

# REFLECTIVE GROUPS WITH MEN TO PREVENT CONJUGAL VIOLENCE: HOW TO ORGANIZE THEM

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## GRUPOS REFLEXIVOS COM HOMENS PARA PREVENÇÃO DA VIOLÊNCIA CONJUGAL: COMO ORGANIZÁ-LOS

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## GRUPOS REFLEXIVOS CON HOMBRES PARA LA PREVENCIÓN DE LA VIOLENCIA CONYUGAL: CÓMO ORGANIZARLOS

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**Objective:** to describe material the construction of a reflective group for men intending to prevent and cope conjugal violence. **Method:** descriptive study, whose reference was the Critical-Emancipatory Perspective of Paulo Freire. The participants were 44 prosecuted men in Salvador, Bahia. **Results:** the step by step to construct the reflective group had the following requirements: definition of the didactic-methodological project; human, and financial resources; location for the development of the reflective group; and the gathering of the target population. **Conclusion:** the implementation of these educational spaces is financially and operationally feasible, considering their potential for reducing cases of conjugal violence, which can be replicated by professionals from different fields of activity, in different scenarios and with men from all socio-cultural levels.

**Descriptors:** Violence against Women. Gender-Based Violence. Men. Methodology. Prevention.

*Objetivo:* descrever a construção de um grupo reflexivo para homens com vistas à prevenção e ao enfrentamento da violência conjugal. *Método:* estudo descritivo, tendo como referencial a *Perspectiva Crítico-Libertadora* de Paulo Freire. *O público-alvo foram 44 homens que respondiam processo em Salvador, Bahia. Resultados:* o passo a passo da construção do grupo reflexivo teve os seguintes requisitos: definição do projeto didático-metodológico; obtenção de recursos humanos, materiais e financeiros; escolha do espaço para desenvolvimento do grupo reflexivo e captação do público-alvo. *Conclusão:* a implementação desses espaços educativos apresenta viabilidade financeira e operacional,

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*considerando seu potencial de redução de casos de violência conjugal, podendo ser replicado por profissionais de diferentes áreas de atuação, em diferentes cenários e com homens de todos os níveis socioculturais.*

*Descritores: Violência contra a Mulher. Violência de Gênero. Homens. Metodologia. Prevenção.*

*Objetivo: describir la construcción de un grupo reflexivo para hombres con miras a prevenir y enfrentar la violencia conyugal. Método: estudio descriptivo, tomando como referencia la Perspectiva Crítico-Emancipadora de Paulo Freire. El público fueron 44 hombres respondiendo proceso judicial en Salvador, Bahia. Resultados: el paso a paso en la construcción de los reflejos en el grupo tuvo los siguientes requisitos: definición del diseño didáctico-metodológico; la obtención de recursos humanos, materiales y financieros; la elección del espacio para el desarrollo de grupo reflexivo y captura del público objetivo. Conclusión: la implementación de estos espacios educativos es financiera y operacionalmente factible, considerando su potencial para reducir los casos de violencia conyugal, que pueden ser reproducidos por profesionales de diferentes campos de actividad, en diferentes escenarios y con hombres de todos los niveles socioculturales.*

*Descriptorios: Violencia contra la Mujer. Violencia de Género. Hombres. Metodología. Prevención.*

## Introduction

Conjugal violence is a public health problem. It is responsible for high rates of morbidity and mortality in the female population worldwide. The physical, mental and social impacts of this phenomenon led to the need for developing coping mechanisms, including the implementation of the Law Maria da Penha. This, in addition to increasing the rigor of punishments, recognizes the importance of educational actions directed to the aggressors, although it does not point to the way for their implementation.

These mechanisms for coping and preventing violence, thought and called reflective groups (RG), were considered as a social technology. This is defined as a methodology that can be reapplied, and refers to an innovative development proposal, considering a constructivist approach in the collective participation in the process of organization, development and implementation. It is based on the dissemination of solutions to problems related to health demands, combining the popular knowledge and technical-scientific knowledge.

