






ORIGINAL ARTICLE

CONCEPTION OF ELDERLY WOMEN ABOUT SEXUALITY IN OLD AGE\*

CONCEPÇÃO DE MULHERES IDOSAS SOBRE A SEXUALIDADE NA VELHICE

CONCEPCIÓN DE LAS MUJERES MAYORES SOBRE LA SEXUALIDAD EN LA VEJEZ

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ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to analyze the conception of elderly women about sexuality in old age. **Method:** this is a qualitative, descriptive study, developed within the scope of the Open University to the Third Age extension project, with ten elderly women. The information was collected through a semi-structured script, analyzing it by the technique of Thematic Content Analysis. **Results:** from the data, three categories were pointed out: Sexuality: surpassing the traditional cultural model; Conception of sexuality and Experience of sexuality in old age. **Conclusion:** it was observed that elderly women conceive sexuality as a viable experience in old age, even in the face of bodily and functional limitations linked to aging. **Descriptors:** Sexuality; Old Man; Aging; Health of the Elderly; Women's Health; Sexual Intercourse.

RESUMO

**Objetivo:** analisar a concepção de mulheres idosas sobre a sexualidade na velhice. **Método:** trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, descritivo, desenvolvido no âmbito do projeto de extensão Universidade Aberta à Terceira Idade, com dez mulheres idosas. Coletaram-se as informações por meio de um roteiro semiestruturado, analisando-as pela técnica de Análise de Conteúdo Temática. **Resultados:** apontaram-se, a partir dos dados, três categorias: Sexualidade: superando o modelo cultural tradicional; Concepção de sexualidade e Experiência da sexualidade na velhice. **Conclusão:** observou-se que as mulheres idosas concebem a sexualidade como uma experiência viável na velhice, mesmo diante das limitações corporais e funcionais atreladas ao envelhecimento. **Descritores:** Sexualidade; Idoso; Envelhecimento; Saúde do Idoso; Saúde da Mulher; Relação Sexual.

RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** analizar la concepción de las mujeres mayores sobre la sexualidad en la vejez. **Método:** este es un estudio cualitativo, descriptivo, desarrollado en el proyecto de extensión Universidad Abierta a la Tercera Edad, con diez mujeres de edad avanzada. La información se recopiló con un guión semiestructurado, analizándolos mediante la técnica de análisis de contenido temático. **Resultados:** surgieron tres categorías: Sexualidad: superando el modelo cultural tradicional; Concepción de la sexualidad; y Experiencia de sexualidad en la vejez. **Conclusión:** se observó que las mujeres de edad avanzada conciben la sexualidad como una experiencia viable en la vejez, incluso frente a las limitaciones corporales y funcionales relacionadas con el envejecimiento. **Descriptores:** La sexualidade; Personas de Edad Avanzada; Envejecimiento; Salud del Anciano; Salud de la Mujer; Relación Sexual.

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**INTRODUCTION**

It is known that the combined effect of reduced fertility rate and mortality has caused demographic and epidemiological changes in the population, leading to increased life expectancy and the number of older people.<sup>1</sup> Faced with such transformations, the elderly population is seeking a successful old age, which includes the experience of sexuality.

An average increase of more than one million older people is expected annually, with the possibility of reaching 41.5 million in the year 2030, with an average age of 75.3 years for men and 82.0 years for women, which highlights the process of feminization of aging.<sup>2-3</sup>

It is noticed that women show greater interest in health care and develop activities that provide well-being and are less involved in risk situations, which justifies the feminization process.<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that the quality of female aging is compromised by the inequalities and disadvantages existing in family and professional environments to which women are exposed throughout their lives.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of specific and integral attention to this portion of the population is evidenced in order to provide successful aging, especially to women who, despite living longer, are not necessarily living better.<sup>6</sup>

There are demands in the search for active aging, as well as needs little explored by older people, such as attending socialization spaces to share their experiences, make new friends and remain valued and free to fully express their sexuality, deconstructing the vision of dependence and fragility.<sup>7</sup>

Healthy aging is conceptualized, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), as a process of development and maintenance of functional capacity that makes it possible to experience well-being in old age. It is also pointed out that it is important to consider that sexuality is a fundamental factor for conditioning a good quality of life in old age.<sup>6-8</sup>

It is understood that sexuality represents a fundamental action in the life of the individual, consisting of biological, psychological, social and cultural factors, transmitted from generation to generation, giving meaning to human existence.<sup>9</sup>

