

“Dating is pure suffering”: violence within affective-sexual relationships between adolescents in a school in the Costa Verde, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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Abstract *This work is the result of a master's thesis that aimed to understand students' perceptions of violence within affective-sexual relationships between adolescents in a public school in the Costa Verde, Rio de Janeiro. The study corpus was derived from participant observation in the school and in-depth interviews with three girls and three boys aged between 18 and 24 years. The core areas of analysis were affective-sexual trajectories, experiences involving violence within relationships, and agency in the face of conflict. The findings reveal that violence is part of the everyday lives of adolescents and reinforce the victim/aggressor dichotomy. The adolescents' interpretations of violence were divided into two categories: “suffering” and “serious acts of violence”. These understandings influence the recognition of violence and agency. The reproduction of gender norms contributes to sustaining gender hierarchy and inequalities, which affect girls and boys differently. Silence on this issue contributes to the invisibility of violence within relationships and the consequent failure to seek support from relevant organizations and services. Further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of violence within affective-sexual relationships between adolescents.*

Key words *Adolescence, Dating, Violence*

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Introduction

Violence during adolescence is generally associated with violence committed by adolescents, such as violence by gangs, in schools or on the streets¹, or situations in which adolescents are the target of violence perpetrated by adults. However, violence within affective-sexual relationships is rarely discussed.

The first studies on this topic emerged in the 1980s in Canada and the United States. Over time, the issue gained prominence in Portugal, Mexico, Spain, Brazil and other countries.

In Brazil, a growing body of research has emerged over the last decade²⁻⁴. Some studies adopt an epidemiological approach with the aim of calculating prevalence and categorizing violence⁵⁻⁷.

Caridade and Machado⁵ highlight three weakness in researching violent adolescent relationships: the definition of violence, difficulties in accessing young people and lack of literature on the topic.

Dating violence is defined as acts, omissions and attitudes that produce or have the potential to produce emotional, physical and sexual harm to a partner or affective-sexual partner in the absence of a marital bond⁷. Although violence seems to be more prominent during dating, it is also witnessed in casual dating (a relationship that arises from attraction or an interest that results in kissing or other intimate contact, with or without sex).

An important point in the discussion of teen dating violence is the evidence that violence is perpetrated equally by both boys and girls^{2,5,8}. This evidence has prompted a discussion about the woman-victim/man-aggressor dichotomy and the different manifestations of violence by gender. This discussion encompasses the under-explored issue of violence experienced by boys and evidence that, albeit to a lesser extent, girls and women are also perpetrators of violence.

This article is the result of a Master's thesis in the area of public health entitled "Ties and knots: narratives of violence within affective-sexual relationships between adolescents in a school in the Costa Verde, Rio de Janeiro". The thesis was developed by the lead author under the supervision of the second author.

The idea for the study arose during the work of the lead author while working as a psychologist in the city council education department. During counseling sessions, adolescents recounted situations that could be classified as teen dat-

ing violence, but were not acknowledged as such by the adolescents. This observation raised certain questions: What made these situations take on different meanings? What aspects of gender and sexuality norms influence violence within relationships? What forms of agency were established in the face of violence within affective-sexual relationships?

It is necessary to reach beyond fixed categories and predetermined concepts of violence and a priori definitions of adolescence and sexuality as a "social problem"⁹. We conceive adolescence and youth from a cultural and contextual perspective of the life cycle. As social constructs, these experiences are analyzed in their multiplicity and heterogeneity.

The definitions of adolescent and youth age groups overlap in Brazil. According the country's Child and Adolescent Statute¹⁰ (ECA), adolescence is the period between 12 and 18 years, while the WHO defines adolescents as individuals in the 10-19-year age group and "youth" as the 15-24-year age group. In turn, the Youth Statute¹¹ refers to young people as individuals aged between 15 and 29 years.

We opted to use the term adolescence because it was the term the study participants used to refer to themselves (regardless of chronological age). We focused on life trajectories in this period due to the need to explore the field of adolescent rights, the ECA and health. For the purposes of this study, the use of the term adolescent therefore encompasses young people aged over 18.

In light of the above, this study analyzed how violence within affective-sexual relationships during adolescence is interpreted by students from a state high school in Rio de Janeiro.

Methodology

School settings provide a unique opportunity for researchers to access adolescents in their own *social environment*. The present study was conducted in a state junior high and high school in the Costa Verde (Green Coast) in Rio de Janeiro.

