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Demographic or socio-demographic aspects of women in domestic violence situations: a descriptive study

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To identify demographic and socioeconomic aspects of women in marital violence. **Method:** This is a descriptive and quantitative study, linked to an action research project under funding from the *Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado da Bahia* (Research Support Foundation of the Bahia State). A documentary research was carried out from the information contained in 212 cases registered in 2014 under the jurisprudence of the 1st Court of Domestic and Family Violence against Women in Salvador. Data analysis was performed through the distribution of frequencies. **Result:** the investigation of cases registered in 2014 revealed that the denunciation of domestic violence is performed mostly by women aged between 25 and 49 years old, black, single mothers, who have completed at least high school and are earning up to two minimum wages. **Discussion:** In this profile of women, already desirous of putting an end to violence, there must be an action plan so that they will not give up fighting for a life free of violence.

Descriptors: Socioeconomic Factors; Violence Against Women; Public Health.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women, especially the violent acts that occur in the marital relationship, is a serious public health problem. International studies show that seven in ten women will be beaten, raped, abused or maimed at least once during their lifetime⁽¹⁾.

Regardless of the forms of expression, experiencing violence sickens women: studies indicate association with gastrointestinal and circulatory problems, muscular aches and strains, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy and miscarriage⁽²⁾. In addition to these physical manifestations, several factors show the psychological impairment. Among them are: anxiety, isolation from society, fear, low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts⁽²⁾.

Despite the implications for physical and mental health, it is notoriously difficult to identify this disease in the various areas of health, especially in the context of Primary Health Care (PHC), to which women are admitted with common clinical complaints, such as headaches and epigastric pain and which rarely lead health professionals to relate them to violence. There is corroboration by scholars⁽²⁾ who believe that the difficulty in recognizing this disease contributes to the invisibility of the phenomenon in the health services, especially when there is no link to physical aggression.

This invisibility is grounded in gender inequality, historically constructed and reproduced, allowing us to understand the secrecy that permeates violence against women and the difficult identification of it by health professionals. Thus, there is a need for a professional preparation during academic training and/or in service for the recognition of domestic violence as an aggravation that is associated with the health problems manifested in women. In this

sense, the professionals who make up the Family Health Strategy (FHS), especially in nursing, for integrating the reference teams and occupying management positions in the units, are in a strategic position to identify potential victims and to organize health services within institutions to support victims, so as to constitute a network of intervention, both in prevention and in helping with existing damage⁽²⁾. The relevance of nursing professionals is supported by a study conducted in Jordan with 125 nurses, which advocates the creation of strategies (e.g., education and appropriate training for such professionals) as a way to increase the health services⁽³⁾ and the screening of women victims of violence.

Given the importance of a sensitive look at the suspicion and the investigation of the experience of violence as an aggravation to women's health, it is considered that knowledge in terms of the most common characteristics presented by women with a history of violence perpetrated against them will, theoretically, provide support to the process of professional training. In this sense, the question is: how are the women in domestic violence situations characterized?

The **study object** was: women in domestic violence situations. And the **general aim** was: to identify the demographic and socioeconomic aspects of women affected by marital violence.

METHOD

This is a documentary and descriptive research⁽⁴⁾ using a quantitative approach, linked to the action research entitled "Re-education of men and women involved in criminal process: coping strategy of domestic violence" under research funding from the *Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado da Bahia* (FAPESB) (Research Support Foundation of the Bahia State).

The study was conducted from the consultation about conjugal violence cases recorded from January to December 2014, under the jurisprudence of the 1st Court of Domestic and Family Violence against Women in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. In general, complaints related to violence against women are held in the police stations which specialize in assistance to women and, upon completion of the investigation, the inquiry is forwarded to the judiciary. Initially, the judge of the Court Specialized in Domestic Violence analyzes the investigation and then that, is assessed by the public prosecutor (responsible for offering the formal complaint against the accused).

