

MOTHER'S REACTIONS TOWARDS THEIR SONS' DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE VICTIMIZATION

Angela de Araujo Barros Bonfante^{1 2}, Orcid: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5627-329X>

Linéia Polli^{1 3}, Orcid: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7181-7374>

Jean Von Hohendorff^{1 4}, Orcid: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7414-5312>

ABSTRACT. Studies on the disclosure of sexual violence are majorly based on cases involving girls. The objective was to investigate protective and non-protective reactions of mothers and fathers of boys towards the disclosure of sexual violence victimization. In this qualitative research, we interviewed nine mothers and analyzed the data using thematic analysis, which resulted in six themes: moment of disclosure, trust and distrust, welcoming⁵, help seeking, emotions, and protection. Altogether, results showed that mothers, in general, presented protective reactions towards the disclosure, which was evident in all identified themes. After disclosure, mothers trusted their sons and sought to protect them by attentive listening, although some of them entered a state of paralysis and sadness. This welcoming of their sons' disclosure was followed by seeking information and specialized treatment. Protection was also identified by withdrawing from aggressors and monitoring the boys' routines. Thus, it is necessary to invest in actions to raise awareness of the available services so that caretakers can protect children and adolescents at risk. In addition, interventions are required to assist them to manage their feelings towards disclosure, as well as the consequences of violence for children and adolescents.

Keywords: Sex offenses; boys; disclosure.

REAÇÕES DE MÃES DE MENINOS VÍTIMAS DE VIOLÊNCIA SEXUAL DIANTE DA REVELAÇÃO

RESUMO. Os estudos existentes acerca da revelação da violência sexual são, em sua maioria, baseados em casos de meninas. À vista disso, objetivou-se conhecer as reações protetivas e não protetivas de mães e pais diante da revelação de meninos vítimas de violência sexual. Para tanto, foi realizado um estudo qualitativo, por meio de entrevistas, com nove mães. Em seguida, efetuou-se a análise temática dos dados, que resultou em seis temas: momento da revelação; confiança e desconfiança; acolhimento; busca de ajuda; emoções; e proteção. Tomados em conjunto, os resultados indicam que as mães apresentaram, no geral, reações protetivas diante da revelação, evidentes em todos os temas identificados. A partir do momento da revelação, as mães confiaram nos seus filhos

¹ ATITUS Educação, Passo Fundo-RS, Brazil.

² E-mail: angelaabbg@gmail.com

³ E-mail: lineia.polli@hotmail.com

⁴ E-mail: jhohendorff@gmail.com

⁵ The translator understands that the term 'welcoming' holds many meanings and possibly different context uses. However, taking into consideration the meaning of the original word and the meaning from its Latin roots – receiving, holding together – we believe that 'welcoming' fits into the aforementioned contexts.



e buscaram acolhê-los por meio de uma escuta atenta, também, cabe dizer, algumas entraram em estado de paralisia e entristecimento. Esse acolhimento foi seguido de busca de informações e de atendimento especializado. A proteção ocorreu, ainda, por meio do afastamento dos agressores e monitoramento da rotina dos filhos. Nesse sentido, é fundamental que haja investimento em ações de conscientização sobre os serviços disponíveis para que cuidadores possam proteger crianças e adolescentes em risco. Além disso, são necessárias intervenções que visem auxiliá-los no manejo de seus sentimentos diante da revelação, bem como em relação às consequências da violência para crianças e adolescentes.

Palavras-chave: Delitos sexuais; meninos; revelação.

REACCIONES DE MADRES DE NIÑOS VÍCTIMAS DE VIOLENCIA SEXUAL FRENTE A REVELACIÓN

RESUMEN. Los estudios existentes sobre divulgación de violencia sexual se basan principalmente en casos de niñas. El objetivo era conocer las reacciones protectoras y no protectoras de madres y padres ante la revelación de niños que son víctimas de violencia sexual. Se realizó un estudio cualitativo, a través de entrevistas con nueve madres. Se llevó a cabo un análisis temático de datos, que resultó en seis temas: momento de revelación, confianza y desconfianza, acogida, búsqueda de ayuda, emociones y protección. Los resultados indican que las madres mostraron reacciones protectoras a la revelación, evidente en todos los temas. Desde el momento de la revelación, las madres confiaron en sus hijos y trataron de recibirlos escuchando atentamente, algunos de los cuales entraron en un estado de parálisis y tristeza. Siguió la búsqueda de información y asistencia especializada. La protección también se produjo mediante la eliminación de agresores y el monitoreo de la rutina de los niños. Es necesario invertir en acciones de concientización sobre los servicios disponibles. Además, se necesitan intervenciones para ayudarlos a manejar sus sentimientos ante la divulgación.

