

CONFRONTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: THE WORK OF A WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE

ENFRENTAMENTO DA VIOLÊNCIA CONTRA A MULHER: A ATUAÇÃO DE COLETIVO DE MULHERES

AFRONTANDO LA VIOLENCIA CONTRA LAS MUJERES: EL TRABAJO DE UN COLECTIVO DE MUJERES

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Objective: to describe the work of the Calafate Women's Collective to confront violence against women. **Method:** a qualitative, descriptive study carried out in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, between September and November 2020. The research included the reports of nine women who have or have had an institutional link with the aforementioned collective, based on Thematic Oral History, using the digital media for signing the informed consent form and interviews. **Results:** The Collective's work to confront violence against women includes strategies within the community, thus emerging the categories: space for listening to women; space for sharing women's experiences; space for liaison with referral services; and space for referral and/or accompaniment of women to services. **Final considerations:** the Collective promoted actions to confront violence against women, signaling the importance of feminist social organizations as a reference point in the community.

Descriptors: Violence Against Women. Non-Governmental Organization. Social Support. Adaptation, Psychological. Feminism.

Objetivo: descrever a atuação do Coletivo de Mulheres do Calafate para o enfrentamento da Violência Contra a Mulher. Método: estudo qualitativo, descritivo, realizado em Salvador, Bahia, Brasil, entre setembro e novembro de 2020. Compôs a pesquisa os relatos de nove mulheres que possuem ou possuíram vínculo institucional com o referido coletivo, sendo fundamentado na História Oral Temática, utilizando-se o meio digital para assinatura do TCLE e entrevista. Resultados: a atuação do Coletivo para o enfrentamento da violência contra a mulher inclui estratégias no âmbito da comunidade, emergindo assim as categorias: espaço para escuta às mulheres; espaço para compartilhar vivências de mulheres; espaço para articulação com os serviços de referência; e espaço para encaminhamento e/

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ou acompanhamento de mulheres nos serviços. Considerações Finais: o Coletivo promoveu ações de enfrentamento da violência contra a mulher, sinalizando a importância de organizações sociais feministas enquanto cenário de referência na comunidade.

Descritores: Violência Contra a Mulher. Organização Não Governamental. Apoio Social. Estratégias de Enfrentamento. Feminismo.

Objetivo: describir el trabajo del Colectivo de Mujeres de Calafate en el afrontamiento a la violencia contra las mujeres. Método: Estudio cualitativo y descriptivo realizado en Salvador, Bahía, Brasil, entre septiembre y noviembre de 2020. La investigación se basó en los relatos de nueve mujeres que tienen o han tenido vínculos institucionales con el mencionado colectivo, a partir de la Historia Oral Temática, utilizando medios digitales para firmar el ICF y la entrevista. Resultados: el trabajo del Colectivo para afrontar la violencia contra las mujeres incluye estrategias dentro de la comunidad, y surgieron las siguientes categorías: espacio para escuchar a las mujeres; espacio para compartir las experiencias de las mujeres; espacio de enlace con los servicios de derivación; y espacio para derivar y/o acompañar a las mujeres a los servicios. Consideraciones finales: el Colectivo promovió acciones para afrontar la violencia contra las mujeres, lo que señala la importancia de las organizaciones sociales feministas como escenario de referencia en la comunidad.

Descriptorios: Violencia contra la Mujer. Organización no Gubernamental. Apoyo Social. Estrategias de Afrontamiento. Feminismo.

Introduction

Violence against women (VAW), anchored in gender inequality, is a historically constructed phenomenon of global concern. Due to its complexity, tackling it requires the articulation of knowledge and sectors, and it is essential that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), associations and other spaces in the communities engage in dialogue on the issue and promote prevention and intervention actions.

It is important to point out that some of the normative frameworks have conceptualized violence against women, such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which defined VAW as any form of discrimination based on gender, with the object or result being the depreciation of women, and this concept is based on the search for equality and the guarantee of rights in all contexts⁽¹⁾. Another milestone was the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women, which classified VAW as “an offense against human dignity and a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men”⁽²⁾. These Conventions point to social constructions in which gender is considered a central element in generating violence in intimate relationships.

