



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

LIMITS AND INTOLERANCES OF WOMEN SURVIVING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE
LIMITES E INTOLERÂNCIAS DE MULHERES SOBREVIVENTES DO ABUSO SEXUAL INFANTIL
LÍMITES E INTOLERANCIAS DE MUJERES SUPERVIVENTES DEL ABUSO SEXUAL INFANTIL

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to identify the limits of tolerance of women to the sexual abuse suffered in childhood. **Method:** this is a qualitative, descriptive study developed at a Center for Attention to Women in Situation of Violence. The data were obtained through an open interview applied to nine women and the contributions of Comprehensive Sociology and Daily Life were discussed in their notions about limit sense, tragic and theatricality by Content Analysis. **Results:** "From repetitiveness to tolerance," which revealed sexual abuse, "Using Emotion to Express Tragic Lives of Sexual Abuse," and "The Underground Power of Survivors of Sexual Abuse." **Conclusion:** it is concluded that the work synthesizes silence as the main form of resistance to the repetitive episodes of sexual abuse, an aspect that sharpened the sense of the limit of the participants in order to emerge the subterranean power that allowed them to face the tragic experience and reveal the secrets and resentments to follow up on their lives. **Descriptors:** Adult Survivors of Child Abuse; Sexual Abuse in Childhood; Family Relationships; Daily Activities; Violence; Public Health.

RESUMO

Objetivo: identificar os limites de tolerância de mulheres diante do abuso sexual sofrido na infância. **Método:** trata-se de estudo qualitativo, descritivo, desenvolvida num Centro de Atenção à Mulher em Situação de Violência. Obtiveram-se os dados por meio de entrevista aberta aplicada a nove mulheres e se discutiram as contribuições da Sociologia Compreensiva e do Cotidiano em suas noções sobre senso do limite, trágico e teatralidade pela Análise de Conteúdo. **Resultados:** elencaram-se as categorias - "Da repetitividade ao limite de tolerância", que fez revelar o abuso sexual, "Valendo-se da emoção para expressar vivências trágicas de abuso sexual" e "A potência subterrânea de sobreviventes do abuso sexual". **Conclusão:** conclui-se que o trabalho sintetiza o silêncio como a principal forma de resistência aos repetitivos episódios de abuso sexual, aspecto que aguçou o senso do limite das participantes para fazer emergir a potência subterrânea que as possibilitou afrontar a vivência trágica e revelar os segredos e ressentimentos para dar seguimento às suas vidas. **Descritores:** Adultos Sobreviventes de Maus-Tratos Infantis; Abuso Sexual na Infância; Relações Familiares; Atividades Cotidianas; Violência; Saúde Pública.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: identificar los límites de tolerancia de las mujeres frente al abuso sexual sufrido en la infancia. **Método:** se trata de un estudio cualitativo, descriptivo, desarrollado en un Centro de Atención a la Mujer en Situación de Violencia. Se obtuvieron los datos por medio de una entrevista abierta aplicada a nueve mujeres y se discutieron las contribuciones de la Sociología Compreensiva y del Cotidiano en sus nociones sobre el sentido del límite, trágico y teatralidad por el Análisis de Contenido. **Resultados:** se enumeran las categorías - "De la repetitividad al límite de tolerancia", que hizo revelar el abuso sexual, "Valiéndose de la emoción para expresar vivencias trágicas de abuso sexual" y "La potencia subterrânea de sobreviventes del abuso sexual". **Conclusión:** se concluye que el trabajo sintetiza el silencio como la principal forma de resistencia a los repetitivos episodios de abuso sexual, aspecto que aguzó el sentido del límite de las participantes para hacer emerger la potencia subterrânea que las permitió afrontar la vivencia trágica y revelar los secretos y resentimientos para dar seguimiento a sus vidas. **Descriptor:** Adultos Sobreviventes del Maltrato a los Niños; Abuso Sexual Infantil; Relaciones Familiares; Actividades Cotidianas; Violencia; Salud Pública.

