

# Affects and Emotionalities in Women Who have Suffered Intimate Partner Violence

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### Abstract

From a critical perspective that considers the social involvement of emotions and ways of subjectivation, this article aims to explore the experiences of women who had endured physical violence in an intimate relationship. Specifically, the focus is on how the feelings, effects and emotions were configured and manifested in the process of entering, maintaining, and leaving a violent heterosexual relationship. A multiple case study was carried out through interviews with five women. The material was transcribed and initially analyzed by two researchers separately. Next, the cases were debated seeking their singularities and similarities, considering an analysis through gender *dispositifs*. In the discussion developed in this article, observations on the following topics were addressed: 1) Narcissistic satisfaction of being chosen and special; 2) Forms of violence; 3) Mobilized Effects; 4) “The love of my life”: the idealization of romantic love; and 5) The decentering of romantic love and the entry of the “third party”: possible ways out.

**Keywords:** violence against women, gender *dispositifs*, affects, emotionalities, subjectivity

### AFETOS E EMOCIONALIDADES EM MULHERES QUE SOFRERAM VIOLÊNCIA POR PARCEIRO ÍNTIMO

#### Resumo

Sob uma perspectiva crítica que considera as emoções e os caminhos de subjetivação como socialmente implicados, o presente artigo teve por objetivo investigar os sentimentos, afetos e emoções vivenciados por mulheres que sofreram violência física em relacionamento íntimo, como eles se configuram e se manifestam na inserção, manutenção e saída de um relacionamento violento heterossexual. Foi realizado um estudo de casos múltiplos por meio de entrevistas com cinco mulheres. O material foi transcrito e analisado por duas pesquisadoras, primeiramente de forma separada. Depois, em conjunto, os casos foram debatidos buscando suas singularidades e semelhanças, levando-se em conta uma análise por meio dos dispositivos de gênero. Na discussão desenvolvida neste artigo, foram abordadas observações sobre os seguintes temas: 1) Satisfação narcísica de ser escolhida e especial; 2) Formas de violência; 3) Afetos Mobilizados; 4) “O amor da minha vida”: idealização do amor romântico; e 5) O descentramento do amor romântico e a entrada do “terceiro”: possíveis vias de saída.

**Palavras-chave:** violência contra a mulher, dispositivos de gênero, afetos; emocionalidades, subjetividade

### AFECTOS Y EMOCIONALIDADES EN MUJERES QUE HAN SUFRIDO VIOLENCIA DE PAREJA

#### Resumen

Partiendo de una perspectiva crítica que considera las emociones y formas de subjetivación como socialmente involucradas, el presente artículo tuvo como objetivo investigar los sentimientos, afectos y emociones vividas por mujeres que han sufrido violencia física en una relación íntima, cómo se configuran y manifiestan en el ingreso, mantener y salir de una relación heterosexual violenta. Se realizó un estudio de caso múltiple a través de entrevistas a cinco mujeres. El material fue transcrito y analizado por dos investigadores, primero por separado. Luego, en conjunto, se debatieron los casos buscando sus singularidades y similitudes, teniendo en cuenta un análisis a través de dispositivos de género. En la discusión desarrollada en este artículo, se abordaron observaciones sobre los siguientes temas: 1) La satisfacción narcisista de ser elegido y especial; 2) Formas de violencia; 3) Afecciones Movilizadas; 4) “El amor de mi vida”: idealización del amor romántico; y 5) El descentramiento del amor romántico y la entrada del “tercero”: salidas posibles.

**Palabras clave:** violencia contra la mujer, dispositivos de género, afectos, emocionalidades, subjetividad

Romantic love, which is heavily idealized in our culture, is the product of a social construction. In Brazil, affects and sexuality were shaped by the State and the Church over many centuries, to conform them to the ideal of a Catholic society (Del Priori, 2019). As Almeida (2018) highlighted, the discourse related to a “pure” love that “surpasses everything” covers up the fact that affective bonds are established and sustained within a profoundly hierarchical, violent, and unequal world. In addition to idealization, love is permeated by ambiguities and socially established lines of power that have different effects on the subjectivity of men and women.

Violence against women perpetrated by an intimate partner is one of the most harmful expressions of this inequality. According to Data Senado (2019), 27% of women reported having suffered domestic violence provoked by a man, of which 78% were partners or former partners. The research shows, however, that when presenting violent situations to women and asking whether they have experienced something similar, the percentage rises from 27 to 36%, indicating the difficulty of understanding this violence as such. Only 32% of the victimized women filed a complaint. When the subject is psychological, sexual, or moral violence, it becomes even more difficult to estimate the amount, given the greater difficulty these women have in identifying and naming the violence they suffer (Queiroz & Cunha, 2018). Ramos and Dourado (2009) indicate that the private character of these crimes produces two consequences that feed each other: the maintenance of the aggression, by creating a “secret”; and the social acceptance that one cannot intervene in this type of relationship. Therefore, domestic violence needs to be approached considering both its social and collective dimension and its most intimate dimension, as is the case of the field of affectivities.

It is necessary to emphasize that even this intimate field of effects and emotions is linked to the sociopolitical and cultural context. As highlighted by Le Breton (2019), socialization and culture directly influence the way of expressing, feeling, and identifying emotions. Accordingly, the author constructed a critical perspective for the comprehension of affective configurations, emphasizing that they do not occur spontaneously, purely intrapsychically and detached from culture, but symbolize the moral and cultural climate that permeates and constitutes the individual and their relationships. Therefore, the construction of the affective field occurs within the context of historical and social processes, resulting in diverse cultures and social positions that shape the field of emotionalities in unequal ways, creating different paths of subjectivation.

