GENDER VIOLENCE: THE SILENCE AND CONFRONTATION EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN IN THE LIGHT OF SOCIAL PHENOMENOLOGY

VIOLENCIA DE GÉNERO: O SILENCIO E ENFRENTAMENTO VIVIDO PELAS MULHERES À LUZ DA FENOMENOLOGIA SOCIAL

LA VIOLENCIA DE GÉNERO: EL SILENCIO Y LA CONFRONTACIÓN QUE EXPERIMENTAN LAS MUJERES A LA LUZ DE LA FENOMENOLOGÍA SOCIAL

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: to understand gender violence from the perspective of women inserted in the daily life of an urban community. Method: study of qualitative approach, anchored in the Social Phenomenology. The participants were adult women who participated in ten educational workshops on violence against women. Results: the analysis disclosed experiences in the community, emphasizing the perception of the other in relation to the social phenomenon of violence. There was interpretation in the empirical categories: gender; its characteristics; forms of local coping; types of violence; and the reasons for the silence of those women. Conclusion: when considering the experiences of women and their social relations, understanding how the woman herself, main victim of gender-based violence, thinks, views and develops relations on the subject, allowed a broader understanding of the phenomenon, covering cultural (experiences), historical (knowledge) and social (beliefs, prejudices, feelings of anguish) issues. Descriptors: Domestic Violence; Violence Against Women; Gender Relations.

RESUMO

Objetivos: compreender a violência de gênero na perspectiva de mulheres inseridas no cotidiano de uma comunidade urbana. Método: estudo de abordagem qualitativa, ancorado na Fenomenologia Social. Os atores sociais foram mulheres adultas que participaram de dez oficinas educativas sobre violência contra a mulher. Resultados: o análise revelou o vivido na comunidade, enfatizando a percepção do outro em relação ao fenômeno social da violência. Interpretaram-se nas categorias empíricas: o gênero; suas características; as formas de enfrentamento locais; os tipos de violência; e os motivos do silêncio destas mulheres. Conclusão: ao considerar as vivências das mulheres e suas relações sociais, entendendo como a própria mulher, vítima principal da violência baseada no gênero, pensa, visualiza e desenvolve relações sobre o tema, permitiu uma compreensão mais ampla do fenômeno, abarcando questões culturais (experiências), históricas (conhecimento) e sociais (crenças, preconceitos, sentimentos de angústia). Descriptors: Violência Doméstica; Violência Contra a Mulher; Relações de Gênero.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: comprender la violencia de género desde la perspectiva de la mujer en la vida cotidiana de una comunidad urbana. Método: estudio de enfoque cualitativo, anclado en la Fenomenología Social. Los participantes eran mujeres adultas que participaron en diez talleres educativos sobre la violencia contra las mujeres. Resultados: El análisis reveló los fenómenos en la comunidad, haciendo hincapié en la percepción del otro en relación con el fenómeno social de la violencia. Se interpretaron en las categorías empíricas: género; sus características; formas de afrontamiento locales; tipos de violencia; y las razones para el silencio de estas mujeres. Conclusión: considerándose las experiencias de las mujeres y sus relaciones sociales, comprendiendo de cómo la propia mujer, principal víctima de la violencia basada en el género, piensa, visualiza y desarrolla las relaciones sobre el tema, permitió una comprensión más amplia del fenómeno, que abarca cuestiones culturales (experiencias), históricas (conocimiento) y sociales (creencias, prejuicios, sentimientos de angustia). Descriptors: Violencia Doméstica; Violencia Contra la Mujer; Relaciones de Género.

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INTRODUCTION

In the international and national levels, violence is recognized as overarching issue, considered worldwide as rights violation. It is a historical and social phenomenon, with different contents and forms in different societies, according to the variation of cultural values that influence each ethical judgments. Cultural differences hamper the concept of violence; however, certain aspects surrounding it are kept in the various communities and cultures, allowing its characterization.\(^1\)\(^2\)

The severity of violence is indisputable, considered a complex event, presenting various forms and multiple consequences. Among the types of violence, there is one that is so aggravating and has been a silent evil: violence against women or gender violence\(^3\). Such violence configures as a serious public health problem, and has been, from the twentieth century, synthetized in the sociological category known as "gender". Gender means a set of social, cultural, political, psychological, legal and economic characteristics attributed to people differently according to sex. In this sense, that category includes types of violence arising from unequal gender relations.\(^4\)