Despite national and international efforts to tackle violence against women, this phenomenon

remains a serious social problem rooted in gender inequality. According to the United Nations, in 2017, 87,000 women were victims of femicide, around 50,000 by their acquaintances – partners, ex-husbands or family members⁽³⁾. In Brazil, 4,519 femicides were recorded in 2018, which amounts to one death every two hours⁽⁴⁾. As a result of these high rates and the increasing trivialization of women's lives, Act 13.104 formalized the definition of a heinous crime for the murder of women, when motivated by a context of domestic and family violence or as a result of contempt or discrimination against the victim's status as a woman⁽⁵⁾.

In this context, when the experience of violence does not lead to femicide, studies show that the experience has serious repercussions for women's health. According to the World Bank, for every five years a woman experiences violence, she loses one year of healthy life⁽⁶⁾. This is the result of a variety of physical problems such as injuries, muscle tension, headaches, tachycardia, hypertension, digestive problems, loss of appetite, among others that can be identified in women in situations of violence. It is worth noting that, in addition to the physical marks, violence can cause post-traumatic stress syndrome, deep sadness, emotional lability, depression and impact on women's subjectivity, which leads to a lack of perspective on life and

can also culminate in suicidal behavior and self-inflicted death.⁽⁷⁾

These consequences generate direct and indirect expenses for public coffers in different sectors such as social, health and legal-police, a scenario that requires society to work together to prevent and tackle the problem, with social organizations being essential in this process by stimulating community social action⁽⁸⁾. In this regard, the *Coletivo de Mulheres do Calafate* (Calafate Women's Collective – CWC), a community organization created in 1992 in response to cases of violence in the community, has become an important social support for women, developing actions to prevent and confront violence against women. This type of social support is an important strategy for supporting women, who find in these spaces welcome, listening, empowerment and sorority as tools for breaking out of the cycle of violence⁽⁹⁾.

From the perspective of the relevance of feminist organizations for the empowerment of women, and considering the leading role of the CWC, the object of study was the work of this organization, created more than 25 years ago, to confront VAW. The aim of this study is to describe the work of the Calafate Women's Collective in confronting violence against women. The research question is: how does the CWC act in confronting violence against women?

Method

This is a qualitative, descriptive study carried out at the *Coletivo de Mulheres do Calafate* (Calafate Women's Collective – CWC), a women's organization in the city of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, created with the aim of tackling domestic violence against women.

Thematic Oral History was used as a methodological reference, which provides an opportunity to hear the experiences of women who, in their social context, have worked in a popular feminist organization to empower women for a life free from violence⁽¹⁰⁾. Therefore, nine women over the age of 18 who have or have had institutional links in management positions

or as members of the CWC were included in this study. The exclusion criterion was that they were not emotionally and psychologically well enough to talk to the interviewer. The process of getting to know the collaborators came about as a result of the researchers' involvement in teaching, research and extension activities carried out over the years in partnership between the university and the CWC.

Data collection took place between September and November 2020, and was carried out by researchers who are members of the research group via virtual communication applications, using the interview technique guided by the guiding question: "how does the CWC act to confront violence against women?". The interviews were recorded using digital media stored in a virtual database and then transcribed. The speeches were systematized using the stages proposed in Bardin's Content Analysis, a technique that groups the text into categories according to the following stages: 1) pre-analysis; 2) exploration of the material, categorization or coding; 3) treatment of the results, inferences and interpretation⁽¹¹⁾. Using Thematic Oral History, it was possible to describe in a unique and personal way the process of the CWC's work in confronting violence.

It should be noted that due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, in order to respect infection prevention guidelines, we used electronic communication for the invitation and signing of the Informed Consent Form, which contains the objectives of the study, the risks and benefits of participating in the research and the confidentiality of information. This research was duly approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee under opinion no. 094588/2020.

Results

The nine collaborators are between 28 and 45 years old, self-declared black⁽⁷⁾ and brown⁽²⁾, married⁽²⁾ or in a stable union⁽⁷⁾ and with diverse educational backgrounds: complete university degree⁽²⁾, incomplete university degree⁽²⁾, complete high school degree⁽³⁾,

incomplete high school degree ⁽¹⁾, incomplete elementary school degree ⁽¹⁾. With regard to their professional activity, the majority do not have a permanent job or are in low-paid positions, with informal jobs without a formal

contract ⁽⁴⁾, unemployed ⁽³⁾, caregivers for older adults ⁽¹⁾ and domestic worker ⁽¹⁾.