It can be seen that the concept of sexuality has progressed and is understood as an aggregation of symbolic and physical feelings, manifested through intimacy, reproduction, respect, self-realization, self-esteem, acceptance, affection, pleasure, among others.<sup>10-11</sup> It should be considered that, nowadays, sexuality is still understood as the sexual practice aimed exclusively at young people, without considering its consequences, such as

understanding, companionship and affection, which are fundamental at any moment of life.<sup>12</sup>

It is noted that the limited view of sexuality is accompanied by the prejudice of family, health professionals and even the elderly population, which interferes with the way of experiencing it.<sup>13</sup> It is necessary that sexuality in old age be seen naturally, so that the human being can accept that the sexual act is a common practice that goes beyond youth and provides health and well-being to the elderly.<sup>14</sup>

Studies such as this are justified by the growth of the elderly population, especially women, with demands for an active and healthy aging that includes the experience of sexuality, revealing the need to address the issue at different stages of life, especially in old age, phase in which she is denied.

The importance of this study is highlighted, as it can subsidize health education actions, contemplating the sexuality of the elderly, with a view to promoting sexual health in stereotype-free old age.

**OBJECTIVE**

- To analyze the conception of elderly women about sexuality in old age.

**METHOD**

This is a qualitative, descriptive study, carried out within the scope of the University Open to Old Age (UATI) extension project, on a campus of the State University of Bahia (UNEB).

The research was conducted with ten elderly women, who were intentionally selected from the participation in the aforementioned project. The following inclusion criteria were elected: regularly attend UATI and be registered for more than six months, time deemed necessary by the research team for the best interaction between UATI participants during data collection.

Women with pathological processes or any other situations during the collection period that prevented the presence in scheduled meetings were excluded.

Information was collected in June 2018 through the focus group technique (FG). The research instruments used were a semi-structured individual script containing questions of sociodemographic characterization and a script of guiding questions on the subject under study, both elaborated by the research leaders and applied in a meeting lasting an average of two hours, which ended after the saturation of the information obtained through the reports.

The elderly women participated in the FG, a moderator, who conducted the dialogue according to the research object, keeping the discussion focused, and two observers, to register and assist during the meeting. The data of the discussion

were recorded by means of a digital recording device, with permission of the elderly and, later, the information was transcribed with the purpose of maintaining its reliability.

The data obtained in the research were analyzed based on the Thematic Content Analysis technique proposed by Laurence Bardin, composed of different phases, namely: pre-analysis; material exploration and treatment of results, inference and interpretation.<sup>15</sup>

This study was developed in accordance with the ethical and scientific aspects presented in Resolutions 466/2012 and 510/2016 of the National Health Council, which deal with the norms and guidelines that regulate scientific research involving human beings. The study began after the research project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the University Center of Guanambi (UniFG), under the opinion n. 2636252 and CAAE 85830417.6.0000.8068. The anonymity of the participants was preserved, identifying them with codenames (P1, P2, P3 ...) followed by age and marital status.

RESULTS

The ten elderly women were characterized according to sociodemographic aspects, and the age ranged from 60 to 71 years, with a mean of 64.4 years.

Regarding marital status, five (50%) participants were married, three (30%), widows and two (20%), separated. As for income, it was observed that only one participant has a monthly income above two minimum wages. In relation to occupation, it was evident that of the home (60%) and, regarding religion, it is noted that seven are Catholic, two evangelical and one Spiritist.

In the data collected, regarding education, it is pointed out that five (50%) did not complete elementary school, four completed high school and one had completed elementary school. Regarding family arrangement, 50% reported living with their spouse.

Three categories were raised from the data analysis: Sexuality: surpassing the traditional cultural model; Conception of sexuality and Experience of sexuality in old age.

DISCUSSION

Sexuality: Overcoming the Traditional Cultural Model

It was observed in this category that most of the elderly bring in their reports, the comparison between the past and the present, highlighting the positive and negative changes to the experience of sexuality. It is understood, according to the speeches, that the theme in question, which until recently was treated as a taboo and repressed in

the family, gained more freedom and is seen more naturally.

*In the past, mothers were ashamed to talk about it there with their children, but today it's pretty much normal. I was ashamed myself, I'm not going to lie, but nowadays mothers even teach their children to use. Today we have more freedom to talk to our children. (P1, married, 63 years old)*

*When I was young, no one argued for me and I learned for myself through a book, study. In the past, we didn't even express it to anyone, everything was hidden. (P4, widow, 71 years old)*

*Younger people, they can give us a better orientation, because parents did not guide them in the past, so we bring this remnant of being chaste. In the past, you didn't do that, no one gave a hug or a kiss to your husband or boyfriend near your parents, and today you already have that freedom. (P8, married, 61 years old)*

*It was very difficult to talk, nobody said anything to us, neither mother nor father. They were very reserved. It was a very difficult phase, created in the fields, the school said very little. Today is easier, I can talk normally with my daughters, I do not hide anything from them, they do not hide anything from me, I can talk more openly. (P10, separated, 67 years old)*

It is noticed that the sexuality taboo has been deconstructed and has been increasingly included in family life. Thus, it is possible to maintain a closer relationship with the family, especially with the children, thus providing the dialogue that the research participants did not have with their parents.

