







Perception and experiences of victimization by violence in adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to describe the perception and experiences of victimization in adolescents. **Methods:** this qualitative research was conducted between April and June 2019 at a public high school with the participation of 40 adolescents, divided into four focus groups. Data were collected through trigger questions on the topic. The Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (IRAMUTEQ) software was used for analysis. **Results:** the study included heterosexual, female, Catholic, and mixed-race adolescents. Their discourse highlighted gender-based violence and prejudice against sexual diversity, knowledge about the manifestations of violence, experiences with bullying as perpetrated violence, and the impacts of violence, especially from accounts revealing sexual violence and domestic violence. **Conclusion:** adolescents are vulnerable to perpetrating and suffering violence, which reinforces the need for recognition of the phenomenon and early intervention to avoid consequences.

Descriptors: Violence; Adolescent; Life Change Events; Crime Victims.

INTRODUCTION

Violence is understood as the intentional use of physical force or power, whether threatened or actual, against a person, group, or community, which results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, deprivation, or developmental impairment⁽¹⁾.

Violence has multifaceted characteristics and diverse expressions. It can be present explicitly in urban and institutional spaces, or in subtle and veiled forms, as in the cases of violence that primarily, but not exclusively, affects children, adolescents, older adults, and women⁽²⁾.

In adolescence, violence can manifest itself in a variety of ways and occur in family, community, and school settings. This population group is more vulnerable to abuse (especially sexual abuse) or neglect, as these individuals require the protection and security necessary for their optimal development from adults. Therefore, the repercussions on their lives must be considered with special attention⁽³⁾.

A study⁽⁴⁾ with 102,301 adolescents enrolled in the 9th year of elementary school in the 26 states and the Federal District in Brazil, based on secondary data from the 2015 National Adolescent Health Survey, revealed that 14.5% of adolescents reported episodes of physical violence perpetrated by a family member and a higher frequency of violence suffered by females, with 15.1% of the sample.

Between 2011 and 2017, there were 1,429,931 cases of interpersonal/self-inflicted violence in Brazil, and of this total, 374,673 (26.3%) had adolescent victims; the highest frequency occurred among females (65.2%) and black race/color (68.6%); and the most prevalent violence was physical (64.7%), followed by sexual (24.7%)⁽⁵⁾.

It is known that the earlier an adolescent is exposed to violence, and depending on intensity, the greater the resulting problems, such as disabilities, mental dis-

orders, poor academic performance, risky behavior, suffering for families and society, and a greater likelihood of developing future violent behavior^(5,6). It is also worth noting that violence is associated with an increased risk of depression in adolescence, especially in girls, as some types of violence increase considerably at the beginning of this phase, particularly sexual violence^(5,6).

Given the magnitude of this problem in adolescents' lives, it is necessary to reveal the perceptions and experiences of victimization from the perspective of this audience, which could offer elements for greater visibility of the phenomenon and its proper coping and prevention, based on the understanding of its dynamics and consequences.

Based on the assumption that violence in adolescence compromises health and human development, this study aimed to describe the perception and experiences of victimization in adolescents.

METHODS

This descriptive, qualitative study was conducted from April to June 2019 at a public state high school in the municipality of Picos, Piauí state, Brazil. The school had 477 students enrolled regularly, of whom 254 were high school students. Participants were selected by convenience.

The inclusion criterion adopted for the participation of adolescents in the study was that they belonged to the age group between 12 and 18 years old, as defined by the Child and Adolescent Statute (In Portuguese, *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* - ECA)⁽⁷⁾. The absence of adolescents from school on the days of data collection was adopted as an exclusion criterion.

The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) recommendations were used during the preparation of this text⁽⁸⁾. After the school administration had been informed and authorized the research to be carried out, a preliminary meeting was held with the institution's faculty staff to present the study, request permission to access the classrooms, and schedule the dates for data collection with the target audience.

Access to the classrooms occurred on agreed-upon days, during which the research was explained to adolescents. The Informed Consent was provided, requesting signatures from parents or legal guardians, and an Assent Form from those interested in participating in the study. A date was also agreed upon for collecting the forms, scheduling, and conducting data collection through focus groups.