The study describes the work of the Calafate Women's Collective to confront violence against women, which is exemplified in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Contribution of the Calafate Women's Collective in confronting intimate partner violence. Salvador, 2021.



Source: created by the authors

* TN. The title: Intimate Partner Violence. The signs: To comprehend, To Empower; To recognize. The banner under them: To break up.

Hence, based on the orality of the women interviewed, the following categories emerged:

Space for listening to women

The Calafate Women's Collective (CWC) is described as a welcoming environment for women with a history of domestic violence. Based on their own experiences, the members of the Collective, who have also experienced spousal abuse, exercise empathy and are willing to practice sensitive listening and social support

Space for sharing women's experiences

The reports of the collaborators describe the CWC as a space that gives women the opportunity to share their life experiences, including their experiences of intimate partner violence. The incentive to share stories, whether through conversation circles or workshops, emerges as a result of the bonds of trust and solidarity established in the groups and in the Collective.

as a way of supporting other women in the community.

In difficult times, when I wanted company to let off steam, I would sit with the girls because my family only knows how to criticize. In the Collective, I know I have a companion to hug me at any time. [...] most of the women who are part of the collective's coordination have suffered violence, so we understand each other and no one's hand is untied!. (WINNIE MANDELA)

For me, the Calafate Women's Collective is an NGO that welcomes women who have suffered domestic and intimate partner violence. [...] They took me in, gave me words of comfort and advice, they listened to me. (BELL HOOKS)

In the Collective, we had conversation circles to talk about violence, to talk about our lives and share the situations we were experiencing. We used to open up, say something personal, and listen to each other. If there was a case of violence, one was there to support the other. [...] the Collective is like a family because it took me in when I needed it most (MARIA DINIZ).

The conversation circles that took place in the Collective were put together by members from Calafate, the UFBA [Federal University of Bahia] School of Nursing and psychologists. For me it was a very good experience, it was a space where I felt welcome, where I could let off steam. We talked about things that were happening

in our lives, about our families, we felt at ease to talk.
(WINNIE MANDELA).

Space for liaison with referral services

The CWC also acts as a coordinator at the *Rede de Atenção ao Enfrentamento da Violência Contra as Mulheres* (Care Network for Combating Violence against Women) of Salvador city. This activity took the form of technical visits to a number of referral services and active participation in meetings of the *Fórum de Combate à Violência* (Forum to Combat Violence). This has helped CWC members, as well as some residents of the community, to get to know the referral services for women in situations of violence, which helps prepare them to make referrals when necessary.

It was through the collective that I began to take part in the meetings of the Network for Attention to Women in Situations of Violence and got to know the services that deal with violence: Loreta Valadares (a Referral Center), the women's police station, the shelter and the public defender's office (JACINTA MARTA).

[...] I got to know Loreta (a Referral Center), the women's police station. There was a time when we visited the police station to find out what the service was like (MARIA DINIZ).

Space for referrals and/or accompaniment of women to services

Guidance on support services also emerged from the speeches as a form of action by the CWC in providing social support to women in the community. The members' commitment to accompanying women in their search for institutional support is noteworthy.

At the Collective, I was told to report my son's father. They referred me to DEAM (Women's police station) and Loreta Valadares (Referral Center). The Collective does everything right: it makes the referral, gives you the address and even goes with you! (BELL HOOKS)

The main service was to accompany women to DEAM (Women's police station), the Referral Center and the public defender's office. Accompanying them was also very common, because it was one thing to get there on your own and another thing to get there accompanied by a representative from the CWC. (LIGIA MARGARIDA)

Discussion

The study reveals that in order to tackle with VAW, the CWC provides a listening space for women, who need to seek out the members to share their experiences and feelings. The listening space, which takes place in a dynamic and non-institutional way, as mentioned by the participants, refers to a moment of welcoming emotional demands and is characterized as a favorable opportunity to establish a bond and build a relationship of trust. By verbalizing the violence, they have suffered, the women seek support to protect them.

