

## SOCIOCULTURAL ASPECTS AND VIOLENCE IN DEPRESSED WOMEN

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### ABSTRACT

Being analyzed is the socio-cultural relations of ten women diagnosed with depression, living in a peripheral region in the interior of São Paulo. Data was collected in 2009 through semi-structured interviews and were discussed elements like: origin, friendships, play, school, leisure, religion, clothing, dreams, among others, according to each stage of life: childhood, adolescence and adult life. From sociocultural references, we encountered the phenomenon of violence in all its diversity: psychological, moral, physical, sexual and social supported on *androcentric* power. The research pointed out that the lives of these women was permeated with violence from childhood to adulthood. Depression in women falls beyond a biologically disease determined by genetic, organic and hormonal factors. It can be seen as part of a social and cultural construction in specific contexts, so it is not an individualized disease in a subject, but may be the result of a society with a still *androcentric* predominance.

**Keywords:** Sociocultural factors. Violence. Women.

### INTRODUCTION

The structure of gender in the social organization of human history abides the subordination of women compared to men<sup>(1)</sup>. Thus, violence against women parts from culturally constructed principles and is present in many areas of society –starting at home, work, even symbolic violence conveyed by the media, which can be a factor of vulnerability and risk for depression in this group. Depression affects men and women of any social class, but in women the incidence is twice as high<sup>(2)</sup>.

Women who experience violence during any phase of life, childhood, adolescence or adulthood, have their health compromised both physically and emotionally. Among the hazards and risks, there is emphasis on depression<sup>(3)</sup>. Violence against women and depression became public health issues and cover social and cultural aspects. The first is considered a worldwide phenomenon that pushes the boundaries of social class, ethnicity, age, religion and education level. The main locus of violence against women remains within the family. The chance of a woman being attacked by a nearby male figure, as the father of her children, ex-husband or

current partner, is often greater than the suffering any violence by strangers. In the intra-family relationships, the power of men over women and female roles which reproduce the design on women culturally charged of being a mother, educator, homemaker and subject to the standards imposed by the abusive partner, is evident<sup>(4)</sup>.

According to worldwide literature data<sup>(5)</sup>, one in five days of absence of women in the workplace stems from violence at home. In Brazil, about 23% of women are subject to domestic violence; and, in 85.5% of cases of physical aggression against women, the abusers are their own partners. According to estimates, it's the country that most suffers from domestic violence, with a loss of 10.5% of its GDP. The cost of domestic violence varies between 1.6% and 2% of the GDP of a country, which makes it a social problem that can disrupt the social fabric<sup>(6)</sup>.

The state of depression, fear, loneliness, low self-esteem in women victims of domestic violence<sup>(4)</sup>, as well as feelings of guilt for depriving the family of a stable home and without fights is denoted<sup>(7)</sup>. Women express violence as a naturalized and common factor, resulting from the power granted to men socially<sup>(7)</sup>.

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Continued exposure to violence in the history of life of women must be understood primarily as a sociocultural issue capable of generating impact on the mental health of these women. The victims of violence from childhood are likely to develop symptoms of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation<sup>(8)</sup>.

It is believed that memories, perceptions and sensations of context lived from childhood to adulthood of depressed women are permeated by continual experience of violence in all its dimensions, is not sufficient to face the problem of depression in women only from the point of view of the etiology of the disease. So the defined objective of the study was to describe some characteristics of the experiences of life of women who experience depression.

## METHOD

Data was collected between September and December 2009. The participants were ten women diagnosed with depression, living in a peripheral region in the interior of São Paulo. To obtain statements, a semi-structured interview lasting an average of 50 minutes, recorded on a digital recorder and fully transcribed was used.

The reference to build a semi-structured interview was based on studies of genetic criticism, theory studying networks of relationships that make up the process of creating artists<sup>(9-10)</sup>, for realizing that the constitution of what we are today is a process of organization stemming from experiences everywhere. Like the artist, we are a receptacle for emotions that come from the sky, the earth, colors, smells, shapes, our ancestors, our coexistence among others, and with these emotions we gradually built ourselves procedurally. There are no perceptions that are not steeped in memories, and feelings have an amplifier role, allowing certain perceptions to remain in memory<sup>(11)</sup>. The evocation of facts experienced by women through the memories of scenes, smells, colors, tastes, friendships etc. was chosen, in order to bring the immersed story of life in relation to culture.

