

BREAKING THE SILENCE: REPORTS OF ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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Abstract: Sexual violence has been present in society since ancient times. Despite constant ethical reflections in society and legal advances, this evil has not been exterminated. The objective was to know the profile of sexual violence reported by schoolchildren. Cross-sectional study, with a stratified random sample, data collected through questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Ceará with opinion number 1,819,159. A total of 843 adolescents and young people aged 15 to 24 participated. Sexual violence was reported by 59 (7%) and occurred on average at 10.3 years of age and in more than 30% of cases aggression committed by father and stepfather. Among those who suffered sexual violence, more than twice as many were female ($p=0.003$), they were 8.6 times more likely to report that they did not have a good relationship with the people they lived with ($p<0.000$), girls had 2.38 times more likely to have become pregnant early and 80.4% of those who suffered sexual violence said they did not want to talk about it. Given this reality, early, multisectoral intervention is suggested to prevent sexual violence among adolescents and young people.

Keywords: Sexual Offenses, Violence, Sexual and Reproductive Health, Adolescent.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence can be understood as any lewd act contrary to the victim's will, which exceeds his/her capacity to understand or harms his/her dignity and right to freedom.

Despite reaching all age strata, children and adolescents are the predominant victims of this crime, as they usually do not have the tools to defend themselves, either due to immaturity or failure in social protection. Thus, it constitutes a serious public health problem, with repercussions for moral,

intellectual and social development, as well as for sexual and reproductive health (WHO, 2017).

A report on rape in Brazil points out that of the total notifications that occurred in 2011, in more than 70% of the cases the victims were children and adolescents, more than half under 13 years old and of black or brown race. The report points out that the psychological consequences are devastating, since these children and adolescents are in the process of building self-esteem, which can compromise their social relationships (CERQUEIRA; COELHO, 2014).

Sexual violence is defined as any conduct that compels a child or adolescent to practice or witness carnal intercourse or any other lewd act, including exposure of the body in photo or video electronically or otherwise (by law n° 13.431, of April 4 de 2017, BRASIL, 2017a, p. 2).

It is the duty of the family, the community, society in general and the government to ensure that each child and adolescent has the opportunity to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially, in conditions of freedom and dignity (BRASIL, 1990).

In the family, children and adolescents find security. It is the model of society that will shape its conduct. The occurrence of sexual violence within the family can affect the social development of that person in training, with greater damage to their physical and psychological health.

For justice, when sexual violence is committed by someone who supposedly has the responsibility to protect, care for or supervise the victim, the penalty is increased by 50% (according to Law 12015/09, BRAZIL, 2009a)

Children and adolescents who suffer sexual abuse do not always seek help directly, but may present nonspecific complaints or somatic illness. Therefore, sexual violence is among

the sneakiest crimes in society, with low detection and punishment of aggressors, since only 10% of cases are reported (CERQUEIRA; COELHO, 2014).

This underreporting can be justified by the vulnerability and immaturity of the victim, such as the close relationship with the aggressor and social and financial issues. Many victims suffer threats and psychological violence in an attempt to prevent the complaint, which can facilitate the chronification of violence.

Children must receive guidance on their sexuality from infancy, preferably at home, with age-appropriate language and content, through a relationship of trust between the child and those responsible. Above all, they must find reference, reception and protection in those responsible.

To combat sexual violence and break the cycle of violence and vulnerability, it is essential to know the profile of victims of sexual violence, the characteristics that are repeated in this type of violence and the profile of the aggressors. These data support the implementation of effective public policies for the prevention, care and protection of people in situations of violence (BRASIL, 2015).

Faced with this problem, the objective was to know the profile of sexual violence reported by schoolchildren.

METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional and descriptive study carried out in three state public schools in the city of Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil, randomly selected among the three Superintendencies of State Schools in Fortaleza. The schools served similar audiences, the three being located in peripheral neighborhoods, with elementary school II and high school students.

The study population consisted of high school adolescents and young people from state schools in the city of Fortaleza. In 2016, 77,627 enrollments were made in regular

secondary education in state schools in Fortaleza (BRASIL, 2017b).

For the sample calculation, an error of 5% and a confidence level of 99% were admitted. The safety index of 25% of excess participants was adopted, as sample loss is expected. 659 participants were obtained. By adopting the safety index, the estimated sample increased to 824 participants, but a small variation in the final composition of the sample was accepted.

Adolescents and young people aged between 15 and 24 were included and those who answered the questionnaire incompletely, with possible damage to data analysis, were excluded. By stratified random sampling, the participants were approached in the classroom, in the groups selected for research.

The invitation was made through the Free and Informed Consent Form (ICF) and the consent form for those under 18 years of age. Those responsible for underage schoolchildren were given a specific TCLE to consent to the child's participation in the research.

Data were collected from March 2015 to November 2016, through a questionnaire and the data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 22.0 software. The variables were related to each other and to the sociodemographic data using Pearson's Chi-square or Fisher's Likelihood Ratio to verify the existence of an association.