A world survey showed that, in 2016, approximately 87,300 women were killed, and most of them were murdered by their spouses<sup>(1)</sup>. The survivors usually become physically and mentally sick, with apparent injuries, such as bruises, fractures and burns, in addition to

depressive behavior, such as fear, low self-esteem and sadness<sup>(2-3)</sup>.

Even with all impacts of violence for women's health, only from the 1970's, with the charges and demands from the Feminist Movement, this problem began to gain visibility. Several instruments were created to cope with this reality, such as the first Specialized Women's Police Department (DEAM), implemented in 1985<sup>(4)</sup>. In the legal framework, in 1995, the Law of Special Courts, although this system had not been effective in protecting women, because it covered only offenses of lower offensive potential, in addition to enabling the conversion of the sentence into basic food baskets and the conditional suspension of the proceeding. In this way, men felt unpunished, since they would rarely be arrested due to violence against women<sup>(4)</sup>.

Facing the aforementioned weaknesses in this system, the justice recognized the urgency of a more rigorous law. In this context, in 2006, Law N 11,340 was sanctioned, which created mechanisms to deter, prevent and eradicate all kinds of violence against women. Some of its advances include: emergency protective orders; prohibition of punishment and of giving the subpoena to the aggressor by women; possibility of imprisonment, both in blatant as preventive detention; as well as the need to notify the

woman regarding procedural acts, especially regarding the entry and exit of the offender from prison<sup>(5)</sup>.

The law also provides for the creation of centers of education and rehabilitation for the perpetrators of conjugal violence, who must attend them in a mandatory way, through judicial determination. Nevertheless, the law does not clarify the frequency and quantity of meetings<sup>(5)</sup>. In this sense, there is a social construction based on gender issues that directs men to becoming aggressors and women to submitting themselves to violence<sup>(6-7)</sup>, requiring educational spaces for reflection and awareness for men, with the purpose of not making natural the abuse and enabling behavioral change.

Although the legislation and various studies highlight the importance of these educational spaces, there is little scientific evidence addressing which methodology to use to implement educational groups. The search performed on the issue at Capes database, with temporal cut of 10 years (2008-2018), for representing the milestone of the creation of the National Policy of Integral Care for Men's Health, returned four studies, but none revealed the methodology used<sup>(4,6-8)</sup>. The scarcity of information on the theme reflects the reduced use of Reflective Groups with male perpetrators of conjugal violence in the country.

Among the 26 federal units, only six States (Santa Catarina, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Federal District and Bahia) perform RG with male perpetrators of violence, but do not clarify the methodology used and the organization of such groups, according to a study conducted in Southern Brazil<sup>(7)</sup>. Other studies in Brazil and in the United States addressing groups with male perpetrators of violence do not report how such groups are conducted, which issues they address, how to develop the expected articulation for the accomplishment of these groups<sup>(2,6)</sup>. Among Brazilian states where RG have already been carried out for male perpetrators of violence, the starting point were results of experiences of educational actions with women, which showed the contribution of informational and educational actions for women's empowerment<sup>(2,9)</sup>.

In order to fill this gap in the city of Salvador, Bahia, and share experiences that may subsidize the formulation and implementation of RG and, with it, the operationalization of the law, the objective of this study is to describe the construction of a reflective group for men with the purpose of preventing and coping with conjugal violence.

The Vid@ Group, at the Federal University of Bahia, created the RG. One believes that this is a form of collective intervention, which can contribute to the construction of a free and fair society<sup>(10)</sup>.

## Method

Exploratory, descriptive study, derived from the thesis entitled "Social Technology for Men with the Purpose of Preventing Conjugal Violence", funded by the State Foundation for Research Support of Bahia, and approved by Opinion N 877,905 of the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Bahia. This is an action research cut-off, used as a method to create social technology, whose emphasis in the health area is the popular participation, especially in collective health. The construction of this article based on the second of the five steps of the action research, which are: diagnosis, planning of actions, execution of actions, evaluation and data analysis.