Palabras clave: Delito sexual; muchachos; revelación.

Introduction

In Brazil, the rights of children and adolescents are reaffirmed in the Child and Adolescent Statute (ECA), which consists of a Federal Law created in 1990 (Lei nº 8.069, 1990). As a complement to the ECA, Law 13,431, of April 4, 2017, was approved, which establishes the guarantee of the rights of children and adolescents who are victims or witnesses of violence, guaranteeing specialized listening to this public. According to this law, sexual violence consists of any action that embarrasses the child/adolescent, including sexual intercourse or any lewd act (e.g., photo or video exposing the body of the child/adolescent with the aim of sexual stimulation, which may or may not be done electronically; Lei nº 13.431, 2017).

Most victims of sexual violence in reports between 2011 and 2017 are girls, in the case of children, with a higher prevalence between one and five years old, and adolescents, between 10 and 14 years old. Sexual violence against boys represented only a quarter of the total percentage of reports (Brasil, 2018). In this sense, there is evidence

that, for cultural reasons and the way it occurs, sexual violence against boys is less reported, which does not imply a lower occurrence (Hohendorff, Habigzang, & Koller, 2014).

The dynamics of sexual violence, in turn, has been analyzed since the 1980s by different authors (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Furniss, 1993; Sgroi, Blick, & Porter, 1982; Spiegel, 2003; Summit, 1983). Taking these references, Hohendorff, Nelson-Gardell, Habigzang and Koller (2017) proposed a conceptual integrative model composed of six phases of sexual violence against children and adolescents.

The first is 'preparation', when the possible aggressor begins to approach the child/adolescent, gaining his/her trust, giving him/her attention or even gifts. 'Episodes' characterize the lewd nature of the aggressor's acts, usually starting with subtle contacts and can culminate in penetration. 'Silencing' may result from the child/adolescent not understanding the violence, as well as threats and blackmail made by the aggressor. On the other hand, the narrative of violence (the Telling) can occur accidentally, usually carried out by younger children when there is no intention to disclose the violence, or intentionally, commonly carried out by adolescents, when there is the intention to talk about the violence suffered. The 'repression' phase can also occur, when, after the narrative, children and/or adolescents are forced to draw back, either due to lack of support from the family or social context, which they believe is a lie on the part of the child, or because of threats from the aggressor. Finally, with major components the separation of the child/adolescent from the aggressor and the interruption of episodes of violence, there can be 'overcoming', a stage in which the victim will receive the necessary care (Hohendorff et al., 2017).

For there to be the possibility of overcoming violence, disclosure is crucial for the protection of the victim. It is through disclosure that victims can receive help and stop sexual violence, restoring their well-being, according to the protective measures recommended by the ECA (Lei nº 8.069, 1990). In this context, disclosure can be understood as a specific process that may or may not happen, since it will depend on the victim's interaction with the environment in which he/she is inserted, therefore, its occurrence may be late (Alaggia, Collin-Vézina, & Lateef, 2017).

In a systematic review of 33 articles in English, we aimed to understand the scenario of research on the disclosure of sexual violence. Five themes were identified: (1) influence of interpersonal relationships on disclosure, which is a process of interaction with the environment and not an isolated event; (2) the current scenario where the victims are inserted - current social and cultural values, exposing the importance of the population knowledge about sexual violence for the disclosure to occur; (3) age and gender as strong obstacles to disclosure, emphasizing that accidental disclosure prevails in children, while late disclosure (e.g., victims disclose it in adulthood) is more frequent in boys and men – due to social stigma, the fear of being labeled as homosexuals and the fear of becoming aggressors; (4) lack of perspectives on disclosure throughout life, lacking data on how disclosure is viewed at different times, what historical effects or developmental periods may facilitate disclosure; (5) barriers and facilitators of disclosure, indicating older age as a facilitator, due to better conditions in communication, on the other hand, the prevalence of feelings of guilt and fear are identified as impediments to disclosure, especially in intrafamily violence and sexual violence against boys and men (Alaggia et al., 2017).

