence the victim’s attitude, one of them can also refer to their life satisfaction. In this regard, given that the quality of relationships seems to be the element which can mostly influence one’s level of happiness (Coman, 2018), it is possible that women who are not satisfied with their life are more prone to adopting a passive position when they are being victims of domestic violence.

Hilary Abrahams (2010) states that starting from childhood, victims do not recognize the abusers as the culprits, and even more, they blame themselves and find excuses for the parents that abuse them. This fact is repeated in adulthood with partners. The return of the victim to the aggressor is a repetitive scenario because of a childhood marked by suffering and aggression. The fears that the victim generally faces are the lack of a stable home, worries about raising the child / children alone, poor financial situation, fear of loneliness and many other reasons that contribute to returning to the aggressor in a relatively short time after leaving. These factors also prevent the victim from ever taking this step.

Domestic violence affects children’s education, as well as having long-term effects and consequences. Children can be indirect victims of violence occurring in their home, by seeing it taking place. Teachers have an essential role in identifying and responding to domestic violence (Lloyd, 2018). A violent climate, among other factors, can lead to school dropout. (Trancă & Runcan, 2013)

According to Noughani and Mohtashami (2011), “women need to be empowered through education”. Rapp et al. (2021) emphasize that improving education is one of the most important interventions to reduce domestic violence. Their study found that couples with low education (primary education level or less) were the most adverse groups in terms of domestic violence. Highly educated couples, with the same level (secondary educational level or higher) were less likely to experience domestic violence. Also, wives with higher education than their husbands were less likely to be victims of domestic violence.

2. Materials and Methods

The purpose of this research was to identify the factors that influence the victims of domestic violence to not leave the aggressor.

The first objective involves identifying the causes that determine the victim to stay with the aggressor. The second objective is to analyze the victim's status and awareness of the situation. The third objective evaluates the victim's projections related to the aggressor's potential for change.

The elaboration of research hypotheses was correlated with each objective. The first two hypotheses are related to the first objective: [1] The victim stays with the aggressor because she is financially dependent [2]. Because of the violent scenes the victim was subjected to as a child/was a direct victim, this behavior now seems normal. The following three hypotheses are related to the second objective: [3] Sometimes the victim does not recognize the forms of abuse, as a result she is not aware of the seriousness of the situation [4]. Over time, violent scenes become a habit for the victim. [5] It is not only the abused person who suffers, but also the children. The last hypothesis is correlated with the last objective [6]. The victim hopes for a continuous change, which determines her to stay with the aggressor.

The sample consists of 10 women, between the ages of 25 and 36, victims of domestic violence, from the western part of the country, both in rural and urban areas.

Instrument: The interview guide had six topics referring to: [1] "The family's influence on the decision to remain in an abusive situation", [2] "Education and professional status", [3] "Victim status", [4] "Awareness", [5] "Children", [6] "Projections of the victim related to the potential to change the aggressor's behavior".

Procedure and data analysis: Participation was voluntary, and the subjects were assured from the beginning of data confidentiality. After the initial contact with the subjects, we set the date and place (as convenient as possible) to conduct the interviews. The interviews were conducted in an informal environment after which they were transcribed and analyzed according to the six topics mentioned earlier. Three interviews were conducted face to face in an informal environment while the others were conducted by telephone due to the crisis generated by the Covid-19 virus. The subjects were informed about recording the interviews. To keep the subjects anonymous, their names were replaced with a pseudonym, used consistently for each participant. Data was collected in June 2020.

Study limitations:

- The first limit of the study is characterized by the delicate situation in which the subjects find themselves, which makes it possible that they had certain reservations.
- The results cannot be generalized to the entire population of women that are victims of domestic violence because the number of respondents is small. Due to the small sample, the results cannot be generalized to a larger part of the population.

3. Results

The family's influence on the decision to remain in an abusive situation

Whether they are directly advised to stay with the violent partner, or whether the subjects have taken this behavior as an example from the family of origin, family influence is a factor that can contribute to the victim's decision to stay in the relationship.

Eight out of ten subjects confessed that violence existed within the family of origin, while the other two said the opposite *"No. My parents got along very well and still get along. I can say that harmony and compassion predominate in their relationship"* (M.R.). Although the parents were an example, the reality in which the victim lives is completely different.