In our society, gender constitutes one of the factors that define these distinctions and hierarchies among social positions, by transforming an anatomic-biological difference into social, moral and material inequality (Laqueur, 2001). Butler (1986) stated that gender consists of a stylized repetition of performances, guided by cultural scripts. It is important to note, however, that these gendered cultural scripts guide not only performances, but also affects and emotions that, in sexist cultures like Brazil, are deeply marked by the binarism of becoming a man or a woman (Zanello, 2018). From this perspective, it is emphasized that a critical study of affects and emotions must consider them not only as something of the intimate and individual

sphere, but as arrangements made available by culture, through affective pedagogies (Zanello, 2018) and gender technologies (Lauretis, 1984). That is, feelings, affects and emotionalities are constructed, modeled and interpreted through the sociopolitical and cultural context, with specific configurations according to race and ethnicity, social class and gender (Le Breton, 2009; Zanello, 2018).

Zanello (2018) proposed a reading of love from the perspective discussed above and pointed out that it constitutes the fulcrum of one of the main paths of subjectivation for women in our culture. According to the author, these privileged forms of women's subjective constitution can be understood from two central subjectivation "dispositives" (the concept in French, *dispositifs*): the maternal *dispositif* and the love *dispositif*.

The maternal *dispositif* refers to the cultural construction of a lack of differentiation between the ability to care and the ability to procreate, which naturalizes care – a human skill – as an eminently feminine characteristic. Through this construction, the work of caring for the other (and all its consequences) fell mainly on women and received an "affective cover", which naturalized it as something "spontaneous" (Zanello, 2018, p. 150), which does not require remuneration. Furthermore, it is highlighted that, via the maternal *dispositif*, women in general – and not just mothers – are subjectively constituted in heterocentrism. That is, they go through a strong affective learning process in which they are taught to be available and prioritize the demands, needs and desires of others, to the detriment of their own (Zanello, 2018).

The love *dispositif* indicates the learning of a specific way to love that is identity for women, since they subjectify themselves in the relationship with themselves "mediated by the view of a man who chooses them" (Zanello, 2018, p. 84). That is, the identity value of being a woman in Brazil is legitimized by the ability to be chosen and remain chosen by a man. This process of subjectivation by the love *dispositif* was represented by the author through the metaphor of the "shelf of love". This shelf, which is crossed by the aesthetic ideal – currently white, young, blond and thin – imposes strict standards on women's bodies, generates competition between them and promotes the affective neglect of those who are not in a privileged place. Furthermore, this logic of the shelf places women continually under the scrutiny and judgmental gaze of men, while men are elevated to the position of evaluators of women.

The shelf of love, as a privileged locus of their subjectivation, is an important vulnerability factor for women, including those who are supposedly "well-positioned", given the ephemerality of these positions in the face of aging and body changes in the different cycles of life (Zanello, 2018). However, despite not being good for any woman, the shelf is more perverse and destructive for black, indigenous, or disabled women, that is, those who are far from the aesthetic ideal. The multiple articulations and intersectionalities between these markers engender different forms of subjective fragility, bodily oppression, narcissistic and identity shocks, and attacks on self-esteem (Zanello, 2018).

The gender *dispositifs* discussed above have identity value and are linked to the subjects' narcissism. At this point, it is necessary to highlight that, contrary to the pejorative meaning of

the term narcissism often mobilized in the normal sense of the word, which alludes to a supposed character flaw, here we adopt the meaning given by the Freudian concept (Freud, 1911–13/2010), which refers to the process of constitution of the “self” and the psyche, which plays an essential role during the life of each subject and is not, in itself, a moral defect or pathology. In the realm of love, for example, narcissism would justify renunciation and sacrifices in the hope of being loved and gratified (Santos, 2020). In this sense, it is possible to think that narcissism is also realized through gender *dispositifs*, which can mediate the way the subject sees themselves and is satisfied in the world, anchoring narcissistic issues in a gendered way (Zanello, 2018).

In view of the discussions presented, there is an urgent need to comprehend the subjective experiences that make women more vulnerable to abusive and violent relationships. From this perspective, this study aimed to investigate the affects and emotionalities in women who had suffered violence in an intimate heterosexual relationship, observing its configuration and manifestation in entering, maintaining and leaving the relationship.

### Method

**Participants:** Five Brazilian women who had suffered physical aggression in a relationship that had already broken down.

**Instruments:** closed questionnaire developed by the authors; semi-structured interview, script developed by the authors. The closed questionnaire contained simple questions aimed at obtaining the following information: the duration of the relationship; the types of violence experienced (patrimonial, moral, sexual, physical, psychological); whether a complaint was made or not; the frequency with which the physical violence occurred; whether or not the relationship broke down after the first episode of violence; whether the woman had children with the aggressor; whether they told someone in their support network; and sociodemographic data.

**Procedures:** This was a multiple case study, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Human and Social Sciences of The University of Brasília (*Instituto de Ciências Humanas e Sociais da Universidade de Brasília*), CAAE No.: 34092920.9.0000.5540, Authorization: 4.299.620. The request was made through the dissemination of an invitation and a questionnaire on social networks. The questionnaire was anonymous, with simple and closed questions about the violent relationship; the sociodemographic profile; a space to provide contact details, whether they were available to participate in the interview; and the contact details of one of the researchers. The questionnaire was released on October 26, 2020 and the interviews were carried out between December 2020 and January 2021.

As the women applied for the interview, a single contact was made to schedule an appointment. The interviews were only scheduled when the woman volunteered to participate and immediately made an appointment, without any insistence or need for a second contact.

The questionnaires of those that volunteered were separated based on the frequency with which the physical violence occurred and the moment they left the relationship: 1) Women who had a single violent relationship and ended the relationship after the first episode of physical

violence; 2) Women who had two violent relationships, at least one of which involved an episode of physical violence; 3) Women who had lived in a relationship in which episodes of physical violence occurred regularly. The reason for this selection was to observe whether there were differences and how they occurred in terms of the affects, emotionalities and subjective processes involved in each relationship dynamic. Within each category, the women were contacted one by one, until it was possible to arrange an interview with two women from each group. It should be highlighted that category 1 had only one interviewee since the other candidates withdrew from participating or revealed that they had not suffered physical violence during their participation, and their testimonies were separated for later study.