The study complied with the criteria of autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice and equity established in Resolution No. respect for research participants, the scientific community and the State. The project was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Ceará under Certificate of ethical assessment presentation 61014716.6.0000.5534 and approved on November 14, 2016 under opinion 1,819,159.

The present work uses data collected during the construction of the thesis: "Program of

educational interventions for the prevention of STI/HIV among adolescents and young people”, presented to the Postgraduate Program in Clinical Care in Nursing and Health, at the State University of Ceará. The results presented here are unprecedented and did not form part of the results presented in the thesis.

RESULTS

A total of 843 adolescents and young people participated in the study, most of them male (435; 51.7%), with a mean age of 16.5 years (standard deviation – $sd=1.4$ years), 467 (56.1%) declared themselves brown, 365 (43.3%) were in the second year of high school, 238 (47.8%) came from a nuclear family (father, mother and children), with an average monthly family income of 2042 reais ($sd=1935$). .8 reais) and an average of 2.08 assets in the family ($sd=1.1$ assets).

Of the 843 participants, 59 (7%) reported having experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives. There was no significant difference between most of the characteristics of the participants who reported or did not report sexual violence.

However, it was observed that among the participants who reported experiencing sexual violence ($n=59$), the females (40; 67.8%) were more than twice as high as the males (19; 32.2%)., with a significant difference between the sexes ($p=0.003$).

Although the majority in both groups reported a good family relationship (528; 94.1%), those who experienced sexual violence were 8.6 times more likely to report that they did not have a good relationship with the people they lived with (11; 27.5%), when compared to those who did not experience this type of violence (22; 4.2%), with a statistically significant difference ($p<0.000$),

Adolescents and young people reported having experienced sexual violence for the

first time in chronic cases, on average at 10.3 years of age ($sd=3.72$). Most of the participants suffered sexual violence at the age of seven (9; 16.4%), followed by 12 (7; 12.7%), nine or 15 years of age (6; 10.9% each). The earliest age of occurrence of sexual violence was two years and the latest was 17 years.

Sexual violence was mainly practiced by aggressors classified as “no bond” (21; 38.2%), which included neighbors, unknown or not included in the other options. Sexual violence committed by a father and stepfather corresponded to more than 30% of the cases (17; 30.9%). When including uncles and cousins, this frequency reaches almost half of the cases (27; 49.1%), which may explain the significantly greater difference observed in the reports of those who did not have a good family relationship among those who experienced sexual violence.

The age range of occurrence of sexual violence varied significantly according to the profile of the aggressor. In the case of family aggressors, the violence occurred mainly in childhood, up to 10 years of age in 69.2% ($n=18$) of the cases. Aggressors with no known relationship also victimized more children up to 10 years of age in 52.4% of cases ($n=11$). In cases where the aggressor had an intimate relationship with the victim, the age at which the violence occurred was later, after 14 years (4; 66.7%), which coincides with the phase in which many young people are establishing affective relationships and starting sex life. (fisher 16.091; $p=0.003$).

Study participants were asked if they had ever become pregnant. The study showed that not having suffered sexual violence was a protective factor for early pregnancy among girls, since those who suffered sexual violence were 2.38 times more likely to have already been pregnant when compared to those who did not experience this type of violence.

Participants were asked if they wanted to talk to someone about sexual violence, but the vast majority of adolescents who suffered sexual violence said they did not want to talk about it (45; 80.4%) and four abstained from answering. For the others (11; 19.6%), a digital channel was opened where they could schedule a time for the conversation.

DISCUSSION

Victims of sexual violence were predominantly female in this and other surveys carried out in Brazil. In addition, the occurrence of violence occurred mainly in early adolescence by family aggressors or with a close relationship with the victim (OLIVEIRA, et al. 2014; MIRANDA, et al. 2014; JUSTINO, et al. 2015). This difference may also be due to the fact that boys report less the occurrence of sexual violence (BECHTEL; BENNETT, 2018).

Girls often fail to identify what the law, researchers and educators describe as sexual harassment and abuse. So, how can we expect the denunciation and rupture of the culture of violence if there is no understanding of violence as violence? (HEATHER, 2014).

In addition, sexual abuse rarely goes unattended. It is common to have physical, emotional abuse, neglect, family violence and other situations of violence associated with sexual victimization, as well as threats for the victim not to report their aggressor (WARD et al., 2018).

In this research, the presence of poor relationships between schoolchildren and the family was found more frequently among those who experienced sexual violence. The family is a space of protection for the full development of children and adolescents. To achieve the full protection provided for in the Child and Adolescent Statute, it is necessary to protect the family by strengthening family relationships and a culture of peace

(PEREIRA; CONCEIÇÃO; BORGES, 2017).

Due to the low average age of victims of sexual violence, they may not know how to deal with the situation or how to ask for help. Vague complaints and sudden changes in behavior can be indicative that something is wrong. Thus, parents and professionals who care for this child must investigate suspicions of sexual violence or other types of violence.

It is recommended that health professionals maintain a high degree of suspicion for any sign of sexual violence (BRASIL, 2017a). In this case, it is also necessary to carry out the notification, as this data will contribute to the construction of social protection policies and to guarantees the rights of victims.