The contents of the interviews was analyzed in order to understand the experience and the socio-cultural significance of women diagnosed with depression in the aforementioned phases of

life. The survey was conducted after the approval of the Federal University of São Carlos Ethics Committee on Research with the assessment No 20/2009. The women agreed to participate voluntarily in the study and signed a consent form.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The ages of the women interviewed vary between 24 and 73 years, mean age 46.9 years. When women were encouraged to remember sociocultural aspects in their lives, they especially highlighted the presence of violence in its many forms, beginning in childhood and remaining during all stages of life.

### Childhood

All research participants are living in a city in the interior of São Paulo and, among the ten interviewed, nine are originating from rural areas and only one from an urban area, but with the experience of poverty and homelessness in childhood. This original condition of life may have triggered the need for child labor, including slave labor.

[...] I worked from six years of age. It was slave labor that people don't even see on television and think that it no longer exists. (M4)

The origin of child labor in Brazil dates from the Colonial Period. Children, as those of slaves and/or Indians, already lined-up as labour force for agricultural and domestic work in the farms. During the Industrial Revolution, the use of women and children to reduce the cost of production became a reality<sup>(12)</sup>. We can say that child labor was constituted historically and culturally as a social value in Brazil, able to discipline, prepare for adulthood, remove the child from delinquency and for need to provide their family's' livelihood. This Brazilian sociocultural aspect, built since colonization and of poverty, led to the early involvement of these women encouraged to work by their own family.

[...] Was about nine years old when she {mother} sent me to São Paulo. I suffered with it. I only worked there. I had to clean the house, wash dishes and serve as a waitress. It was a Pension of the type that was serving lunch. I could hardly reach right but had to serve. I spent two years

there. I came back and my mom gave me to other people here... (M6)

[...] When I was a child I never attended school. I worked all the time... (M5)

In general, people exposed to a work situation as a child, may stop the development of their potential, which creates problems for the child itself directly and social problems indirectly as they become disqualified adults with difficulties on entering the labor market. It is known that children from poorer families are more likely to work than children from other social strata.

Specifically with regard to women, 10% of workers in Brazil began their activities with less than 9 years<sup>(12)</sup> old. There is research data that correlates the low level of education among women that were sacrificed through an early entry into labour, before 9 years of age, associated with rural origin, with the poverty of the female population<sup>(12)</sup>. This is also true for participants of the study who attended less school.

[...] I was very little (time) at school. I was only three years in school ... (M4)

[...] Never went to school. In the 40's there was no school in the bush ... (M1)

[...] Everything was difficult at that time! We had to walk a lot in the sun to go to school, made us hungry right? ... (M10)

Since childhood, these women experience the process of social exclusion by their living conditions and lack of opportunities. It's through the story of life experiences that we can understand the material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages of these women. The conditions of poverty are associated with the absence of rights, precarious work and educational background, making them vulnerable individuals<sup>(13)</sup>.

Another element that put these women in conditions of risk and vulnerability, especially in relation to mental health, was the decrease in living with the family and the lack of play in early childhood, conditions provided by child labor:

[...] Played nothing. Didn't play because my father who raised me was a farmer. He had a lot of calfs, a lot of cattle. Look, I'm not gonna lie, it

was me who took care of the calves, who looked after the animals was me... (M1)

Experiences of violence in other dimensions were described by women when they evoked childhood memories, such as the abandonment.

[...] When my mother became pregnant the first time, the father always told it would be a boy. My deceased grandmother attended the birth of my mother and when I gave the first cry, the father came to see the sex. She said it was a girl and had to hide me because he wanted to kill me, he did not want to know about me and I had to move in with my grandmother... (M2)

[...] My father, I did not get to know him. My mother, I knew, but I didn't live with her. I was adopted. She was way too young and thought she could not afford to raise children. Picked us up and before my father died, the children were donated to each family member evenly. (M5)

Among the possible consequences of the abandonment of the child by the parents, there is the construction of an adult discouraged with trouble expressing feelings and may have depression, anxiety and trauma<sup>(14)</sup>. The family is the first hosting space, provides the first human experiences. The experience of abandonment in childhood is something remarkable narrated by these women. In some cases, the abandonment of the father exposed the family to homelessness.