Although the researcher works in the city council education department, we opted to develop the study in a school in order to position the professional in the field as a researcher, therefore avoiding overlapping roles.

The school had 1,695 students in 2018 with different racial identities and skin color, white and black (light skinned black person / dark skinned black person), different ages and social

classes and living in different neighborhoods in the city and neighboring cities, resulting in interaction between a range of cultural and social backgrounds.

We conducted an ethnographic study¹² involving participant observation in the school schoolyard over a period of seven months (March to October 2018). We also administered six in-depth interviews (three girls and three boys). Throughout the article, situations are illustrated using narratives produced during the interviews and conversations in the schoolyard.

The researcher was gradually immersed into the research setting. Initially she joined the school team, which hampered bonding with the students. Initial contact with the adolescents was therefore made through the school gatekeepers, who have constant contact with the students. However, to avoid being labelled as the “gatekeeper auntie” and establish her presence in the research setting, the researcher mingled in the schoolyard, broadening her contact with the students.

Participant observation focused on the dynamics within the school environment, student-staff relations, representations and bodily expressions, gender and sexual behavior, and accounts of violence within affective-sexual relationships.

Six students were interviewed (one girl and one boy in each year of high school who had already had contact with the researcher in the schoolyard). The following characteristics were considered in the choice of the interviewees: aged between 18 and 24 years, different races/skin color and no distinction between sexual orientation (identified based on the accounts of sexual practices).

This age group was chosen to provide a retrospective of adolescence and respect the autonomy of the adolescents in accordance with the National Health Council Resolution 466/12¹³. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee. We explained the risks and benefits of the study to the participants and that fictitious names would be used to keep their identity confidential. Confidentiality and ethical considerations extended to the accounts used from the conversations with students in the schoolyard during participant observation.

The term violence was only used at the end of the interview, when the respondents were asked whether they had experienced violence or an “abusive relationship” during the affective experiences and stories they had narrated. The term

“abusive relationship” was added after we noticed the use of the expression during participant observation. The aim of the question was to understand the meanings assigned by the adolescents to the terms violence and abusive relationship.

The use of the expression “abusive relationship”¹⁴ in Brazil became more prominent in 2014 and has been used as a synonym for physical and/or emotional violence. Driven by feminist groups and organizations working to tackle violence against women, the expression has gained voice on the internet and in other media.

The interviews addressed the following aspects: affective-sexual trajectory since initial experiences, experiences involving violence within the relationship, and agency in the face of conflict. Chart 1 provides the interviewees’ sociodemographic characteristics and Chart 2 provides a synthesis of the narratives produced by the interviewees.

The analysis drew on the concept of gender proposed by Butler¹⁵ and the intersections between gender, class, race and sexuality. We also use the notion of “sexual scripts”, put forward by Gagnon¹⁶, and Gregori’s¹⁷ perspective of “relational violence”, which views men and women as both perpetrators and victims of violence. Finally, to understand the agency employed by the adolescents in the face of conflict and violence, we drew on Ortner¹⁸.

Results

Affection, sociability and the school space

Sexuality is woven from experimentation, exchange of affection, desire and the search for pleasure. This learning is influenced by sexual scripts¹⁶, which are interactive skills learned in social contexts and internalized through social norms and values and interactions with family, friends, school, religion and the media^{19,20} and, more recently, strongly influenced by virtual socialization on social media^{21,22}.

These scripts tend to organize thoughts, sexual behavior and partner choice. Certain values and expectations that permeate scripts, permanently influenced by context and relationships between subjects, can both instigate conflict and violent actions and drive agency in the face of violence.

For some, school represents the main place for flirting and finding partners. The students used the space to enhance their capital for the

Chart 1. Social demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

Name/age	Self-declared race/skin color	Year	Family income	Religion	Family
Ana Aged 20	Black	2nd year HS*	0-1 MS**	Evangelical	Father, stepmother and 3 siblings
Ingrid Aged 19	White	3rd year HS	Not informed	Evangelical (not practicing)	Mother, stepfather and 1 sister
Lígia Aged 18	White	1st year HS	Not informed	Spiritualist (not practicing)	Father, stepmother and 1 sister
Carlos Aged 19	Light skinned black person	3rd year HS	3-5 MS	None (Parents evangelicals)	Father, mother and 1 sister
Guilherme Aged 18	Black	1st year HS	1-3 MS	Catholic (not practicing)	Father, mother and 1 brother
William Aged 18	Black	3rd year HS	3-5 MS	Evangelica	Father, mother and 2 siblings

*HS: High school; **MS: Minimum salary.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Chart 2. Affective-sexual experiences; experience of violence, support networks.