Researches show high prevalence of violence against women in the studied groups, indicating the need to expand prevention and care for women’s health and break the continuities that affect, in a significant way, the political, economic, social and cultural aspects, focusing on improving the quality of life women, their families and people related to them\(^5\)\(^3\). A single fact cannot explain the violent behavior in some communities; however, understanding how those determinants are linked to violence is one of the important steps in addressing Public Health in order to prevent that phenomenon\(^6\). Therefore, knowing gender violence, its forms and effects on communities is essential, aiming to raise awareness and mobilize the civil society, reaffirming the right to citizenship by encouraging the arraignment and intolerance to aggressive acts against women, of any kind.

This study aimed to understand gender violence from the perspective of women inserted in the daily life of an urban community.

METHOD

Qualitative study, anchored in the Sociological Phenomenology of Alfred Schütz\(^7\). The methodological framework of Social Phenomenology of Alfred Schütz aims to describe the structure of the experience and the perception of individuals about their experiences. Its goal is to research the world of social relations, focusing on what one can built as a typical characteristic of a particular social group to experience certain phenomenon. The analysis occurs through the observance of real life, through what one captures from the reality. That analysis enables understanding the other and their social interaction.\(^7\)

The study participants were adult women who participated in ten educational workshops on violence against women in a Family Health Strategy in the city of Montes Claros, Minas Gerais - Brazil. The workshops, which had the average participation of 12 women, took place every two weeks and dealt with issues of violence against women (types, causes, coping); true stories that occurred with women in society; family relationship and education of children; legal basis of gender violence and the establishment of a Peace Culture. The inclusion criteria took into account a minimum of seven meetings (70%) and acceptance to respond to the interview.

Data collection took place in February and March 2013, through interviews that included the following question: “Tell me, how do you perceive violence against women in your community?”. The interviews lasted an average of 25 minutes, and were applied in the participants’ households, on pre-scheduled times, allowing greater privacy. It is noteworthy that the number of participants was not predetermined, since the focus of the qualitative research is not to get quantifiable answers, but to cover the entire research problem in its multiple dimensions. Thus, the collection ended with six interviews, in view of the recurrence of data.\(^8\)

The interviews were recorded and, then, transcribed. Initially, there was a floating reading of each interview, when they were transcribed. Subsequently, there was a detailed reading; choice of units of analysis; thorough reading; horizontal reading of information with reordering in analysis categories and subcategories. Finally, the results were interpreted and supported by methodological conceptions of Alfred Social Phenomenology of Schütz\(^7\), understanding the social reality of women in their reports, taking into account the place they occupied in the community; the role they played and their ethical-religious, intellectual and political positions in family; biographical experience, that is, what they thought, felt and practiced; and the knowledge acquired and developed
through the experiences and experienced situations, from which they interpreted the phenomenon of violence and practiced their actions.

In order to maintain the respondents’ anonymity, they were identified by “Marias” (Maria do Rosario, Maria de Jesus, Maria Solidária, Maria Esperança, Mary Auxiliadora, Maria da Piedade), a name that expresses femininity and has connection with love and the family.

The Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Montes Claros approved the study, opinion Nº 2008/2010.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The interviewed “Marias” were between 37 and 53 years old. Five reported being married and all had at least one child. The main occupations mentioned by them were domestic and dental hygiene techniques.

From the interviews, it was possible to identify two categories and their respective concrete subcategories of the experiences. After the identification, one sought to comprehend the reasons expressed in the experience of ordinary women, in the light of the reference of Alfred Schütz.7

**Gender violence in the community: coping ways**

In this category, there were ideas that showed the family violence against woman, in the various segments of society, as a question connected to the gender. The following women expressed the occurrence of that grievance, present in the community and daily life of families, in the home, highlighting man as perpetrator:

*We know all of them, here, drank, the crazy husbands nearby. (Maria de Jesus)*

*There is discrimination against woman, because the person who loves doesn’t do it to the wife (...) offending, because, through that offense, the violence comes and the aggression starts; the husbands begins to beat his wife. (Maria Esperança)*