Seven of the eight subjects participated directly in the scenes between the two parents. *"When he beat my mother, we had to be present to see what happens when we are disobedient"* (C.T.). The father adopted this "method" of education for both the mother and children, so that they would be obedient. Another subject (R.A.) confessed that *"Our father beat us with a whip. He is now dead, I don't visit his grave because it's not worth it"*.

None of the respondents were directly advised to stay with the abuser, but they were not encouraged either.

The violence to which the victims were subjected to in childhood tragically imprints both their life as a child and their life as an adult, as violence has become a learned behavior that's accepted. The fact that they did not have a positive example in childhood but an abusive father, the fact that they were victims, in adulthood, the respondents are still victims.

Education and professional status

Denomination of the table

Table 1

Respondents	Educational level	Professional status
C.T.	2 grades	housewife
K.M.	8grades	unqualified worker at a factory
M.O.	10 grades	homeworker (works in the greenhouse)
M.R.	12 grades + baccalaureate	housewife
O.A.	12 grades	hotel housekeeper
P.A.	11 grades	hotel housekeeper
P.M.	10 grades	baker
R.A.	3 grades	housewife
Z.C	12 grades	housewife
Z.M.	10 grades	unqualified worker

As it can be seen from the Table, the respondents generally have a low educational level, that does not offer many possibilities on the labour market. No respondent received any form of higher education.

One of the respondents confessed that she would have wanted to finish school because she enjoyed learning but did not have this possibility: *"I really liked school, but because we were so many brothers and sisters and we were poor, my parents didn't have*

the opportunity to send me to school, so I only finished 10 grades” (P.M.). Another subject said that she failed to complete primary school because she had the responsibility of caring for the other younger siblings, even though she was quite young. *“I only have two grades; I didn't finish the third one because I had to take care of my younger brothers”* (C.T.). Even if the subjects were motivated and wanted to learn, this was not possible due to the circumstances.

In two other cases, the respondents chose marriage over learning. *“I finished 10 grades because at 18 I chose to marry, not my husband, but the other, my ex-husband”* (Z.M.). At the same time, they saw the marriage as a way to escape from the tense situation in the family of origin, but unfortunately, they continued to be victims (seven out of ten subjects were physically abused by their parents).

Given their level of education, professional opportunities are not very promising either. Four out of ten respondents do not have a job, and three of them have never worked legally. Six of the ten subjects stated that they have low-paid but stable jobs, of which five of the six work legally.

C.T., one of the subjects motivated the factors that prevented her from finishing school, which influenced her continued dependence on other people *“I only have two grades, because I had to take care of my younger brothers. I have to take care of the children now and can't work”*. This continued dependence contributes to the victim status.

Given the level of education, but also the professional status, no subject has had the opportunity to develop, both intellectually, (which is visible both in language and mentality), and in terms of a career. These victims are dependent on their partners from a financial point of view, they did not have the opportunity to continue their studies and have a degree and this is due to the family that did not support them, except for one respondent who had the opportunity, but chose to marry.

Victim status

Regarding the victim status (the image the victim has regarding herself and her relationship with the partner), when asked [How would you describe your marriage?], four out of ten respondents described it as a good one, a satisfactory relationship, although the reality proves otherwise. *“Children are happy every day, we never get bored. The most beautiful thing in a house is to have many children [...]”* (P.A.). This respondent preferred to highlight the joy that children offer and to omit the description of the relationship itself. In opposition to those who described it as a good one, there are those who expressed themselves directly, categorizing it as problematic: *“I don't like to admit it, I don't like to show it, but it's awful. The way I live, I would not want it for my greatest enemy”* (M.R.). The rest of the subjects, made a transition from the description of a good relationship, highlighting the pluses of marriage, and then to problems and conflicts.

Of the ten subjects, two began with a short description of the past, making a comparison between what was and what they are living now. *“My relationship is... it was beautiful in the beginning, my husband was very nice to me, he always gave me presents, he took care of me, I spent a lot of time with him, but over time he changed a*

lot' (Z.C.). The fact that they described the relationship from the beginning shows that they were left with the hope of change, the desire for things to be as before. They relive the joy from the beginning of the relationship and want to return to it.