The number of adolescents who decided to participate in the study determined the number of focus groups to be conducted. Four focus groups with ten adolescents each were held, lasting a maximum of one hour and twenty minutes (1 hour and 20 minutes). The conversations were recorded on audiotapes and described through field notes in a diary. The groups were held in a private setting, in the library and in the school's meeting room, during the morning and afternoon shifts. Adolescents' perceptions and experiences of victimization, motivations, implications, and coping strate-

gies were used as trigger questions.

After transcribing the focus group audio recordings, they were organized using Libre Office Writer (Office, version 5.3, 2010, The Document Foundation, Germany). It was decided not to return the transcripts to participants to avoid recalling negative events.

The material was prepared through new readings, corrections, and decoding of the fixed variable, as can be mentioned: *GROU_1 to *GROU_4, where GROU means Focus Group and 1 - 4, the group number.

The following codes were adopted to identify participants' statements in the focus groups: AD (adolescents), M or F (to describe biological sex; male and female), and 01-10 (number given to adolescents during the focus group).

Data processing and analysis were performed using the *Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires* (IRAMUTEQ⁽⁹⁾) free software⁽⁹⁾, (version 0.7 alpha 2, 2017, *Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherches Appliquées en Sciences Sociales* est, France), which allows different forms of statistical analysis of texts, produced from documents, speeches, among others.

This study used Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC), which divides the *corpus* into classes, grouping words according to their greatest association with the class and presenting the percentage of representation in the *corpus* studied. The recorded speeches of adolescents obtained in the focus groups were processed in IRAMUTEQ⁽⁹⁾. Processing the data from DHC in the program enabled the development of four thematic categories, organized according to similarities and differences. The results were analyzed reflectively and descriptively in accordance with the literature in the field.

Due to the characteristics of the target population, it is possible that some of the adolescent victims of violence did not accept the invitation to participate in the research due to fear of talking about the topic, lack of interest, or even fear.

The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC), under Certificate of Presentation of Ethical Consideration (In Portuguese, *Certificado de Apresentação para Apreciação Ética* - CAAE) n. 07569019.6.0000.5055. This study respected the ethical and legal aspects present in Resolution 466/2012, referring to research involving human beings, and in Resolution 510/2016, which establishes the standards applicable to research in social sciences and humanities.

RESULTS

Forty adolescents participated in the research, the majority female (n = 26, 65%), 18 years old (n = 40%), mixed race, heterosexual sexual orientation, family income of one minimum wage, and Catholic religion.

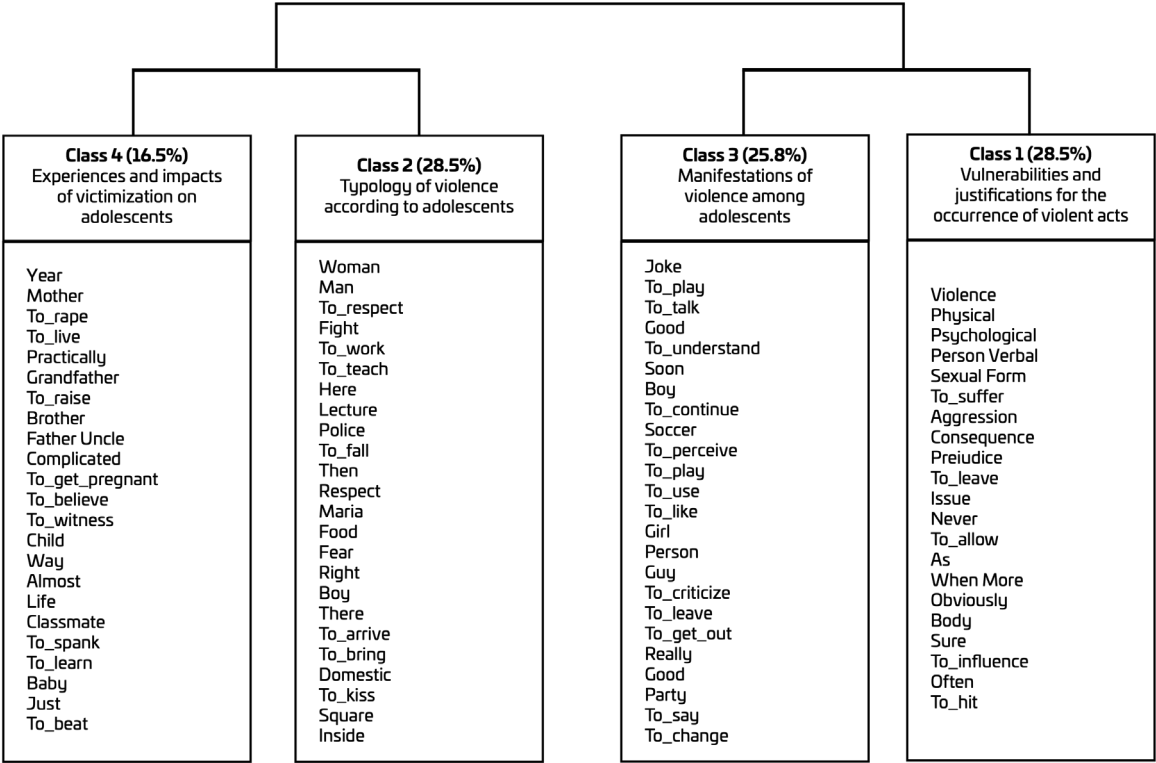
The *corpus* of speeches analyzed achieved a high level of performance. Of the 466 text segments, 376 (80.69%) were retained. DHC allowed the text *corpus* to be divided into four classes.