It was found, through the reports, that even bringing benefits to the intra-family relationship, freedom in the present day is also seen as something over-experienced, with total lack of limit, which in turn generates disrespect and has a sexuality profile that is experienced without love.

*Nowadays, people experience this without love, and it was not so in the past. (P1, 63 years old, married)*

*So much is evolved. Today, it's just freedom, if you know a boy today, today, he's already in bed, and in our time, no, I at least don't admit it. (P2, separated, 68 years old)*

*Today, the way the world is there, there are times when you do not even understand what that is, there is a time that is in default. (P3, widow, 67 years old)*

There is a change in the way of experiencing sexuality over the generations, so intergenerational living can generate conflicts of values. It is understood that the elderly received a differentiated education, with strict moral values derived from behavioral norms already established since previous centuries.<sup>11</sup>

Older people are considered to have a limited conception of sexuality, since information extracted from their parents or relatives during their youth was scarce, demonstrating insecurity to initiate their sexual life and, therefore, for



clarification, friends from the same age group with similar experiences were usually used.<sup>14</sup>

*My family never talked about sexuality, nor did menstruation know what it was. A classmate of mine who told me. (P8, 61 years old, married)*

It was evident from the statements that most of the interviewees married early and with their first boyfriend, following the culture of the time of preserving chastity and maintaining "honor" until the wedding day. It is noted that these choices were driven by the idealized feminine vision of the 60s to 80s, in which the woman played roles focused only on domestic service, reproductive function, child rearing and submission to spouse.<sup>16</sup>

*It's totally different today, but at the time I married 16 years old, I only met one man until today and I will stay with him, with faith in God, until the end of my life. (P6, 61 years old, married)*

*I had my parents who, at that time, did not guide us and sometimes made us afraid of trying to relate to a man, they said that even by the kiss got pregnant, that sat in the chair that a man sat, got pregnant, took disease, I would not sit on my uncles' lap, they would not accept. (P9, 60 years old, married)*

*Today's times are very different from those of old. In the past, mothers lived for their husbands and children, and not today. (P9, 60 years old, married)*

It is observed that women have increasingly conquered their space, both about sexuality and in their professional life. It is evident that its participation in the Brazilian labor market has increased considerably in the last decades, being higher when compared to other countries; However, discrimination, lower wages than men, and double working hours put women in a position of social vulnerability.<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that women have conquered new roles and are no longer limited to domestic care.

#### ♦ Conception of sexuality

It is claimed that sexuality is a complex phenomenon, constituted by symbolic and physical feelings, which are adapted to the social, cultural and religious context, causing, over the years, changes in the conception and experiences of women's sexuality.<sup>9-10</sup> The category highlights the understanding of what sexuality is for the elderly in the group.

*Sexuality is also living together, not only is sex [...] having a partner for living is part of sexuality. [...] you get up in the morning and have your husband on your side, lie down and you know that your husband is on your side, makes us live better and longer. (P4, 71 years old, widow)*

*If I don't have love and understanding, there is no sexuality, because I have to understand him and he understand me. Both respect each other's side, if he is in the mood and she is not, he has to respect. (P8, 61 years old, married)*

*I liked to hug, to kiss, to do that beautiful thing, really. I think that, having love, affection and*

*when you are a good husband, affection never ends, never fails. (P10, 67 years, separate)*

It was observed that most of the deponents bring a positive conception of the theme through their own experiences. An expanded conception of sexuality is demonstrated, based on the construction of love, affection and coexistence. It is clearly stated that sexuality is good for health and can provide a better life for the couple.

It is revealed in the statements of P4, P8 and P9 that sexuality is independent of sexual intercourse and, to fully express sexuality, there must be a healthy interpersonal interaction in the relationship.