The violence against women described in the previous narratives, when taken up to the opposite sex for the use of the pronoun “he”, shows that it is impossible to dissociate the mistreatment of women from her husband/partner, who is responsible for triggering so many atrocities. Corroborating, authors state that the violence unleashed by the husband or partner is considered the main form that violence takes when practiced against women. The basis of violence against women is the use of power of men over them, and occurs as a way to dominate and control them, especially if they are partners in a marital relationship.9

Another point worth mentioning in the perception of the “Marias” was they did not differ the violence in the home and practiced by the partner from when it relates to other segments of society. About it, “Maria do Rosário” reported:

*It feels like we are finding this type of violence in more needy populations, and it’s not like that. For instance, in higher financial-level populations, people hide it. (Maria do Rosário)*

As observed, the narrative shows the violence related to social and financial issues, pointing out that violence is not restricted to financially disadvantaged populations. While others “Marias” brought such phenomenon present in different groups, highlighting that it occurs in different age groups and religious group:

*We think we are not having such problems at the church; it’s the people from church, it’s a family, and there is the religious issue, but it happens there. Inside those groups, I found out lots of women there who also have that problem. (Maria Solidária)*

*You see they are elderly people who went through it (...) but there are places where young people get beaten, got it? (Maria de Jesus)*

Besides highlighting the violence in religious groups, “Maria Solidária” highlights the fact that there is no definition of how and where that phenomenon occurs. The previous narratives bring important points that are widely discussed among researchers in the field, showing multifocal and multifactorial nature of violence, irrespective of the targets it affects. Supplementing, authors explain that gender inequality is one of the great controversies of society maintained throughout the history of civilization and has placed women in a social place of subordination. Such inequality is the result of a difference of power, which translates into domination and power relations, and that comes as a maintenance strategy of the social hierarchy and male dominance over women. Thus, gender-based violence has constituted a phenomenon that affects any age group, social or instructional level, population and religious groups, greatly influencing the way of life, illness and death of women.

It is also noteworthy that violence against women may be present in the various areas of their life, with repercussions on their health and, depending on the phase they are, affects the health of their descendants.10

*Because it is difficult to get along at school, because 90% of cases of aggressive children...*
are children with separated parents or people who live this kind of reality, which messes with drugs, with drink, with all. (Maria de Jesus)

The unfavorable family background, including experience of violence, brings consequences for the children, showing that the experience of women with that type of violence is real, exposing the phenomenon as it actually occurs. According to authors11, the effects on children who experience violence at home, either as a direct victim or witnessing their mother being beaten, present as trauma, depressive and anxiety disorders and aggressive behavior with colleagues. Such fact is considered a situation of risk to develop emotional, school and behavior problems of children.

When unveiling violence in different areas and groups, the role of media in exposing, or not, those violent acts became notorious. The interviews, almost unanimously, exposed the media and the repercussion of the violence phenomenon. In this context, women who represent the community demonstrate emphatically the space that violence gained in communication vehicles:

They (the media) publicize it a lot. I watch television, I watch the news and I’m always seeing it. If this kind of violence happens in the family, they talk about it and publicize it. (Maria da Piedade)

Today, the media, I don’t watch the news anymore. Because we turn on the TV, it’s all about it. And today as well, there is so much IBOPE, there are lots of news all day (...) it’s the whole day. (Maria Auxiliadora)

Also regarding the media, “Maria de Jesus” brings the impact media can bring in raising children as a person and the need to make them aware of what is right or wrong:

Even the little ones are already seeing it, got it? They are already seeing sex on TV, they see everything, son cursing his mother; people raising hands to the mother; people fighting and getting beaten on the soap opera. They already have to be aware that it is wrong. (Maria de Jesus)

Authors emphasize that studies conducted in 1907 showed, when analyzing the behavior of children in communities that had television compared to others living in communities without that communication medium, there have been changes in the behavior of children who lived with presence of television. They developed more aggressive and less creative behaviors in play in relation to those living in communities without the presence of television12. Those same authors add that it is important to know how to analyze the modes to represent violence and the public's reaction, since they are different for each person, as they involve factors related to the context of the representation and the individual characteristics of the viewer, such as the characteristics of the perpetrator of violence and victim; the cause or motives for acts of violence; use and presence of weapons; duration and intensity and degree of realism of violent scenes; recompense or punishment of the violence in the scenes; caused damage and the existence of humor in the presentation of scenes of violence.12

Another consequence pointed out in one of the speeches of “Maria Auxiliadora” was the lack of awareness that such cases of recurring violence in the media generate in society.