The text *corpus* was initially divided into two parts. Each divi-

sion had subdivision into two other parts, giving rise to classes 1 and 3, 2 and 4. The words in these classes obtained a p -value < 0.0001, and class 2 had the highest prevalence (29.3%) (Figure 1).

The perceptions and experiences of victimization in adolescents are presented below, organized into four categories that represent the classes, and in decreasing order of their prevalence.

Figure 1 - Descending Hierarchical Classification dendrogram with participations and corpus content of the focus groups, Picos, Piauí, Brazil, 2019



Vulnerabilities and justifications for the occurrence of violent acts

This category originated from class 2, which had the largest representation (29.26%) and whose highlighted words with p -values < 0.0001 were “woman”, “man”, “to_respect”, “fight”, “to_work”, and “to_teach”. These words demonstrate, in adolescents’ perception, the vulnerabilities and justifications associated with the occurrence of violence in this population. In this class, the discourses of focus groups 02 and 03 stood out, as shown in Table 1.

The central idea of the speeches focused on gender violence and prejudice directed at sexual diversity, revealing that the condition of “being a woman” and “being homosexual” increases vulnerability to suffering violence, and not fulfilling one’s social roles appears as a justification for the outbreak of violent acts against this public.

Typology of violence according to adolescents

This category originated from class 1 with a representation of 28.5% and whose highlighted words with a p -value < 0.0001 were “violence”, “physical”, “psychological”, “person”, “verbal”, “sexual”, “form”, “to_suffer” and “aggression”, representing the types of violence known by adolescents, as shown in Table 2. In this class, all

Table 1 - Vulnerabilities and justifications for violent acts according to adolescents in the study, Picos, Piauí, Brazil, 2019

Focus group	Excerpts from participants’ speeches
Focus group 3	At home, mom works all day, so my dad gets home earlier than my mom. ADF5
	In that case, it’s okay; the man and the woman already make the agreement. ADM1
	And also, even with the Maria da Penha Law, some women don’t report the matter because the man is the one who brings food into the house, and then an entire family has many children, sometimes. ADF6
	You can’t, “cuz” [because of] the children, small children passing by, and you can’t. In today’s society, you see a couple kissing, man with man, woman with woman. ADM1
	I think there are a lot of people who have this [impulsivity] and can’t control it; they don’t like it, you know? ADM4
Focus group 2	So, the man goes to work, comes home, makes lunch, eats it, and goes back to work? ADM1
	But of course, you have to help, man. Do you think the woman stays home and lies around? ADF6
	Give encouraging talks, both for men to respect women and for women to seek help because, often, women accept it out of fear or threat. ADF7
	Or sometimes, depending on the type of help, nothing ends up happening. ADF1

Table 2 - Typology of violence according to adolescents in the study, Picos, Piauí, Brazil, 2019