Name	Affective-sexual experiences	Violence committed or suffered	Agency
Ana	First kiss: aged 14. Relationship status: single.	Suffered and retaliated to physical aggression. Suffered psychological violence. Partner led her to distance herself from her friends.	Did not seek help but received support from friends and family. Did not seek professional help.
Ingrid	First kiss: could not remember the age. Relationship status: dating for a year.	Physical aggression, cursing and swearing on both sides. Control of cellphone. Suffered sexual coercion.	Reacted to conflict (verbally and physically). Did not seek professional help.
Lígia	First kiss: aged 14. Relationship status: single.	Physically assaulted boyfriend. Suffered sexual coercion. Numerous arguments.	Asked her sister and friends for support. Sought psychological support.
Carlos	First kiss: aged 10. Relationship status: dating for 2 years.	Did not mention violence.	Turned to a friend for help.
Guilherme	First kiss: aged 12. Relationship status: single.	Arguing and offensive behavior on both sides. Suffered physical aggression. Had intimate images exposed.	Turned to family and friends for advice. Did not seek professional support.
William	First kiss: aged 8. Relationship status: single.	Forced a girlfriend to kiss him. Fighting and insults on the part of his girlfriend. Partner led him to distance himself from his friends.	Turned to father and friends for help. Did not seek professional support.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

production of desire. The compulsory school uniform serves as an example. Students modify their uniform adding touches from their spaces of interaction and culture outside the school.

Dating at school was common among both heterosexual and, albeit to a lesser extent, homosexual couples. Public displays of affection between heterosexual and homosexual couples differed, with the latter showing more discretion. For example, *only girl/girl couples were seen walking around the school, not boy/boy couples*. In this regard, few cases of same-sex interactions and discrimination were observed in the study setting.

Affective relationships were common conversation topics and generally the stories that emerged centered around disillusionment: “The things we go through, dating is pure suffering” (Guilherme, 18). The term “suffering” was a way of expressing negative events in the relationship, misunderstandings, jealousy, *unfaithfulness*, breakups, fights.

Although “suffering” represents more than just violence, for the purposes of this article, the term is used to divide ways of interpreting different forms of violence. Violent relationships are divided into two categories, which we call “suffering” and “serious acts of violence”.

With regard to “suffering”, the place of the victim is ambiguous. Relations range from jocularity to pain and humiliation; violent practices in this category do not receive “labels”. Whereas in “serious acts of violence”, the place of the victim/aggressor and the characteristics and severity of the violence are well defined.

The remarks of the students and staff show that different moral values are imposed on girls and boys. Bad reputations spread quickly and become the topic of gossip. Gossip can play the role of social control of sexuality and can often be derogatory to the people involved²³. The more harmful consequences of sexual behavior fall mainly on heterosexual girls and homosexual boys and girls.

The moral status of stigmatized girls carries marks²⁴ and the girls were often punished with insults, excluded from circles of friends and even physically assaulted, while boys were generally not criticized for their affective-sexual relations, receiving the status of “potent” and reinforcing the image of the virile man.

Gender stereotypes are permeated by morals that cut across and validate violence. The gossip and discourses illustrate how these stereotypes are reproduced. According to Butler¹⁵(p.30): “The

limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture”. However, this does not mean that there cannot be other possibilities of gender, but rather that these limits are set within the language of a hegemonic culture predicated on binary structures that appear to be universal.

With regard to homosexual relations, no interactions were observed between self-declared homosexual boys. As to girls, Lígia (18, white) helped elucidate some lesbophobic situations in the school: “This year I was almost beaten up by five boys here from the school. They picked up a piece of wood to hit me, like because I like girls”. The girl did not take the case to the principal’s office because she did not trust the school. She also mentioned that the staff were more likely to warn homosexual couples seen dating than heterosexual ones.

The school ends up operating as a place of control, reproduction of morality and judgment of sexuality. In this regard, according to Louro²⁵, the school is one of the most complicated spaces for coming out homosexual, for it is a place that habitually silences, denies and ignores non heteronormative sexual orientations and, when “accepted”, it is expected that they should be discreet.

