

# University student's views on the agents surrounding violence by intimate partner

*Olhares de universitários sobre os atores envolvidos na violência por parceiro(a) íntimo(a)*

*Perspectivas de estudantes universitarios sobre los actores involucrados en la violencia de pareja íntima*

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to analyze the perception of university students about the actors involved in intimate partner violence. **Method:** this is a qualitative study carried out in the student's homes at the Federal University of Rio Grande, in the city of Rio Grande/RS. Four students from each household participated in the study, totaling 28 participants. All answered the semi-structured individual interview, carried out in 2019. **Results:** the perception of university students on the subject reveals the man as the perpetrator of violence and the woman as a victim. However, bidirectional violence was also recognized. They talk about the need to take care of this man. Victims are seen as helpless women, lacking the courage to come forward. They also discuss the need for an effective support network and for disseminating more information on the subject. **Final considerations:** the university, as a training institution, is fertile ground for the transformation of social thinking and co-responsibility for confronting this violence.

**Descriptors:** Universities; Education; Knowledge; Intimate Partner Violence.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** analisar a percepção de universitários sobre os atores envolvidos na violência por parceiro(a) íntimo(a). **Método:** trata-se de uma pesquisa com abordagem qualitativa realizada nas casas do estudante da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande, no município de Rio Grande/RS. Participaram do estudo, aleatoriamente, quatro estudantes de cada moradia, totalizando 28 participantes. Todos responderam à entrevista individual semiestruturada, realizada em 2019. **Resultados:** a percepção dos universitários sobre o tema revela o homem como autor da violência e a mulher como vítima, todavia, reconhecem a violência bidirecional. Mencionam a necessidade de cuidar deste homem, que não é monstro nem bom moço. As vítimas são vistas como mulheres indefesas, sem coragem para denunciar. Discorrem ainda sobre a necessidade de uma rede de apoio eficaz e de divulgar mais informações sobre o tema. **Considerações finais:** a universidade, como instituição formadora, é terreno fértil para transformação do pensamento social e corresponsabilização pelo enfrentamento dessa violência.

**Descritores:** Universidades; Educação; Conhecimento; Violência por Parceiro Íntimo.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** analizar la percepción de estudiantes universitarios sobre los actores involucrados en la violencia de pareja íntima. **Método:** se trata de una investigación con enfoque cualitativo realizada en las residencias estudiantiles de la Universidad Federal de Rio Grande, en la ciudad de Rio Grande/RS. Participaron en el estudio cuatro estudiantes de cada hogar, totalizando 28 participantes. Todos respondieron entrevistas individuales semiestructuradas, realizadas en 2019. **Resultados:** la percepción de los universitarios sobre el tema revela al hombre como autor de la violencia y a la mujer como víctima. Sin embargo, también se reconoció la violencia bidireccional. Mencionan la necesidad de cuidar a este hombre, que no es ni un monstruo ni una buena persona. Perciben a las víctimas como mujeres indefensas, sin coraje para denunciarlo. También discuten la necesidad de una red de apoyo efectiva y de difundir más información sobre el tema. **Consideraciones finales:** la universidad, como institución formadora, es terreno fértil para cambiar el pensamiento social y promover la corresponsabilidad en la lucha contra esta violencia.

**Descriptores:** Universidades; Educación; Conocimiento; Violencia de pareja íntima.

## INTRODUCTION

More than ever, changes in the current scenario caused by the new coronavirus pandemic have reinforced the importance of debating domestic violence. This is a type of interpersonal violence that also occurs in intimate relationships of affection, in which the aggressor lives or has lived with the woman in a situation of violence<sup>1</sup>. This violence perpetrated by the partner or ex-partner is typified in the Maria da Penha Law as a form of gender-based violence<sup>1</sup>.

With the distancing and social isolation imposed by the pandemic as a measure to contain the virus, there was an increase in these cases of violence, that is, committed by the partner in the domestic setting<sup>2-4</sup>. An increase in the occurrence of intimate partner violence (IPV) was observed in European countries after the imposition of mandatory home quarantine<sup>2</sup>.