It's worth noting that the CWC's work is structured on the basis of daily activities, based on the intuition of what has worked. And it is in this way, considering the empiricism involved in its practice, that the CWC organizes the space and meets the demands presented by the women. Studies show that verbalizing about violence is a therapeutic strategy that enables self-knowledge.⁽¹²⁾ The space that promotes speech favors listening to oneself and to others, the environment without noise can promote women's access to their intimacies, thoughts, desires, fears, it makes it possible to listen to the "heart".

From this perspective, the Brazilian National Policy to Combat Violence against Women encourages the promotion of spaces for active listening and welcoming care for women in situations of violence, such as those carried out within the scope of Primary Health Care of the Brazilian Unified Health System⁽¹³⁾. It is important to point out that spaces that promote speaking favor listening to oneself and others, especially when it takes place in a noiseless environment, with the potential to give women access to their intimacies, thoughts, desires, fears and listening to their "heart".

Thus, in the context in which the CWC is presented, the support offered through this welcoming and non-judgmental listening is referred to as a primary social network. This structure is built on the interpersonal relationships between those who share the same reality and

rely on the collectivity to develop strategies to deal with violence in their daily lives.⁽¹⁴⁾

As such, these relationships are accompanied by a feeling of belonging and identification with the shared problem, which is often not remedied by the institutional social network, as set out in the document on the *Rede de Atendimento às Mulheres em Situação de Violência* (Attention Network for Women in Violence Situation). This reality reverberates in the perception of community spaces, and is a strong link within the social support network for women in a violent context.⁽¹⁵⁾ Knowing exactly what the other person is talking about, because they have experienced the same or similar things, gives the women taking part credibility when they take a stand, because they know exactly what they are saying, they have knowledge of the facts. Thus, in addition to being practical, the discourse is also theoretical, because in that space they are building theories, feeding their feminist political consciousness.

When they seek support at the CWC, women can also count on group meetings held in the form of conversation circles or workshops. These moments, which are also part of the collective's work to confront VAW, reveal the reciprocity imbricated in welcoming women who are experiencing the disease, as they share similar experiences, which leads to the recognition of their own experience in the other's speech and stimulates the participation of those involved, establishing exchanges of ideas.

The metaphysics of the gaze can be considered in the CWC conversation circles. Mimicry, the imitation of another's gaze, is important for the construction of the self; the gaze of the visible and the invisible are aspects to be considered in the moments of sharing at the CWC. Women may not see certain situations they experience, but when they are presented and spoken to by others, they may recognize their own stories there, like a mirror.⁽¹⁶⁾

Learning from the experience of others, evaluating the personal applicability of the answers given by other people, recognizing the variety of resources that can be used to resolve

a conflict situation are some of the potentialities found in the workshops and conversation circles.

In this way, women are empowered and strengthened in spaces of exchange. In this context, other studies have also shown that workshops and/or group therapies are an important source of coping not only with violence, but also with issues involving physical and mental health.⁽¹⁷⁾

In the meantime, the exercise of sorority, a term that consists of a subjective experience and a relationship of unity between women with the aim of reducing the damage caused by the discourse of "female rivalry", which produces daily practices of competition, antagonism and conflict. Offering an alternative to rivalry can change the way women are taught to compete with each other, and is a concept with aggregating potential⁽¹⁸⁾. To have the necessary reach and become everyday practice, it is necessary to realize the limitations of sorority by recognizing the differences between women⁽¹⁸⁾.

This union between women is related to the ethical, political and practical dimensions of feminism, following a movement to raise awareness of the patriarchal culture expressed in violence against women and the relationships of solidarity between them. The CWC, by conversation circles and workshops, tries to highlight the meaning of sorority by seeking to deconstruct patriarchal discourse and violence against women, which is considered a collective struggle.

Initially, these meetings were held in the midst of the violent daily life in which the CWC members were inserted, as the focus of the meetings was on externalizing suffering. In the course of these groups, the need arose to seek an understanding of the reality they were experiencing and to develop strategies to deal with the problem, which required a self-taught approach in the search for solutions. This behavior is similar to that of other feminist groups in the 1980s, which met at the time to explore possibilities for change in a society structured around principles that were mostly patriarchal and harmful to women⁽¹⁹⁾. It is interesting to note that the initial amateurism of these black

and poor women was supplanted by the will to mobilize personally and collectively to change the scenario of their lives. As their demands are recognized during the meetings, they reshape the CWC and gradually seek out new links to support their agendas.

