

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS: NARRATIVES OF WOMEN  
WASTE PICKERS****VIOLÊNCIA DOMÉSTICA E SOFRIMENTO PSÍQUICO: NARRATIVAS DE MULHERES CATADORAS DE  
RESÍDUOS SÓLIDOS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this research is to analyze the interface between domestic violence and psychological distress, from the perspective of women who waste recyclable materials. This is a qualitative study, with a social constructionist approach, conducted with twenty women waste pickers, living in the Federal District, Brazil. The semi-structured interview was used as a data collection instrument and the Association of Ideas maps for analysis of the contents of the speeches. The contents extracted from the collected narratives are divided into three thematic categories: violence producing psychic suffering, resources to cope with violence, and work and psychic suffering among women who work with solid waste. At work, we noticed personal memories of the suffering experienced and experienced in the present time in the workspace. In reading women, there are few resources to help, even with the knowledge of the legal resource. However, there were indications of self-knowledge of the right to life, respect and appreciation of being a woman. It is concluded that resistance strategies with psychosocial, legal and protective care for women are necessary, to proactively support the reduction of their vulnerabilities and facilitate the expansion of their capacities to face the causes of violence, and to produce care, support and prevention networks, which include their children.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence. Garbage collectors. Psychological suffering.

**RESUMO**

O objetivo desta pesquisa é analisar a interface entre violência doméstica e sofrimento psíquico, a partir da perspectiva de mulheres catadoras de materiais recicláveis. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, com abordagem construcionista social, realizado com 20 mulheres catadoras de resíduos sólidos, moradoras do Distrito Federal, Brasil. A entrevista semiestruturada como instrumento de coleta de dados e os mapas de Associação de Ideias para análise dos conteúdos das falas foram utilizados. Os conteúdos extraídos a partir das narrativas coletadas estão divididos em três categorias temáticas: violência produzindo sofrimento psíquico, recursos para enfrentamento da violência, trabalho e sofrimento psíquico entre as mulheres que trabalham com resíduos sólidos. No trabalho, perceberam-se memórias pessoais do sofrimento vivido e experimentado no tempo presente no espaço laboral. Na leitura das mulheres, são escassos os recursos de ajuda, mesmo com o conhecimento do recurso jurídico. Contudo apareceram indícios de autoconhecimento do direito à vida, do respeito e da valorização de ser mulher. Conclui-se que são necessárias estratégias de resistência com atendimento psicossocial, jurídico e de proteção às mulheres, a fim de apoiar, de forma proativa, a redução de suas vulnerabilidades e facilitar a expansão de suas capacidades para enfrentar as causas da violência e produzir redes de cuidado, de suporte e de prevenção, que incluam seus filhos.

**Palavras-chave:** Catadores. Sofrimento psíquico. Violência doméstica.

## INTRODUCTION

The process of globalization, intensified in the late 1990s, caused a considerable increase in unemployment and, parallel to technological progress, caused social inequality (THERBORN, 2001). Several workers, because they were not trained, found difficulties to enter the formal market and switched to informality, to guarantee their livelihood and that of their families.

The waste picking emerges as an alternative to unemployment because this activity does not require specific skills and skills for its entry. It is an activity that demands intense labor, for solid waste management, which can still have economic and environmental value.

The waste picking is important for the protection of public health, safety, environmental and economic quality, and solid waste pickers are important components in the development of this activity. Studies by Hoefel *et al.* (2013) state that, among workers, there is a predominance of women waste pickers, and 85% of these workers are in the reproductive age group, up to 49.

Cruvinel *et al.* (2019) argue that despite the socioeconomic and environmental importance resulting from the activity of picking recyclable materials and the significant presence of women working in picking, it should be noted that the activity is developed in unhealthy conditions. Zolnikov *et al.* (2018) signal that these women are more exposed to occupational, biological, chemical, physical, ergonomic and social risks due to the manipulation of solid waste contaminated with biological agents such as bacteria, fungi, viruses, parasites and toxins

Social risks can be exemplified by the discriminatory processes to which waste pickers are subjected. Pereira, Secco and Carvalho (2014) identified that the collection of recyclable materials is soured by stigmas and prejudices, considering that these workers survive from and in the "garbage", which is why discriminatory processes are accentuated, culminating in the expansion of the conditions of social vulnerability, as well as the symbolic violence that ends up producing illness of workers.