Despite the lower percentage, the communication of the crime may be performed in ordinary police stations or directly to the Public Ministry, which can also provide the complainant with the denunciation without opening an investigation in case the communicant presents a minimum of evidence to demonstrate the occurrence of a criminal act. As for cases involving minors, it should be noted that communication can be made to the child and adolescent protection police stations and the process will then be passed to the Court of Domestic and Family Violence.

In 2014, there were 252 cases. Among them, 212 were related to domestic violence. The others were related to other forms of violence involving gender issues within the family. For data collection, a structured instrument based on an institutional form that contains data relating to women and their history of violence perpetrated on them has been prepared. This document, which is part of the process, was completed during the interview by a psychologist and/or social worker, who are employees of the service, for psychosocial support. The instrument prepared for data collection included variables related to demographics (age, and color), socioeconomic

(marital status, number of children, education, remunerated activity and income).

For data collection, eleven previously reported visits to the judge, the legal representative of the 1st Court of Domestic and Family Violence against Women, were collected. This collection took place on the morning shift, and was conducted by a master student, with the aid of graduation students and other post-graduation students who integrate the study group, all of whom are properly trained.

Data processing was carried out through the distribution of frequencies, enabling the characterization of women experiencing conjugal violence. Quantitative data were stored in Excel spreadsheets and analyzed in STATA version 11.0 (Stata Corp, College Station, TX, USA).

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Nursing of the Federal University of Bahia, under protocol No. 877,905. The ethical aspects recommended by Resolution No. 466/12 of the National Health Council were respected, considering the principles of bioethics: autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice.

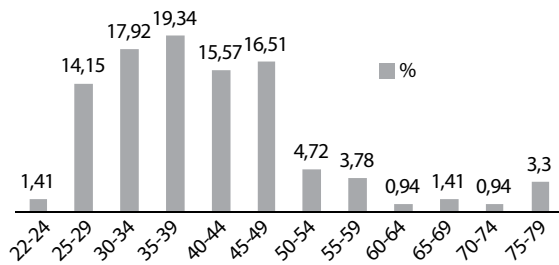
RESULTS

From the analysis of 212 conjugal violence cases registered in 2014 at the 1st Court of Domestic and Family Violence against Women, it was possible to identify demographic and socioeconomic aspects of the women who experienced this phenomenon.

Demographic aspects

It was observed that the age of the women who make up the study sample ranged from 22 to 79 years, with a predominance of the group aged 25 to 49 years, equivalent to 84.9% (Graph 1).

Graph 1 - Proportional distribution of women (n=212) according to age. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, 2014.



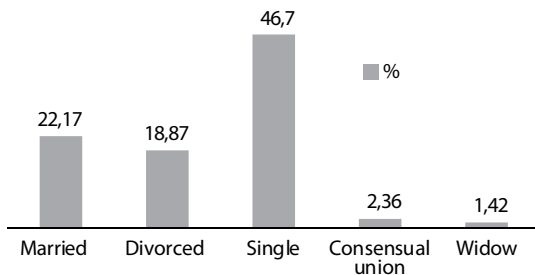
Source: Information of the study participants collected from the institutional form of the 1st Court of Domestic and Family Violence against Women.

Regarding the *skin color* variable, most women are self-declared brown (43.3%), followed by black (32.55%), which, together, represent the black race (75.85%) as defined by the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE) (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics). The percentage of white women was 13.68% and, without information, 10.38%.

Socioeconomic aspects

Regarding *marital status*, most women declared themselves single, representing 46.7% of the group analyzed (Graph 2).

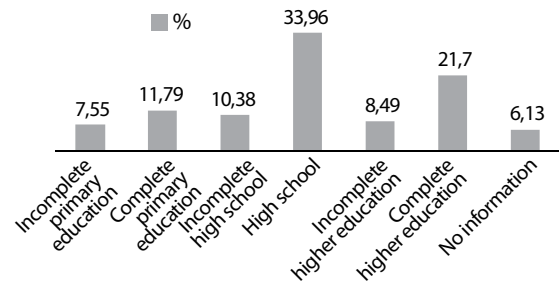
Graph 2 - Proportional distribution of women (n=212), according marital status. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, 2014.