This type of situation illustrates the weakness of the school in its role as protector and in promoting critical reflection on relevant social issues among students. Rigidity and lack of dialogue in relation to questions of sexuality and gender lead to a loss of credibility and push away adolescents exactly in the moments in which they need the support of the school.

Violence within affective-sexual relationships

During the first weeks of participant observation in the schoolyard, Aline (18, white) recounted that when she was 13 she dated an 18-year-old boy who pressured her into having sex: “I was really young. I wasn’t old enough for that. So he’d go after other girls”. She became pregnant when she was 14 and her boyfriend kicked her in the stomach during a fight, which has caused her abortion: “He was lucky that I didn’t report him to the police. If I had done it when I had the abortion, he would have been arrested, especially given my age; he was above the age of criminal responsibility”.

This case illustrates that adolescents may be exposed to violence from an early age, their fra-

gility when it comes to seeking help, and lack of action of the family in not resorting to the legal authorities to make the perpetrator accountable.

The accounts of the adolescents show that the main causes of conflict were jealousy, distrust and unfaithfulness. Jealousy was found throughout all the accounts. It is worth bearing in mind that emotions are not universal feelings, but rather delineated and legitimized by “relationship rules”, which include expectations of reciprocity and exclusivity²⁶. Ways of dealing with jealousy either remain within the sphere of feelings or are translated into actions, triggering fights with partners and third parties, physical aggression, etc.

The main causes of jealousy mentioned by the adolescents were fear of loss, unfaithfulness and insecurity, as the following remarks illustrate: “Even when you are ‘casual’, it always ends up in jealousy. You end up feeling insecure, I don’t know, especially when the person is good friends with [other] women” (Ingrid, 19).

Friendship was a key motive for jealousy. Some girls mentioned situations in which they were forced to distance themselves from their peers, including both face-to-face relationships and social media. This controlling behavior tends to affect mainly girls and women⁸. Only one boy reported having been pressured to distance himself from his friends. However, although he avoided his friends, he did not cut all ties.

Another problem identified during the analysis was digital abuse, notably controlling a partner’s phone and exposing intimate photos. Motivated by jealousy and distrust, this behavior was part of the everyday lives of the adolescents. These findings are consistent with the literature, which shows that adolescents tend not to perceive digital abuse as violence or, when the situation bothers them, refer to it as “annoying” behavior. This type of abuse is commonly interpreted as a “test of love”, sign of insecurity or a “joke”²⁷.

One boy and one girl mentioned having their photos exposed. In both situations, the photos were shown personally to fellow students and the consequences clearly show the gender hierarchy surrounding sexuality. While no comments were made to the boy, a series of provocations were directed at the girl, leading to fighting and the student being transferred to another school.

According to Petrossillo²², the boy showing the photos is a display of virility, while the act of the girl is seen as “whoring around”, or in other words, inappropriate sexual behavior. This exposure reveals the moral values surrounding female

sexuality, showing that women are more affected by digital abuse than men⁸.

Sexual coercion was mentioned by two girls, who reported being pressured into having sex. Both considered the situations bad experiences and complained that they were not respected.

Physical aggression appears to be common in the lives of the adolescents, with episodes of violence occurring in the respondents’ own relationships and those of their friends, as illustrated by the following accounts: “To have spoken shit, be called a slut, and being slapped in the face. I was younger and really stupid” (Guilherme, 18, black). “A boy I was casually dating said some bullshit to me, I can’t remember what, and slapped me. [...] I slapped him back. So he came at me, I went at him” (Ana, 20, black).

The boys did not mention being cheated on, unlike the girls, who cited different reactions to unfaithfulness, including indignation, depression followed by self-harm, and physical aggression directed toward their partner, as illustrated by the following example. During a conversation in the schoolyard, Débora (14, black) recounted the time she was cheated on by a boyfriend. Taken by anger, she physically attacked him and he reacted by grabbing her arms to stop her, making them go red. She went on to say she didn’t know how her boyfriend didn’t “come at her”, adding: “if he had, I would have called the police”. Questioned about whether her boyfriend could have called the police to her, she said: “he couldn’t do that, but I would and I’d do a Maria da Penha on him” (referring to the Maria da Penha law on domestic violence). She claimed that he could not hit her because she was a woman, then when asked if a girl could hit a boy she replied: “I’d hit him anyway, I was angry”.

The situations narrated by the adolescents show ambiguities and tensions between gender relations, where the victim/aggressor dichotomy is reinforced and aggressive behavior is a normal part of everyday adolescent life. According to Gregori¹⁷, the different standards set for men and women are not linear and fixed, meaning they are reframed in interpersonal relations, resulting in violent communication between couples.