Internationally, studies have identified barriers to disclosing sexual violence against male victims, which are divided into three domains (Easton, Saltzman, & Willis, 2014; Sorsoli, Kia-Keating, & Grossman, 2008): 'personal' (e.g., lack of cognitive awareness,

naming the experience as sexual violence, intentional avoidance, emotions such as shame, concerns about sexual identity and orientation); 'interpersonal/relational' (e.g., fear of negative repercussions, isolation, lack of credibility from others, threats from offenders); 'sociopolitical/sociocultural' (e.g., patterns of masculinity, limited resources, lack of acceptance or knowledge of male victimization). These barriers, in short, contribute to the fact that male victims do not report the occurrence of sexual violence and, consequently, do not seek professional help (Kia-Keating, Grossman, Sorsoli, & Epstein 2005; Sigurdardottir, Halldorsdottir, & Bender, 2012).

A quantitative study carried out in Israel with 3,156 children and adolescents, aged between 11 and 16 years, who had experienced at least one episode of child sexual abuse and/or violence, found a greater reluctance to disclose in boys. In other words, the social bias reinforces the belief that boys are considered homosexuals, when a man was the perpetrator, not being seen as sexually abused. In addition, two factors were considered as barriers to disclosure: first, when sexual violence occurs with physical contact, and second, when the perpetrator is someone very close to the victim. Also, the research found a positive correlation between the difficulty of revealing and the emotional reactions presented by the victims, indicating that the less said about it, the more intense the emotional reactions (Lev-Wiesel, & First, 2018).

In Brazil, studies on mothers' reactions to disclosure are, above all, referring to cases of girls, victims of sexual violence (Santos & Dell'Aglio, 2008, 2009, 2013). From a literature review, it was found that mothers of victim girls can take two positions towards disclosure: accomplices of violence or protectors of the child. Factors such as lack of information about available services, financial dependence on the aggressor and a history of sexual violence can negatively influence mothers' reactions (Santos & Dell'Aglio, 2008). In an investigation, through interviews with ten mothers of victim girls, positive and ambivalent reactions were perceived. Most mothers believed the daughter's report and reported the violence, but not all of them took their daughters away from the alleged aggressors. The difficulties in carrying out the report were: threats from the aggressor, fear of social judgment and of those close to her about her role as a mother figure and the fear of losing her family (Santos & Dell'Aglio, 2009). In a broader study, on the perception of 27 mothers of girls, the disclosure occurred in an interactive way from mother observations and the child's communication. The disclosure process involved three moments: antecedents of the disclosure, the disclosure itself and the consequences of the disclosure in the family context. These stages encompassed the mothers' perception of changes in their daughters' behavior before the disclosure, the insecurity towards disclosing violence, the mothers' personal experiences with sexual violence and the search for help (Santos & Dell'Aglio, 2013).

Nationally, only one case study was found on the process of disclosing sexual violence against boys. The discovery of sexual violence occurred through observation and conversations between the mother and the child, who, little by little, revealed the situation that had occurred. The disclosure triggered a feeling of guilt in the mother for not having protected her son, concerns about his sexuality and the possibility of him becoming an aggressor. Furthermore, repercussions of sexual violence were identified both on the family, which experienced a moment of crisis, and on the victim (e.g., depression, stress, anxiety). In view of this, it was highlighted that sexual violence against boys still requires greater attention due to the reduced number of reported cases, as well as the difficulty of accessing this population for conducting research (Hohendorff, Santos, & Dell'Aglio, 2015).

In view of the above considerations, Brazilian studies on the disclosure of boys who have suffered sexual violence are scarce. Therefore, the objective was to know the protective and non-protective reactions of mothers and fathers towards their sons' disclosure of sexual violence victimization.

Method

Participants

Participants were nine mothers of boys suspected of having been victims of sexual violence. Characteristics of the participants are listed in Table 1. The inclusion criteria adopted were: biological and/or adoptive mothers and fathers, or main caretakers, over 18 years old, of boys up to 18 years old who were referred for care due to suspected sexual violence, and that were not suspects or had committed violence against their child. The exclusion criteria were: signs of cognitive deficits, substance use and/or psychological disorder that prevented them from understanding the interview questions, these criteria were evaluated by observation during the interview. One participant was excluded for showing signs of cognitive impairment.

Of the nine interviews carried out, two referred to cases reported but not confirmed by the mothers interviewed. The study intended to include approximately 12 interviews with biological and/or adoptive fathers and mothers of boys victims of sexual violence, with at least six fathers and six mothers or main caretakers. However, difficulties during data collection (see Procedures section), as well as the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria were decisive for the number of participants obtained. There was no interest on the part of the parents in participating in the research.