The next question, after each subject described their marriage, focused on the description of the husband. Four of the ten subjects described their partner in a pleasant way: *"Working in constructions is not an easy job. Like me, he did not grow up rich, he also has many brothers [...]"* (C.T.). The subjects chose to highlight the qualities. Three others highlighted the negative parts. *"Once it was raining outside and he dragged me through the mud, to cut my neck. I was lucky, my neighbour shouted at him from his yard to leave me alone and he let me go"* (Z.M.). Certainly, the subject was deeply marked by this scene, and after such an episode the fear became even stronger. The last three subjects chose to highlight both the positives and the negatives: *"He's a cold man, but he provides"* (M.O.). In this way she motivated what bothers her about her husband, and on the other hand she described how she justifies his actions.

Regarding the start of violence, only four respondents found out about the abusive side of their partner before marriage. *"It started immediately after the wedding. But unlike my first husband, he is much better. The other one, in addition to beating me, did not even let me talk to my family, he also threatened to kill my mother, he locked me in the attic once, he kept me there for two days. My current husband was my escape and that's why I often tolerate the beatings"* (Z.M.). The subject makes a comparison and thus finds a much better solution than the previous one. But the reality is that she exchanged a bigger abuser for a smaller one. The other six confessed that they discovered the violent tendency of their partner only after their relationship was advanced.

Regarding the visibility of conflicts between partners, in six cases both the victim's parents and the abuser's parents know about the abusive scenes and the accumulated tension. The example of the parents contributes to the victim's decision to stay with the partner.

The abuse continues also because neither the victim's parents nor the abuser's parents intervene and thus the victim lives with the feeling that there is no support, and there is nowhere else to go. In two other cases, neither of the extended families knows what is happening. *"We do not keep in touch with his parents. What my parents say does not matter and my grandmother does not know anything, she's old and I don't want to upset her"* (P.A.). Subjects live with the feeling that what happens must be confidential.

And in the last two cases, only the abuser's parents are informed. Of these two tense situations, only in one case does the abuser's father intervene to resolve the conflicts. *"My father-in-law still tries to show my husband it's not alright to hit a woman, but from what I heard he was sometimes violent with my mother-in-law in his youth"* (P.M.).

To the question [How much do these violent and repetitive scenes affect you?], all subjects had similar answers. Each subject is affected in a destructive way. *"It's hard not to have peace in the house, to go to work with worries at home, it's hard. It's like you have no energy"* (Z.M.).

The difference is that only half of the subjects thought of children when they gave this answer. *"I'm very upset at that moment, I'm still crying, not in front of him, so that the*

girls don't see me, they don't have to know that I'm upset" (K.M.). Subjects should be aware that they are not the only ones affected, but also the children.

Although the victims realize their difficult and dangerous situation, not only for them but also for the children, they do not have the strength and ability to get out of the relationship. They are afraid, they consider themselves powerless, they feel that they have nowhere to turn.

Awareness

Regarding victim awareness (their perception of domestic violence, how they feel), eight out of ten subjects gave an eloquent answer to the question [How do you define domestic violence?], while two subjects avoided answering. Out of the eight, only two answered from their own point of view, giving as an example their own person: *"My life? Or how to say? The way I've lived so far maybe. The people around me were very violent"* [Do you mean parents here?] – *"Parents, husband, my whole family"* (Z.C.). The other six preferred to answer in general. *"Domestic violence means any insult, yelling, hitting, I think that domestic violence involves even banning certain habits"* (M.R.).

Regarding the acts of violence, only two subjects out of ten talked about how their children are affected. *"I told him even if he drank, not to come home to make a scandal, to beat me, because we have 3 girls and I don't want them to be scared"* (K.M.). Even if only two subjects included children in the answer they gave, all subjects have children (between 1 and 6 children). Subjects do not seem to realize that domestic violence affects their children indirectly, even if they are not direct victims, because they live in an unfavourable environment.

It is difficult for women to accept that they are abused and humiliated, to talk about the ordeal they go through every day because of shame, fear or both.

Children

Eight out of ten subjects strongly disagree that a child should witness or be a victim of violence. Instead, one of them argued that in some cases it is normal to resort to such methods in order to discipline the child *"No, but sometimes you have no other way, especially when they are small and many..."* (P.A.). Another subject agrees with a parent hitting his child when the child does not behave. However, in only three cases the children were subjected to emotional but not physical violence. *"The little boy not too much, but he beats the older boy, often and hard"* (M.R.).

What is worrying is the fact that three of the subjects chose to blame the children for their partner's violent actions. *"He beat the oldest child when he was 5 years old. The child broke a tool from work, and it wasn't his"* (C.T.). The subjects tend to agree with the abuser and prefer to say the real culprit had reasons for his violent behavior.