[...] When my father left my mother, we were on the street. My mother suffered a lot with us, standing on the street, passing many needs often without eating right, because she took from herself it to give to us. She always found a way and arranged something for us to eat... (M7)

Research shows that this family is embedded in the reality in which people live on the streets. Currently one in four people who live on the streets can not obtain food every day, and their nutritional status is inadequate to human needs<sup>(15)</sup>. The mother fulfilled the role of family provider, and the research participant recounts that, despite the extreme condition in which she found herself, the warmth and affection were present in the interaction, which acted in the dynamics of this family as a protective factor.

[...] My mother gave so much love to us and suffered much with us, standing on the street, passing many needs. (M7)

However, the Guardian Council did not have the same assessment of the family and takes children away from living with the mother. This act of the Guardian Council marked her life. She narrates that she was six years old and was sent to a place (perhaps a hostel), where children had no affection and were assaulted.

[...] I remember when the car of the Guardian Council passed on the street, my mother pregnant, my brothers and I with her. So they took us from her and led us to a place where there were kids, do not know if it was a hostel. This impressed me a lot, I remember that till today, right? And in that place we suffered much, the woman was very bad, she beated my brothers, made us clean the house, everything. .. (M7)

The Guardian Council is a permanent and non-judicial body charged with protecting the rights of children and the adolescent. Despite not being a judiciary organ, it has power of decision that can only be revised by justice. The mother appeals to the justice and rescued their children after three years, when the grandmother got a house and hosted all the family in São Paulo. The women, while being in such an extreme situation, become vulnerable to circumstances pertaining to their gender<sup>(15)</sup>. This story describes the rights violations caused by imposing a condition of life. Years of struggle to regain again the family may in fact influence in various dimensions of human life, including the psychic dimension of each family member.

In the reports on memories of food, preparing food in childhood, a woman recalls the adoptive family:

[...] Who was preparing it was the woman who raised me, it was terrible. We did not eat well, at times we had nothing to eat. That way they {adoptive family} really hurt my person. I was beaten a lot for nothing. Didn't study. They would not let me study. Quarreled with me because I loved my mother {biological mother}...Eh, my child, I suffered. I didn't want to exist ... (M5)

On evoking a daily fact, preparing food, memories of their life's history associated with pain are reported. Perhaps because the act to feed themselves is a structuring factor of everyday family life in its innermost core<sup>(16)</sup>.

This separation from the family of origin is recalled again by this participant when invited to recall the feelings of the age of childhood.

[...] Losing my father and being away from my sisters and my mother. That struck me too. My father died and I had never known him ... They took me from my mother's house when I was six years old. (M5)

Another woman narrates the suffering of being separated from her family of origin:

[...] I was just born and they carried me away, far away to the man they gave me to. I was adopted. I cried a lot because I said like: every child has a mother, but I don't have my mother. Because I was rejected. I cried because I wanted to have a mother and had not. Then I was sad ... (M1)

The process of perception of facts, feelings and their memories are mediating between them and the world, bringing singular subjectivities being built. Memory is recorded if a strong impression is left<sup>(17)</sup>, like that of a woman who brings the element of adoption, of sexual abuse suffered in childhood and the consequences of the fact in relation to her husband ...

[...] My uncle raped me at that time, right? I remember it like it was today. I was 6 years old, I went to school and that was just me in the morning. And my mother 'charged' this uncle to pick me up and take me, because she worked. In the afternoon I lived at his mercy. My other sister went to school and the other two children were in daycare. I wish my mother knew. Because I think it is impossible for a mother not to notice anything wrong with a daughter, especially a child. It is because at the time who was doing laundry was her. I was bleeding, I did not know how to hide it. I just changed clothes. She never mentioned it, the most anger, hurt I have is this. She gave me to some people from São Paulo to work. And I never went to school. I was about nine. I was there for almost two years in São Paulo. After that I wanted to go away. I went back to her house. At times she led men into the house. They raped us sexually, I, the other sister a year younger. She gave me to another family jealous of their partners. For me it was such a disgusting thing, so unbearable that it marked me too much. Then when I got married and went to have relationship with him {husband} for the first time, he soon realized that I was not a virgin. And to this day he does not accept that I was raped. He says that is a lie ... (M6)