Studies by Zolnikov *et al.* (2018) and Cruvinel *et al.* (2019) point out the vulnerability of waste pickers women to illness due to work wear and consequent impairment of physical health, psychic integrity and social relationships.

Women who waste solid waste are in poverty. Susmitha (2016) points out that situations of poverty and social exclusion are linked to the existence of domestic violence. Thus, the core elements of the problem of violence include low wages, economic pressures, working conditions and living conditions that permeate the lives of women who work with recycling.

A study by the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IAER) analyzes that the rate of violence against women who make up the economically active population (52.2%) is almost double that recorded by those who do not make up the labor market (24.9%) (IAER, 2019). Violence, for Oram, Khalifeh and Howard (2017), is associated with an increased risk of mental disorder. And yet, according to Landerdah *et al.* (2016), violence is associated with increased suicide rates, a higher incidence of problems related to headache and gastrointestinal disorders and is considered by the Pan American Health Organization/ World Health Organization (2016) as a key factor that significantly and negatively impacts the mental health of women in several countries, making it precarious.

Therefore, it is essential to turn to the understanding of psychic suffering as an analysis of the category of domestic violence. Based on these considerations, this study questioned the interface between domestic violence and psychic suffering of women who waste recyclable materials and aimed to analyze the interface between domestic violence and psychological distress from the perspective of women who waste recyclable materials.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study was produced from the research project entitled: Psychic suffering as a category of analysis of domestic violence in women, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the

Institute of Human Sciences of the University of Brasília, under opinion 2,760,010, CAAE: 91922818.6.0000.5540. The qualitative and social constructionist approach was adopted as a theoretical-methodological framework, according to Spink and Medrado (2013) it is an approach based on discursive practices and the production of the senses.

Meaning is a social construction, a collective, interactive enterprise, through which people construct the terms from which they understand and deal with the situations and phenomena around them, having the same function of guaranteeing people conditions to feel integral to a social body (SPINK; MEDRADO, 2013, p. 22).

The research scenario was the Labor and Production Recycling Cooperative of the Federal District, Brazil. The participants of the research were 20 women, workers of the cooperative, who met the following inclusion criteria: member of the cooperative, over 18 years old, who suffered or not some kind of violence and agreed to participate in the research.

Quoting Santos *et al.* (2020), the technique used was the semi-structured interview, which allows the researcher to obtain the data more flexibly, based on parameters with depth and non-directed, avoiding questions that could direct answers to what is in mind. Data collection was previously scheduled, and occurred from 9/28/2019 to 10/28/2019, in the recycling cooperative.

According to Creswell (2010), qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field and where participants experience the studied question. Qualitative data were collected individually in the work environment. In the cooperative, a spacious room was made available to conduct the interviews in a way that would allow a private, clean, bright and pleasant aroma environment. The women were invited to participate in the research, and oriented to the dialogue with the interviewer in an interspersed way, so that the flow of the service could be maintained, without major interference to the productivity of their work.

For analysis, the contents of the interviews were recorded in full, and then organized in tables, in Word, respecting the sequence of the enunciation process, in columns corresponding to the descriptive categories that emerged from the objectives of the research and the reading and analysis of the original interviews. This mapping corresponds to the data analysis technique called Idea Association Maps.

Idea Association Maps is a table where columns are defined thematically. The definition of the columns that systematize the interview (or the discursive material) is related to this process of content organization of a very peculiar discursive interaction generated by the research procedure (SPINK; LIMA, 2013, 84).

The technique works as follows:

A data processor, Microsoft Word type, is used and the entire interview is typed; a table is constructed with several columns corresponding to the categories to be used; the cut and paste functions are used to transfer the contents of the text to the columns, respecting the sequence of the dialog. A stair effect (SPINK; LIMA, 2013, p. 85).