Regarding sexual violence, the ages of the likely victims ranged between five and ten years and the aggressors were mostly people known to the boys. In one case, the age of the likely victim was not reported. In the others, the ages of the probable victims were: five (n=3), seven (n=2), four (n=1), six (n=1) and ten (n=1). The age of the likely aggressor was not reported in five cases. When informed, the ages were: five (n=1), eight (n=1), 13 (n=1) and 14 years (n=1). The relationships between the probable victim and the probable aggressor reported were: father (n=1), stepfather (n=1), biological brother (n=1), cousin (n=1), great-grandfather (n=1), daycare employee (n=1), daycare playmate (n=1) and owner of the market (n=1).

Table 1. Characterization of participants

Gender	Color	Marital status	Schooling	Age/years	Number of children	Occupation	Kinship with the child	Who lives in the house	Monthly family income
Female	Black	Single	Incomplete elementary	37	6	Cleaning assistant	Biological mother	Mother and 4 children	937.00
Female	White	Married	Incomplete elementary	22	3	Cleaning lady	Biological mother	Mother, father, and a son	2,000.00
Female	Black	Single	Incomplete higher education	37	3	Baker	Biological mother	Mother, mother's brother, son and daughter	1,170.00
Female	White	Married	Incomplete elementary	39	1	Businesswoman (Restaurant)	Biological mother	Mother, father and son	3,000.00
Female	White	Single	Incomplete elementary	33	3	Unemployed	Biological mother	Mother and children	1,105.00
Female	Black	Single	Incomplete elementary	34	2	General Services Assistant	Biological mother	Mother, grandfather, grandmother, two children	937.00
Female	Black	Married	Incomplete elementary	50	5	Cleaning lady/retired	Biological mother	Father, mother and two children	1,200.00
Female	Black	Cohabitation	Incomplete elementary	26 years	4	Cleaning assistant	Biological mother	Father, mother and two children	763.00
Female	White	Cohabitation	Complete high school	35 years	3	Cleaning lady (not working because of pregnancy)	Biological mother	Stepfather, mother and two children	700.00

Instruments

Semi-structured interview script: developed for this study. This was used to investigate the protective and non-protective reactions of mothers of boys who were victims of sexual violence. It contains questions such as “How did you find out about the violence that happened to your child?” and “What was your reaction at the time of the disclosure?”.

Sociodemographic data form: produced for this study, and used to characterize the participants in terms of gender, age and marital status.

Procedures

After approval by the Ethics Committee (CAAE 70421417.0.0000.5319), a partnership was signed for data collection with an evaluation and psychological care center for children and adolescents suspected of having suffered some type of violation of their rights, in a city in the northern region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. In this context, help was requested to collect data from the coordination of the center, therefore, a list with 39 cases was made available, containing the address, telephone number of the fathers, mothers or caretakers of the boys who were victims of sexual violence, which allowed the invitation to participate in the study.

In addition, the center provided a room for phone calls and interviews. Initially, the most recent cases (i.e., attended between 2018 and 2016) were contacted, followed by the oldest (i.e., attended in 2014), considering that there could have been changes in telephone numbers over the years. With little feedback, after two weeks, calls were also made with potential participants for the years 2016 and 2015 and, in the third week, for the same reason, for the years 2015 and 2014. From 39 selected contacts, 15 interviews were scheduled and only five mothers were willing to be interviewed. For data collection to approach the number initially estimated (i.e., 12 interviews), the possibility of inviting mothers and fathers of boys who attended the center to take their children to the workshops was investigated. On that occasion, the researcher talked to two mothers who were at the center, presented the research objectives and, then, two interviews were scheduled and carried out. Further, the center's social worker provided contact details for the fathers and mothers of children and adolescents who attended the workshops. Thus, telephone contact was made with ten possible participants and two interviews were scheduled, but the mothers did not attend. Thus, data collection at the center totaled seven interviews, however, during an interview, we observed that one of the participants had signs of cognitive impairment, which prevented her from understanding the questions asked.

At the same time, a partnership was signed with a Social Assistance service that provided psychosocial care to people who had their rights violated. The local psychologists and social workers committed to scheduling the interviews due to the characteristics of the research, a role delegated to them by the bond already formalized with the users. However, when trying to contact the families, the techniques were not successful, so the researcher was asked to try, on her own, to contact the possible participants to arrange the interviews with the nine contacts. In view of this, it was possible to schedule four interviews, but only two people attended. Finally, after contacting and scheduling all possible participants, data collection was completed.