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INTRODUCTION

It is known that sexual abuse in the domestic environment is an unexpected event in the daily lives of girls, that disharmonizes the emotions and interferes in all spheres of life: physical; emotional; cognitive and interpersonal.¹ It is an example of a situation that occurs in an unfavorable context, with the sudden invasion of feelings, which results in an uneasiness of tragic intensity,² whose negative impacts follow their victims until adulthood, especially in the fields of affectivity and sexuality.³

It is understood that this type of violence, commonly practiced by men linked to girls by affective relations, constitutes a criminal practice and disrespect to the decisions and the autonomy of the infantile limits.⁴

The prevalence of this phenomenon in the female sex is estimated, with one in ten girls under the age of 20 already suffering from some form of sexual abuse.⁵ It was identified in a household survey carried out in South Africa with 5631 girls and boys, that of the 2,497 participating girls, 14.61% had suffered some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18, and 3.59% had suffered acts practiced by a man attached to them.⁶

In another study, 8194 high school students in Quebec and Montreal found a higher percentage of girls sexually abused (15.2%) than boys (4.4%).⁷ It is recorded that in Brazil, 28.4% of girls attending emergency and emergency services were victims of sexual abuse.⁸

It is emphasized that repetition is a feature commonly found in domestic sexual abuse, favored by intimidation, in which the abuser forces the victim to keep the secret, which is one of the main reasons for the abuse to last longer,⁹ because, given the circumstances against which they cannot intervene, it is difficult for a child to speak spontaneously about what is happening.

It is understood, therefore, that a domestic environment, in the presence of sexual abuse, becomes a space unfavorable to the full development of the child, with physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological harm in the short and long term,¹⁰ being intense the association between exposure to childhood sexual abuse and the onset of depression and suicidal ideation and homicide in the adult life of the victim.¹¹⁻²

It is pointed out that, by the character of repetitiveness, the abuse sharpens the sense of the child's limit, which begins to experience conflicting situations and confused feelings, especially when the abuser is the father himself, for although he loves them, in the circumstances, the victim feels confused and also hates him.¹³

It turns out that the child, conscious of its limits of tolerance, reaches a stage of intolerance, which contributes to the silence, which keeps the secret, broken and abuse, revealed. It should be noted,

however, that this does not occur in an equal time for all abused children, since each one, at their own pace, supports this uneasiness for a longer or shorter period and, for their visibility, the emotion to express feelings arising from the experience, through gestures, cries or ironies.¹⁴

In this order of ideas, the following questions were answered: "To what extent can the tolerance of a woman who has been sexually abused in childhood and how to survive the experience of sexual abuse in childhood be reached?" It is assumed that awareness of the limits of tolerance to sexual abuse suffered in infancy accentuates the power of the woman to transfigure her daily life in the pursuit of a healthy life, since it is imagined that in exposing sexual abuse, a woman can reach the strength needed to change your daily life.

Thus, the objective of the research was to identify the limits of women's tolerance for sexual abuse suffered during childhood.

OBJECTIVE

- To identify the limits of women's tolerance for sexual abuse suffered during childhood.

METHOD

This is a qualitative, descriptive study, developed in 2014, in a Center for Assistance to Women in Situation of Violence, in the city of Petrolina, Pernambuco, Brazil, with data obtained through an open interview conducted by the questions "Tell me about your daily life during the time you were sexually abused" and "How was your day to day after the time you were sexually abused?" The analysis of the results was based on notions and theoretical and sensitivity assumptions, developed by Comprehensive Sociology and Daily Life,¹⁵ which, unlike traditional Sociology, has the purpose of assisting in the theoretical understanding of numerous social contexts of everyday life, investigating them in detail, through sensible reasoning.

Considering that this research discusses a tragic day-to-day sexual abuse in childhood, it assists in the assumption called Form, in order to favor the initial contextualization of the experience and its subsequent description, which was based on the imaginary category of the limit, meaning the awareness of someone in the face of tragic events in life, which is often related to situations of oppression, which, in this case, refer to sexual abuse in childhood.

In order to facilitate the description of the limits of the participants in the face of repetitive episodes of sexual abuse, excerpts from their individual speeches in two variations, called tragic and theatrical, have been used, the latter utilizing the emotion and resources of the theater, such as drama (therefore, the name of theatricality), to show these tragic experiences.¹⁶ It is practically described that

the person uses masks to dramatize and, through the interpretation of roles, externalizes the situation.

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Nursing School of the Federal University of Bahia under the opinion 684.203. It is emphasized that the participation was voluntary and data collection only occurred after the signing of the Free and Informed Consent Term. In order to guarantee confidentiality and preserve anonymity, the participants were identified by the fictitious names Eva, Marta, Clara, Rosa, Júlia, Lara, Alice, Isaura and Mel.