*Because when we love, it's not just sex that will make us live and like the person. (P4, 71 years old, widow)*

*No need is "rolling" to be happy, to have sexuality. (P8, 61 years old, married)*

*In my house, I talk a lot with my boys, with my husband, and where he has love, has sex, where he has affection, maybe he does not have sex, but has the coexistence. (P9, 60 years old, married)*

It is estimated that older people's understanding of sexuality is closely linked to a set of sensations that seek companionship, respect, friendship, intimacy and giving, which goes far beyond the sexual act itself.<sup>17</sup>

Some elderly women relate the theme only to the sexual act, or associate it with the expression of feelings, which they consider fundamental for a good sexual experience, but do not portray sexuality comprehensively. This limited perception has been shown to be attributed to the biological conception and is determined by influences existing in the environment in which they live.<sup>16</sup>

*I think sex, the person only feels horny if it is done with love, with respect. And if you don't have love, you don't feel hot about having sex with a person you barely know. Because you won't tell me that none of us here won't enjoy sex just because we're going through this phase. (P6, 61 years old, married)*

*I think the love between the couple is very important. She said that she's getting old, that it doesn't work. Gives! Because there are many old people who tell me that sex is better now, that they are older than younger, because younger is thinking about getting pregnant. (P7, 60 years old, widow)*

There was no consensus on the conception of sexuality in the reports. It is noted that due to the use of the expressions sexuality, sex and sexual intercourse as synonyms, a distortion of their real meaning has been caused.<sup>8</sup>

It was found that the elderly value the experience of sexuality in old age, seeking freer and more satisfying sexual achievements.

It was evidenced that, although there are physiological changes that decrease libido, the frequency and intensity of intercourse, the elderly women care and enjoy sexual pleasure, claiming

that sexual activity gains quality with age. Other studies, highlight that desire exists, and can be experienced at any age, which causes it to undergo several adaptations throughout its life.<sup>10</sup>

It was also found that some participants believe they can no longer live their sexuality for lack of a partner and could not experience it individually, as shown in the following reports

*I understand that sexuality, when I had a husband, was normal, had no difficulty, had no intrigue, had nothing, was a lot of love. (P2, 68 years old, separated)*

*I also think you need to have love, affection, respect. If you don't have it, it's not sex. Now I have no husband, but when I had it was wonderful. (P7, 60 years old, widow)*

*I had five children, I'm already in the third generation, it was very good, I have nothing to complain about, while it lasted, it was very good. Today, I no longer live my sexuality. (P10, 67 years, separate)*

Given these findings, it is essential to clarify, to society and the elderly, that even in the absence of a partner, it is possible to seek other forms of pleasure and that sexual identity is not determined only by the presence of the other.<sup>8</sup>

It is inferred that the conception of the elderly has some limitations, which remained from youth until the present moment. It is necessary to promote discussions with the theme at all stages of life, because sexuality is still under construction throughout the course of the human being.<sup>17</sup>

#### ♦ Experience of sexuality in old age

It is proposed to discuss, in this category, the experience of sexuality, as well as the limitations encountered by the elderly when experiencing sexuality during the aging process and the means of adaptation used to overcome the difficulties.

It is understood that old age is a continuous process, bringing implications in the morphological, functional and psychological areas, which cause loss of functional and cognitive capacity.<sup>18</sup> It is known that this new situation can influence the execution of activities of daily life and work, interfering in the way of thinking and acting and in interpersonal and social relationships.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding sexuality, it was observed that countless changes are faced, among them, the reduction of libido, a factor evidenced in the interviewees' statements.

*When I was young, it was worth it, but now, at my age, my daughter, to me, whatever, whatever. My husband is hardly home and his age, too ... Then, practically, I'm even used to it. (P1, 63 years old, married)*

*I think now, no one really feels that horny anymore, but those things when you're young, there's no fire, no more agitated, everything is much weaker. (P2, 68 years old, separated)*

*I think, like that, we are over 50 and it is getting very different from when we are young. (P5, 66 years old, married)*

*I had sex several times in one night, I liked it today is totally different, we take eight days, ten days to have a relationship and no longer feel that horny of old. (P6, 61 years old, married)*

*There is no more that pique to be leaving, to be doing the "nudes", fantasies. (P9, 60 years old, married)*

It is noticed that the sexual desire of the elderly is expressed with lower frequency and disposition, when compared to that of their youth, however, it is noteworthy that it did not disappear.

The decrease in libido is justified by the reduction in hormone production caused by menopause, the phase experienced by women at this stage of life, causing hormonal and metabolic variations that cause changes in the body, such as decreased vaginal lubrication at the time of intercourse.<sup>5</sup> This aspect was clarified in P6's report

*From that time to today, the woman no longer has that horny she had, she feels the dryness through menopause, you lose your will because of it and all this influences the relationship in old age. (P6, 61 years old, married)*

It is noteworthy that, coupled with these hormonal changes, erectile dysfunction of partners was pointed as a hindrance to sexual practice. It is believed that the use of drugs for the treatment of hypertension is the main justification for the problem raised by the interviewees.