The study scenarios were the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Legal Courts for Peace at Home, located in the city of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. The participants were 44 men prosecuted for conjugal violence at those Courts. The inclusion criteria were: to have attended 75% of the meetings (at least 6 meetings) and to be emotionally able to participate in the study. The men received from the judge a subpoena for participation in the RG, in order to enforce the Law N 11,340/2008, which advocates the participation of men in reflective activities of gender education. Nonetheless, even with mandatory participation in RG, the participation in the survey was free and voluntary. The principle of autonomy was assured, according to Resolution CNS/MS N

466/2012, and the participants were asked to sign the Informed Consent Form (ICF).

The psychologist who is member of the Vid@ Group along with the researchers evaluated the men emotionally. In each cycle of eight meetings, the judge sent us a list with approximately 15 names, totaling about 60 men in five cycles performed. From that moment, with a date already defined, the Vid@ Group made a phone contact to reinforce the date, time and place of meetings. Sixteen men did not participate in 75% of the meetings and, for this reason, were excluded. The RG were performed with 44 men, divided into five cycles: the first, second and fifth cycles were composed of nine men each; the third, of 14 men; and the fourth, of three men.

Data collection was carried out between December 2016 and February 2018, comprising the conjugal violence as a public health problem and the need for actions to cope with the phenomenon. In this sense, aiming at changes in men's behaviors in relation to their relationship with women, five cycles of RG were carried out, with collective participation and suggestions for improvements of the process.

The first RG was performed at the end of 2016, constituting a pilot study, which still required adjustments for implementation over the next few groups. In this way, the focus was the survey of issues those required changes, for a better rearrangement of new RG in the years 2017 and 2018, with four subsequent cycles. The groups were evaluated at the eighth meeting (end of each Reflective Group), in order to check if participants' expectations in relation to the session were reached; if the content, organization, didactic and material resources were adequate, as well as to evaluate preliminarily the efficiency of the RG.

Once the Groups addressed topics linked to sociocultural and gender aspects, the evaluation of the group activities was performed approximately 12 months after the last meeting, through individual interviews with all the men who participated in the cycles. The interval for the last meeting (of evaluative character) was considered essential, so that the participants

could absorb the experience lived in the RG and could report the changes adopted in the way they relate to the family, especially their partners. During the interview, the following question was proposed: "Do you think the participation in the RG changed something in your life with your partner, children, family and work?" The objective was to identify the existence of positive changes in family and marital relationships, and the recurrence, or not, in the proceedings linked to the courts.

The data was collected between the months of December 2016 and February 2018 and were analyzed, using as a reference the Critical-Emancipatory Perspective of Paulo Freire<sup>(10)</sup>.

## Results

This section will present the requirements for developing reflective groups for men prosecuted for conjugal violence. For the elaboration of the RG, the didactic-methodological project was defined, the human, material and financial resources were obtained, the space for developing the RG was selected and a strategy to gather the target population.

### *Definition of the didactic-methodological project*

The first step for the development of RG consisted of defining the project to carry out the educational actions, with the purpose of preventing conjugal violence. This required a research at indexed databases to gather strategies that could be applied to the design of the groups and dimension of impacts of each activity for the male reflection, perception and accountability of their behaviors, and, consequently, behavioral changes for the development of respectful conjugal and family relationships.

The choice of topics was based on the epistemological principle, which values the knowledge brought by subjects and dialog, seeking to overcome limiting situations and change of the worldview, not by replacing the knowledge, but through a dialog based on the

knowledge brought by people. The purpose of creating and implementing RG was to allow for men's reflection on their routine, aiming at the creation and recreation of their praxis based on the experienced conflicts<sup>(11)</sup>. In this sense, the proposal was based on the argument of Paulo Freire, who stated that the empowerment can occur through education of the subjects, and must contribute to a freer and fairer society and to overcoming the various forms of exploitation and domination in force<sup>(10)</sup>.