One of the researchers conducted the interviews through video calls with audio recording only. At the beginning of the call, clarifications were made concerning the study and the participants were given the option of turning off the camera before recording. The triggering question was “Tell me a little about yourself and your relationships”. During the interview, there were interventions such as: “Tell me more about it”, “Can you give me an example?”.

The audio recordings were transcribed in full. Two researchers read the material separately and raised relevant aspects. Together, the stories and aspects listed in each one were compared. The main points and the common themes that crossed them were discussed. A text was written about the story of each interviewee, with the selection of her main statements, in order to organize and review the study of each case.

## Results

The participants were Brazilian, born and residing in different states of the country, aged between 24 and 55. The violent relationships occurred when the women were between 17 and 26 years of age. Next, we present a table – a summary of each interviewee.

**Table 1***Summary table of the participants*

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| <b>Vanessa</b> | <b>Mixed race, a violent relationship with a single episode of aggression, reported the physical violence.</b> At the age of 21, she moved to the USA with her fiancé. He slapped her across the face, she called the police immediately. The US police and legal system acted quickly to protect her.  |
| <b>Júlia</b>   | <b>Mixed race, two violent relationships, children with the aggressor, reported the physical violence.</b> She had a short relationship with sexual violence at 17. She moved to the city alone to attend university and met her second boyfriend. She suffered sexual violence a few times during the two-year relationship and had two children with him. She reported him to the police after suffering physical violence and being held captive during her second pregnancy.  |
| <b>Paula</b>   | <b>Mixed race, two violent relationships, children with the aggressor</b> – She broke up with her first boyfriend after receiving a slap around the face at the age of 18. A year later, they got back together under the condition that he would never attack her again, and they moved in together. He did not attack her again but mutilated himself and threatened suicide in front of her. They had 2 children and, when Paula was 26 years old, he did indeed commit suicide. The second relationship, with whom she also had two daughters, ended after an episode of aggression during pregnancy. He never paid any bills or alimony for his daughters. |
| <b>Camila</b>  | <b>White, a violent relationship with recurrent physical aggression</b> – Met her first boyfriend while at university, he was jealous. Her parents moved out of the state, and she remained alone. The psychological violence escalated to physical violence that became recurrent. The relationship lasted for about 3 and a half years, until Camila broke up with him during an exchange trip.   |
| <b>Raquel</b>  | <b>Mixed race, a violent relationship with recurrent physical aggression</b> – In a new city, alone and going through family problems, she met her ex-boyfriend with whom she had a relationship for a year. The violence quickly escalated after she decided not to file a report.   |

For didactic purposes, the themes found in the interviews and listed in the analysis of the cases were divided into topics that will be discussed below. These are: 1) Narcissistic satisfaction of being chosen and special; 2) Forms of violence; 3) Mobilized Affects; 4) “The love of my life”: idealization of romantic love; and 5) The decentering of romantic love and the entry of the “third party”: possible ways out.

## Discussion

### Narcissistic satisfaction of being chosen and special

In all cases, the functioning of the love *dispositif* was identified in the configuration of narcissistic satisfaction resulting from “being chosen” which, as a fundamental identity endorsement of women in our culture, deeply permeated all the relationships, whether in the entry, maintenance or in the difficulty in elaborating its end.

Camila reported that the fear of abandonment was always present in her life and that, with the ex-boyfriend in question, she did not feel this threat: “*certain he wasn’t going to abandon me because he was crazy about me. Crazy in every way, (...) he thought I was wonderful, the goddess of his life, and I call him crazy because he would do crazy things that would make you question his sanity*”. Camila’s statement shows that the craziness and violence of persisting and stalking were interpreted by the women as proof of love: with her being essential and irreplaceable for the man. This interpretation is produced and reproduced by powerful gender technologies, very popular in Brazilian culture, such as music, films and soap operas (Gama & Zanella, 2019). When Camila said “*he’s crazy*” and uses the complement “*for me*”, what is evident is an interpretative

rotation, in which being “crazy for her” starts to testify not about his madness, but about what she is able to cause in this man.

Feeling somehow special, important or irreplaceable appeared as a common point in the statements of all the interviewees. The effect of this is shown at the heart of entering and in the difficulty of leaving violent relationships. Camila exemplified this, saying: “*I felt drugged. I keep imagining someone addicted to cocaine, who knows it’s bad, knows it’s not good, knows it has a huge cost for their mind, for their body, for their family, for their friends, but they can’t stop taking it*”. Following this metaphor, what made Camila become dependent on this “drug” is related to its psychodynamic effect. The affective dependence created by the love *dispositif* does not only consist of being with a man, or the love she has for him, but is directly related to the narcissistic and identitary effect that feeling irreplaceably chosen by a man causes in the woman.

As in Camila’s metaphor, being unique and special generates a sense of satisfaction and completeness in these women, to which they always try to return. Physical beauty and its recognition from the man’s perspective frequently appeared as one of these routes to narcissistic satisfaction in the reports of all interviewees. Camila reported: “*He praised me a lot. I felt like the most beautiful woman in the world*”. A similar feeling occurred with Paula: “*he made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world, the most wanted, most attractive, most loved*”. Being chosen and endorsed by a man for her beauty is a central element of the love *dispositif*. Although men are also exalted by their partners, profiting from this in terms of self-image and self-esteem, it is rare to find a man wistfully saying: “*My ex made me feel like the most handsome and most loved man on earth*”. It’s not that women never make men feel loved and handsome, they do it all the time. The point is that the endorsement of beauty is socially constructed as a strong issue for women’s identity, giving this issue a centrality and relevance that is not the same for men. It does not constitute a point that anchors male narcissism in the same way as it does with women. For men, the exaltation of their physical beauty may even be important; however, it is not a structuring factor of their masculinity and does not stand out as a relevant reason for choosing and staying with a woman or missing her. For women, on the other hand, they are taught that they are only desirable if there is a man desiring them (Zanello, 2018), which engenders an outsourcing of their self-esteem, requiring this passage through male approval.