Focus group	Excerpts from participants' speeches
Focus group 1	<i>Physical, verbal, and psychological aggression—that's it.</i> ADF03
	<i>Brutality.</i> ADM05
	<i>Trauma.</i> ADF08
	<i>Fear.</i> ADF06
Focus group 2	<i>Cowardice.</i> ADF09
	<i>I think the most common violence is psychological, physical, and verbal.</i> ADF04 and ADF03
	<i>Verbal, because sometimes we curse at people in our daily lives, but we still do it.</i> ADF03
	<i>And sometimes they even attack people for not accepting their choices.</i> ADF07
Focus group 3	<i>Who hasn't experienced violence? Psychological violence, verbal aggression, yes, physical violence, like a pat on the head, for instance, among men [...] ADM04</i>
	<i>[...] because you can see when people are suffering, whether it's sexual, psychological, or even physical violence, you can see it because of their attitudes, because often times the person who was happy, sometimes starts to get depressed, or even starts to attack another person.</i> ADF07
	<i>The fact that we are in a school, we see the issue of violence a lot, it's... maybe not so much sexual, but we see a lot of physical, verbal, psychological violence.</i> ADF04
	<i>Physical violence is assaulting someone.</i> ADF06
Focus group 4	<i>Assault, physical, hitting, does it hurt? Verbal violence is with words, cursing, saying things you don't like.</i> ADM01
	<i>It's a bit bruised.</i> ADF03
	<i>Saying things that make you feel uncomfortable.</i> ADM04
	<i>Verbal.</i> ADF02
Focus group 4	<i>Verbal, psychological.</i> ADF05
	<i>Especially because it's harder to suffer physical violence, right? Why?</i> ADM03
	<i>LGBTQ is definitely one of the most affected by physical and psychological violence.</i> ADM03

focus groups stood out in their contributions.

The adolescents demonstrate knowledge of the most frequent types of violence (psychological, physical, and sexual) and their manifestations.

Manifestations of violence among adolescents

This category originated from class 3, which had a representation of 25.8% and the highlighted words with a *p*-value < 0.0001 were “joke”, “to_play”, “to_talk”, “good”, “to_understand”, “soon”, and “boy”. In the adolescents’ perception, these represent how violence manifests itself among peers, as shown in Table 3. In this class, the discourses of Focus Groups 2 and 3 stood out.

As noted, bullying emerges as a prominent manifestation of violence perpetrated and experienced by adolescents, manifested through “jokes” (understood as such by the perpetrators) and as humiliation, as understood by the victims. Adolescents pointed out that such “jokes” reinforce social roles and segregate individuals, such as preventing females from participating in activities socially

Table 3 - Manifestations of violence according to adolescents in the study, Picos, Piauí, Brazil, 2019

Focus group	Excerpts from participants' speeches
Focus group 1	<i>[...] no, I'm joking, I'm making fun of you, but sometimes it's true.</i> ADF01
	<i>Sometimes we make a joke and the person understands it as something else, but we're not saying it; how do we say it?</i> ADF02
	<i>[...] then it starts with teasing, with jokes, with unfunny things, then the person... well, it's normal, it's quite easy... it's not worth it, it's fine, it's messing with us [...]</i> ADF04
	<i>[...] we're going to try to play with him, but his games are really bad. So-and-so stops, it's not right, we don't like it and he keeps laughing at us.</i> ADF04
Focus group 2	<i>[...] these things, but the boys said, no, you're a girl, women play with dolls, football is only for men.</i> ADF02
	<i>And there are girls who want to play soccer, but the boys won't let them. Oh, you don't know, but how are girls going to be good at soccer if they don't let them participate?</i>
	<i>If they're excluded, when I was little, I was crazy to play dribbling [...]</i> ADF02
	<i>[...] I can joke and play with him here and say, say he's gay, these things as a joke, but this can be offensive to other people around us [...].</i> ADM04

imposed on males (such as playing soccer) and the use of terms considered by some individuals to be pejorative (such as “gay”) that, when interpreted in this way, humiliate individuals who identify as such.

Experiences and impacts of victimization by violence on adolescents

This category originated from class 4, with a representation of 16.49% and whose highlighted words with *p*-value < 0.0001 were “year”, “mother”, “to_rape”, “to_live”, “practically”, “grandfather”, “to_raise”, “brother”, “father”, “uncle”, “complicated”, “to_get_pregnant”, “to_believe”, “to_witness”, “child”, “way”, “son”, “almost”, and “life”. These words reveal the impact of experiences of violent acts on adolescents’ lives, as shown in Table 4. In this class, the discourses of focus groups 1, 2, and 4 prevailed.

The impact of violence on adolescents’ lives is evident, especially in reports revealing sexual violence and the manifestation of violent acts in family relationships, with negative and lasting consequences for victims, such as fear, flight, sadness, and the breakdown of family ties. One adolescent’s revelation that she was the victim of rape (ADF03) stands out, with psychological consequences, as noted in “my mother can't get over it”, and impacting family relationships, as revealed in “I never had any consideration (for my father)”.