Source: Information of the study participants collected from the institutional form of the 1st Court of Domestic and Family Violence against Women.

Considering the number of children, the predominant family was composed of only one child (43.87%), followed by the families with two children (26.42%), those with no children (13.68%), those with three children (12.74%) and, finally, the ones with four or more children (3.31%). Regarding education, there was a prevalence of high school, followed by higher education (Graph 3).

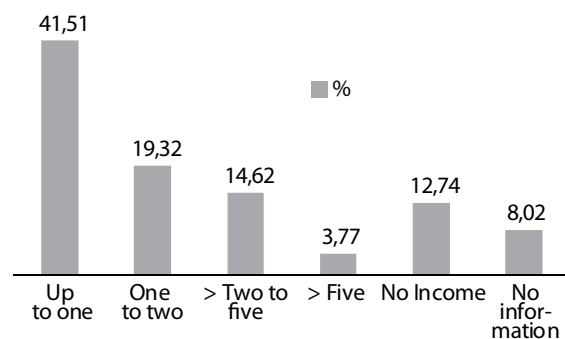
Graph 3 - Proportional distribution of women (n=212) according to schooling. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, 2014.



Source: Information of the study participants collected from the institutional form of the 1st Court of Domestic and Family Violence against Women.

Most women experiencing violence in conjugality worked (79.23%). As regards the monthly income of these women, salaries varied from one to more than five minimum wages, especially those with an income up to one salary (Graph 4).

Graph 4 - Proportional distribution of women (n=212) according to income in wages. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, 2014.



Source: Information of the study participants collected from the institutional form of the 1st Court of Domestic and Family Violence against Women.

DISCUSSION

From the analysis of 212 cases related to domestic violence recorded in 2014, one can infer that women in the age group 25 to 49 years are the most active users of the legal and police institutions directed at women in conjugal violence. This is the age group similar to that identified in a survey conducted in Iraq, which, when analyzing 800 records of women treated in public hospitals in the city of Erbil, revealed that the majority (67.1%) of the women were aged 25 to 44 years⁽⁵⁾.

However, this does not mean that this is the age group where women suffer more violence. Perhaps this is the period of life in which, after trying to contain the aggression, they decide to terminate or to begin the process of perceiving themselves in situations of violence. The fact that the study did not point up women between 18 and 21 years old who reported, as well as the low percentage of women aged between 22 and 24, may be related to this non-perception that they are experiencing violence. The difficulty women have in recognizing themselves in the context of violence was also identified in other studies⁽⁶⁾. This ends up favoring the under-reporting of violence. Therefore, it is possible to perceive the need for strategies to enable women to perceive themselves as being in violent situations, and to realize the problem of the invisibility of this phenomenon that permeates marital relations. Upon acknowledgement of the violent situation, the complaint becomes a possibility.

It is worth noting that, although the act of reporting suggests female understanding in terms of the crime context that permeates the marital relationship, some women seek legal and law enforcement agencies in order to stop such violence with the power of law.

Research on the stigma of violence suffered by women in relationships with their intimate

partners conducted in the Northeast of Brazil, shows that they expect the police to scold or advise their companions in order to change their behavior and also to annul the violence in the marital relationship⁽⁷⁾. Moreover, a study conducted in southern Brazil also confirms that, by denouncing their attackers, women do not wish to incriminate them or get divorced; rather, they want to prevent the recurrence of violence for their own protection⁽⁸⁾.

Therefore, it is clear that, by reporting, the main purpose of women is a conjugal life free of violence, and not necessarily to break the link with the partner. Not seeing separation as a possibility to break the cycle of violence suggests the influence of the hegemonic patriarchal model that permeates the socially shared vision of the nuclear family, the indissoluble marriage, of the stigma of divorced women and of the absence of the father figure. These and other social conceptions impose on women the role of ensuring the family unit. So they continue with their spouses.