RESULTS

◆ Characterization of participants

It consists of nine women, aged between 18 and 53, with a self-declared majority (five), single (four), unemployed and financially dependent on the family (seven). It should be noted that the highest level of education recorded was the complete High School. It is pointed out that seven women had children, noting that one of the pregnancies occurred during the sexual abuse situation.

It is recorded that the age of the participants, when sexual abuse first occurred, varied between four and 17 years, and six of the victims were less than ten years old. It is known that the abusers were biological parents (three), stepfathers (four) or other relatives, such as siblings (two) and cousins (two). It should be noted that, of the nine situations, only four were officially reported to the Specialized Police Service for Women (DEAM) and the Guardianship Council (GC), and, based on these denunciations, the application of protective measures, punishment of abusers and the follow-up of victims.

Results were organized in the categories "From repetitiveness to tolerance," which revealed sexual abuse, "Using Emotion to Express Tragic Lives of Sexual Abuse," and "The Underground Power of Survivors of Sexual Abuse".

◆ From repetitiveness to the limit of tolerance and revelation of sexual abuse

It is demonstrated in the narratives of this category that the repetitive episodes reached saturation point, which allowed breaking the silence to become public sexual abuse. It is observed that each situation required a time for its disclosure and of the nine surveyed, only one revealed the abuse the day after that occurred, according to the following statements.

The day after the abuse, I just waited for daybreak and asked for a ride to the city where my mother met my sister. I told them what had happened, but they did not believe me, they said that I was slandering my own father. (Julia, sexually abused by her father at age 17, once, while sleeping)

Another participant maintains the abuse in secret and only confided it at the age of 53 during psychological counseling.

I have never revealed the abuse I suffered from my two brothers, I keep this secret and I never want my mother to know or dream, nobody in my family knows. I just told my analyst. (Isaura, 53, sexually abused by two siblings, from six to 11 years of age)

It is noticed that, regarding the time and the form of revelation, another participant maintained the association with the intensity of the intimidation used by the abuser.

I remember as if it was the first time the abuse occurred, I was four years old and I woke up feeling a lot of pain, and I felt that one of my cousins was on top of me, abusing me. From there, he and the other two cousins began to threaten me. They said that if I did, they would kill me, bury me and nobody would know where I was, and they also threatened to kill my parents. And that was how the abuse went, it happened for a long time, until I was 18, when I revealed it to an aunt. (Eva, 28, sexually abused by three cousins, aged four to 18)

From the age of eight, my father abused me, but I kept the secret until I was seventeen, because he told me, although he did not say anything, he would give me a touch so I would not speak because he looked at me from under my eyes and I was afraid that he would kill my mother and my brothers. So, I did not directly say that I was being abused, but I took advantage of the news about pedophilia and, despite the fear, I would say, "If this happens to me, I will denounce it." The time was passing and the discovery occurred through an anonymous tip to the Tutelary Council. The counselors asked me things I could not deny, and since I could no longer be abused, I gave myself up and said, "This is what my father did to me, is not it?" (Marta, age 19, sexually abused by father from eight to 17 years)

It is understood that the frequent episodes of sexual abuse sharpened the sense of the limits of the participants, who, because they felt intimidated, did not directly report what happened, but they used subterfuges to express their experiences in an attempt to expose abusers.

My mother left me alone with my stepfather because she trusted him completely and so the abuses were repeated until it reached a point where I could not take the pressure anymore and one night I told my mother do something for her to see. Then she pretended to be asleep and realized he was not in bed, and when she turned on the light, she found my only stepfather in a towel, squatting next to my bed. And so the abuse was discovered. (Lara, age 21, sexually abused by her stepfather from six to 11 years old)

◆ Making use of the emotion to express tragic experiences of sexual abuse

It is pointed out that the participants made use of the emotion to express their tragic experiences of sexual abuse suffered in childhood.

My father beat me because I did not want to lie in bed with him, and I would say, "You stink." Then he tried to penetrate the penis, but I never left, I do not remember well. I know I'm disgusted with him and my older brother. (Mel, 35, sexually abused by her father, from 6 to 13 years old)

My dad took a stick to hit me, and I said: "It's you give it to me and I tear it all apart. You're thinking that I'm forgetful of what you did to me? Have you sexually abused me? I'm not forgotten at all; one day you pay me". (Júlia)

It is evaluated that the reactions help to understand that the oppression generates, in the victim, antagonistic attitudes of love and hate woven in webs of resentments.