Such thematic columns cannot always be defined *a priori*. Although the scripts impose a form on the interaction, the interlocutors do not always respect this form. According to Spink and Lima (2013), Maps have this interesting feature of showing how resistant people are to itineraries and have no predefined themes. The definition of the themes organizing the contents of the interview is already the process of interpretation.

On ethical aspects, the research followed the norms and guidelines that regulate research involving human beings of the National Health Council. The subjects' participations were voluntary, with the authorization as a criterion. To ensure the confidentiality of the information and

the anonymity of the subjects in question, in the presentation of the results, the interviews were described by the algorithm consistent with the order of the interviewees.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Twenty women were studied and their narratives about what they think about violence, among the interviewees, 54.2% belonged to the age group of 30 to 49 years. Table 1 presents data on schooling, self-reported color and situation of women in relation to violence suffered. Among the results, the following stand out: half (50%) had incomplete elementary school I, 95% of them declared themselves brown and black; 75% suffered a type of violence in life, being the former partner (67%), the most frequent aggressor.

**Table 1** - Statistics of the profiles of the research participants.

<b>Teaching</b>	<b>Quantity (%)</b>
Incomplete elementary	10 – 50%
Complete elementary	3 – 15%
Complete high school	3 – 15%
Incomplete high school	3 – 15%
Illiterate	1 – 5%
<b>Ethnic group</b>	
Brown-haired People or browns	15 – 75%
Black	4 – 20%
They didn't want to identify themselves.	1 – 5%
<b>Origin of violence</b>	
Former	10 – 67%
Current companion	4 – 27%
Father or other family member	1 – 7%

**Source:** the authors.

According to the analysis of the maps of association of ideas, the contents emerging from the narratives were grouped into three thematic categories: (1) relationship between violence and psychological suffering, (2) work and psychic suffering and (3) resources to cope with violence and work.

### **Relationship between violence and psychological suffering**

The women narrated types of violence – cursing, beating, humiliating, burning, threatening to sell the house, putting out the house and taking their children away. All these situations can be considered precipitators of psychic suffering. For Becker-Dreps *et al.* (2010), the consequences of violence against women can lead to repercussions on mental health, such as alcohol and drug abuse, depression and anxiety, eating and sleep disorders, feelings of shame and guilt, phobias, panic disorders, sedentary lifestyle and low self-esteem.

*[...] "Mental illness comes because of this, fights, discussions indoors, comes from all this and the person gets mentally ill, weakens, is taking away the will to live, the desire to cook, the desire to raise children, comes all of it." (E5)*

Oram, Khalifeh and Howard (2017) say that whatever forms of violence against women, they increase the risk of mental disorder. In study, Yu *et al.* (2019) state that violence is associated

with a wide range of grave consequences for the health of victims, such as physical injuries, termination of pregnancy and posttraumatic stress disorder, depression and suicide.

*"Yes, I'm sorry. First because usually in the relationship does not come first the tapas. He's not coming! In one, in the marriage where there is a man who likes to hit a woman always come first the discussions and this will make you look bad, sad". (E18)*

Studies by Islam, Jahan and Hossain, (2018) have identified various patterns of violence that trigger mental disorders. One of these type of violence is related to direct aggression to self-esteem, with humiliation and devaluation of women, according to statements:

*[...] "Because the man when he wants to offend or when he wants to put the woman down he first hits her body, saying that the woman is ugly, that the woman does not take care, that the woman... There's a lot of women who... No... that's going to hurt, there it goes... is when the woman goes into a pit of depression." (E3)*

*[...] "After I married him, he said I was ugly, hideous. And he said he wasn't going to go out with me anywhere. It's sad, it's a sad situation." (E10)*