This study was financed in part by the macroproject "Social representations of university students living in the student's home: violence in affective-sexual relationships". Scholarship for the Student Development Program - PDE / Universidade Federal do Rio Grande (FURG - Brasil), May 2018 to May 2019.  
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Editor in chief: Cristiane Helena Gallasch; Associate Editor: Thelma Spídola

In Brazil, institutions that make up the protection network also announced the increase in number of cases, highlighting the invisibility of the phenomenon due to home confinement and restricted care for women in specialized services<sup>5</sup> in this period.

It is believed that the increase in tension between the actors involved in violence was in part a result of staying at home almost full time. On the other hand, several factors ended up reinforcing the climate of tension, which could contribute to cases of IPV, such as unemployment, the decrease in family income and alcohol consumption<sup>2,6</sup>. Sociocultural issues also overlap by legitimizing the hierarchical relationships between men and women, based on the condition of sex and gender.

This does not mean that men are not victims of domestic violence. However, according to epidemiological data, television media, and police and health information, while women are affected in the domestic sphere, men are victims of urban violence<sup>7</sup>. When analyzing the recognition of intimate partners about suffering non-fatal violence and perpetrating it, a study revealed that women mention more episodes of recurrence of any type of violence, while men hardly recognize themselves as perpetrators<sup>8</sup>.

The deviated perception about the practice and experience of violent acts can accentuate aggressions by the fact of men not understanding such behavior as an aggression, or even women remaining in the violent relationship, either by believing in their role in maintaining the harmony of the family, either by naturalizing the aggressions. In view of this, even though it is an increasingly frequent adversity, there are misconceptions, beliefs, lack of knowledge of the protective legislation for women, as well as judgment of people involved in cases of domestic violence.

In a study of health professionals, the judgment of the man who committed violence against women was observed, objectified as an animal, monster and ignorant<sup>9</sup>. When women are not blamed, they are seen as suffering, submissive people with low self-esteem<sup>10</sup>. It is no different among the civilian population, because even if impressions on the subject have improved, there is still an idealization that women are beaten because they like it or because they did something inconsistent.

The perception of young students about the processes of protection and distress related to violence was identified in a study in the university scenario, recognizing the occurrence of institutional, sexual, gender, psychological, economic and social violence especially against women, blacks, LGBTI+ population, poor people and children<sup>11</sup>. When thinking about strategies to reduce the different forms of violence, in addition to public policies for men's safety and awareness, academics stated the need for awareness raising strategies with more humanized training in undergraduate courses<sup>11</sup>.

In this way, it is essential to encourage the debate on domestic violence among the different sectors of society, in schools, companies and the media, and produce information in advertisements in buses, walls and shopping malls. In this sense, the university stands out as fertile ground for raising the awareness of citizens and future professionals regardless of their training area.

Considering that university students are in the process of training, it is essential to give them a voice and encourage a critical look at socio-environmental problems. The dialogue in student houses becomes an interesting possibility to meet a more macro vision of the object of study without being limited to the speeches of only one nucleus of knowledge. The complex issue is that IPV demands a debate in the communities to confront this offense based on different perceptions.

Given this scenario, as well as the occurrence of violence in intimate relationships among university students, the question is: what is the perception of university students about the actors involved in IPV?

The objective was to analyze the perception of university students about the actors IPV.

## METHOD

Descriptive qualitative study performed by Study and Research Group on Nursing, Gender and Society, with university students who live in student houses at a federal university in southern Brazil.

Initially, a list with the registration of student residents of the seven houses located in the municipality of study was requested to the Pro-Rector of Student Affairs. It contained information such as name, course, house and room number.

Four people from each house were personally invited to participate in the study; two men and two women at random. Only those over 18 years of age were included. There was no refusal to participate in the study.

Data collection was carried out in a private room in the student houses during the year 2019. Individual interviews were guided by a semi-structured instrument containing open-ended questions about impressions on IPV, lasted an average of 25 minutes, were recorded with authorization and subsequently transcribed. There was no return of transcripts by participants for correction.