It turns out that is banal, is common when you see a terrible case, then you do not care anymore, and this is serious because your sensitivity will eventually end. The love to other will eventually end. (...) And, the more you watch this kind of thing, the more you feed your mind of violence. (Maria Auxiliadora)

The previous statement highlights love and sensitivity, feelings that, according to the interviewee, has been increasingly less present on the featured phenomenon. Authors12-16 report that another point that result from long-term exposure to violence on the screen is desensitization, which characterizes by the indifference of individuals when violence directs towards others and there is omission attitude towards the victim.

When also analyzing violence in the various living spaces in society, women emphasized the fact of the neighbor who practice violence. In this subcategory, they reinforced the violence in other’s experience, making it clear that the experience they had on the phenomenon related to cases occurring in the community through direct or indirect contact.

The women come different, they come with a sad countenance, and we try to pull something, but usually they get retracted. I have seen, but, most often, it is only that suspicion. (Maria do Rosário)

There are people who arrive speaking, complaining of pain, that even begin to cry. Hence, when you realize, it’s another problem, they end up unburdening. (Maria Solidária)

We get to know, sometimes, the husband comes home drunk, beats up his wife, begins to beat the children, put his wife out of the house. Sometimes women come up and say: “My husband swore at me a lot, called me this, that,” you know? (Maria Esperança)

Another point worth mentioning in this subcategory is the affirmation of the
experience of the other and the constant denial of women that “there is no such thing at home”.  

For some, it is difficult to say what is happening to herself, but for people who do not suffer this kind of violence anymore, every day, it is easier to talk. (Maria da Piedade)  

We need to pay attention. Thank God, at home, there is no such thing. (Maria Auxiliadora)  

Thank God, at home, such issue is very peaceful, thank God, I don’t experience it. But, thus, we see. (Maria do Rosário) I, thank God, at home my husband is peaceful. So, you read something and you know what happens, but you do not know if you live it everyday. (Maria de Jesus)  

Such fact characterizes as positive, since one understand the interviewees did not suffer with their partners, being inserted into the homes of absent violent relationships.  

However, one of the interviewees reported the opposite, showing that she has experienced episodes of violence, but, when asked to address further, refused to go into details on the subject:  

I’ve already heard it, there have already been some cases, too, I have already reported I’ve suffered it. (Maria da Piedade)  

Previously, the same interviewee reported not experiencing the phenomenon of violence at home. However, when asked further, she reported having suffered. That brings the idea of denial to the investigated object. In this regard, scholars explain we experience the world of life according to degrees of familiarity and anonymity. Familiarity relationship is experienced in the form of “us” and allows understanding the other as unique in his/her individuality. In this sense, the other’s anonymity relationship on his/her experiences, whatever they are, establishes with others from experiments and transfer of individuality. The more anonymous the relationship, the more remote is the uniqueness and individuality of my similar, and very few aspects will be considered as relevant to the issue I want to address or solve.  

When reporting the experiences and their perception on violence against women in the community, it was impossible to dissociate on ways of coping given that silent evil, bringing to the discussion ways of coping: social engagement, education, neglect and religion. In this subcategory, emerged key points about the role of society and family before the women victims of violence.  

It’s been three years that we’ve been attending lecture with the deputy of the Gender violence: the silence and confrontation…

woman’s police station; there are guiding folders; phone numbers, where to look and various types of guidance. (Maria Auxiliadora)  

First, we had to dialogue with that neighbor (...) so we can help him. If he wants it through a dialogue, if he wants through a psychologist, what he wants us to be doing with him. Encouraging the wife also to talk to who might be coming out of these problems. (Maria da Piedade)  

It is important to highlight the role of society in the speeches, with emphasis on activities of the own “Marias” in combating violence against women. In this regard, Paulo Freire says: “The first condition for one to be able to assume a committed act is to be able to act and reflect” 14:16. For the author, the real commitment is solidarity, whether with the own person and his/her group, because, from the moment there is commitment with dehumanization, there is, inevitably, the dehumanization of the own person.14  