DISCUSSION

The study shows that violence, as adolescents describe it, is related to gender and sexual orientation. Adolescents are familiar with the types of violence, report humiliation from victims, and in-

Table 4 - Experiences and impacts of victimization by violence according to adolescents in the study, Picos, Piauí, Brazil, 2019

Focus group	Excerpts from participants' speeches
Focus group 2	<i>[...] so, because of the children is... of not giving their children a good life, they end up accepting [being abused].</i> ADF07
	<i>I am the result of rape, my mother was raped, so, ... she got pregnant at 15 years old, so, ... she was raped by my father.</i> ADF03
	<i>[...] I say this, my father, just to identify, because it's... I never had any consideration, I have no consideration, and my grandmother was also raped and got pregnant by my mother.</i> ADF03
	<i>My mother can't get over it, she still cries, [...]. [experiencing rape with her children].</i> ADM03
Focus group 4	<i>[...] his father also makes a lot of jokes, all homophobic, and he's also learning that.</i> ADF03
	<i>When I was younger, when I was about four, I witnessed my father strangling my mother.</i> ADM06
Focus group 1	<i>Yeah... I feel [sorry], she's my old classmate, one of my old classmates, she was raped when she was a child, practically three or two years old, practically a baby [...].</i> ADM04
	<i>[...] I think it's kind of an attraction for people nowadays to fight.</i> ADM03
Focus group 4	<i>It shouldn't be, but it ends up becoming so. From an early age, we are practically raised in violence. Many parents only believe that children will only change if they are beaten.</i> ADF07
	<i>Almost everyone has witnessed it, either a friend or a man beating a woman, or a mother beating a child, or me beating my brother. This also happens a lot, beating my friends [...].</i> ADF04

difference from perpetrators, which is reflected in their family relationships and experiences.

When women fail to fulfill their role as “wife, homemaker, and caretaker of their children”, they tend to be blamed and punished through violent acts. Violence against women has become a global public health problem with multiple causes. Central to its occurrence is the perpetuation of hierarchical gender norms and the belief in male superiority over the female body and behavior across all age groups^(10,11). This factor is considered important in keeping women in abusive cycles.

This evidence is evoked by adolescents, who pointed out that many women suffer violence and remain in the cycle of abuse due to their financial dependence on their partners. Furthermore, they fear the recurring threats they receive from their perpetrators, even though some are aware of the legislation as a mechanism for preventing and punishing this abuse.

In Brazil, Law 11,340/2006, known as the *Maria da Penha* Law, became a legal and symbolic landmark in the fight against domestic violence suffered by women⁽¹²⁾. With this law, domestic violence against women, which until now was considered a police matter, is now being raised to a new level by the State. There is an understanding of the need for the creation and coordination of public agencies to build protection and prevention networks, since

gender-based violence is more than just a police matter; it is a social problem⁽¹³⁾.

According to adolescents, homosexuals are another group susceptible to victimization, as they break with what tradition and social culture impose as correct, moral, and ethical: the heterosexual relationship, i.e., between men and women. Violence committed against non-heterosexual sexual orientation is highlighted by the fact that adolescence is the first time adolescents experience sexual activity. When adolescents begin to exhibit behaviors considered inappropriate by heteronormative society, they become targets of homophobic discourse and violence, such as symbolic violence, intended to coerce them into taking on the gender role/identity corresponding to their biological sex⁽¹⁴⁾.

When a homosexual adolescent perceives themselves as different from their peers, they begin to harbor negative thoughts about themselves, internalizing homophobia. This can lead to the adoption of risky behaviors, with negative impacts on socialization, habits, and behaviors that ultimately harm their well-being. A greater association has also been reported between non-heterosexual sexual orientation and suicidal ideation/attempts as consequences of homophobia in this population⁽¹⁴⁾.

Verbal violence was frequently reported by participants, and it constitutes a form of manifestation of psychological violence.

Psychological violence is understood as the intentional use of power in any conduct, causing emotional harm to the victim, diminishing their self-esteem, and hindering their full development. It is characterized by repetitive verbal abuse, resulting in imprisonment or deprivation of material, financial, and personal resources^(15,16).

Physical violence, in turn, is understood as the use of force or power intended to injure, cause pain, or incapacitate, and can even lead to death. Although not the most common form of violence, it is the most frequently identified due to the injuries it causes and its consequences⁽¹⁷⁾.