Thematic-categorical content analysis was used<sup>12</sup>, which allowed data exploration, treatment of results and interpretation. In the first, the material was organized, performing a careful reading of the corpus, seeking particularities of each informant for the development of ideas and possible categories. After this search, the themes (Registration Units - RU) were codified and regrouped into similar nuclei or meaning units (MU), giving rise to three categories, entitled: Gender-based abuser; Opinion about the perpetrator of violence in relationships; and Opinion about the abused person in relationships.

This study is part of a macroproject entitled "Social representations of university students living in the student house: violence in affective-sexual relationships" and it was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the institution involved. The ethical principles governing research with human beings were respected. Participants were identified by the letter I followed by consecutive numbers.

## RESULTS

Twenty-eight students aged between 18 and 38 years participated in the study. Of these, 14 were men and 14 were women, among which 17 people declared themselves white, followed by mixed race and black. The predominant sexual orientation was heterosexual, followed by bisexual. As for relationship, 15 had a partner during the data collection period. The main undergraduate course was Language and Literature with five participants, followed by Information Systems; Civil engineering; Mechanical Engineering; Law; and Accounting, with three participants each. The remaining were distributed in the courses of Physics, Chemistry, Administration, Librarianship, Nursing, Agroindustrial Engineering and Computer Engineering.

The following categories emerged from the proposed analysis: Gender-based abuser; Opinion about the perpetrator of violence in relationships; and Opinion about the abused person in relationships.

### Gender-based abuser

This category discusses the view of university students about the gender of the abuser in the context of IPV. It comprises 148 RU representing 21.3% of the RU of the total analyzed corpus. Its composition includes eight MU, namely: men attacking women (41 RU), patriarchal society (38 RU), male power (13 RU), aggression towards the vulnerable (12 RU), male physical strength (11 RU), women as victim (20 RU), man defends himself (8 RU), man fights back (5 RU).

*To be quite honest, I have rarely heard that particularly: poor guy, his wife beats him every day. I've never heard: did you see that the girlfriend threw the boyfriend from don't-know-which floor? It's usually a guy attacking a woman, attacking a transvestite, it's usually the male, because of a power he gained, a patriarchy. Our patriarchal society gives men this power and allows them to do this. Men say everything is fine, there's nothing going on, she fell down the stairs, that bruised arm she bumped into the sink, and society kind of covers it up. (I3)*

*There are men who are beaten by women, I've seen cases. I wouldn't say that men should get back at a woman's aggression, but they are physically able to avoid it, so I think women are certainly more victims of aggression than men, except in cases where there is a gun, then either one will be a victim. (I2)*

### Opinion about the perpetrator of violence in relationships

It portrays the opinion about the person who inflicts violence in the relationship, in this case the male sex. This category includes 305 RU, representing 44.1% of the corpus, and covers seven MU, namely: judgment and labeling of the aggressor (77 RU), care for the aggressor (47 RU), punishment of the aggressor (60 RU), psychological support of men (40 RU), childhood trauma (31 RU), change in society (28 RU), abuser exposure (22 RU).

*I think it's a person who should be erased from society, not like that but actually, I think they should be punished, they must be exposed, must be exposed precisely so that this doesn't keep happening. This is because those who do it, those who commit this violence often pose in society as a good guy, this person, horrible actually, in society they are the good guy, so this person has to be exposed. (I3)*

*I don't think like my father, who thinks for example, that he has to die... I don't think that. I don't think it's at that level [...]. But, well, I don't think you have to crucify him and call him a monster because he's human, it's not monsters under the rug who do that, it's usually a man, or a woman. I say men because it is one of the cases that*

*occurs the most, and then, there is no point in crucifying and saying “my God, that monster, that horrible being”, because that will only bring about mystification. They should be humanized, show that anyone can do this. (I20)*

*The person who engages in it has to be arrested, but I also have my disagreements with the prison system. So, I imagine these situations can be changed in the long term by changing early childhood education, but for example, a man who raped a woman, he should be arrested, but I believe we can reverse this situation in the long term, many years, by offering education about equality, from the early grades, based on respect. (I19)*

In addition, participants mentioned the need for psychological follow-up for these men, so they can be reinserted into society. The presence of violence in this aggressor's childhood is reported as a possible cause of aggressions perpetrated against women.