Another mentioned way of coping was arraignment, as seen in the reports below:  

And our role is to take to the authority what is happening, or trying to help that neighbor. (Maria da Piedade)  

The woman has to report the types of violence that she is suffering, because if she does not report, she will never get out of it. Today she suffers a kind of violence, if she does not report, she will never be able to get her life straight, then it is our role to help this woman. (Maria Esperança)  

It is interesting to observe the speeches on arraignment, an extremely important act to break the cycle of violence, whether carried out by the victimized woman or by third parties. The arraignment is a moment of rupture in which the woman move away from oppression/submission condition because she admits she needs help for suffering violence. It can also mean a first step towards her “deliverance” and change the relationship. Therefore, it is essential that both professionals as the common civil society encourage women to report violence cases, for the society has bonds and may act in their favor, enabling a moment of reflection along with the woman to the arraignment.  

The interviewee “Maria de Jesus” brought other discussions to face violence, which is the education of children at home, highlighting the act as an example and the moral as stimuli to the proper development of children. Encouraging them to act properly in social relations, who, consequently, become adults with the same behaviors.  

So, I think what it is worth it to begin to change the mentality of those who have not
made it, then it has to be since childhood. We have to be aware and to have moral in order to guide. Because if I had been beaten, she’d say: “My father hit you, will you speak to me?”. If I have not been beaten, I will not let my daughter get beaten. (Maria de Jesus)

On this point, Córdula states that children are the result of family relationships and are always learning, whether positively or negatively, since they always take the adults as a reference, and intimately, their parents. The kids really learn not only from things their parents want them to learn, but they also learn to deal with everyday situations from the adult practice, who often do not realize those learners are watching everything: gestures, words, attitudes, facial expressions.

However, when mentioning the ways of coping, the interviewees reported forms of disregard for the victims of violence, highlighting the prejudice in popular culture.

(...) because sometimes one comes talking about the problem, then speaks like this: “I will not meddle in the fight of husband and wife, in husband and wife fight no one puts the spoon ... and so on, got it?” (Maria Esperança)

But we still see like this, that people are very accommodated over a neighbor who suffers this type of aggression. They think so, what I saw: “In fight of husband and wife no one puts the spoon. That thing is up to them, there, no one has to butt in.” (Maria Auxiliadora)

The popular saying has gained ground in women’s discourse, making it clear that the actions of all must favor women and a culture of peace. The silence resulting from the imprisonment of the victims within the domestic relationship can trigger extremely serious crimes against women. Often, people in the community internalize silence and faithfully reproduce jargons as the mentioned one. Therefore, when violence is witnessed or brought to someone’s knowledge, there is complicity with the offender and the omission from his wife. It is everyone’s duty, families, ordinary people and, especially, law enforcement, “to put the spoon” in those suffering relationships.6

Religiosity also got a privileged space in the researched narratives, highlighting it as a primary support for combating violence.

Because the spiritual side is very important for it. For, when one has spiritual limit, she has some fear, to go further, to go further than she should. Then, with this fear, a knowledge that there is a God who forbids certain things for her sake, she already gets fearful. (Maria Auxiliadora)

Gender violence: the silence and confrontation...

First, God in front of all of that, because without God we don’t do nothing. And, in second place, man, husband and wife. (Maria Esperança)

Interestingly, the speeches of the “Marias”, beings with beliefs and positive feelings that things can improve, place religion and faith as important elements in the coping and empowerment of women on the phenomenon of violence.

Religious practices, such as mediation of social relations, are a dynamic and great variability object. The greater or lesser relevance of the religious dimension in training and daily life of people determines and conditions, at the same time, the reconfiguration of social and family relations, mediated by ethical, political and cultural assumptions. It affects also the patterns of attitudes towards family and society, such as alcohol and other drugs and practice of violence.17

Religion can trigger greater involvement with their own reality, the search for solutions of problems of everyday life, and even the actual building of alternatives of resistance to oppression, whatever it may be.17

In this sense, one can explain the importance of religious expression for women, when providing the adherence, not only spiritual, but also psychosocial, to networks constructed based on religious practice.

