

Maternal Violence Against Children: A Brief Literature Review

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Abstract

Domestic Violence against Children and Adolescents (DVCA) is considered a social and public health problem, which occurs in the private space of the family. Mothers are among those who most violate their children because they are the main ones responsible for their care. This review analyzed the articles published in the last 12 years that dealt with maternal violence. It was found that most of the studies were qualitative, written in Portuguese, carried out in Brazil, and in the area of psychology. The high production by Brazilian authors shows that this phenomenon has become visible in the country. Physical violence and neglect were the most highlighted and the mothers participating in the studies were mostly from lower socioeconomic classes. There is a gap regarding the inclusion of mothers with other socioeconomic characteristics and from other countries. The content of the articles provided a wealth of information about the life histories and personalities of these women, but only a minority explored the relational vicissitudes of the mother-child dyads, which could result in more comprehensive and effective intervention proposals in the context of DVCA.

Introduction

Domestic Violence Against Children and Adolescents (DVCA) is considered a social and public health problem, which occurs in the private space of the family when the adult responsible for the care abuses their power of authority to inflict physical, emotional and/or negligent damage on those under their responsibility [1]. This DVCA results in serious disturbances in the identity and personality of children and adolescents [2-5]. Mothers are among those who most attack and neglect their children for reasons such as: spending more time with the children and adolescents; being the only or main person responsible for raising and disciplining them; having to reconcile motherhood with tasks inside and outside the home, which generates overload and stress; and taking their existential frustrations and personal affirmation difficulties out on them; among other reasons. It is also a problem that affects all socioeconomic classes [6].

The concept “myth of maternal love” was coined by Badinter (1985) in order to deconstruct the idealization around motherhood, which crystallizes the woman in a loving and benevolent role, removing all humanity from her. This romanticized view imposes a heavy social burden on women, erases their individualities, disregards the particularities of their life contexts, and overloads them with high expectations. This may result in serious consequences such as abortion, abandonment and intrafamily violence. The importance of maternal care for the personality development of children and adolescents is indisputable; however, the criticism of Badinter (1985) implies the conviction that motherhood is a construction [6,7]. Given the above, mothers who perpetrate violence against their children challenge the ideology that every woman is born with an instinct to be a loving mother. Additionally, because it is a complex public and social health problem, it deserves attention from the scientific community. Therefore, this review aimed to analyze the articles published in recent years that dealt with maternal violence. The databases used for the research were LILACS, SciELO and PsycINFO. The descriptors chosen were “maternal violence”, “maternity AND violence” and “maternal attitude AND violence”.

Results and Discussion

The combination of descriptors identified 1435 articles (158 in LILACS; 1153 in PsycINFO; and 124 in SciELO). These were submitted to the following inclusion and exclusion criteria: a) referring to adult women who assault or neglect children and adolescents; b) studies derived from academic research or case reports from the professional practice (excluding theoretical studies or literature reviews); and c) scientific articles (excluding theses, dissertations and book chapters). After the application of these criteria, 16 articles were retained, which comprised the sample of the present review. Considering the amplitude of the time interval chosen for the selection, the number of studies that met the criteria was low. Most of them (9 articles) were written in Portuguese and carried out in Brazil, an indication that the DVCA is a common theme that is widely investigated in the Brazilian academic environment. There was an increase in publications from 2014, with 2020 being the year with the most publications (3 articles). The first author's field of study was mainly Psychology (10 articles), followed by Nursing (5 articles) and Anthropology (1 article). Regarding the type of study, 10 articles were results of qualitative research and 2 of quantitative research. The others were case reports of the professional practice and a documentary analysis of a film, included because of the pertinence of the discussion about the phenomenon of maternal violence. Most of the studies on the origins of maternal violence proposed a transgenerational perspective for analysis and interpretation, which revisits these women's past to understand how the formation of their personality occurred based on the quality of their primary relationships [5,8]. This is because the way they were nurtured is closely linked to how they experience motherhood [9]. The publications showed that the life history of these mothers includes losses of close family members, ruptures of bonds, situations of alcoholism, poverty, intrafamily violence and the absence of an intimate and continuous relationship with a care figure [9-16].

Due to the deprivations they were exposed to, these women exhibited a fragility in the structuring of their personality, characterized by disorganization, limited autonomy, rigid self-representations, and a fragile identity. They also found it difficult to establish affective bonds, to identify with a role or function and sustain it over time, to interpret everyday life situations, and to find appropriate solutions to be empathetic, to express affection and control aggressive impulses [15-19]. These fragilities led these mothers to establish unstable, inflexible, stereotyped bonds permeated by omnipotence with their children. These characteristics prevented them from understanding their children and adolescents in their



singularities. Despite this, it was highlighted that mothers who felt guilt for their attitudes and/or made efforts to mobilize other care strategies for their children (other than violence), were more permeable to social and psychological interventions and, therefore, were more likely to transform the mother-child bond [17]. The literature [20-22] presented risk and protective factors for the generational (non) reproduction of violence by mothers who had a troubled life history. The quantitative studies [20,21] revealed a positive correlation between physical violence against children and the following conditions: favorable attitude to violence in adult life; perception that the violence suffered in the past was legitimate; young age of the child who is under their responsibility; parental stress linked to the child's temperament; marital violence [20]; higher levels of poverty and social exclusion of the family; absence of husband/partner, leading to an overload with the accumulation of tasks inside and outside the home; excessive crying or actions of the child that are out of control; and violence perpetrated by these women against their partner or other family members [21].