These discussions, coupled with the demands that arose at the meetings, led the CWC to seek partnerships in order to broaden the range of mechanisms for the group to act in order to tackle IPV. Thus, partnerships with universities and services began a new phase of collective construction, based on technical support to strengthen the group in favor of female empowerment. In the meantime, it is also worth emphasizing how important it is for the university to be part of this community, since this articulation enables a differentiated professional training, sensitive to the issues of VAW and its confrontation, while at the same time favoring a better understanding by the women members of the collective about the services available in the network.⁽²⁰⁾

Once this scenario has been understood, the CWC works by mapping the services that make up the Network, gathering a series of information that enables referrals to be made according to the demands identified when they are welcomed. This mapping was carried out on site by the members, who sought to get to know how the different institutions functioned through conversations with professionals and to understand whether, in practice, their rights were being ensured as provided for in the policy to tackle the problem.⁽¹³⁾

The CWC's support in this mapping greatly minimizes women's pilgrimage through the services. Being in pairs or in greater numbers optimizes time and, consequently, the suffering in the search for solutions and meeting the demands presented, as one woman shows the way, directing the other based on similar experiences they've had, and sometimes similar trajectories.

The members of the CWC start to accompany each other on their visits to the services, which is an attitude of solidarity and security, as well as part of the process of monitoring the guarantee

of their rights. This accompaniment enables them to show the network that they are not alone: they are members of a CWC and are supported there. This allows them to move forward with self-confidence, because they know that they have a partner by their side.

This exercise of social control, which provides a sense of security against the fear of inadequate treatment at the services, is also gaining strength with the inclusion of the CWC in meetings of the Working Group (WG) of the Attention Network for Women in Situations of Violence. The WG, made up of services that make up the Network, civil society organizations and government bodies, has been in operation for more than twelve years and is fundamental to expanding access and the quality of care provided to women in situations of violence in the city of Salvador.⁽²¹⁾ Thus, the Attention Network's WG is also a facilitating tool for referring women to specialized services, which has contributed to lodging their complaints.⁽²²⁾

The study, based on the orality of the participants, makes it possible to advance in the sense of providing visibility to feminist social organizations, unveiling the way in which they articulate and engage to confront violence against women. All of CWC's mobilization to improve the quality of life of women immersed in contexts of violence reveals its importance in coping with this damaging problem. The study shows how essential it is to have social organizations supporting women in situations of violence, both to break away from disrespectful relationships and in the process of social restructuring, which is necessary for their livelihood⁽²³⁾. In this process, it is highlighted the importance of creating these spaces in the community that act as agents of female empowerment to break intimate partner violence based on disrespect and violence.

Final considerations

The Calafate Women's Collective works to confront violence against women by promoting listening spaces among their peers in order to meet their demands. These moments also take

place collectively, where experiences are shared in an empathetic way, favoring the support network and the development of strategies to solve the problems linked to the issue.

In addition, the CWC works in conjunction with the services in the network for tackling violence, both from the perspective of understanding how they work in order to better target women, and by developing social control. With this, the collective is able to encourage, refer and accompany women when they decide to look for a specialized service.

The actions developed by the Calafate Women's Collective are of the utmost importance, as they help women make decisions based on individual empowerment. Considering the experiences reported by the women, the study provides guidance for other social organizations that work or intend to work to confront the problem of VAW.

The limitations of the study include the fact that it was carried out in just one collective, so it was not possible to relate it to other realities. Also, because it was carried out in a pandemic context, in which prevention measures indicated social distancing, face-to-face contact between the researchers and participants was not possible, making it difficult to identify facial expressions and gestures that would lead to other understandings about the questions asked.

Collaborations:

1 – Conception and planning of the project: Jacinta Marta Tavares Leiro, Nadirlene Pereira Gomes, Lilian Conceição de Guimarães Almeida, Isabela Carlyne Sena de Andrade, Ionara da Rocha Virgens and Luana Moura Campos;

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Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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