Vanessa commented: “*he was an artist, he painted, made pictures, photographs, I felt like a muse... you know, for him (...) I didn’t think I was pretty, until I met him, and then he started painting me and so on. That’s how I started to see a certain beauty in myself*”. For Vanessa, the racial issue also marked the experience. “*I was the typical woman from Bahia, you know. Dark skinned, with curly hair, thin (...) I thought my friend was pretty, she was very white, with freckles and had green eyes (...) the one I wanted to introduce him to, who was blond, with blue eyes and such*”. She liked the man right away, but didn’t even think about a white, blond, foreign man as a possibility. She thought, rather, that she would match him with her friend, which may point to introjected racism. In the hegemonic standard of beauty, or in the so-called “shelf of love”, a black woman usually occupies a position of amorous negligence (Pacheco, 2008; Zanello, 2018). Therefore, being chosen by a man

desired within the standards of beauty, that is, with a differential within a racist matrimonial capital, was a strong endorsement of Vanessa's womanhood and affirmation of her beauty, which, as she pointed out, "caught her in a fragility". The fewer attributes dictated by the rigid standard of beauty a woman has, the more affectively vulnerable she tends to be in this sense, as someone who "has hit the jackpot", a factor that has the potential to make violence invisible and increase the challenge of leaving a relationship that promotes this type of narcissistic validation. The recognition of beauty, however, was not the only way in which the women felt unique and special. Júlia was sensitive to the reports of her partner's complicated childhood and assumed, predominantly, a caring attitude. She said that at times she took care of the man like a son: "*I don't know why I felt this need to care, to be important to someone*". As the report shows, it is often from the confession of male pain that women start to care for the men's lives and not for their own.

Raquel, in turn, was touched when her boyfriend told her that he had been sexually abused in childhood: "*He said he hadn't spoken to anyone about it*". Therefore, she was not surprised by his first screams and manifestations of aggression, interpreting his emotional instability as the result of trauma. It is identified that she was urged to comprehend her boyfriend's suffering about his racial and class experience, because he came from a poor, black family. Both the place that her boyfriend put her "*as a privileged white girl*" and a phone call made by her mother-in-law when Raquel was on her way to the police station, convinced her to become racial complicit with him and not report him: "*his mother said 'my son is black and my son is poor, according to statistics he should have gone to jail a long time ago, but he managed to get into university, please don't spoil it for him'. And then she used these issues that are very important to me to discourage me from reporting him, as if it was my fault, and as if I were the one who decided his fate*". It is important to remember that Raquel's awareness of the racial issue would hardly have the same effect had she not also been a black woman with lighter skin than her boyfriend. It should be highlighted that, in Brazil, racism and the myth of racial democracy operate by denying the black population the chance to identify themselves as such, name the oppressions and fight against them. In this sense, Devulsky (2021) elucidates that the complex dynamics of colorism is part of this problem as a reflection of white supremacy. Colorism also creates inequalities among members of the black community, affecting men and women in different ways and deepening inequality between them. Aware of the effects of racism in her own life and of the colorism that permeates society, Raquel was summoned to act in racial complicity and not go through with the complaint. Even accepting complicity, she was disallowed by him in her blackness, even though her experience also passed through a social place of racialization and exclusion.

After her mother-in-law called, Raquel gave up reporting him and got used to the aggression, which from then on became recurrent. "*I'm sorry I was such an emotional crutch for him, you know? That he told me all his things, that I had to be here. Always available to listen to his things*" (Raquel). Being someone's "emotional crutch" is certainly a very heavy burden; however, there is a narcissistic "gain": one assumes a unique and supposedly essential place for the other.

In cases like those of Raquel and Júlia, there was no direct exaltation of the image of these women as beauties; however, there was a feeding of their narcissism by way of being the only ones to have access to the fragility of the boyfriend and by the idea that he needed them. Women often need to be needed, as this is the way offered to make them feel relevant (Zanello, 2018). Furthermore, ending a relationship with a suffering man, who is also a victim, can be morally reprehensible.

Therefore, it was identified that the satisfaction of feeling unique and special was also brought about by a combination of the maternal and love *dispositifs*, in which the woman appeared as the only one who understood and took care of her partner, the only one he felt comfortable with and to whom he confided his great pain. Being the exclusive depositary of this male pain seems to have an effect here that touched the narcissism of the women. The secret shows that she is unique and special, captured by the love *dispositif*. Faced with this capture, women tend to respond with affects linked to the maternal *dispositif*, becoming sensitized to take care of these men. There is often a hyper-comprehension of the pains of the men, who rarely spend the same amount of time, energy and empathy on the woman's pains. Seeing the boyfriend as a victim or holder of traumas and disorders can cover up or mitigate the mistakes he makes and justify his aggressiveness. Therefore, even the negative characteristics of violent men pose obstacles for women to seek to break off the relationship. At the same time, the ability to forgive, understand and endure the adversities of the relationship are reaffirmed as qualities of the victim (Cunha, 2008).

This structure "a traumatized or psychically ill man with a woman who intends to help or save him" was repeated in all cases, to some extent. As in the dynamics of the story "The Beauty and the Beast", the outburst about the traumas and suffering activates in women the fantasy that their patience and love would be able to transform the beast into a prince, that their commitment and affection would be the cure for their partners' illness. "*I felt that at least he could let off steam with me (...) that he would improve (...) and that I should be happy because he opened up to me, so I felt kind of res... Not responsible for his well-being...but I felt that I... could help him resolve these issues*" (Raquel). This dynamic seems to culminate in female hyper-responsibility and male dis-responsibility (Guimarães & Zanello, 2022), which guide the engendering of guilt and shame, as will be discussed later.