Finally, sexual violence, also mentioned in the speeches, is defined as any action in which a person, in a position of power and using physical force, coercion, intimidation or psychological influence, forces another person to have, witness or participate in some sexual interaction or use, in any way, their sexuality⁽¹⁶⁾, with its underreporting being notorious^(18,19). This type of violence has physical and psychological consequences for victims, such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse, especially when it occurs in childhood and adolescence, with repercussions in adulthood⁽¹⁹⁾.

A study⁽²⁰⁾ using the UK Biobank database with 155,223 participants revealed that 1.8% of the sample had suffered sexual or physical abuse in adolescence. The highest prevalence of sexual abuse occurred in females (11.1%), while physical abuse was more prevalent in males (8.3%). The same study showed an association between sexual abuse and symptoms of depression in adulthood.

Bullying is defined as repetitive physical or psychosocial force, usually exerted by a stronger person against a weaker person, which can lead to an imbalanced power dynamic between the per-

petrator and the victim. Bullying and physical conflicts are reported as behavioral disorders frequently present among adolescents, and raise concern due to their association with poor academic performance and mental health problems in this population⁽²¹⁾.

Adolescents' discourse in this study points to their daily practice in school settings. This is a group phenomenon, and in the school context, most children and adolescents are directly or indirectly involved, whether as victims, perpetrators, or bystanders⁽⁴⁾. Their expressions/manifestations include insults, humiliating expressions and gestures, physical aggression, threats, theft, verbal abuse, among others⁽⁴⁾.

In addition to victims, perpetrators and witnesses of bullying can suffer consequences. Those who perpetrate it are highly likely to maintain aggressive behavior throughout their lives, including adopting antisocial behavior. Those who witness it, in turn, feel uncomfortable due to the climate created in the environment and the fear of being the next target, which ultimately leads to losses in educational and social development⁽²²⁾.

Rape victimization can cause immediate trauma and long-term physical and psychological outcomes for its victims, such as genital injuries, obstetric complications, sexual dysfunction, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections, depression, alcohol and drug use/abuse, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, somatic complaints, sleep disorders, withdrawal from relationships, violent behavior, and suicide attempts^(23,24). When this act involves children and adolescents, consequences include guilt, shame, eating disorders, cognitive distortions, mental disorders, sexual and relationship problems, and school dropout⁽²⁴⁾.

Another important factor highlighted in adolescents' discourse refers to generational violence. Violence experienced within the home is a global problem and a frequent phenomenon that cuts across different cultures, social classes, and ethnic groups⁽²⁴⁾. In many families, there is still an understanding that good child-rearing occurs through punitive methods, as revealed in the discourses. To modify their offspring's behavior, parents use coercive discipline through threats, direct use of force, physical punishment, and deprivation of privileges⁽²⁵⁾. Children raised with this concept may present several psychological and behavioral problems in the present and future⁽²⁶⁾.

The perpetuation of violence in family relationships impacts the generational transmission of violent behavior. Children and adolescents who have experienced violence may experience similar experiences in adulthood⁽²⁷⁾. Furthermore, factors such as maternal abandonment, parental substance abuse, and/or repeated violent behavior are risk factors that can contribute to the perpetuation of this phenomenon. The intergenerational and cyclical nature of violence encourages its naturalization, as witnessing violent relationships between parents/family members from childhood and adolescence can condition the reproduction of this pattern in future relationships with children⁽²⁸⁾.

Given this context, there is a clear need to strengthen the net-

work to combat violence against this population, particularly in the fields of health and education. Professionals in these sectors need to be prepared and trained to identify the various manifestations of violence, as well as to report, advise, and refer cases to the appropriate agencies.

Some limitations of this study include its implementation in only one educational institution, and the lack of specific groups for different age groups, which may have limited participants' expression.

CONCLUSION

Adolescent victims of violence recognize the types and manifestations of the abuse and point out that stereotypical social and cultural structures for men and women are determinants of its occurrence. Personal experiences of victimization, especially within family relationships, reveal the consequences of this phenomenon in their lives, highlighting the manifestation of psychological problems, fear, avoidance, and family breakdown.

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FTLSM: formal analysis; methodology; visualization; writing – original draft and writing – review & editing.

MSVL: supervision; visualization; writing – review & editing; writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interests

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