Humiliation and disqualification are strategies of the aggressor to maintain control over these women. Mendez (2004) calls the strategy of *micromachismo* characterized using moral, psychic, economic or personal methods to try to subjugate women and convince them to side with them. Another control tactic is to unlink the woman from your social support network. Social support network, understood as the sum of all relationships that the person perceives as significant. For Canesqui and Barsaglini (2012), friendship is considered as a social circle consisting of traces of affinity, forming a team that unites people. Without a network, the woman is isolated, without affective support, and is weakened to owe the aggressor. Sometimes the woman isolates herself by shame:

*[...] "I had no friends; he wouldn't let me. There was no one, I was isolated in my house. My father in a fight with my mother, my father loved my mother very much, back at my parents' house it was all good. But he was the only one who beat me up." (E7)*

Isolation can be a precipitator for psychic suffering, because women are left alone, moving away from a support network, which contributes to becoming even more prisoners of an abusive relationship, and continuing in this relationship of violence.

The impacts of violence are noticeable, even after the end of the aggressions. For Douglas and Walsh (2010), the consequences for children and adolescents are emotional and behavioral problems, low self-esteem, disobedience, among others. This scenario often demands women seek professional help.

*[...] "It's the marks today, because to this day my children take with them right, I have a son who needs psychological treatment I'm looking for, also looking, because from the other relationship he brings a story, so he thinks that he has like a hurt inside him, because of this that his father did not take care of him, finally, then I bring consequences of this marriage." (E9)*

Violence resonates with women's behavior. One example is insecurity for a new relationship. The traumas generated by violence and the situations that occurred cause the victim to be afraid to reconnect, sometimes compromising the affective field of his life. Testimony below:

*[...] "You're kind of afraid of what's already happened, you know? So much so that this one I don't even live with him, you understand? Because I get kind of... because I don't want to be disappointed. So, I'm going to slow down so I can see what's going to happen. that if it ends at least he's going to be there and I'm going to be here... Now pass what I've been through, I never again! Never! I spend the rest of my life alone." (E13)*

Another aspect of violence is the permanence of women in abusive relationships. According to Mizuno, Fraid and Cassab (2010), the reason is associated with the lack of financial resources and support network, and because it is inserted in a relationship of affective dependence resulting from the process of subjection of domination by the other. The subjection covers feelings of denial and submission, thus resulting in a fragile self-esteem.

*"I spent twelve years getting beaten up by my ex-husband, twelve. I cried in the corner, he punched me, pulled my hair out, set me on fire. You threatened me, there's no one, I'm going to hit you even if you must die, I cried you know? "I even asked God to seek me, he spoke to me for God, he seeks me." (E19)*

Valverdi (2014) argues that the use of psychoactive substances is sometimes used as a reason to precipitate the aggressions practiced by the abuser. Which gives these women the feeling that the aggressor only commits such an act, because he is under the substance and not of his own free will. Such a feeling can bring the illusion that it is something temporary, making it feel obliged to forgive the aggressor, according to testimony.

*[...] "Oh I'd stay in mine, right? I wouldn't answer him. Even he passed. Then when he stopped drinking, he'd apologize to me. I thought no, he's going to change. It wouldn't change. He continued." (E18)*

*[...] "It's him using drugs, drinking, and I didn't know how to deal with it and if I was going to say anything he came to assault me and in that I went on living, spending years and years, and raising my children practically alone because he didn't support me." (E8)*

The use of psychoactive substances appears as a facilitator for the violent act. Alcoholism not only triggers violent behavior but is also seen as a cause for disagreement between couples. According to Smith (2000), the use of psychoactive substances may also be involved in domestic violence in more subtle ways, such as discussions on financial, marital and other issues.