### Forms of violence

Different forms of violence perpetrated by intimate partners were identified based on the manipulation of the women's affects. These manipulations were sometimes linked to the pre-existing and unique vulnerabilities of each one of them, such as, for example, family problems, self-esteem and the experience of racism, which intensified their effects. Blaming was the main manipulative strategy found. Along with it, disqualification and humiliation were the most common mechanisms in the cases in which the physical violence was recurrent. Under these circumstances, in the case of a woman with more social advantages – like Raquel, her

lighter skin and more comfortable financial condition than her boyfriend's became arguments for her to be discredited for her own pain and disqualified. Camila was also humiliated by her boyfriend: *"as much as he told me that I was nothing, that I was useless, I think I really turned it around"*. Humiliation is present as a gender construct that generates immobilization (Díaz-Benítez, 2019), therefore, by criticizing and reducing women who are already fragile, the effect is to produce a mirage that this man already does a lot by being with her, as if the woman should be grateful that he puts up with her.

In the cases of Vanessa and the first relationship of Paula, there was only one episode of physical violence. In response, they set the condition that the violence never happened again before resuming the relationships. Neither of them suffered physical violence from their partners again. However, in both cases there was a transition from violence directed directly toward them to self-directed violence, which recruited the woman's view as a witness to experiences of horror. Vanessa saw her boyfriend trying to commit suicide in the house they lived in, shortly after they got back together. Paula saw her companion self-harm *"he kicked the tree until he broke his foot (...) he had these fits of fury and violence, but they started to be with himself. (...) he would punch [the wall] until his hand was all bloodied and raw... he would hit his head on the wall (...) I was horrified (...) it was still violence for me (...) I got home from work and he was lying on the bed with the gun to his head cocked and he was like 'I'm just waiting for you to arrive so I can say goodbye to you, bye'"*.

In these two cases, the men's illness and emotional instability were evident. Cassorla (2021) points out that the suicidal act is highly aggressive towards the survivors affected and that its violent content is often coated with fantasies of revenge and the production of guilt and suffering. Therefore, suicide and self-harm also constitute a form of communication. In episodes like those witnessed by Paula, there is the creation of a shocking scene that, in addition to the psychic illness of the man in question, also refers to an aggression that violently affects the people who are summoned to watch. Thus, it can be identified that the limit set by these women was able to stop only one form of violence, but not its continuity. Furthermore, the shock of witnessing such scenes seems to reinforce the routes of the maternal *dispositif*, challenging women to take care of men.

Another violence identified was "control with affection" (Zanello, 2018), a refinement in the way of expressing the classic affects of jealousy and a feeling of possession in relation to the partner. It is an ambiguous way of reducing women's freedom with affectionate justifications and subtleties. *"He was a person who gave me a lot too, you know. He cared for me, he gave me affection, but at the same time he abused me in every way"*, said Camila. This mechanism is hard to spot as abuse given its veneer of concern, care, kindness, and true love. Paula, for example, said in shock that she did not perceive the situations she was experiencing as aggression: *"In the beginning it was very innocent like that, very! That thing there 'we two are soulmates' and everything, 'we don't have secrets, you tell me everything, and I tell you everything, ok?'"*. It was only possible for her to realize that she lived in 'a prison' years later. When this companion died, Paula did not know the password to her own bank account. He said he wanted to save her from having to deal with "the

money thing” and going to the bank, as she had small children and he could do it himself: “if I wanted to buy myself a lipstick, a pair of socks I had to ask him, you know? (...) he had complete control of my financial life”. He also prevented her from driving, monitored her schedules and phone calls, masking his jealousy in the form of concern for Paula’s well-being.

Sexual violence was also silently present. Some women highlighted the sex in their relationships as a violent experience, even though at the time of its occurrence they could not name it that way. Paula’s second partner assaulted her after pressuring her to have a sexual relationship and accusing her of cheating. Júlia woke up with blood on her legs and noticed that her first boyfriend had taken advantage of her drunkenness to take her virginity. With her second boyfriend, the father of her children, she woke up twice with him “*having sex with me unconscious... really penetrating me*”. Similar situations occurred with Camila, whose ex wanted sex every day, accused her of cheating if she denied it and woke her up at dawn already penetrating her: “**Today** I know that I was raped several times within the relationship”. This “**today**” denounces the invisibility of sexual violence, especially when it happens in a romantic relationship.

Rape in relationships has historical roots in the conjugal right, in the idea that women should give sexual satisfaction to men. It is not uncommon for women to agree to sex unwillingly or even to learn to emulate pleasure and fake orgasms (Zanello, 2018). Júlia felt pressured to have sex without a condom, even though she felt no difference in her personal pleasure. Her two pregnancies took place in this context: “*It was always just that, like, he would look for me, we would have sex, I was never satisfied, he was always satisfied*”. She said that she forced herself to do it “*to be able to see if I got it back, to see if I felt like before, but it didn’t come back, you know*”. In Julia’s case, in particular, in addition to guilt and the feeling of being dirty, she reported disgust with herself and her body. This self-reported disgust is quite common in cases of violence, which is intrinsically related to the self-blaming processes of women in these situations and indicates, according to Díaz-Benítez (2019), repudiation of their own bodies and their own sexuality. According to the author, the ‘disgust’ affect marks a hierarchy between the subject who feels it and the object that provokes the revulsion. In this torsion in which disgust appears self-referred, the subject and the object of disgust coincide, configuring a movement of trying to leave oneself and of displacement and refusal in relation to one’s own body.

Another form of violence identified among the interviewees was the vexatious exposure of the women’s sexuality. Camila reported that, when she broke up with her boyfriend, she suffered the threat of having nude photographs of her leaked and sent to family members: “*it was the worst part. The worst. More than the physical aggression, if that’s possible*”. This situation reveals how female sexuality is deeply associated with the moral value of women, both individually and in the sphere of family honor (Zanello, 2018).

### Mobilized affects

Faced with the violent dynamics and the capture by the women's narcissistic satisfaction, three main affects marked their reports, deeply crossing the experience of living in an abusive relationship: helplessness/loneliness, guilt and shame.