The themes chosen for implementing the RG were organized into eight meetings aimed at provoking reflections on family, gender, masculinity, violence and peaceful resolution of conflicts, according to Brazilian and international studies on the theme. The meetings were scheduled for Thursdays, which was randomly chosen, from 05:30 p.m. to 07:30 p.m., with the themes and objectives organized after several modifications proposed in the groups, based on a dialogic relationship. After each cycle performed, the men could propose new topics for discussion, considering the social, cultural and economic contexts.

In the first meeting, the RG was presented in order to socialize members with the work team; the 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting with the theme family influence in the formation of the "Me" aimed to incite the value of the family institution and alert to its influence on the behavioral reproduction; the 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting, on the social construction of gender inequality, proposed to clarify which roles and functions assigned to men and women were historically constructed and reproduced; the 4<sup>th</sup> meeting, whose objective was to warn about the consequences of the hegemonic model of "being a man" regarding the male vulnerability to diseases/injuries and the need for new models of masculinities anchored in respect and affection, focused on the theme masculinities and the formation of the "new man"; the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting aimed to cooperate with the understanding of health injuries to which the male population is vulnerable, due to "being a man", and encourage the care with the health and healthy marital relationships; the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting enabled the men's

recognition of disrespectful/violent behaviors and criminal accountability; the 7<sup>th</sup> addressed peaceful resolutions to incite the male perception about precipitating/intensifying elements of conjugal violence and peaceful strategies for conflict resolution; in the 8<sup>th</sup>, and last meeting, there was the evaluation of the impact of the RG for the men's transformation, especially in marital and family relationships.

The strategies used were the active methodologies, with the resource of problematization, use of videos, songs, current stories that made men reflect on the addressed themes. The RG also aimed to include the participation of doctoral applicants for the Vid@ Group, support of advisors and scholars of graduation, called work team (WT). Activities of dispersion were also carried out, with themes of the following meeting, so that men could reflect on their routine, aiming at the creation and recreation of their praxis based on the lived conflicts, as proposed by Paulo Freire<sup>(10)</sup>.

Regarding the temporal clipping, each meeting lasted on average of 2 hours (totaling 16hrs), being reserved 30 min for lunch and socialization of participants. In these moments of relaxation, the men could feel comfortable to share their experiences and perspectives, both in relation to the group as to their conjugal and family relationships. Out of the eight meetings, seven occurred weekly and the latter one-month later, so that men could reflect the transformations that resulted from the experiences in the RG.

#### *Obtaining human, material and financial resources*

The RG, in this experience, was conducted by a work team from Vid@ Group integrated by 4 professors and 15 graduate and postgraduate students who devoted themselves to teaching, research and extension activities about the violence issue, with the purpose of preventing and coping the phenomenon. Members of the law, psychology and social service areas form the human resources that operationalize the RG, although with prevalence of nurses. There

were about SIX meetings with WT prior to the completion of the RG to plan the dynamics that would be carried out.

The necessary material resources are physical space that could guarantee the accommodation of participants with minimal external interruptions; audiovisual equipment for projection, sound and recording; educational materials and tools (cartridge, legal and metro paper, among others) for the didactic-methodological project. It is important to elaborate a checklist for each activity for application by the researchers: reception of the participants, with signature of the individual attendance list, to be delivered to the Court at the end of the RG; delivery of badges and certificate of attendance; assembly of instruments and performance of the educational action; record of speeches and images publicized through codenames; transcription and validation of speeches; purchase and organization of snacks; delivery of financial aid for transportation funding.

The development of RG requires financial support for the funding of all the activities inherent to the reflective group. Specifically regarding technical support, the funding is essential for hiring professionals from all categories.

#### *Choice of the space to develop the RG*

The development of activities required a preferentially easily accessible space. The chosen place was a public school located near the Court, located in a neighborhood in the city center, allowing for the mobility of participants by public transport. The meetings occurred on Thursdays, from 05:30 p.m. to 07:30 p.m., and a member of the WT, usually one of the doctorate students those conducted the meetings, welcomed the participants.