The protective factors that helped the mothers not to reproduce the abuse with their children were: the existence of other significant people in the lives of the mothers, who formed a good identification model; individual psychotherapy, which helped them to elaborate and construct new meanings for traumatic experiences; emotional maturity encouraged by pregnancy and the care needs of the children (which, in some cases, could have the opposite effect); and personal characteristics such as desire for change, autonomy, flexibility, good problem-solving skills and planning for the future [22]. Although the life history of these mothers was marked by deprivation and unfavorable environmental conditions, the literature is cautious, stating that the studies conducted so far can only offer a non-deterministic understanding of this phenomenon. They were unanimous in declaring that, in adult life, these women could develop psychological resources and count on the support of the environment to transform their traumas and not reproduce the violence they suffered [8,23-25].

Mothers living in vulnerable neighborhoods of Buenos Aires considered that verbal, psychological and physical aggression was acceptable when it was intended to protect their children, to teach limits and when it was accompanied by other care actions, such as feeding, supervision and health care. The intent behind the violence was highlighted as a differentiating factor in what was or was not good care. Due to the participants' divergent opinions regarding what constituted violence, the authors of this study associated its meanings with the subjective understanding, life history, and cultural, social, and economic context of those who perpetrate it [26]. One study found and selected for this review investigated the perceptions of children and adolescents about the maltreatment suffered. The authors described the maternal communication as self-centered, centered on the mother's own emotional states, geared toward unrealistic aspirations about herself and her children, motivated by psychic frustrations, and generally used to lie and attack. The children's reaction faced with this mismatch was to feel fear, hopelessness, sadness and distrust. However, they listed resources that could help them cope with maternal violence: being able to name the experiences and have them validated; building a good bond with other significant people; being resilient; and counting on a third person who mediates the relationship between them and their mother [27].

All family members who live directly or indirectly with violence are negatively affected by it, however, the quality and extent of the damage will depend on the individual experience, the personal coping resources and the family configuration of each child/adolescent. Some common symptoms in victimized children and adolescents are anxiety, depression, suicidal ideations, substance use, eating disorders, aggression, antisocial behavior, learning problems, and instability in interpersonal relationships [5]. In general, the published articles that focus their attention on children and adolescents who are victims of domestic violence [2-5] reiterate the negative consequences of aggression for the psychological and emotional development in childhood and adolescence [28].

Conclusion

The high production of articles by Brazilian authors concerning maternal violence against children indicates that this phenomenon has become visible in the country. It is significantly present in many families, but it is also being reported more frequently. The identification of the consequences of this phenomenon on the children, as well as on the mother herself, worried the professionals, who sought guidance to act both at the actual moment and in the prevention of future difficulties. The promulgation of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente, 1990) [29] and the Law of Spanking (Lei da Palmada, 2014) [30] sought to establish guidelines for coping with and intervening in this problem in the public sphere, therefore, this

brought more visibility to the phenomenon. However, it was noticeable that physical violence and neglect were the most emphasized aspects in the investigations, indicating that psychological and verbal violence, which do not leave visible marks, often remain concealed.

Mothers mainly attack/neglect their children because they are the main person responsible for their care, which justifies the emphasis of most of these studies on the violence perpetrated by them. In this sense, the scientific productions provided a wealth of information about the life history and personality of these women. Considering that violence pervades all socioeconomic groups, it is noteworthy that the majority of studies identified in this review solely focused on women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who are more disadvantaged and vulnerable from a socioeconomic perspective. One of the possible explanations for this would be that these families are the focus of greater attention and intervention from the social welfare services and, therefore, access to their homes is easier. In this sense, there is an important gap in relation to the inclusion of mothers with other socioeconomic characteristics and also from other countries, since culture is one of the determining factors in the phenomenon of violence. Furthermore, with the exception of the investigation by Bedoya and Giraldo [17,27], no studies were found that deeply explored the phenomenon of maternal violence from a relational perspective. In other words, there were no studies that included both mothers and children as concurrent participants, which would allow for an understanding of how the relationship between them is established in these situations, as well as the impacts of this dysfunctional relationship on the dyad. Additionally, giving greater emphasis to the resources and potentialities of these families could result in more comprehensive and effective intervention proposals for addressing DVCA.

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