The strength of the patriarchal culture allows us to understand why women stay in a relationship anchored in disrespect and violence as well as the perpetuation of female behavior in conforming to the situation⁽⁹⁾. Studies indicate that, although they make the complaint, these women decide to resume the marital relationship because of their children or because of the belief in the transformation of their companions^(8,9). The hope that the partners will change was also shown in a study conducted in the state of Ceará, Brazil⁽⁷⁾. Another reason to save the marriage relates to the fear of being alone without their husbands⁽⁹⁾. These elements, anchored on the uneven construction between the genders, contribute to the continuation of women in a cycle of violence.

With the women's movement, questions arise as to the roles and attributes considered

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inherent in each sex. Violence against women is rooted in the acceptance of inequality between the sexes, responsible for the social vision of inferiority and women's submission and subservience in relation to men. The socially shared belief in male superiority over women, historically constructed by the patriarchal society, demonstrates the need for further discussion of the gender perspective⁽¹⁰⁾. Understanding the social construction process of what it means to be a man and what it is to be a woman may be the first step for women to see themselves in a situation of violence and believe in the possibility of a life free of violence.

Despite the importance of discussions on gender categorization for the social visibility of the problem of violence against women, including discussions practiced by the women themselves, we must point out that there was a strengthening only in the 1970s. This leads us to infer that women born before that decade, a priori, would have less chance of recognizing themselves in the situation of domestic violence and less chance of creating ways to get out of this situation. This scenario allows us to understand the sharp reduction in the percentage of denunciation of women aged over 50 years, born when the patriarchal model was not questioned. However, it must be considered that, even in old age, women seek a life free of violence, as evidenced by the 14 elderly applicants of the processes studied.

Regardless of age, most of the women involved in legal proceedings in the 1st Court of Domestic and Family Violence against Women in Salvador are self-declared black. Considering Salvador, a town predominantly inhabited by black people, with a female population represented by 78% of the total of 1,426,759 women⁽¹¹⁾, one cannot conclude, just by this study, that black women are the most vulnerable to the experience of conjugal violence. However,

a study conducted in southern Brazil, in Porto Alegre, where the population is predominantly white, corroborates a higher percentage of black women who started legal proceedings in court due to violence in the marital relationship⁽¹²⁾. By portraying the living conditions of the female black population in Brazil, the Dossier "Black Women" alerts us to the interface between vulnerability to violence and racial and gender inequalities⁽¹³⁾.

Regarding marital status, it is noteworthy that single women are the ones who mostly denounce. A study performed on 38,009 women attending the *Delegacias Especializadas de Atendimento à Mulher* (DEAMs) (Specialized Police Stations for Assistance to Women) of the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, revealed a prevalence of 50.3% of single women⁽⁶⁾. This percentage is in line with the data found in this study, which showed that approximately 50% of women are single, which is almost double the percentage of women living in stable relationships, including married women. These, in turn, account for less than a quarter of the complaints.

It is difficult for women in stable relationships to denounce their companions as they have an established relationship with the social value of having a husband and a stable marriage, considered symbols of true riches⁽¹⁴⁾. When not meeting this standard imposed by society, women are judged, especially for failing to maintain the nuclear family, the only form of family composition for centuries. There are still remnants of the family model that are based on the man as head of the house; the woman, submissive to him and the children obedient to parents⁽¹⁵⁾.

Another situation that may be associated with a lower percentage of complaints by married women compared to single women refers to economic dependency. A survey conducted

by the analysis of 886 records of women seen at an inn that temporarily houses abused women and women in need of protection in the capital of Paraná, Brazil, confirms that the married ones or those in stable relationships are in the context of greater financial dependence and points out that this is one of the factors that hinders the termination of their relationship with their intimate partners⁽¹⁶⁾. Economic dependence, coupled with the lack of shelter for themselves and their children, was also noted in a study which defines three categories representing the grounds related to the permanence of women in the marital relationship. The “helplessness” is the economic dependence. The category “sentimental” includes the love for their spouses and the hope to rebuild the family and it was identified as associated with the interruption of separation. Finally, the category “maternal” relates to the welfare of the children and the longing for their father⁽¹⁷⁾.