There speaks the elucidation of this as a fact that occurred in childhood can continue to generate consequences in adulthood. In this particular case, this woman still remained subject to the symbolic violence of her husband, who expressed disrespect to his life story through social roles imposed on men and women, reinforced by patriarchal cultures that establish relations of violence between genders. In this sense, the relations of men's violence against women can not be understood as natural or biological relationships between the sexes, the limits have been historically and socially constructed. We can then understand gender violence as a phenomenon within the existing social structure and a problem of a social and public health.

The reports described so far corroborate specific research in the field of mental health and psychiatry, for children suffering from maltreatment, sexual abuse and neglect have risk of suffering depression in adolescence and/or adulthood<sup>(18)</sup>. The childhood, a privileged locus of playing, was marked in the memory of these women as a time of suffering, prohibitions and mistreatment.

### Adolescence

Violence was also continuously present in adolescence. The interviewees share experiences marked by bans coming from some male figure that demarcated the contact with friends, the way they dress and make-up, the balls, local circulation and religious choices.

Adolescence does not seem to bring production of social meanings mediated by symbolic systems of language and culture<sup>(19)</sup>.

There is ignorance of the beginning of that stage of life and they associate it with the beginning of the marriage and work.

[...]What the hell is that? {Adolescence.} I guess I never had, because I worked very much ... (M1)

[...] Whatever. Adolescence passed and we did not even notice... (M3)

[...] I'll tell the truth to you that I do not remember. I do not remember, and I was not happy in my teens ... (M4)

[...] When I moved in with my husband, aged 14. There I was beaten, to say... that suffering. I suffered, I mean, it was not a life, it was slavery ... (M2)

[...] When I got married {voice with laughter} ... (M6)

[...] At that time my parents were very reserved, very ...I had no such phase ... (M10)

[...] Ah think with 13 years ... Because my sister got pregnant and her boyfriend did not assume it and left town and she was 15. She was already working. She worked in a family home. Then when she was having the baby, then she had to stay home for at least another five months. Then for her not to lose your job, I went to work in her place. I think it was there. (M9)

Adolescence is considered as a transition between child and adult world, deals with stages ranging from childish dependence conquest of autonomy envisioned in adulthood, does not emerge as something meaningful in memory of these women, because they had a childhood marked by work, abandonment, without the right to school, to family life, thus exposed to violence. These facts can be corroborated for not recognizing the start of adolescence because there is a continuity marked by violations of rights, especially the right to education. The work, marriage and prohibitions mark the initial period of adolescence.

The majority of respondents lived adolescence in the 1960's and 1970's, with the exception of two women: one who lived adolescence in the 1950's and another in the decade of 1990. In the 1960s and 1970s, the youth began the criticism of the existing order and sought, in several movements, social transformation. It was a period of political struggles, the *hippie* movement in the struggle for peace and questions about the culture. The entrance of adolescence and the experience of it in this period was marked by a growing questioning. It meant questioning about the moral, sexual patterns, among other things prevailing at that time. This way it justifies the uniqueness in the reporting of these women who had an ignorance of themselves and little mentioned values of the time as something to be questioned.

However, if you relate to the period of childhood marked by child labor, the physical and sexual violence by economic conditions to which they were subjected, can be hypothesized that there was an early maturation of these

women, that in this period their psychic formations already indicated depressed aspects in their personalities.

It is also common in adolescence that we verify an expansion of the social universe compared to childhood. In general, they prefer the relationship with friends to family.

They form groups of friends, especially when attending schools. The sociocultural environment of the study participants was not conducive to school attendance and, of course, may have been a narrowing in creating bonds of friends in adolescence. Associated with this, there were also early marriage and the prohibition of having friends by a male figure: father or husband.

[...] Had no friends, only under his order {husband} and together with his family. (M2)

[...] Had no friends, no, no way. Not talking to anyone. My dad would not let me... (M1)

Regarding the memory of songs that marked, dances of the season and as one took care of herself, they bring stories tagged with prohibition and dissatisfaction. There surface issues too with religion and an association of forgetfulness with depression.