*I think most of the time, aggressors also need help, psychological help. Sometimes they are so immersed in this reality of violence and as much as they don't want this to happen again, and maybe they've already seen it in their family, it ends up becoming a vicious cycle. And when they realize, they are doing the same thing their parents did (I9).*

### Opinion about the abused person in relationships

This category reveals solidarity with the person who suffers aggression, in this case, the woman. It also includes most of the highlighted RU, representing 34.6% of the analyzed corpus with 240 RU and seven MU that address women's feeling of fear (48 RU), submission (28 RU), helpless victims (32 RU), courageous victims (29 RU), police complaints (37 RU), attention from the support network (52 RU), accountability of society (14 RU).

*A defenseless person [woman], who submits to things that could be changed... in my view, a person who submits to this, is certainly defenseless and does not have the potential to say enough is enough, but on the other hand, there is also this psychological issue, of what she gets to think of this relationship, why is she in the relationship, what is her purpose? Because she obviously has one. (I7)*

*Courage, the person must have a lot of courage, at the same time fear, because imagine a person suffering violence and not having the courage to tell it, and at the same time wanting to leave the relationship and not being able to. I think women need courage, perseverance, there are cases and cases, we need to put ourselves in the other's shoes and analyze the case well. (I16)*

*If she managed to denounce it, she is a warrior and has her head straight, she shows no discrimination, if she did the right thing. If she turned the person over, that's fine, if she didn't, she could be stronger and gather the courage to report. (I15)*

*I think women need a support network, and this network is more than just psychological, which helps a lot. But I think it should be more than that, maybe if the theme was more debated, if there was more information. I don't know if information, but if there wasn't the taboo of let's talk about it, it would be better, there would be a better support network. (I20)*

### DISCUSSION

This study reveals different perceptions of university students about the actors involved in IPV. This analysis starts from the principle that by revealing the thoughts of university students about the object in question through their speeches, it is possible to contribute to transform social reality and erroneous mental contents that only blame women and criminalize men.

When talking about the gender of the person who commits violent acts in the relationship, it is agreed that men are the main aggressors, a fact highlighted by university students. Physical strength and cultural issues, which legitimize male supremacy, were listed as determinants in the configuration of roles: abused versus abuser. Many men perpetrate violence because they consider it to be the “correct” way to act, correcting marital problems through aggression<sup>8</sup> or even by believing in their domineering condition, head of the family, that is, responsible for maintaining order in the house.

It is recognized that the forms of violence practiced against women range from sexual violence to death. In police stations, formalized cases are often those considered more serious that leave apparent bruises or require hospitalization and referral to the Legal Medical Institute<sup>13</sup>. The femicide epidemic reinforces the vulnerability of the female sex and the common sense that the opposite does not occur, as reported in the present study.

On the other hand, participants also mentioned that the woman can be an aggressor. A study that characterized the manifestations of dating violence among adolescents and young adults revealed bidirectionality, with boys reporting a greater infliction of violent acts, and showing greater victimization<sup>14</sup>. In another study, women reported more perpetration in the relationship than men reported having suffered physical violence<sup>8</sup>. This bidirectionality of violence

recognized by the studies reveals the importance of understanding the dynamics of violence at different stages of life and of debating the theme in the educational setting, as part of civil training and ethical conduct. Students are believed to be agents of transformation when encouraged to reflect on the problems affecting society.

Regarding the opinion that men are those who most perpetrate violence, although speeches are contradictory, both discuss the mystification of this subject. On the one hand, is stated that the aggressor is seen by society as a good guy hence, he should be exposed. Regardless of the adjective used, they proclaim that the perpetrator of violence needs to be supported considering that they are men, hostages of society.

On the other hand, they repudiate the stereotyped view of the aggressor as a monster, as this prevents the real knowledge about this author's profile. Although the perpetrator of violence does not always recognize himself as a potential aggressor<sup>11</sup>, it is necessary to recognize that the family father, the beloved child and the romantic boyfriend can also be perpetrators of violence. This indicates the need to increase the attention to violence committed by partners beyond the care for the victim and penalization of the aggressor<sup>15</sup>. The demystification of the perpetrator of violence is significant evidence that needs to be debated, allowing the identification and embracement of this man.