Data were collected between April 2018 and December 2018. During these eight months, nine interviews were carried out with mothers of boys suspected of being victims of sexual violence. Interviews were carried out in the rooms available at each center, by a master's student in psychology, who had undergone previous training through dramatizations with her advisor. The average duration of the interviews was approximately 22 minutes, with the shortest interview lasting 14 minutes and the longest, about 48 minutes. Participants were identified by fictitious names to ensure anonymity.

Data analysis

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed in full by the researcher. Data analysis process was based on the Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with six stages: (1) familiarization with the data: the researcher transcribed the verbal data, trying to maintain the veracity of the information. Then, the material was repeatedly read; (2) selection of initial codes: when reading the transcripts, specific passages (initial codes) were highlighted and notes were made; (3) review and insertion of themes: in this phase, the researcher surveyed the codes and data identified and started a grouping to identify possible themes; (4) refinement of the analysis through the review of themes: when reviewing the themes, it was noticed the need to improve them, discarding themes considered unnecessary (due to the lack of sufficient data to justify their permanence)

and/or turning them into a single theme (in cases where two themes corroborated the same theme); (5) definition and refinement of themes through examples: as the researcher managed to define a thematic map of the data, the essential meaning of each theme was extracted; (6) defining results: at this stage, the report was prepared. The researcher described the findings in a descriptive way. NVivo software was used for analysis.

Results

Based on the analysis of the interviews carried out with nine mothers of boys suspected of having been victims of sexual violence, six themes were identified, namely: moment of disclosure; trust and mistrust; welcoming; help seeking; emotions; and protection.

The theme 'Moment of disclosure' included excerpts from the participants' speeches in which they described how the disclosure of sexual violence occurred. The disclosure occurred through the son's report in four cases, usually when asked

My son, what is this? He said: mother, nothing, I fell. I said: no, you didn't fall, no, are you hurt? Then he said like this: mother I fell on an iron. I said: son, tell the truth to your mother, otherwise the mother will be very sad. He looked at me and started to cry, then he told me: Mother was B., he held me from behind and hurt me, so I didn't ask him anything else, right (Paula).

In three cases, the disclosure happened by third parties: two through the school "The teacher told me that in this case they were in a classroom playing, then the teacher asked to organize the toys, then the others went to a room and left just the two of them, so when she saw that they took too long she went in the room and saw that the boy was sucking his dick" (Clara) and a case the niece told the participant "When they told me I was talking to my niece, A. you knowing everything that the aunt goes through with W. because of the pee issue you never tell the aunt?!" (Luisa). In two other cases, third parties suspected the occurrence of sexual violence. In one case, the suspect came from the victim's mother and, in another, from the paternal grandmother. Such suspicions caused the boys to be questioned about the alleged occurrence of violence.

The theme 'Trust and distrust' is formed by fragments in which the participants described the reasons that made them believe or not in the disclosure of their children, as well as if they became ambivalent. Of the nine interviewees, six reported having believed their son's report "Yes, because then, he is a child who lived in this place, in my house, at the school and in the church, he is not a child who goes to many places, who plays freely, so if he showed it, something weird was going on" (Mara). The main reason to give credibility to the children's report was the presence of physical symptoms related to violence

He came from school and in a lot of pain, we gave him medicine, we thought he had eaten too much, then he complained about a stomachache again, and couldn't sit still, and then he told me, he said: Mom, I don't want to go to class, but I have something to tell you, aren't you going to beat me? Then I said: no, tell me what's going on, then he said: mother, me and C. - who is his brother - wanted to play boyfriend with me, then he stuck his dick in my ass (Fátima).

Ambivalence was reported by two mothers. One justified her ambivalence because her son did not remember what had happened "I suffered a little because I believed that this had really happened, on the other hand I was afraid that it had not happened, I don't know if you understand me, because of the part that my son say he doesn't remember" (Luisa) and another suspected that her husband had raped her children, but they denied

what had happened “I thought he had abused the boy, but no, the boy says no, never, and the others didn’t either, they said no, so this one, right, I denounced him because being naked is also abuse, right?!” (Rose). One mother indicated that she did not believe the paternal grandmother’s report, who suspected the occurrence of violence against her grandson, as she believed in her husband, identified as the alleged aggressor

I know she went there to say that my husband had abused my boy [...] It’s just something that’s not true, because the baby only stays with me, you know? I haven’t worked for two years, so when the baby went home, he was only with me, I bathed him, I took care of him, this is why I was surprised and wondering why they did that (Raquel).

‘Welcoming’ is a theme formed by excerpts from the interviews in which the participants verbally expressed how they emotionally welcomed their children. Five participants did not express how they conceived this welcoming. Two participants reported trying not to show sadness to their son, in addition to expressing gestures of affection “I had to hug, pretend everything was fine and I cried hidden so he wouldn’t see it, so he wouldn’t notice” (Mara).