[...] Ah I had music in my mind this passage {teens}, but after the depression seems that many things were erased from my mind. (M10)

[...] Look, I did not dance. My dad would not let me dance... (M4)

[...] The only place was the church in fact. He took the car {husband}, put the family in and we went to church ... So. then after I lost those five children, the only living thing left was the couple, the husband put me out, put another woman into the house, then I took ...I abandoned the church of believe that I spoke this God is love ... Where's the love? Then I revolted ... (M2)

[...] It was the hardest thing {dance}. And they did not let me {adoptive family} My life was just service and church... (M5)

[...] Not {danced}. My father would not let me. Don't even remember the songs of the era. (M3)

[...] Just dress and skirt. I had to use them because they were the clothes he accepted {husband}. If I solved using a trousers or anything he tore them ... (M2)

[...] My clothes were long, dresses with sleeves. Never put on lipstick because my father would not let me. (M1)

[...] What I did to take care of me? Ahhh! I did not take care of me... (M5)

In the period when most women lived adolescence, Brazil lived with the oppression of the military dictatorship and the imperatives it brings to daily life. There was no democracy, the rights were suppressed, the suppression was done by force, sexual repression, among others. Television and radio censored conveyed only by the customs imposed by the regime. There was encouragement to individualism, consumption, valuation of private property, religious morality and the family headed by the male figure.

The reports above show close relationship with the period in which the power exercised by man, the breadwinner, was advocated social and morally preconized. The male figure and families with their impositions forbade women's autonomy in relation to where they were transiting, the activities they performed and how they dressed and arranged themselves. These prohibitions then became a form to hinder freedom of expression and individuality of the female figure. The women interviewed don't seem to have had contact with social and youth movements of the time that preached peace, sexual liberation etc. Only one of the women brings in the musical context the taste for singers that influenced Brazilian youth through television to disseminate lifestyles, way of dressing and acting.

[...] Roberto Carlos, Erasmo Carlos. Those who everybody liked, everybody ... (M4)

When invited to speak of feelings of adolescence, questions of violence and the desire not to remember negative feelings involved appear again:

[...] This time that he {husband} began to belittle me I said: "My God, now I'm fried." (M2)

[...] I usually leave that life behind, you know? I think it was not worth anything. (M4)

[...] Very bad feeling because with everything we go through now I feel connected to my growing up early in my life. (M5)

In adolescence, determinants as biological and social, historical, cultural and affective are fundamental to the formation of the adult individual. In this transitional period of life there are conflicts between the child's world and the new preparatory phase to the development of adulthood and intra-family affective relations are basal. These relationships play a key role in the development of psychological and sexual adulthood. The subjects, when asked to remember dreams of this time, they refer to intra-family relationships that generated suffering in this period of life. This, hypothetically, could have influenced the condition of the mental health state in which they are at the time of interview: depressed.

[...] At that time one only dreamed of marrying. But marriage is no future, no. And when married one got 'screwed'. (M3)

[...] We had nothing. It didn't even 'pay' to dream. I was raised in a way so that we did not even dream. Upbringing understand? (M4)

[...] Ah I had several dreams. One was studying, graduating, having some profession. I just thought about being a teacher. Yes... Then I thought so ... How to be a teacher, if I do not study? And I did not study because I did have how to ... (M5)

### Adulthood

The suffering of these women in childhood and adolescence has continued into adulthood, when they become susceptible to aggression and subordinate of their spouses.

The subordination to her husband occurs, for example, as to religious choice itself.

[...] I followed a good time the evangelical (church). Then I gave it a stop. I felt much stronger, much happier. I'd go to cults, I sang, I felt fine. It seemed that there was no problem, you know? But I saw my husband saw that I was not of the same religion and made the ugly face at me, that blocked me already, would not let me so at ease. Then I stopped going. (M8)

The hard living with her husband through problems of alcoholism and drug addiction brings feelings of powerlessness in the face of the situation, translated by sadness, distress, nervousness and expressions of extreme situations.