#### *Gathering of the target population*

For the RG to occur, strategies to gather the men, target population, were necessary to direct actions with the purpose of preventing conjugal violence. The criterion for choosing these men,

adopted in this study, was being prosecuted for conjugal violence, which demanded articulations along with the Legal Courts for Peace at Home. However, the proposed method suited to whatever space in which men were inserted - communities, Family Health Strategy (FHS), workers, drivers, among others.

The following strategies to gather men to participate in the RG could be carried out: invitation by psychologists and social workers who belonged to the courts or by members of the Vid@ at waiting rooms, where the men waited for their hearings or judicial subpoena. After this first contact, the phone numbers were recorded for a phone call in the week of meetings, in order to remind of the date, place and time. A phone line was intended to the RG, and male WT members made these phone calls, because it was believed to encourage the dialog, the bond and, consequently, the adherence to educational actions. During the phone call, the survey and the guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity were previously explained.

### **Discussion**

Although there are initiatives for development of RG in the world, the methodologies applied are not disclosed. An example is the Research and Intervention in the Brazilian context about violence, held in 2017, which distanced from intervention programs nationally and internationally disseminated, which focus on women<sup>(8-9)</sup>. In the international scenario, a research carried out in the USA revealed, in low- and middle-income countries, the use of male and female groups focused on community interventions between couples to prevent violence<sup>(11)</sup>. This situation end up hindering the reproduction of actions with men with a focus on violence prevention. The number of meetings considered the national and international socioeconomic context of men whose employment situation tended to be compromised with the criminal proceeding and/or preventive detention<sup>(6,8)</sup>

Among these actions, there stands out spaces for men and women to reflect about



the social construction, which determines the naturalization of gender inequality and the construction of conjugal violence, a problem that affect negatively the quality of life, including the perpetrators of the aggression. In this context, a research on violence performed in Brazil and the United States of America revealed that men see violent attitudes in marital relationships as natural, not realizing that these behaviors harm the entire family<sup>(6,12)</sup>.

Making violence natural can also be understood from the perspective of Paulo Freire, which says that neutrality would be more comfortable, i.e., making violence natural may be more convenient than facing it. In this way, to overcome the reality, understanding and recognizing the phenomenon is fundamental to change the society<sup>(10)</sup>.

Although there is no consensus between researches regarding the duration and interval between the meetings of interventions involving men with the purpose of preventing violence<sup>(8-9)</sup>, the time defined in the reported experience is believed to be essential, so that the experience lived in the RG can affect the lives of its participants, who shall assess how much they are willing and able to change, particularly in the way they relate with family members, especially their partners.

In this way, this low-cost, and easily replicable, didactic-methodological project model can be implemented in various scenarios for different professional categories. This type of proposal is feasible because it can be present in the relational spaces and materialize in the attitudes of the subject, favoring the acceptance and integrality in the health context, especially in primary care<sup>(9)</sup>. In the national scene, similar methodologies are conducted primarily by occupational therapists, psychologists, sociologists and professionals in the social sciences, since previously trained, using psychoeducational perspectives of gender, masculinities, human rights, among others<sup>(13)</sup>.

Regarding the chosen topics, in various places in the world, there are some programs that incorporate the theories of masculinities and gender in their interventions and aim to

transform the harmful standards of masculinity that promote violence, encouraging reflections on the male role in society. These interventions work with men to reflect the marital relationships and challenge the prevailing harmful male standards<sup>(14)</sup>. English programs, such as the M Project and the Men As Partners Program<sup>®</sup>, showed that the interventions based on gender and masculinities can be effective for working in groups with men and can reduce the perpetration of violence<sup>(15-16)</sup>.