In the theme ‘Help seeking’, excerpts from the interviews were included, in which the participants indicated that, after disclosure, they sought information about sexual violence in order to provide adequate welcoming. A mother told her daughter, the victim’s sister “I got to the room and told my daughter, she’s 11 years old. I said: A. look what happened, B. hurt Y” (Paula), two participants tried to call the mothers of the aggressors (both relatives of the victims) “I called his mother, you know, for her to go there, then she went, then I told her what had happened” (Fátima) and two spoke with their mother-in-law and their mothers “So, as my mother is a retired teacher, I called her and asked her, at the time we all lived together, my father, my mother, everyone lived there in the same house. So, I called her and asked how I should act, because as a teacher, she would have some more information” (Mara).

Eight mothers reported having sought specialized care. The mothers sought the following consultations: one mother sought private psychological counseling for her son “To this day I still take him to a psychologist” (Fátima), another mother sought psychological care for her “In these consultations that I went to, the psychologist told me, you want to treat your child, I have to treat me first, start by me, and then him, because the problem was in me” (Clara). Eight mothers went to the police station, to the guardianship council and, consequently, were referred with their children to a psychological evaluation at the center. After the evaluation, a report that proves whether or not the victims were sexually abused is sent to the judge of the Childhood and Adolescence Court

They – child counselor – said that I was supposed to go to the police station, I reported, then I took the exams there and they didn’t call me anymore, it’s stopped, the only place they called me was here – center –, to talk, to only refer Y. to the psychologist [...] I don’t know what happened, I don’t know what progress is going on (Paula).

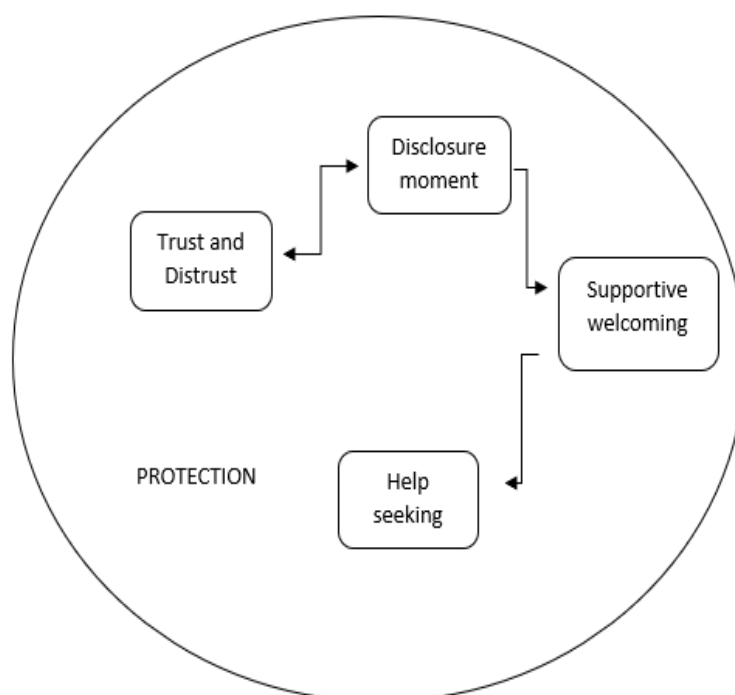
The excerpts in which participants described what they felt about the violence suffered by their children were included in the theme ‘Emotions’. Emotions described were fear “I’m afraid, terrified today when I see him on the street. I’m afraid he’s going to do something with my son, he’s going to take my son” (Luisa), guilt “For having allowed, because I usually don’t let them go out like that, I take very good care of my children, you know, even though I’m alone with them, I’m a single mother but I take care of them the best I can. But that day, I shouldn’t have allowed, but he always went play and it never

happened” (Paula), anger/hostility “It’s very difficult, very difficult because I have nothing to do. The desire I have is to go there and kill that person, but I will disgrace my life, that of my family, my children will not live with their father, they will not live with their mother” (Mara). Such emotions resulted in behaviors such as crying “I was terrified [...] then I went to look at him, he was very hurt... I bathed him and took him to the physician, very terrified, I cried a lot with him, he cried and I cried, terrified” (Fátima) and paralysis “I bathed him, got him ready [...] but I got that panic in my head, I didn’t do anything at the time, at the time I didn’t do anything, I panicked, I didn’t tell my mother, I didn’t tell my father, I kept it for myself” (Paula).