### **Work and psychic suffering**

Bourdieu (1997) states that violence in the most different expressions, noting to the inert violence of economic and social structures are protagonists of "small miseries", highlighting, in this context, violence at work. In the daily work of the participants, the narratives give evidence of suffering, helplessness and loneliness. Waste pickers undergo work that has unhealthy conditions and unfair remuneration, bringing a feeling of injustice, as shown below:

*"It hurts, because it is, here in the shed also the staff already mistreats the people too much that here we here we have no friend, it's a thing I don't know, we work because we need to see, but it's so much that I'm going through, this shed here he mistreats us too much, so, we don't make money, people are not friends with us, there is no person to come and talk to us knows." (E17)*

These women present complaints that refer to suffering from the conflicts generated by the lack of social support and social cohesion to support the precariousness of work. Citing Werlang and Mendes (2013), the social origin of suffering would relate, in this sense, to the issue of social precariousness, which means social insecurity, insecurity due to the absence of social supports, related to insecurity related to loss: loss of confidence in oneself, loss of confidence in others and loss of confidence in the future.

### **Resources used to cope with violence**

The coping tactics used by the victims, according to Benetti et al. (2015), has the purpose of surviving or overcoming the episodes to which they are submitted. One of the resources used and lived that helped to cope with the situation were the laws that defend the right of women. For example, the Maria da Penha Law.

*[...] "I had, I had this help when the law came out, that's when the law came out Maria of the pledge. That's when I went to the police station, my brother took me to the police station, then he had to stay 100 meters away from me. He's been chasing me for many years, but then, it was an arduous process that went on, but we try to move life forward." (E18)*

These women feel that, although there is a law that up sources them, it can be inefficient, because victims, after making the complaint, continue to suffer from abuse, or even fall victim to an attempted murder. Thus, these women see no other way out but to use physical violence against their aggressor as a form of defense:

*[...] "Like this, I have, and I don't. Because instead it was to die, I must do it first, I already think about it, but fear I have!". (E1)*

*[...] "I felt if not anything, because he beat me too much and I did not react. But then there was a day that I reacted, I reacted because I realized not... because you keep getting beat up. Because I was afraid I knew, to turn him over to the police, and talk like that oh, I'll turn him in when I get back I'm going to die. Then when it was one day my daughter, gave me an attack, I said "Hey, now I got off the jump" and it was such a run, I cut machete, machete cut him..." (E7)*

Another strategy to confront violence has been the church or religiosity. These can be resources to help to cope with abuse, or sometimes to encourage their continuity, because it can spread that the woman has her duties with the family and the husband, which reinforces again the role of the woman who is imposed by society, as a caregiver, mother, wife who must annul herself, to submit to her husband.

*[...] "We had to go to church, especially in the community I congregated, in the community I lived with, I had to live with my husband, I had to live that because God was going to set it free, but in that I still lived 14 years being assaulted, being threatened, and thank God, he freed me from that situation right, but that's how I told you I bring consequences of this marriage." (E18)*

Finally, I present a narrative that exemplifies other resources to support women, described by the recognition of freedom, appreciation of one's own and empowerment:

*[...] "... I want to talk as soon as we women are free, we are like any human being, we are dying degraded, one day after another, we are dying and are killing us as if we were an animal and we are not... every day we see on television that women are dying in a sad way, in a quick way we are not pigs, we are not animals to die like this, we have tended." (E3)*

Another resource for dealing with suffering, amazingly, is crochet. The interviewee reports that it serves to soften thoughts and can be an ally to produce well-being.

*[...] "It's too much suffering, isn't it? That I've had, right? That there's time so I try to forget. Sometimes when I leave my service here I'm going to make a little crochet... for me not to remember these things." (E5)*

Therefore, we see the use of crochet as a resource "not to remember these things" and enable a positive focus of the stressful situation experienced.

In narratives of cases of domestic violence in the solid waste recycling cooperative, the behaviors that are evoked to describe psychic suffering and its evolution are situated in the field of marital problems that culminate in violence. It is not surprising that psychic suffering is identified in the field of conjugal relations for the most part – it is, above all in the field of symptomatology, that women express their illness. Certain aspects are emphasized in discourses about violence: humiliation, devaluation, fear, control disorder and suicide are pointed out in the narratives as a sign of psychic suffering. Violence is constituted in this context as a manifestation of psychic suffering.

