

21/06/2016

Importance of Shelter in Coping with the Repercussions of Violence Against Women



The aim of shelters for women in situations of intimate violence is to ensure assistance and protection of the physical and psychological integrity of women and their minor children who are in imminent risk of death. Based on interviews with 12 women who had experienced situations of violence and had been taken in by shelters in Brazil, this study analysed the impact of the process on the familial relational dynamics with the aim of discovering the effectiveness of these services.

Author: iStock.com/prawny.

Violence in the family context is characterized by the actions or omissions that undermine the family members' well-being and their physical and psychological integrity or freedom. Violence within a family is also seen as a paradox, in that the relational dynamics established between the offender and the offended are based on a co-dependency between affection and aggression, which is expressed through the presence of ambivalent feelings. The search for help and strategies to cope with violence can occur when it reaches an extreme situation where there is a threat to women's lives. Among the sheltering institutions for women in situations of violence, there are the women's shelters. They are entitled to ensure assistance and protection of the physical and psychological integrity of women and their minor children who are in imminent risk of death.

Women in situations of violence are sent to these shelters by protection agencies or by the

police when they find their lives are at risk. The time women spend in these shelters varies according to each case, depending on the psychological and safety conditions they are provided with in order to be reintegrated in society. Women's shelters are considered an important feature in the support network to cope with violence, since it provides security and teams of professionals that promote care and support for women, additionally allowing moments for them to reflect upon their lives and helping them to create strategies to address the problem of violence.

According to what was mentioned above, this study aims to analyse the repercussions of the process of sheltering on the relational dynamics of the families of women in situations of violence. The relevance of this scientific study, in face of the small number of studies in the area, is due to the necessity of investigating the efficacy of the women's shelters in regard to the service provided. The focus of this study is to reflect upon the improvement of the public policies to cope with violence against women as well as on the professional practices found in women's shelters. Also, it is to develop appropriate and strategic assistance that may help to intervene in the family violence cycle.

This is a qualitative study of interviews with 12 women in Brazil who have experienced violence in the family context and were welcomed into a women's shelter. The data collection took place at the Secretary of Social Assistance, and was scheduled according to the availability of the women. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. The interview questions consisted of matters related to socio-demographic aspects, women's relationship with the perpetrator of the violence, the impact of violence, and the coping strategies used. The data collected was organized into two categories of analysis that aimed to reach the purpose of this research: 1) the characteristics of family dynamics before sheltering and 2) the elaboration of strategies for coping with violence during sheltering.

With regard to the *characteristics of the family dynamics before being sheltered*, the trigger points of violence were jealousy, distrust, betrayal and abuse of alcohol and other drugs. The existence of a disease or disorder was mentioned by the participants as a possible explanation and/or justification for the occurrence of violence. The results of this study also showed that episodes of violence were present at different stages of the life cycle of the family, such as pregnancy, family with young children, couple separation and the attempt of it, all of which seen as horizontal stressors.

With regard to women's permanence in the relationship with a perpetrator of violence, some participants reported a desire to follow the family standards of life such as keeping the marriage until the end of life and/or not separating from their partners due to religious beliefs about marriage. Likewise, the participants mentioned ambivalent feelings about the perpetrator of the violence, such as love and disappointment, hope and fear, especially when considering positive traits of their partners even after recurrent episodes of violence. Emotional consequences of violence left visible and invisible marks. The former relates to physical violence and the latter, to feelings of anxiety and depression as main symptoms of psychological distress, and feelings of shame, fear and humiliation.

Accordingly, with regard to the *appearance of coping strategies in situations of violence*, the participants found personal resources and access to institutions that enabled them to cope and/or withdraw from the cycle of violence. The search for psychological help, the police and social services composed the problem-focused strategies, which led the participants to the women's shelter and to have psychological assistance which began right after they left it. For the participants, talking about violence and the ways to overcome it were considered

important factors in addressing the problem. For the participants, their permanence in the shelter provided them with the chance to reflect on their lives and rethink of certain behaviours that could be modified in the future. Moreover, the shelters also contributed to the empowerment of the women, to the rescuing of their dignity and to the potentiality in the search for strategies to cope with the problem.

This study, in turn, was able to show that contact with those outside of the family system, characterized by the demand for the intervention of friends and professionals at the women's shelter, allowed them to break the boundaries of the violence routine in the family. Based on the data collected in this study, the hardening of the family relations and the rupture of the bonds with the networks of reference contribute to the permanence of these women in the situations of violence. This can happen for both their social isolation as well as the obscurity for finding resources to leave their condition as subjects of violence.

The shelter was essential in order to help the participants to cope with the situation, by allowing them to re-establish their affectional bonds, by means of reflection about their own experience. The women's shelter is also seen as an important resource among many others that may contribute for the life protection of women in situations of violence as well for the recovery of their dignity and citizenship. The results of the present study contribute to a reflection upon the establishment and improvement of sheltering and intervention strategies, as well the establishment of public policies which are engaged in the promotion of health and of the right of citizenship of the women and their family members in situations of violence.

Scheila Krenkel

Carmen Leontina Ojeda Ocampo Moré

Centro de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas - Federal University of Santa Catarina (Brazil)

scheilakrenkel@gmail.com, carmen.more@ufsc.br

Leonor Maria Cantera Espinosa

Department of Social Psychology - UAB

leonor.cantera@uab.cat

References

Krenkel, S.; Moré, C.; Cantera, L. M.; Silveira, S.; Cunha, C. [Resonances arising from Sheltering in the Family Dynamics of Brazilian Women in situations of Violence](#). *Universitas Psychologica*. 2015, vol. 14, num. 4, p. 1245-1258. doi: 10.11144/Javeriana.upsy14-4.rdad.

[View low-bandwidth version](#)