I hate my father for having sexually abused me, but I surrendered to God, I released his forgiveness for him. (Mel)

I hate my father for having sex with me. At the time, when I saw him on the street, I was disgusted with him, but I also felt ashamed, angry and willing to kill him. I can not forgive him because the problem does not pass. Do you know that big wound that does not close? Create a cone and then burst? (Marta)

Before, I had never physically assaulted my father, but after a while, twice, I tried to kill him with a knife, but I do not want to know that, no, never mind. He is already old. God take action from above. I also do not want anyone to do anything with it, no, because he is my father. (Júlia)

It is understood that the silence that veiled the tragic experience of sexual abuse has contributed to the participants harboring resentments that have caused them harm and have led them to a life-long suffering.

During the time I was abused by my cousins, I felt hatred, but today I no longer feel. I do not like them and I'm working hard to forgive them, but I still can not. The feeling I have is that they've destroyed my life. I'd rather have them kill me because living with those memories is terrible. There is not a night that, before bed, I do not think about it. (Eva)

This problem of having suffered sexual abuse from my stepfather has harmed my life and is still hurting, it bothers me greatly, I feel angry. It's a hell of a thing because he comments on what happened and tried to separate me from my husband, but he could not. I would only be okay if he disappeared, without telling me where he was, so I would not know him any more. (Clara, 21, sexually abused by her stepfather from 11 to 18 years old)

My life has changed, changed for the worse, gave me revolt, until today, when I remember, I feel disgust of life. I do not feel like a human being, I feel like crap because it's bad for something like this to happen to my father. Because of this, I

wanted to kill myself: in front of a cart, I tried to drink bleach, I cut myself with razor blade with disgust. (Júlia)

◆ The Underground Power of Survivors of Sexual Abuse

It is suggested that the sense of limit, sharpened by the tragic experience of sexual abuse, contributed to the participants' empowerment to follow life with determination.

Finding my mate, getting married, gave me courage because before, I did not have the courage to face this problem and my husband gives me strength for it. I decided to play life away from my city, we have a child and I can say that, compared to the time when I was being sexually abused, nowadays, it is much better. (Clara)

Since the abuse was discovered, I was cut off from living with my father and, three years ago, I'm getting assistance from here. When I arrived, I did not talk to anyone, I hid myself from people in fear, but during that time, my life changed. Currently, I can live with the trauma, I went back to school and I am encouraged by the teacher to be a narrator because she said that I speak well. (Marta)

I have dedicated myself to the church and since then I have continued the work of evangelization and to perform at the mass, this helps to follow the life because I see that it has bigger problems than mine, like people in terminal condition of cancer, or people who until the same problem, but did not find support. Then I try to take some comfort through music. (Eva)

DISCUSSION

In summary, frequent exposure to sexual abuse has sharpened the sense of the tolerance limit, disrupted the participants' natural course of childhood and affected the coexistence of family members. It is also noted that the memories kept in memory were manifested in resentments that remained throughout the life of the victims. On the other hand, awareness of the tolerance limit was a favorable factor to increase the power of each woman and intensify the forces necessary to combat the traumas caused by the tragic experience, modify the abusive experience and continue the projects life in an attempt to establish a healthy daily life.

It is estimated that the remembrance of sexual abuse has rekindled the trauma and accentuated latent grievances, and although it is a problem common to all participants, each one dealt with it in a proper way, which shows the different degrees of tolerance for stand it.

It is seen that the masks were used as protection devices, because, besides hiding a horrible face,¹⁷ represented by the memories of the abusive experience, also helped them to protest and to expose the abusers, so that the masks used at the time in that the abuse occurred, and also later were mechanisms to survive oppression, understanding that in a context of sexual abuse in the domestic

environment, role playing by an abused girl means raising awareness of their limits of tolerance, in other words, a form of passive resistance to survive the tragic life.