Loneliness appeared as an important factor among these women for entering and maintaining the relationships. Júlia and Raquel had moved to another state to attend university. Camila's parents had to move while she remained at university, with no relatives nearby. Vanessa was living alone with her boyfriend in the United States when she was assaulted. Only Paula had the presence of family members in the same city. It is true that geographic isolation can act as a vulnerability factor; however, women are not taught to deal with loneliness in our culture, often preferring heartlessness to solitude (Zanello, 2018). There is a culturally constructed promise that a relationship is capable of filling gaps and generating completeness. Identitarily linked to this, women often have difficulty being alone with themselves (Zanello, 2018). It is in this sense that "being alone", or being single, can be intensely felt as helplessness. Júlia said that she used a romantic relationship app, as she was alone in the city, and through this she met her ex: "*it was this too, a bond to break the loneliness*" (Júlia). However, loneliness, in most of the cases, was not buffered by the relationship. On the contrary, it was often intensified, generating an affective dependence along with a feeling of being alone, although accompanied. Júlia said that her pregnancies were very lonely, despite living with her ex. Raquel lost friends at the university when she dated the aggressive senior. Camila said that nothing compared to the loneliness she felt in that relationship.

Guilt was the emotionality that appeared most recurrently among the interviewees. Guilt is a feeling historically fostered and interpellated by women as a form of social control and an instrument for their submission. Díaz-Benítez (2019) emphasized that some emotions are deeply gendered, assuming differentiated contours marked by gender. The author pointed out that this does not mean that only women feel guilt, but that the mechanisms of these affects, as well as the effects generated by them in people's lives, are diverse. It is important to highlight that in the cases dealt with here the guilt was not only due to facts that occurred. It was also established within the affective dynamics, when the woman took responsibility for the man's affects – and inevitably failed – as a side effect of the phenomenon that we describe as "beauty and the beast". From this perspective, two main types of guilt were evidenced: guilt for the partner's affects; and guilt due to what he did.

When seeing their boyfriend as a victim, the women tended – and were sometimes encouraged – to take responsibility for his affects. Imbued with the desire to transform the partner, women attribute this responsibility to themselves without even noticing. They begin to mold themselves so that the partner is spared from feeling a certain way (Guimarães & Zanello, 2022). Faced with the impossible nature of the task, there is an announced failure to take responsibility for the affects of others, which returns in the form of guilt.

Paula reported that, faced with the sick partner who threatened suicide and was the protagonist of scenes of self-mutilation, she began to change the way she spoke and behaved to prevent him from feeling bad. *"I could see that he was upset about this (...) so I kept trying, like, I changed, you know?"*. She said that she started to feel constantly watched: *"As he became suspicious, I became hardened, right (...) like 'I can't do that', so I think I lost my naturalness"*. At one point, she tried to stop his abusive behavior, but after her partner's suicide, she felt guilty: *"I blamed myself a lot, I kept thinking it was my fault that he had done this"*. Paula said that, for many years, she had difficulty speaking and that since then she started to pay attention to what she said (not only to him, but to people in general) and the possibility that her words could hurt someone: *"The feeling I had was that I had punched a hole in him"*.

In her second marriage to another abusive man, Paula did not change her behavior to please him, but committed to paying for therapy for her husband. There was a significant change in Paula when comparing the two relationships, as she did not try to fit in with her second husband, but referred him to a professional. This indicates that she had found an alternate path, not fully taking on the impossible task of saving him. However, paying for psychotherapeutic sessions has an important symbolic effect: whether with the body or with money, who pays dearly for the illness and treatment of these men?

Raquel's boyfriend said he was ashamed of her: *"My attitudes, spontaneities, sometimes embarrassed him (...) So when I was happy, the problem was I was too happy and that embarrassed him. When I was sad, I was too sad and he was embarrassed too, (...) I ended up taking the blame for myself. (...) Then it was really bad because I always thought I needed to do it so he wouldn't feel embarrassed by me anymore"*. It is possible to see that the feelings expressed by these men were not interpreted as problems that they themselves needed to solve, but as a failure and a responsibility of the women (Guimarães & Zanillo, 2022).

Raquel, Camila and Vanessa received calls from their mothers-in-law when trying to report the violence. All three felt guilty after the phone call. Raquel and Camila decided not to make the complaint. Vanessa had already called the police when she spoke to her mother-in-law and wanted to withdraw the complaint; however, she was welcomed by a psychosocial team who helped her to realize that she should keep it. The mothers-in-law's connections, therefore, by appealing to the damage that their sons would receive, promoted a transfer of responsibility when faced with the violence, in which the women were held responsible for the consequences of the men's acts. In addition, it was identified that the partners blamed the women for the recurrent aggressions that they themselves committed. Raquel's boyfriend, after hitting her, cried and shouted saying: *"look what you have made me into"*. Camila, on the other hand, once tried to hold her boyfriend by the arm in the middle of a crowd and her long nails marked his arm. The next day he showed her the marks and claimed that, from that moment on, she had *"inaugurated"* the physical violence within the relationship: *"this (...) gave him the freedom to start hitting me"*.

Finally, the women with children, Júlia and Paula, had an intense feeling of guilt linked to the lack of relationship between the fathers and the children. *"I always thought that he would be*

missed in their lives, that **I should include** him (...) I feel guilty about it (...) because they don't have a father present today (...) as if I had an obligation there... to **try to make that bond happen**". With this statement, Júlia brought up the responsibility that falls on women, especially those who are mothers, to maintain relationships and to be present where the father is not (Lobão, Leal & Zanella, 2020).

Paula, whose second husband never paid for anything for their two daughters, felt bad about demanding it or going to court: "I think it's shameful that you have to ask your daughter's father to help you support her (...) It's like I had (...) a sign stamped on the wall 'I am incompetent to choose a father for my daughters'. His incompetence counted as her incompetence. Paula felt guilty for her ex's lack of involvement and, at the same time, she could not bring him into line with the law: "this thing of thinking I'm responsible for everything, you know? (...) I have a lot of difficulty receiving and I want to give too much". The blame here lies as an obligation within the maternal *dispositif*, enforcing the female burden.