According to students, the perpetrator of violence should be exposed and punished, although some mention that the penitentiary system is not an adequate environment to serve sentence, considering the violent correctional role<sup>16</sup>. In view of this, they discuss the need to work on primary prevention, debating IPV in the school environment, discussing gender equity from the early grades.

In this sense, the importance of interventions aimed at male perpetrators of violence has been increasingly debated, as in addition to promoting male care, they provide learning and reflection on misconduct, modifying aggressive behavior<sup>16-18</sup>.

University students' speeches are in line with this view that makes use of the humanization of these men, which recognizes the need for support, with emphasis on psychological support. They also believe in the transformation of this violent scenario and in marital relations with a foundation on education about gender equality even in the initial grades, aimed at preventing the phenomenon. According to the international literature, the prevention of IPV is a key strategy to reduce the rates of gender-based violence, and results are more effective when it is implemented at schools or universities<sup>19</sup>.

With regard to the perception of the victimized person, there is a signal to the fragility of women, seen as helpless, afraid of episodes of violence, without the courage to report. In this way, knowing the reasons that keep them in an abusive relationship, strengthening the support network, promoting online support for counseling and questioning about women's safety at home<sup>4</sup> are actions that can help professionals and citizens to help women. How can a woman in a situation of violence break up with the aggressor when she is supported by him, when she has no support from family members, when she does not have her own income to take care of the children? Many of these motivations are listed by victims for the impossibility of leaving the partner<sup>20</sup>.

University students in this study understand these aspects, although they deem necessary that women report the abuse experienced. Note that anyone can file a police report confidentially, and it is the society's duty to contribute to the victim protection network. This was observed in the face of the new coronavirus pandemic, which led public bodies to create online communication channels in order to facilitate the reporting not only by the victim, but by neighbors, family members and even strangers<sup>3</sup>.

The current scenario has been reinforcing that IPV is a serious problem in society<sup>2-5,21</sup>. In this sense, the need to debate the issue in companies, schools, the media and strengthen the support network is more than evident. Seeing IPV as taboo is a failure of society. Therefore, discussing the theme in the university setting enables the formation of critical and reflective citizens to face this form of violence, the transformation and search for a more egalitarian society.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study addresses the view of university students from different courses without digging deeper in relation to the training area, which configures a limitation of the study. However, by giving university students a voice, in general, it was possible to identify how the actors involved in IPV see it, making it possible to encourage reflection on a topic that is not specific to any core of knowledge, but rather a topic on the agenda of the society.

When it comes to the gender of the abused person and the victimized person, students report that the woman is usually the victim, and the man is the author of aggressions. However, they recognize that violence can be bidirectional with greater severity when practiced by men. In this sense, they mention that the man must be exposed and punished,

and recognize that the perpetrator of violence needs to be supported. As for women in situations of violence, there is a feeling of empathy and solidarity. Students characterize women as helpless, without courage and afraid of the situation, a fact that leads them to maintain the cycle of violence.

Therefore, in view of this evidence, this study reveals that the university space is fertile ground to foster the debate on IPV, demystifying beliefs and judgments, promoting knowledge of the support network and gender equity. It is necessary to break the barriers of the course syllabus before a topic that does not end with the present study.

The development of studies focusing on professional approaches by core knowledge is suggested to strengthen ethical commitments to face this form of violence. It is part of the nursing role to provide care and embracement of the actors involved in IPV, in addition to the educational role that can be played by debating the subject in different spaces with society.

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Research Article  
Artigo de Pesquisa  
Artículo de Investigación

Caldeira RR, Acosta DF, Silva PLV, Leão ES  
Perspectives of university students on intimate partner violence

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12957/reuerj.2023.70796>

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**Authors' contributions:**

Conceptualization, D.F.A. and R.R.C.; Methodology, D.F.A. and R.R.C.; Validation, D.F.A.; Formal analysis, D.F.A. and E.S.L.; Investigation, D.F.A.; Manuscript writing, D.F.A., E.S.L. and P.L.V.S.; Manuscript review and editing, D.F.A. and E.S.L.; Supervision, D.F.A.; Project administration, D.F.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