Age difference was a relevant factor in partner choice. The boys taunt friends who “casually date” young girls, as it can “land you in jail” (an indirect reference to the law on sexual violence against vulnerable people²⁸), and do not see any problem with boys seeing older women: “[...] an 18-year-old guy is not going to be with a 14-year-old girl just for a few kisses, he always wants more

[...], an 18-year-old girl also wants to do it, just that women want a serious relationship, they want affection. Men don't give a damn" (Juan, 14).

Once again, gender stereotypes emerge to classify sexual practices, being used to play down laws that define certain practices as violent acts. In this case, the man appears as hypersexual and the woman is dichotomous, on the one hand vulnerable while on the other sexually responsible.

Despite the above, gender identities are not fixed. According to Butler¹⁵, while gendered expressions are produced and naturalized around the masculine and the feminine, they are also deconstructed and transformed, their plurality enabling rupture within a naturalized system.

The reference made by the adolescents to the Maria da Penha Law²⁹ and law on sexual violence against vulnerable people²⁸ raises the following questions: Are adolescents more aware of their rights? How did they get this information about the laws? How does this (mis)information about rights influence the agency of conflict?

In principle, we believe that youth are not necessarily more aware of their rights, since, discursively speaking, laws work as an agent of control of sexuality demarcated by gender. The violence addressed by these laws is polarized: boys/aggressors and girls/victims. As Sarti suggests³⁰, the adolescents' perceptions of violence appear to be influenced more by who is suffering the violence than the act itself.

Despite being theoretically categorized as violent, some of the episodes the adolescents narrated were interpreted simply as "bad", "annoying" and "unpleasant" events. The situations viewed as actually violent or abusive actions were episodes that had a marked negative impact.

The boys found it more difficult to see themselves as subjects or targets of violence, while the girls found it difficult to recognize the violence they practiced. We all have different ways of perceiving and conceiving an event. These meanings vary according to the subject's cultural and socioeconomic constructs and events are incorporated into relationships from the moment they gain meaning¹⁸.

When asked about the meaning of violence and "abusive relationship" within "casual" relationships and dating, most of the respondents defined them as distinct categories. Those who associated violence with physical aggression linked it acts that result in more serious and visible physical harm, exemplified by cases that get media coverage, falling within the category "seri-

ous acts of violence". During the interviews, the explanations given for violence suggest that most of the adolescents who practiced and/or experienced some type of physical aggression did not mention it because they did not consider it a "serious" case.

The term "abusive relationship" seemed to be understood as psychological issues and sexual coercion: "when the person wants to try to cross the line [...] wants to force you to do something they know you don't feel right about, but wants to do it because they like it. That person who uses your feelings, knowing that you are in love" (Lígia, 18).

The meanings assigned to "abusive relationship" relate to everyday practices that cause discomfort but are not necessarily seen by the victim as violence and therefore fall within the category "suffering". There is therefore a risk that this type of aggression continues to be perceived as a "nuisance" or "annoyance" and becomes trivialized.

The borderline between the said and unsaid: agency of conflict

According to Ortner¹⁸, agency is the "power that people have at their disposal, their capacity to act on their own behalf, influence other people and events and to maintain some kind of control over their own lives"¹⁸(p.64). Each subject therefore acts, reacts to and resists conflict.

Agency is not simply an individual autonomous process, as the subject does not control the social fabric of which he/she is part. Agency is therefore played out in social relations in an interactive and negotiated manner. This means that agency is permeated by relations of solidarity, on the one hand, and relations of power and inequality, on the other.

The most common forms of agency cited by the adolescents were retaliation to aggression, insults and seeking the support of friends and family. However, when asked directly about how they resolved conflicts, most responded through dialogue. This ideal way of resolving conflict and managing emotions and attitudes that emerge in times of tension differs from that cited by the adolescents during participant observation. The emotions and agencies played out within relations of power and inequalities are complex and contradictory¹⁸.

The adolescents showed resistance to asking for help, resorting more to peers for advice and help to solve their problems. These findings are consistent with the analysis of Murta and San-

tos³¹, who suggest that people feel more comfortable talking to friends because they experience similar situations.