The shame mentioned by Paula was also an affect narrated by all the other interviewees as something present in the relationships, lasting, in some cases, beyond the breakup. In addition to choosing "a good father for the children", shame was linked to the episode of violence itself or to their persistence in the relationship. The most recurrent situation for this feeling occurred when they reported to someone what happened or was happening, which fomented a cycle of social isolation. Vanessa immediately called the police, ended the relationship and had her story of overcoming problems written about in a local newspaper. Still, a long time passed without telling the family about what happened: "I hid it from my mother. I was ashamed. It was many years later that I talked to my mother, to my sisters, about this subject".

In this sense, social isolation and the reduction of the support network happen both because of the active influence of the men and because of the shame that the women feel when talking about the subject. Raquel's boyfriend made up stories about her to his university colleagues. Vanessa's boyfriend prioritized his friendships over hers. Julia's boyfriend tried to set her against her friends, saying they were fake. Paula reported that her ex was jealous of her friends and wanted to know what they talked about. Camila ended up returning home when she went out with her friends, because her boyfriend got into trouble. He was also infuriated to learn that she had mentioned a fight to a friend; gradually, she stopped going out and talking to others.

This reduction of the support network happened to all of them; however, it was more intense in the cases of Raquel and Camila, with whom the physical violence was recurrent. All the women told other people about the psychological or physical abuse they suffered. However, several of them narrated that their friends got tired. Gradually, the women stopped seeking help and became ashamed of remaining in the relationship. Therefore, it was identified that the aggressor and the victim were closed in a system, with the man often becoming the only affective support reference for her, and the woman being left without any way of asking for help. Camila reported: "nothing compared to the loneliness of that time, because I really didn't have anyone. I couldn't tell my parents, I couldn't tell my friends, they had already given up on me. (...) very, very alone".

The shame for herself and the inability to break off the relationship contributed to the increase in helplessness and loneliness, in a vicious circle, which left the women in an even greater state of vulnerability to the aggressor. Raquel said: “*I distanced myself from all my friends and nowadays I know that several of them had already imagined what was happening, but I could never say exactly*”. In addition to the shame of seeking help, Raquel’s speech denounces a social passivity, also found in other cases. Camila said that she screamed in the apartment, but never had help from any neighbor. When she showed up at the university with bruises and made up excuses, no one wanted to know more. Júlia ran to the house of a neighboring couple when she was attacked, but did not get help.

Therefore, the social silence surrounding violence against women aggravates the risk and potentially intensifies the feelings of shame. As much as the topic is debated, in the presence of a female acquaintance, the taboo and a policy of non-interference are maintained, as the popular saying points out “in a fight between husband and wife, nobody gets involved”. In this sense, with a man who does not want her to talk about it and a support network that no longer wants to listen to her, a deep feeling of shame is generated. Therefore, there is a situation that invites women to be complicit in silence, which keeps the cycle of violence away from interference.

#### **“The love of my life”: idealization of romantic love**

Throughout the interviews, the women often mentioned the love they felt for the men as the reason that made them remain, despite the violence and harm. “*He was extremely jealous, insecure and so, I lived in a prison, in a jail, but I loved him so much [...] I disregarded myself completely (...) to be with him, because I loved him so much*”, said Paula about her first relationship. This mechanism expressed by Paula – recognition of the risks and sufferings of the relationship juxtaposed with the love that overcomes them – cannot be reduced to something simply individual, but is anchored in a sociocultural structure that idealizes romantic love. This love that justifies everything, supports everything and crosses everything is a construction that emerges amid the new family configurations that emerged with the rise of capitalism, starting to inhabit the moral climate of society as an ideal to be conquered and maintained, especially by women. This way of loving is the result, as we present, of strong gender technologies and of learning to love as the core identity of women (Zanello, 2018).

With the promise that they would conquer their happiness in the romantic encounter, and historically charged with fighting and caring for “true love”, women are the ones who suffer most from the burden of this idealization. The women’s lives and personal projects were frequently left in the background and the love relationship became a priority: “*that relationship took 90% of my energy*” said Camila. Paula summarized this topic: “*From loving so much, I had no place for myself*”. It seems that it is not relational love that stands out in Paula’s speech, but the indication of an illness in the love *dispositif*, an investment in the other and in maintaining the relationship so exacerbated that it engenders forgetting oneself.

When something or someone is invested with the idea of being irreplaceable, the vulnerability is even greater, since it implies a definitive loss: “I thought he was the love of my life, that’s what is the most paradoxical of all, I was sure that I would never find a man as wonderful and as horrible as him [...] I thought that no one else in the world could play the role of a caregiver that he did, you know, of solving my problems” said Camila. Rachel, on the other hand, said: “if I didn’t have him, it seems that I really wouldn’t have anything, and that’s what he said to me too, you know? [...] I couldn’t do it without him anymore, because he always said that ‘nobody else is going to be with you’, no matter how much he attacked me”.

Although similar statements appeared in all the interviews, it was no coincidence that statements about the irreplaceable character of men occurred with greater intensity in the statements of Camila and Raquel, the two women who suffered physical violence recurrently and for the longest time, experiencing this closed circuit of the abusive relationship more intensely. The ‘irreplaceable’ character that the aggressor man comes to have for women, as well as originating in the love *dispositif*, is supported and exacerbated by the precariousness of the women’s social network and the lack of friends and family they can count on. The more this network is reduced, the more these men grow in importance in these women’s lives, even if this presence is permeated by profound ambivalences. Camila’s boyfriend, for example, constantly attacked her; however, he was also the one who took care of her bruises after the fight was over: “very paradoxical, right, but really I had no one to take care of me”.