The theme ‘Protection’ is formed by excerpts from the interviews in which the participants expressed concern about monitoring the daily lives of their children so that they are not violated again, as well as the excerpts in which they expressed the search for separation of their children from the aggressor. Five participants started to monitor their children’s daily lives, trying to keep up with their daily routine “I don’t want to leave my son, never with anyone again, I’d rather ask someone for a pack of rice, a milk carton than to have to ask someone to take care of my children, I don’t leave them with anyone else” (Mara). The separation of the boys and the aggressors took place by preventing contact, according to the report of seven mothers “All I know is that I didn’t let my children go there anymore, neither of them, the family was against us” (Paula).

Taken together, our results indicate that the mothers interviewed presented, in general, protective reactions when faced with the disclosure of the possible occurrence of sexual violence against their children. These protective reactions are evident in all identified themes. From the moment of disclosure, the mothers interviewed, as a rule, trusted their children and sought to welcome them through attentive listening. Also, many entered a state of paralysis and sadness, worried about the well-being of their children. This welcoming was followed by a search for information and specialized care aimed at protecting the boys. Protection took place through monitoring, that is, the participants sought to be more present, following the routine of their children. In addition, they tried to keep the victims away from the aggressors, so that their children would no longer become victims of this type of violence. Therefore, the relationship between the themes with regard to the protective reactions of mothers can be seen, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Thematic map of results.



Discussion

The objective of this study was to know the protective and non-protective reactions of mothers and fathers in the face of the disclosure of boys suspected of having suffered sexual violence. To this end, a partnership was established with two centers that provided services to families and to children and adolescents who were victims of sexual violence. Throughout the data collection process, the difficulty of access to the participants was noticed, which may be linked to the social stigma in addressing sexuality issues, since they are treated as a taboo, especially when referring to sexual violence against children and adolescents. In fact, this problem is still omitted and veiled in society, and can directly influence the disclosure of violence by victims (Vega & Paludo, 2015).

Although the objective was to interview parents, none of them offered to participate in the study. In this sense, issues related to the male role and machismo can explain this absence. Specifically in cases of sexual violence, resistance to addressing this topic is often related to the traditional stereotype of masculinity, difficulty in talking about feelings and prejudices related to homosexuality (Okur, Knaap, & Bogaerts, 2017). In addition, the family arrangement of participants indicated that in five cases the father was not present. In Brazil, 40.5% families are headed by women (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, n.d.), who are responsible for providing for the home and taking care of the children.

The disclosure of sexual violence suffered by the children of the participants in this study was, in most cases, reported by third parties (three cases) or arising from suspicions by family members (two cases). These findings, which totaled five out of the nine cases, characterize the tendency to accidental disclosure, frequent in cases of sexual violence against boys. Again, sexist social impositions regarding the male gender, fear and homophobia make boys/men generally only reveal the sexual violence they have suffered in adulthood (Alaggia, et al., 2017; Baía, Veloso, Magalhães, & Dell’Aglío, 2013; Okur et al., 2017). In the other four cases analyzed, the disclosure was made through the speech of the boys themselves, but this only happened when they were questioned by the mothers. Participants reported, above all, that they perceived physical signs and symptoms coming from their children (e.g., bruises, blood), causing them to observe them and question what could be happening, an aspect found in a previous study (Said & Costa, 2019). Given the above, interpersonal relationships are an influencing factor in the occurrence, or not, of disclosure, which is understood as a process, different from an isolated event, which consists of the victim’s interaction with the environment (Alaggia et al., 2017).

Most of the interviewed mothers (06 cases) had protective reactions to the disclosure. The protective reactions identified consisted of welcoming, listening, showing affection and credibility in the children’s report, separation from the alleged aggressor and seeking specialized care. Such reactions are similar to those of previous studies, which were carried out with mothers of girls (Santos & Dell’Aglío, 2009, 2013) and in a documentary study on three cases of male victims (Said & Costa, 2019).

It is possible to raise the hypothesis that mothers approached by research related to the disclosure of sexual violence, being mothers who normally resort to specialized care services, may not represent the general – and real – panorama of the reactions of mothers of boys who are victims of sexual violence. Possibly, mothers who did not show protective reactions do not systematically attend these services, and there is a need, in future studies, to try to access this population. However, in view of the inherent difficulty of approaching mothers, fathers and caretakers who do not have protective reactions and, consequently, do not resort to services, professionals who interact with these caretakers can be participants in further studies, given that these professionals can provide information about cases in which the absence of protective reactions is perceived.