Few cited family support, with some of the adolescents mentioning that they had a difficult relationship with their parents. The adolescents had reservations about talking to adults and asking for help due to lack of trust and feeling embarrassed about showing their feelings. This is consistent with the findings of Njaine et. al.³², who suggest that many young people feel alone when coping with this type of problem, resulting in a lack of advice.

Seeking help may also be seen as a sign of weakness, which means adolescents, especially boys, tend to solve their problems on their own, as the following account illustrates: “If I show a lot of weakness, I’ll end up looking like a victim and I am not a victim of anything. [...] I’d end up screwing myself, so I prefer to show a stronger posture, show confidence” (Guilherme, 18, black).

In this regard, Ortner¹⁸ signals that agency is socially and culturally constructed and therefore permeated by gender differences and inequalities. For boys, admitting that they have experienced violence may be another way of showing weakness and putting their masculinity to the test, suggesting that this may be one of the reasons why the boys did not talk about, or played down, experiences of violence.

It is possible that the fear of being judged creates a borderline between adolescents and their social circles, demarcating situations that are mentionable and those that are confidential. For example, certain plots, such as jealousy, are socially acceptable. Past episodes that have been overcome are also mentionable. However, ongoing situations that may be considered “serious” and/or subject of judgment tend to be kept secret.

Not asking for help may also be linked to the subject’s difficulty recognizing that he/she is in a relationship involving violence, leading to a gap between identification and experience. It is more difficult to understand more abstract situations and micro-violence, in so far as non-physical violence takes longer to be assimilated as violence.

The distinction made by the adolescents between “abusive relationship” and violence determines the situations in which the victim should seek institutional support, which generally occurs when there is physical violence, running the risk of playing down the gravity and effects of other forms of violence on the subject’s mental,

physical and social health. Health care and violence prevention therefore have only a limited potential.

When we asked which person or organization they would resort to for support if they were the victim of violence, all the participants mentioned that they would report “serious” acts of violence like the following to the police: “Serious for me would be hitting, forcing you to do the act, etc.” (Carlos, 19, brown). Few suggested they would turn to the family, a psychologist and/or psychiatrist.

It is important to note that rights protection and health promotion groups and organizations were not mentioned. It is therefore important to consider the limited role these groups and organizations play in the debate on violence and sexuality, making the issue practically “invisible” and, consequently, distancing them from adolescents.

Final considerations

It is necessary to problematize ways of experiencing affective-sexual relationships that go beyond traditional gender norms. Recognizing that girls perpetrate violence does not mean confirming that violence is symmetrical. Gender hierarchy and inequalities mean that girls are vulnerable in different ways to boys. In short, it is well known that girls and women are more socially disadvantaged and tend to be the target of more serious and frequent acts of violence than men.

We did not find any evidence showing that the adolescents actively seek their rights. This may be due to lack of awareness on the part of the participants about protection and rights groups and organizations, their aims and how they operate, on the one hand, and lack of legal clarity on violence within affective-sexual relationships between adolescents in both the Child and Adolescent Statute¹⁰ and Maria da Penha Law²⁹, on the other.

The present study leaves a number of issues that need to be addressed by future research: the silence of institutions and public policies that protect adolescent rights in relation to the issue contributes to the invisibility of dating and casual dating violence; the need for research from the perspective of social markers of difference; forms of violence in homosexual relationships; cross-cutting issues related to digital technology; the potential of agency in the face of violence; and changes in ways of experiencing gender and sexuality.

With regard to the challenges facing research on teen dating violence outlined by Caridade and Machado⁵, our findings show the importance of exploring this issue in adolescents not enrolled in school. From an analysis point of view, the definition of violence is a complex issue that also requires attention.

Through the work of social movements such as feminism and the wider discussion of violence against women, terms like abusive relationship and toxic relationship have become synonyms of violence. It is important to understand whether this range of meanings influences the capacity to reflect on and break the cycle of violence among adolescents or if, on the contrary, it hampers the ability to perceive and identify violence.

Finally, despite the reproduction of a certain degree of control over sexuality and imposition of moral values in schools, we believe in the transforming power of education. Schools are key agents in the debate on sexuality, gender and violence and in raising awareness about violence within relationships and support groups and organizations.

We therefore believe in the power of information and dialogue with adolescents on issues relating to their experiences with affective-sexual relationships, contributing to strengthening agency in the face of violence and recognizing adolescents as subjects of rights.

Collaborations

RS Carvalhaes was responsible for study conception and data collection, and participated in all phases of the development of this article. CM Mora Cárdenas participated in all phases of the development of this article.

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