It is worth mentioning the fundamental role of professionals that work at health services, especially the nursing, to identify vulnerabilities and/or injuries, such as conjugal violence and the family and social context, with a view to implementing health promotion activities, such as waiting rooms with themes dedicated to prevent and cope with violence<sup>(2)</sup>.

The RG developed by the Vid@ Group differs from the model implemented in activities in the area of Public Security, such as woman's police departments and courts of domestic and family violence<sup>(9)</sup>, since they base on themes such as family, gender and masculinities, health care, peaceful problem solving.

In relation to physical space to carry out the RG, the chosen day was different from that when the RG of women usually occurs, in order not to occur simultaneously, avoiding unpleasant situations between them, such as violation of emergency protective order<sup>(5)</sup>.

The partnership with the Legal Courts for Peace at Home, especially with the psychosocial service, enabled the approach between the work team of the Vid@ and this legal scenario, in order to become familiar with the dynamics of the proceedings, in addition to favoring the access to these, both for the knowledge of the situation reported by the complainant as to clarify questions presented by men during the RG.

A study carried out in Salvador, Bahia, about conjugal violence, highlights the importance of intersectoral articulation to develop strategies aimed at coping with the phenomenon<sup>(2)</sup>. In this experience report, this articulation favored the contact with men who were waiting for the

hearing, when the strategy called “waiting room” was implemented, and the invitation to join the group was made. The social worker and the psychologist also made the invitation during the psychosocial care.

Despite such strategies to gather the male public, the limited participation directed the judge’s decision on the dispatch of the subpoena, thus complying with Law N 11,340, which advocates the participation of men in reflective activities of gender education<sup>(5)</sup>. On the one hand, there is clarity regarding the importance of the voluntary participation of men in the RG, on the other hand, when inserted into a legal-criminal proceeding and facing the naturalization of gender inequality that prevents the recognition of their actions as crime the legal measures become imperative. The need for this determination is confirmed by a research that reveals the lack of spontaneous interest of men to change or blame themselves for their acts, and, even when involved in educational actions, they resist the efforts of the facilitators to express themselves, not adhering to interventions<sup>(9,17)</sup>.

Although limited by not delineating the didactic-methodological strategy of the meetings, which was not the focus of this article, the disclosure of the path to implement these educational spaces, directed to behavioral change of men in terms of how they relate with women, may encourage more symmetrical relations between genders and reduce cases of marital violence. The male reflection, action and participation are believed to constitute an important weapon for preventing and coping with this issue. Furthermore, a limitation of the study refers to not bringing a comparative approach between groups of men based on the presence or absence of the experience of participating in the RG.

## Conclusion

The implementation of the RG as educational spaces for men in order to prevent conjugal

violence is financially and operationally feasible, with low cost, and can be replicated by professionals from different fields of activity, in different scenarios and with men from all socio-cultural levels. Regarding Nursing, this knowledge is essential for the practical field and may be implemented by the FHS in activities geared to the male population, such as the Men’s Saturday Project, which occurs in Basic Care of Salvador (BA), or the Health at School Program (PSE) with adolescents, with a focus on preventing and coping violence.

Such path may contribute to subsidize the development of RG not only in the context of violence courts, as advocated by the Law Maria da Penha, but also within companies, schools, communities, including men without a history of conjugal violence, especially adolescents, since the themes of family, gender, masculinity and peaceful resolution of conflicts are important for the knowledge of all publics. Moreover, for men to participate in spaces for reflection and dialog, in which they can share similar experiences, recognizing the degree of violence of their attitudes.

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## Collaborations:

1 – conception, design, analysis and interpretation of data: Fernanda Matheus Estrela, Nadirlene Pereira Gomes, Andrey Ferreira da Silva, Julia Renata Fernandes Magalhães, Anderson Reis de Souza and Álvaro Pereira;

2 – writing of the article and relevant critical review of the intellectual content: Fernanda Matheus Estrela, Nadirlene Pereira Gomes, Andrey Ferreira da Silva, Julia Renata Fernandes



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3 – final approval of the version to be published: Fernanda Matheus Estrela.

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