*My husband has a blood pressure problem, he takes these blood pressure drugs and says he ends the man very early. I already have a long time that I don't know what sex is anymore. For me, until there is a time that gives a little fire, but is unable to put out the fire because the hose is a little weak. (P5, 66 years old, married)*

*You know that with old age you have diseases, you have problems that come, you take prescription drugs. (P9, 60 years old, married)*

It is found that antihypertensive drugs generate adverse effects that impair sexual activity, so in most cases, the dysfunction occurs more due to the effect of the drug, than due to the disease itself, because it promotes the change in hormone levels sexual and neurotransmitters.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the biological aging of the body and treatment with drugs, the deponents reported that family obligations arouse concern and mental tiredness, thus reducing interest in sexual life.

*Because we get older, lose strength and get more worried, because grandson, daughter-in-law, son-in-law comes, and the concern is increasing. And sexuality comes from the mind, the person has to be open-minded to be horny, and the person being worried about everyone doesn't feel like it. (P5, 66 years old, married)*

*You get a certain age and you're not up to sex anymore, the head doesn't work well either. (P9, 60 years old, married)*

In view of their daily responsibilities, household chores, child-rearing and grandchildren, women develop stress, which is due to all the obligations they assume during their daily routine. It is pointed out that some get tired both physically and psychologically, which impairs their libido.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to understand that sexuality is a necessity of the elderly, so it is necessary to recognize the aging of the body, accept the changes caused by this factor and seek strategies to deal with the limitations.<sup>5</sup> It is clear that the family must offer support and support in the face of difficulties faced by older people that may interfere with their sex life.

It is observed, with the physiological changes strengthened by increasing age, that the need to adapt to the new physical condition arises. It is necessary to look for ways to minimize the negative effects of aging.

It is known that there are several ways to improve sex life, as there are several erotic products available in the pharmaceutical market, such as lubricants, which are extremely important for older women who suffer from vaginal dryness.<sup>21</sup> The use of these devices was approached in a non-expressive way.

*So, nothing is more like before, but it has its ointments and other things that you can use to give more pleasure and it goes the way it works. (P6, 61 years old, married)*

Age is considered to interfere with some aspects of the relationship in this new phase and sexual experiences enable the couple to achieve personal fulfillment, greater intimacy and complicity, which is reflected in the enrichment of human relationships.<sup>9</sup>

*My husband works out and, when we feel a little fire, he is not at home, then you will pass it there, until, one day, it ends, but not because of that, the love for our husband ends. When he's at home, that's fine, we give a little girlfriend, sometimes when I'm not in the mood, I say I have a headache and he gets it. (P1, 63 years old, married)*

*And, it's not just because you're married that you have to serve the man, no, you have to have an understanding between the couple. If you don't feel pleasure, you have to talk. He will understand. And also the love that is serious, respected by your spouse, you have a total confidence. Everything flows through love and sincerity. (P6, 61 years old, married)*

It is shown that aging and the beliefs of the elderly interfere in the experience of sexuality, however, the relationship of affection and respect established between the couple allows better experiences and, above all, strengthens the love relationship of complicity and understanding.

CONCLUSION

It was observed that older women conceive of sexuality as a viable experience in old age even in the face of bodily and functional limitations linked to aging. An expanded conception of sexuality was revealed and the interviewees pointed out the evolution in the discussion about the theme, although a table that is noticeable when dealing with the theme is noticeable.

There is a change regarding the conception of the elderly about the purpose of the sexual act, since it was seen only as a mere means of reproduction, however, today, it is associated with the need to feel pleasure and to be sexually satisfied. The need for mutual affection and understanding between the couple is pointed out as a requirement for the experience of sexuality in old age.

The research is relevant, as it shows the importance of discussing the theme of sexuality among elderly women, aiming to demystify the view that is limited to the sexual act. The need for sensitization of health professionals to promote the exercise of sexuality in old age is pointed out.

Only elderly women were included, given that elderly men have cultural issues regarding sexuality and masculinity that need to be investigated in order to promote a better experience of sexuality in old age. It is suggested that further studies addressing this public be developed.

It is noteworthy that health professionals, especially nursing professionals, should consider the conceptions of elderly women in relation to sexuality when building, with these women, the unique therapeutic project, envisaging integral care for the elderly, especially in the context of primary health care.

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