In the cooperative, women who suffer violence have an incomplete degree of elementary education, which limits their possibilities of insertion in the labor market, data consistent with the international research by Rashedi *et al.* (2019), in which domestic violence was associated with women's schooling. There are also racial characteristics, which are brown and black. Brown and black women face barriers that hinder their full equality and progress. Pereira, Secco and Carvalho (2014) report that they are more subject to exploitation in the labor market and to other forms of discrimination and domestic violence that are predisposing and precipitating factors of psychic suffering.

Chong, Vaigankar and Abdin (2013) indicate a direct relationship between mental illness and underemployment. The situation of suffering of waste pickers reflects a form of work like underemployment that determines health, because the conditions to which workers are subjected affect their lives. The work with solid residue, quoting Dejours (2015), part of the idea of "dirty work", because it is an activity of low social representation, one of the reasons is the worthlessness of the object of the activity, garbage, which is associated with the idea of misery, disease and death.

In the sayings of Pereira, Secco and Carvalho (2014), sometimes this work takes place in unhealthy conditions and with an unfair financial return to the work performed, converging with a study by Paixão, Patias and Dell'Aglio (2019), which identifies that women occupy the most precarious and exhausting margin in the production chain of picking/recycling, and has a low level of social support in this work. The authors highlighted a complex relationship between women's participation in the labor market and the chances of suffering domestic violence.

These workers carried in their life history the struggle to survive domestic violence. The forms of support were spirituality and empowerment. When seeking help, it is usually religious/spiritual in nature, but such help can directly affect the continuity of these abuses. For Krob (2017), religious discourses, sacred texts and their interpretations, the Church's practices of exclusion and sexist discrimination in relation to women contribute to the maintenance of this violence.

The fragments of narratives presented indicate that women submitted to violence for a long time, act, from the moment when the case can no longer be administered. For Marinho and Goncalves (2019) new measures, such as triggering the Maria da Penha law, stimulating



protagonism, rights, meaningful learning and freedom to make use of the complaint as a resource or not, are among the repertoires that explain empowerment. But not all access and do not believe in its effectiveness. Most women in the cooperative who have suffered or suffer violence are slow to seek help.

Even aware of the risks, these women do not seek support or health and/or social assistance resources, due to lack of knowledge about measures to help cope with domestic violence, such as Specialized Centers for Women's Care (SCWC), shelters, among others, which can help in cases of violence.

Devries *et al.* (2011) state that, to reduce violence and mental disorders, it is necessary to promote protective factors and reduce the facilitators of violence through programmatic measures, strengthening health resources and regulatory measures. Therefore, empowerment needs to be stimulated and developed among women who work with solid waste, through resistance and support strategies, such as: popular education, strengthening bonds in solidarity networks, involvement of self-help groups and awareness programs.

Finally, two more aspects of the narratives expressed by women stand out. In relation to empowerment, the repertoires affirm the need for respect and the right to life and dignified life, and the fact that they are mothers, whose children, from what was reflected here, need to be targets of health care, with a view to promoting and preventing new injuries. In fulfilling this task, Primary Care, both in the Unified Health System (SUS) and the Unified Social Assistance System (USAS), has a primary role to articulate services and weave networks.

Networks composed of official, unofficial and collective devices, articulated that account for the complexity of domestic violence aiming at the development of prevention strategies that ensure women's empowerment and autonomy.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to emphasize that violence has a dimension that precipitates psychic suffering, and has a productive role, as it is a product that emerges from the social, economic and work relationships to which women waste pickers are subjected, as the literature has shown.

It can be said that correlating violence against women with psychological distress is after the level of education and ethnicity, which intensifies suffering, presented as a feeling of insecurity, fear, helplessness, depression, low self-esteem, loneliness and lack of assistance, including in workspaces.

The results indicated the need for specific programs for these women and their children, with intersectoral actions of social assistance, health, articulated with reference services in the care of victims of violence.

It is important to discuss the possibility of implementing domestic violence prevention programs in recycling cooperatives. With gender awareness program, which can be the beginning of the path, empowering women for self-knowledge, freedom, social exchanges and respect for these women proactively.

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