In addition to the physical abuse to which the children were subjected, they also suffered from an emotional point of view *"The oldest girl was also tortured by him. I felt the most pity for her, she was small, and she didn't understand why Daddy does not love us anymore"* (M.O.). In six of the ten cases the children witnessed the abusive scenes between the two parents before being victims themselves.

Projections of the victim related to the potential to change the aggressor's behavior

Five out of ten subjects reported noticing various changes in their partner's attitude. *"Sometimes I notice some changes, but sometimes it's the same behavior"* (O.A.). Instead, the other five subjects claimed that they did not notice any change, and the aggressor's attitude remained the same. The changes that the subjects have noticed can be facade because the abuser is afraid of being abandoned and thus uses this method in order to convince the victim that things will change for the better.

Regarding the aggressor's desire to change and the promises made to the victim, nine of the ten subjects confessed that they felt this initiative. *"Yes, he wants to change, he also said that he doesn't want to drink anymore. And if he gives up drinking, we'll do very well"* (K.M.).

To the question [Do you think there is an explanation for your partner's violent behavior?] 50% of ten subjects chose to indirectly defend their partner on the grounds that stress, work and daily worries are the factors that generally contribute to the onset and maintaining of his aggressive attitude. *"He has a lot of work, he is a bricklayer, he works during the day and it is harder with the money, sometimes he does not get paid"* (R.A.). Two others said that the partner's parents contributed to the formation of the abusive behavior, by taking the family of origin as an example. *"I think he is still affected by his parents and because of the environment in which he lived and how he was educated"* (O.A.). Other reasons include alcohol, gambling or infidelity. *"And gambling is to blame, when he loses, he gets angry"* (Z.M.).

Eight out of ten subjects tried to do something about the situation, while two chose to let things sort themselves, already accustomed to the current situation or aware that there is nothing more to be done. *"I never had the courage to go that far."* (Why?) – *"Because I would have returned to him and rather than aggravate things, I preferred to let the situation calm down on its own"* (M.R.).

This is another case, especially in which the victim wants a separation, but hesitates, due to financial reasons, lack of support and fear. *"I want to. But I can't. He threatens me, especially regarding the girls. And I am afraid I'm going to lose them. The house is in his name, at my mother's house I have no possibilities to raise the children. I don't have a job and I am afraid I will lose the children"* (M.O.).

Also, in eight out of ten cases, subjects do not want to separate from their abusers. Either they will not be able to manage financially on their own, they are afraid, or they think that it is best for a child to grow up with both parents regardless of the circumstances. *"I have two children, who will give me money to raise them?"* (R.A.).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Being financially dependent is an important factor for which the respondents from this study do not leave the abusive relationship, thus confirming our first hypothesis. The low educational level of the victims is the reason they cannot have well-paid jobs and manage without the help of the abuser.

Although none of the respondents were directly advised to continue the relationship,

neither victim was encouraged to leave the abusive partner. The violence to which the victims were subjected in childhood continues to influence their adult life, as the abusive behavior and its acceptance have become a habit, thus confirming the second and fourth hypotheses.

It is difficult for a woman who is abused by her partner, but especially who has been abused since childhood, to get out of the situation. Roberts and Van Wormer (2009) state that all repetitive abuse and violent scenes become a habit for the victim.

The respondents seem to recognize the forms of abuse, knowing at least that physical abuse is a type of domestic violence, but they do not have the strength to get out of the relationship. The third hypothesis is not confirmed, as the respondents are aware of their status and the risks it implies, but it is still difficult for women to fully accept that they are abused and humiliated.

Given the fact that children are direct victims of violence, the fifth hypothesis is also confirmed. Regarding the hopes for change, the victims find various excuses for the violent behavior of their partners and continue to hope for better days, when the aggressor might change his habits, thus confirming the last hypothesis. The subjects do not want to end the relationship with the aggressors for financial reasons, due to the lack of support from those close to them, because they believe that a child should grow up with both parents or wait for things to change. Walker (2000) also says that victims of domestic violence do not leave their aggressor because they have learned to accept all abuses. Unfortunately, domestic violence has become a learned phenomenon.

According to the data of this study, no family support, financial dependence, not wanting to raise children alone and a hope for change contribute greatly to the victim's decision to remain in the relationship.

To get out of the situation, victims of domestic violence should be aware of the danger they live in and have the courage to recognize their position, but more importantly to ask for help.

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