Concern for the children is possibly a reality for the vast majority of women who reported their spouses in 2014, since only 13.68% did not have children. In a study of 64 women who reported the experience of violence in a state reference center and support to women (CERAM) in the city of Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil, it showed a much reduced percentage of women without children: 3.2%⁽¹⁸⁾. Although the study suggests that women with children are the ones that denounce most often, the fact that surveys show just the opposite draws attention to the fact that having children hinders the complaint^(16,8). Another study, also conducted with women in situations of violence, reveals that only 10% of these abuses are denounced and that children, fear, shame and economic dependence contribute to the silence and to the women remaining in the relationship⁽¹⁹⁾. This scenario causes us to reflect upon the underreporting, suggesting that the number of cases involving women with

children is certainly not representative of women experiencing violence.

In this sense, the research shows a gap to be further investigated in other scenarios, other than those linked to the legal and the police system, trying to focus on the experience of violence and not on the record of the fact.

Another variable studied was education. This study showed a higher prevalence of women who had, at least, completed high school. Even with the lower percentage (53.7%), the Center for Assistance to Women through the telephone number-180, confirms that most women have an education above the average level⁽²⁰⁾. Thus, it can be deduced that the greater the number of years of study, the greater women’s knowledge in terms of their rights and thus the greater the chances of finding strategies to break the cycle of violence, including using a complaint.

Although this study points out a relationship between higher education and experience in terms of violence, the various consolidated publications indicate otherwise^(5,18). This apparent contradiction reminds us, once again, about the fact of under-reporting and the need for studies with a sample that is not only made up of the women who reported the crime to the police, in order to allow the identification of the association between the level of education and the experience of violence and not of the complaint.

Converging with the percentage of education, the majority (75%) of women are seeking a job. However, having a job does not mean economic independence, given that over 60% of them earn no more than two minimum wages. This financial situation makes them vulnerable to a marital relationship of economic dependence that may sometimes contribute to permanence in the cycle of violence. An analysis of 4,478 police reports recorded by women victims

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of violence showed that 47.3% of them were financially dependent on their partners. This situation undermined the termination decision and favored staying in the violent situation. In short, women with lower incomes denounce less because they are economically dependent on their spouses, particularly with regard to their own and their children's livelihood⁽²¹⁾.

CONCLUSION

The investigation of cases registered in 2014 revealed that the complaints of domestic violence are carried out mostly by women aged between 25 and 49 years old, black, single mothers, who have, at least, completed, high school and are gainfully employed, despite the fact that they earn up to two minimum wages. These findings suggest that this is the profile of women already prepared to break the cycle of violence, and denunciation is one of the possibilities. There must be an investment in actions that empower women not to give up the struggle for a life free of violence.

However, it is important to note that the identified characterization is not representative of women who experience domestic violence, but of those denouncing it. Considering the underreporting of domestic violence, it can be said that the number of women in a situation of domestic violence in Salvador in 2014 was much higher than 212. This limitation of the study points to the need for further research with no specific population groups that would allow us to know the demographic and socio-economic aspects of women experiencing the phenomenon in order better to target early recognition measures of this disease and introduce preventive strategies. Moreover, it is believed that this type of study will indicate the percentage of women who have denoun-

ced their violent situations. Furthermore, the similarities and differences between the groups will be known.

It is notable that, among the variables studied, the majority showed some percentage of uninformed questions, although, in this study, that number has not exceeded 11%. The unsatisfactory statistics that feed the health information system can cover up relevant data. This enhances the risk of bias in the epidemiological profile and, consequently, the development of erroneous preventive actions. Hence there is the need for guidance and monitoring of the professionals responsible for filling out the information tools whose data, if reliable, will adequately direct the action for preventing and combating violence in a particularly vulnerable group.

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