[...] Due my husband messing with drugs, it is very difficult to deal with aggressive attitudes when he

uses drugs. I do not like his friends, so I end up getting very nervous. So I guess I'm not very well so I want to be better. (M7)

[...] We do not live well {husband}. He is an alcoholic, admits and accepts no treatment. Thus arrived at the limit, enough. It isn't working anymore. I feel sad, unhappy in my marriage because of the person he has become, especially when he's drunk. It is no longer possible, can not afford it. (M6)

Studies show the perpetration of violence of men against women when nine times more when men drink compared to days without alcohol and that 70% of partners consumed alcohol and 11% used illicit drugs before the assault<sup>(20)</sup>.

The interviewees above tried to divorce because of the suffering to which they were subjected; however, not yet had separated by the time of data collection. Hypothesis is: is that depression a process of rupture with their sociocultural history and an outlet for the situation in which they are now?

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is observed that among the socio-cultural practices and experiences lived by the interviewed women violence and androcentric power are highlighted to which they were subjected in their life stories.

Memories and perceptions of their sociocultural universes as: food, dances, play music, friendships, etc. indicated a violent socio-cultural world from birth to adulthood. There were virtually nonexistent memories that brought positive experiences of the cultural context in which they arose as women, which led to research to engage with theories on violence in women.

The androcentric power and violence against women - whether physical, emotional, sexual, moral or symbolic since the beginning of their existence - left marks that have limited their practices and socio-cultural experiences, which can be found in the narratives. The strength of the masculine order in the lives of these women seems to have been achieved by the simple fact that it does not need justification: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need for legitimation. We can then understand gender violence as a phenomenon within the existing social structure.

The depression in these women can be seen as part of a social and cultural construction in specific contexts: vulnerable contexts, violence, economic and cultural restriction, abandonment, subordination, among others. This is not an individualized disease in a subject, but may be

the fruit of a society. However, the study can not be conclusive with respect to the causality associated with violence and power exercised by man over woman depression.

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## ASPECTOS SOCIOCULTURAIS E VIOLÊNCIA EM MULHERES DEPRIMIDAS

### RESUMO

Analisa-se as relações socioculturais de dez mulheres com diagnóstico de depressão, moradoras de uma região periférica no interior de São Paulo. Os dados foram coletados em 2009 através de entrevistas semiestruturadas e foram abordados elementos como: origem, relações de amizade, brincadeiras, escola, lazer, religiosidade, vestimentas, sonhos, entre outros, de acordo com cada fase da vida: infância, adolescência e vida adulta. A partir de referenciais socioculturais, deparou-se com o fenômeno da violência em sua diversidade: psicológica, moral, física, sexual e social apoiado no poder *androcentrista*. A pesquisa apontou que a vida destas mulheres é permeada de violência desde a infância até a vida adulta. A depressão em mulheres se insere para além de uma doença biologicamente determinada por fatores genéticos, orgânicos e hormonais. Pode ser vista como parte de uma construção sociocultural em contextos específicos, portanto não se trata de uma doença individualizada em um sujeito, mas pode ser fruto de uma sociedade ainda com predomínio *androcentrista*.

**Palavras-chave:** Fatores socioculturais. Violência. Mulheres.

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## ASPECTOS SOCIOCULTURALES Y VIOLENCIA IN MUJERES DEPRIMIDAS

### RESUMEN

Se analizan las relaciones socioculturales de diez mujeres con diagnóstico de depresión, residentes de una región periférica en el interior de São Paulo. Los datos fueron recogidos en 2009 por medio de entrevistas semiestructuradas. Fueron abordados temas como: origen, relaciones de amistad, juguetes, escuela, recreación, religiosidad, prendas de vestir, sueños, entre otros, según cada fase de la vida: niñez, juventud y la vida adulta. El uso de referencias socioculturales se encontró con el fenómeno de la violencia en toda su dimensión de la diversidad: psicológica, moral, fuerza física, sexual y social en apoyo *androcentrista*. La encuesta mostró que la vida de estas mujeres está impregnada por la violencia desde la infancia hasta la edad adulta. La depresión en mujeres es parte de una enfermedad más allá biológicamente determinado por genética, hormonal y orgánicos. Puede ser visto como parte de una construcción sociocultural en contextos específicos, por lo que no es una enfermedad en un sujeto individual, pero puede ser el resultado de una sociedad todavía predominantemente *androcentrista*.

**Palabras clave:** Los factores socioculturales. Violencia. Mujeres.

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