### **The decentering of romantic love and the entry of the “third party”: possible ways out**

In all the interviews, it was possible to notice the crossing of gender *dispositifs* as beacons of female feelings and the maintenance of the relationship. However, it is worth highlighting the case of Vanessa, in which, although present, the *dispositifs* did not follow a path of psychic illness for her. Although feeling like “the muse” of a foreign, blond man was fascinating at the beginning of the relationship and made his emotional instability invisible, the feeling did not last long: “I saw him as a handsome guy, you know... different, blond, strong, blue eyes... traveled, who spoke several languages, so I think I put him on a pedestal, you know. And little by little I saw that it wasn’t quite like that (...) I also started to realize that (...) that I had my value too”.

What can be observed in Vanessa’s case is that, when her boyfriend validated her beauty, this generated a certain numbness resulting from narcissistic satisfaction, at the same time that there was active management on her part. The ex-fiancé’s validation seemed to be the starting point for her to reframe her concepts of beauty and change the way she looked at herself: “I started (...) to see a certain beauty in me”. She said that the relationship “opened the world” for her, that she was able to perceive other cultures, other standards of beauty, languages, and arts. Vanessa didn’t take her boyfriend’s validation as a gift or affection that could only come from him. She made use of this, accepting what interested her and strengthening her self-esteem, using this validation as an impetus, but walking independently of the endorsement provided by the man. In this sense, Vanessa deconstructed racist ideals of beauty and engaged in professional

activities and artistic studies, even surpassing the knowledge of her then boyfriend. She used the view of her fiancé at first but managed to make a crossing by constructing something positive beyond him.

Vanessa showed a great interest and commitment to her own career, her projects, hobbies, travels and studies. It is noted that she was not totally love-centered and fell in love with several other things besides her fiancé: *“it was important, and all, but it wasn’t everything in my life, no, because I... I already had a college degree, I had a career too, I had my dreams, you know”*. It can be seen that Vanessa’s narcissistic construction (a fundamental dimension in the psychic constitution of the subjects) was not mainly anchored in the endorsement provided by the man, but was supported by other pillars that sustained her realization as a woman.

In addition, the active intervention of the State, such as the entry of a third party, was also fundamental in Vanessa’s case. Despite the fact that the ex-boyfriend cut the emergency call she made, the police in the United States traced the call, arrived at their house in a few minutes with a protective measure already issued by the police authority and ensured that the aggressor left. A scholar and active in the legal field, Vanessa compared her experience with that of other women who try to make a report in Brazil: *“we need the protective measure to be issued, in Brazil, by the police authority that attends, (...) I see a lot of women who have difficulties, are poorly attended, there is no... there is no police chief, then-, then the police chief has to look for the judge, then the judge is out of town, then there is no protective measure and the woman goes home and is attacked again, you know? Then (...) it cannot just be the judge who can give the protective measure”*. Faced with the guilt she felt for the complaint, Vanessa reported that she was welcomed by a specialized team; *“Yeah... I thought that was fantastic, because, first: I was the victim and... I wasn’t discredited at any time. Second: the protective measure was issued at the time by the police officer”*. It is noteworthy that Vanessa was not free from feelings of loneliness, guilt and shame, so present in the reports of the other women. She said that the care she received from psychology and social welfare professionals was crucial for deconstructing the guilt and for a positive outcome. This report contrasts with the unpreparedness of many health professionals to handle cases of violence against women in Brazil and also with Camila’s report, who, when seeking a psychologist while suffering recurrent aggressions, received the suggestion of a herbal medicine, and was advised to research about the theme “respect” and try to talk to her boyfriend.

With Raquel and Camila, the entry of the third party took place not by the State, but by family members. In Raquel’s case, albeit belatedly, this third party was important both for her to seek self-care and strengthen herself (when her mother encouraged her) and for her boyfriend to stop insisting (when her friend placed herself between the two of them and threatened to call the police). For Camila, the support of her mother and a friend was also important.

It can be observed that in relationships crossed by idealizations – such as meeting a soulmate or the fantasy of narcissistic completeness when being chosen – the entry of a third party can promote the deconstruction of this imaginary, facilitating the breakup. A third element threatens the maintenance of silence in the relationship and opens up the possibility of a new

horizon for the woman, by breaking the closed relationship in itself and piercing the fantasy that proliferates. The more closed and impermeable the relationship, the more violence tends to flare up and the greater the woman's dependence.

### Final Considerations

This study showed that the subjective factors and emotionalities that make women more vulnerable to violence in intimate relationships are directly linked to the privileged paths of subjectivation given to women in Brazil, marked by the love and maternal *dispositifs*.

In the first theme, it was identified that “being chosen” by a man and having the feeling of occupying an important and irreplaceable place for him appeared as central factors that contributed to the entry, persistence and difficulty of breaking violent intimate relationships. The second theme highlighted the different forms of manipulation of affects and the manifestation of violence in intimate relationships, highlighting, in addition to physical and sexual violence, disqualification, humiliation and “control with affection”. The third topic discussed the main affects and feelings reported by women in the face of violence and being captured by narcissistic satisfaction: isolation and loneliness, guilt and shame, which contribute to the perpetuation of the cycle of violence. The fourth theme addressed the idealization of romantic love and its potential to make women vulnerable, by leading them to prioritize men and relationships to the detriment of themselves, and to remain in situations in which they are humiliated and violated in the name of a supposed love that confronts everything, justifies everything and overcomes everything. Finally, the fifth theme showed how the decentralization of romantic love and investment in oneself and in projects outside the sphere of love can function as important protective factors. In addition, it was shown that the entry of third parties into violent loving relationships is essential for women to be able to break the siege of violence and isolation. In this sense, it is important for the State to function as this third element so that the exit from the violent relationship does not depend on chance, individual luck or the conformation of each woman's social network, but on the existence of available and effective health, social welfare, public security and legal programs and institutions.

In summary, the results of this study highlight that the vulnerability and persistence of women in abusive and violent relationships are anchored in an identity way of loving, which is historically and culturally conformed, and is interpellated in women. It is therefore necessary to reflect not only on ways of intervening to stop violence, but also, and above all, on means of creating and proposing new identity paths, of subjectivation, for them, which transcend the beauty-care-love script.

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