Some mothers interviewed did not know how to react in the face of what had happened, not having prior information about what needed to be done or which specialized care services they could seek. In at least five of the cases, participants reported the lack of information, and one resorted to the victim’s daughter, who was only 11 years old, for not knowing how to react. Given this, it is necessary to rethink how far the service network can still be from the public that needs it most. The population’s lack of knowledge about the occurrence of sexual violence against children and adolescents, a topic that is still very veiled and silenced, makes people not know which services to turn to, which can victimize even more children and adolescents who need support (Vega & Paludo, 2015). Parallel to this, fear due to vulnerability and lack of protection in the context, guilt for not being able to constantly monitor the children, for having to take care of sustenance and raising alone, and anger at what happened were emotions often felt by the participants. They reported reactions such as crying and paralysis when faced with the disclosure of violence due to the fear and panic that the situation generated, not knowing how to react. These reactions and the feelings involved were also identified in national studies regarding the reaction of

mothers of girls to disclosure (Santos & Dell'Aglio, 2008, 2009, 2013), and related to a case study with a boy (Hohendorff et al., 2015). In summary, this highlights the need to intervene and instrumentalize the family context to better deal with the situation of violence (Said & Costa, 2019).

The protection of the boys took place, after the disclosure of sexual violence, through constant monitoring of daily life, as well as the search for distance between aggressors and victims. Monitoring children is an aspect reported in previous studies on sexual violence against boys (Hohendorff et al., 2015; Said & Costa, 2019). Although necessary, it is essential to problematize such monitoring, since not all families are able to do so. Often, families served by public services are low-income, so fathers and mothers need to work during the day to ensure the financial home support. Consequently, if they do not have access to public institutions (e.g., day care centers, schools) for their children to have the necessary care, they need to remain at home or with community members, which can be a risk factor for violence. Faced with these difficulties, it is possible that a feeling of guilt may arise among the caretakers.

The separation of victims from their aggressors is one of the most important protective measures in cases of sexual violence against children and adolescents. Although such a measure is provided for in the ECA (Lei nº 8.069, 1990) and requires the action of the Guardianship Council and, in some cases, of Justice, the adherence of mothers to this measure is necessary. However, even if there is a protective measure of removal issued by the Guardianship Council and/or the Justice, if the aggressor is free, the guarantee of compliance with this measure ends up also falling on the victims' caretakers. In this study, in one case, the boy's mother did not believe her report, which can be considered a risk factor, as contact between the possible aggressor and the victim may continue. In cases like this, intervention with the mother is even more necessary. Initially, the objective of the intervention should be to understand the reaction presented and not to judge, since factors such as emotional or financial dependence on the partner can influence. In addition, it is important to carry out psychoeducation related to what sexual violence is, how it occurs, its signs and consequences, as well as the measures provided for by law. Whenever necessary, the family should be included in social assistance programs in order to reduce possible situations of financial dependence. Psychological care must also be guaranteed.

Final considerations

This study contributes to a better understanding of reactions of mothers towards their son's disclosure of sexual violence victimization. Nationally, studies on the subject usually refer to cases of girls (Santos & Dell'Aglio, 2008, 2009, 2013), with only one case study involving a boy (Hohendorff et al., 2015). Internationally, a systematic review of 33 studies (Alaggia et al., 2017) showed that most studies on disclosure are carried out with surviving adults, with few carried out with children and adolescents. No study with mothers and fathers of victims and/or survivors was included in the review. That said, it was identified that one of the main facilitators for disclosure are supportive family relationships, on the other hand, one of the main obstacles is gender, in which boys are less likely to disclose it.

In practical terms, our results indicate the need to develop awareness-raising interventions for the general public, aiming at the knowledge of the network services. The

interviewed mothers did not know which services to access in the face of disclosure. Therefore, it is necessary that services of the network, especially the Guardianship Council, which has the role of receiving reports and guaranteeing the protection of children and adolescents, seek greater approximation with the community through actions to raise awareness about their role. In addition to working directly with mothers and families, it is necessary to invest in teacher training to detect signs of violation of rights and to carry out reports. After all, family members and teachers are in constant contact with children and need to be prepared to act in the case of suspected or confirmed violation of rights (Said & Costa, 2019). Also, due to emotional reactions of the mothers, it is imperative that psychotherapeutic care be made available to this population, so that these mothers have psychological support so that they can learn to manage their emotional reactions towards the fact and, thus, provide greater support to their children.

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Received: Apr. 13, 2020
Approved: Dec. 06, 2021