It is understood that remembrance rekindled the trauma, which was expressed in feelings, mostly opposites, such as life and death, love and hate, distrust and trust, affection and disaffection, which proves the existence of life and that make it part, at the same time, the shadow and light.¹⁸

It reinforces, therefore, the understanding that exposure to certain adversities during childhood is a potentiator of effects that can last for a lifetime. In a meta-analysis that explored the patterns of responses of girls and boys to exposure to traumatic events, girls reported more severe signs of posttraumatic stress and more intense anger symptoms as a response to the abusive experience.¹⁹

It is noted that sexual abuse interferes negatively in the daily life of a woman abused in childhood, which can induce her to suicidal ideas and desires of revenge, in the form of homicide.¹² It is pointed out that the experience is so striking that in comparative terms, depressed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse may go so far as to attempt suicide more often than other women, who are also depressed but who did not experience sexual abuse in childhood.²⁰

It is argued, in regard to revenge desires aroused by abusive living, that they establish the spread of violence and provoke outrage, according to a survey that describes the wrath of a 50-year-old woman who survived her father's prolonged incest since the age of five of age.²¹

The feeling of revolt seized is highlighted as another aspect that drew attention. It was interpreted, in the face of subjectivity, the unconscious desire of the participants to return to the point before the abusive experience, that is, to return to a life free of oppression. It is understood in this line of thought that the revolt was the trigger through which emerged, from each woman, the power to confront the tragic fate of sexual abuse, with the confidence that change would be possible. It is, therefore, translated by power, a force more intense and lasting than the apparent power that the abuser imagines to possess, which in fact is fragile and temporary.¹⁸

It is established, as it happens in other everyday experiences, in the case of sexual abuse, even after being discovered, that even the passing of time is not enough to forget it. It was noticed, however, that the participants acted with determination to work on the problem at the present moment, without delay, which corroborates the thought that it is in everyday life that the ground is rebuilt from which they can grow and to strengthen the new ways of being and thinking.²²

It is necessary to emphasize that the theatricality allowed the participants to play different roles to

express the daily tragic and overcome the destiny of sexual abuse. It is observed that they camouflaged themselves to survive, using forms of passive resistance, such as silence.

It is confirmed that sexual abuse, like other tragic experiences, unleashes the sensitivity and affection of contemporary social relations, showing that, instead of excluding or isolating feelings, the daily lives them and turns them into an ethics of aesthetics. It turns out, then, that this way of reflecting on the relation between ethics and aesthetics is anchored in the way that form, that is, as the way of being, compromises behavior, that is, being in existence.²³

It is therefore considered that sexual abuse is a life that compromises the existence of a child and can be classified as a disturbing phenomenon, especially for those who propose to investigate it,²⁴ so that health professionals need to be attentive to understand how abusive situations take hold and affect a woman's life because, as a result of the negative and prolonged repercussions of sexual abuse, these women are likely to seek health services with multiple needs related to the phenomenon, requiring the interprofessional team to take care of the sensibility, allowing them to capture the small details, often hidden in gestures, silence, crying, ironic words or behavioral changes.

It is argued that this process is possible, offering victims the support to understand life in its present moments with what it provides them: pain and stumbling, but with the strength to fight. It is noticed that, although it can not be prevented from occurring, and even in the face of memories, the participants confronted fate from a perspective of the present moment, showing that the act of realizing the abusive experience represented the starting point to make possible the redemption of the joy of living.

It is inferred that understanding sexual abuse in its unfolding presents itself as a possibility for the victim to manage its negative repercussions consciously, knowing that there are no magical changes, but that it is necessary to strive to overcome what happened.

The imaginary of the home, a private space of coexistence, conceived as a protective environment, in which one expects, of those in charge, the necessary support for the balanced development of children and adolescents.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

As limitations of this research, a single scenario of data collection and, consequently, the view of the collaborators from a single place is presented, which does not guarantee that the findings can be generalized to all women who experience the same experience of being sexually abused children.

It is pointed out, for the results, silence as the main element of the limit of tolerance imposed by

the sexual abuse in childhood, considering that, faced with a same traumatic experience, the exposed people have different limits to support it.

Emotion is shown as the condition that showed the mechanisms of survival, the escape valves that allowed the participants to incorporate characters to make public the abuse and also to express the resentments, signs of the emotional illness due to the abusive experience.

It is evaluated that the contributions of the study are useful for the planning and execution of care that, based on sensitivity and solidarity, will help women survivors of sexual abuse to restore the balance needed to achieve a healthy daily life.

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