The silence of women who experiences violence

The second category brings important points that attempt to “justify” the woman standing before the acts of aggression. The first evidenced subcategory was the lack of family and social support and lack of preparation in the refuge of victims:

Those who accept it have no refuge, no family, the family does not entirely support them. Oh, she ends up in the house, even with that suffering, beaten, suffering discrimination. (Maria Esperança)

In many cases, the woman has no real conditions to violence situations for lack of access to the means to get rid of her dependence on the abuser1. Women who decide to break the violent cycle demand social and family support, psychological and legal assistance, housing, childcare and/or school, need to work to acquire financial independence and health care. Such situation demonstrates the importance of comprehensive, integrated and effective intersectoral network in attention to women’s health.7

A point worth mentioning in this item is what Maria de Jesus shows:
because when you report, the guy says: “Why are you getting beaten? You are more slut than him”. Because police treats us like a dog. That’s what everyone says. We get demoralized. Besides getting demoralized in the house, getting beaten close to the children, the neighbors, who are told, we still go through it? (Maria de Jesus)

Corroborating the previous discourse, studies observed that, in practice, the conduct of professionals, whether health, police and other law enforcement officials, is not welcoming women’s needs, restricting their actions to referrals that do not always result in adequate response to the demands of women. The services little address the main needs of victims, that is, actions are timely, fragmented, without continuity of commitment in the care of victims, both in the aspects of physical and emotional rehabilitation as in social and legal rehabilitation. In order to provide care that is more effective for victims of violence in a comprehensive and humane way, it is necessary to assume new positions in receiving women, thinking of strategies that include multidisciplinary care and the conjunction of various sectors of society, and strategies to the prevention and reduction of episodes of violence.

Other points highlighted the fear and shame to denounce, as follows:

Many of them are afraid, others are ashamed, ashamed to report. Back in the day, many of them did not denounce, but today are denouncing, others not. (Maria da Piedade)

So, even with support, sometimes, the woman could not overcome this barrier. But I think the woman who gets beaten, comes covered in fear of that happening again, so I think she is apprehensive, blocked. (Maria do Rosário)

The woman, in addition to suffering such attacks, still needs to fulfill her role of mother, wife, woman, and often professional, before others. The woman, through socialization, grasps her role as natural, not recognizing the limits of that conception for her performance and participation in society. Men and women have different formation and growth, and they live from certain culture, but each gender has different roles in social relations. The man always belonged to the public space, and the woman, within the limits of the home, in family care. The behavior patterns distinctly established for men and women lead to the generation of a true honor code. The society mistakenly determines for women a submissive and fearful posture, limited in the pursuit of their ideals.

Some women are reluctant to report their attackers for fear that violence increases, which happens often, as impunity often prevails even after the arraignment. Others, in turn, denounced their partners just to intimidate them, then, they withdraw the arraignment and do not carry the process that could result in a punishment. Still, it is important to denounce.

The belief that the partner is not so bad also detached in the interviews. Two of the “Marias” exposed the subject:

But, she thinks that in a way, that the rage time is normal, that person does not have that thing to beat, he lost control. (Maria Auxiliadora)

Laziness to restart all over again, to start over. “That day was good,” “The other day he did it.” One day, the day that lit the holy, he was cute. “No, deep down he loves”, got it? A thousand and five hundred excuses. (Maria de Jesus)

The woman who suffers such aggression avoids denouncing and isolates from support systems, which makes her even more dependent on their abuser. The feeling of fear that paralyzes and prevents women from seeking help emerges. The decreased attitude of abuse in which women tend to minimize the violence also emerges due to factors such as fear, lack of information and awareness about what actually constitutes violence and by the desire to believe the partner is not so bad.

One highlights the importance of implementing services aimed at repression and prevention of gender inequality in order to promote and stimulate the construction of a new culture of thinking the question, where respect and commitment to the human rights of women are values incorporated into the daily lives of all Brazilians.

This study has unveiled the experiences of women on gender violence in the community, allowing realizing that even they did not experience that phenomenon as direct victims, the interviewed women know the causes and nature that trigger it, ways of coping and consequences of such evil, both in general society, as more closely in the home.

When considering the experiences of women and their social relations, understanding how the woman herself, main victim of gender-based violence, thinks, views and develops relations on the subject, allowed a broader understanding of the phenomenon, not restricted only to biological aspects, but covering cultural (experiences), historical
Gender violence: the silence and confrontation...

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