Society as a whole must be aware of the need to investigate and deal with cases of consummated or simply suspected violence (when it comes to underage victims).

Adolescents and young people reported having sexual violence for the first time in chronic cases at an average of 10.3 years of age, with more than half of the reports before the age of 10 years.

Sexual violence perpetrated so early increases the chances of a person suffering sexual violence at other stages of life and becoming a perpetrator of sexual violence. Thus, it is essential to join efforts to build policies and implement primary prevention programs among young people, in order to prevent early victimization, victimization in adulthood and minimize the consequences for mental and physical health associated with experiencing sexual violence (MERRICK et al., 2018).

Regarding the perpetrators of sexual violence, there was a difference between the victim's age at the occurrence of violence and the close relationship with the aggressor. When the perpetrator had a family relationship with the victim, violence occurred mainly up to 10 years of age.

The literature shows that, in the case of sexual violence against children, 24.1% of the aggressors are family members. Unknown aggressors are more frequent as victims get older. In general, most aggressors are male and in 70% of rapes they are relatives, boyfriends, friends or acquaintances of the victim (BRASIL, 2017c).

In this research, the age at which violence occurred in cases where the aggressor had an intimate/romantic relationship with the victim was later, after 14 years of age. Similarly, the literature points out that sexual violence perpetrated by an intimate partner occurs mainly from adolescence and the first years of adulthood, which coincides with the period of establishment of more lasting affective relationships. In addition to sexual violence, in these dysfunctional relationships physical, financial, emotional abuse and controlling behaviors are frequent (WHO, 2010).

Among girls, those who experienced sexual violence at any time in their lives were 2.38 times more likely to report early pregnancy when compared to those who did not experience this type of violence ($p < 0.000$). Sexual initiation and early sexual initiation (before the age of 15) were also more frequent among those who suffered sexual violence. Similarly, a study observed a higher occurrence of sexual behavior problems after childhood sexual abuse (ALLEN, 2017).

Sexual violence can bring several damages to the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents and young people, as it favors risky practices and the occurrence of unwanted outcomes. Other problems arising from sexual violence include physical, emotional traumas such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, drug use and nonspecific somatic complaints (TRACY; MACIAS-KONSTANTOPOULOS, 2017).

Participants were asked if they wanted to talk to someone about it, but most of those

who had experienced sexual violence said they didn't want to talk. Young people may be afraid to talk about it because they are not aware of their rights and legal protection.

In this research, participants who experienced sexual violence and who had a good family relationship were more likely to declare that they did not want to talk to someone about it. Based on this result, it can be interpreted that good family relationships favor dialogue and function as a support and protection network, essential for the full development of children and adolescents. And the latter, when feeling safe and protected, has less need to talk about the subject with a person who is not part of his family circle.

Differently from what was found in this research, a study carried out in Kenya showed that when the child or adolescent had someone who represented security and protection, they were more likely to report sexual violence. Which in turn increased the chances of seeking care in health and protection services and receiving psychosocial support (BOUDREAU, 2018).

In addition to a good family relationship being a protective factor for sexual violence among children or adolescents, a good relationship between children and their parents or other parental figures contributes to better post-traumatic recovery and fewer psychological sequelae from sexual violence. In fact, parental support after violence may be more significant for overcoming violence than violence-related factors (BECHTEL; BENNETT, 2018).

Therefore, to prevent or treat this abuse, it is necessary to act on the risk and protection factors. Several programs have been tested to prevent sexual violence by improving adolescents and young people's understanding of what sexual violence is, reducing the number of occurrences, raising awareness of potential aggressors and informing victims

about the support offered by health and safety services (WEINGARTEN). et al., 2018).

One of the approaches to preventing sexual violence is promoting changes in social norms, gender culture, empowering girls and women to adopt preventive attitudes, creating protective environments and supporting survivors. Among boys, there must be encouragement to take a stand against sexist behaviors and attitudes, behaviors that promote violence and involve them as essential allies in the prevention of sexual violence (LATE, 2018).

While these cultural changes are sought, the entire population must unite in combating the culture of violence and learn about support services for victims of sexual violence.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that adolescents and young victims of sexual violence have a heterogeneous profile. However, most reports showed that sexual violence occurred among girls under 10 years of age, perpetrated by family aggressors.

A good family relationship was seen as a protective factor for sexual violence and that sexual violence had consequences for the sexual and reproductive health of the participating adolescents and young people.

Most stated that they did not want to talk about it, especially those who had a good family relationship. What can hide the fear of talking about the subject or the sufficiency of family support to overcome the violence.

Prevention measures must be carried out with young people of school age, before initiating romantic-affective relationships. It reinforces the need for cultural changes related to female empowerment, reduction of differences between genders, valuing women and fighting the culture of acceptance of violence.

The study is limited to the reality of young schoolchildren from the state public network in the city of Fortaleza and cannot be extrapolated beyond this population. The study brought data on sexual violence declared voluntarily by the participants and did not consider the reports of sexual violence that occurred during the study period or in the age group of the participants.

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