

## MOTHERHOOD AND INTRAFAMILIAL CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: TO GUARANTEE A PROTECTIVE EMBRACE

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### ABSTRACT:

Many were the changes over the past decades regarding the status of women. However, the dominant discourse is still set on the maternal role as being the women's duty to care for, and protect, their offspring. Women are still seen as largely responsible for family balance. If a child faces intrafamilial sexual abuse, his mother may offer him a protective embrace, or fall silent, becoming the abuser's accomplice. That she may be the one effectively protecting her child gives the mother the ability to reconfigure family relationships as she sets limits and attention priorities to them. This article intends to analyze motherhood when confronted with cases of child sexual abuse within the family. A qualitative approach has been adopted, by means of literature and law reviews. The first survey was conducted using scientific articles in journals with an attention to keywords related to the possibilities of understanding the phenomenon. The conclusion on literature review shows that variables relative to the mothers' socio-economic roots may influence their reaction. The legislative review indicates the need to surpass the mere reading of regulations for their effective implementation. Moreover, it has been noted that the conception of motherhood may change depending on cultural or socio-historical context. The occurrence of adversities affecting their offspring entails a proactive stance, distinct from the housewife status. When firm, motherly care can signify the protection of her child's welfare.

**Key words:** motherhood; sexual abuse; child protection; family

### INTRODUCTION

Motherhood confers women a new status, which entails a redefinition of their place in society, as they live and perform, in their femininity, the function of mother.<sup>1</sup> It is within this culturally segmented role that women find themselves, and grow, before both themselves and the meaning ascribed to them by society.

Each individual experience is intergenerational, assimilates cultural values, and require certain measures, practices and acts of accountability that are projected onto a lengthy time of development, as they involve the need for aid

and protection that enable their children's physical and psycho-emotional development.

Throughout the twentieth century, social, technological and economic changes have fostered modifications in Brazilian families and in the expectations and duties of its members. Noteworthy is the easier access to contraception methods as one of the circumstances that granted women a greater mastery over their body and a free choice regarding motherhood, allowing them the power of choice, such as a reduced number of children, especially in the middle and upper classes.<sup>2</sup> The greater participation by women in the labor market and their ensuing rise to the role of head of the

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household<sup>3</sup> constituted, among others, elements of significant change.

To Wagner<sup>4</sup>, the women's insertion in the labor market led to several changes in couple relationships, fostering the decline of male-power superiority. The author emphasizes, however, that though contemporary families may show increased participation by the father in the domestic environment, there remains a greater demand from the mother toward their home and children. In agreement are Azevedo and Arrais,<sup>5</sup> to whom "a new woman has risen, though she yet lives under the mantle of the old representations, for we continue to demand from them the old model of idealized mothers" (p. 270).

Despite all social changes in recent decades, old social speeches have strengthened women's role in the family as mother and wife. In the present day, the mother figure is still the symbol of the culturally and socially constructed embodiment of love and affection, and is the main conflict mediator at home.<sup>6</sup> This role, played especially in cases of hardship regarding their offspring, must also be met when there is intrafamilial sexual abuse.

Moreira and Rasera<sup>7</sup> suggest that the significant and the meanings given to the motherhood phenomenon by women today remain largely influenced by socio-historical conceptions. Motherhood is wrapped, according to study participants, in something covered with extreme beauty, love, instinct, that is, a natural and divine event, to be experienced by all women. This understanding solidifies peculiar meanings about what motherhood is or needs to be, establishing forms and standards for its correct exercise that interfere in the mothers' daily practices.

The rights of the child move forward via the Brazilian Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA)<sup>8</sup> and the emergence of policies that assert maternal responsibility in the upbringing of healthy and balanced children, regardless of the conditions and problems faced by mothers<sup>9</sup>.

Under certain circumstances, however, families will not succeed at the legally-assigned protection of their members, as in cases of violence, such as the sexual abuse of children, where the internal family relationship boundaries are trespassed.

The sexual abuse is understood as a type of violence involving any act of sexual nature between a child, or adolescent, with someone in possession of a more advanced psychosexual stage, whereby the victim is used by the perpetrator for his gratification or sexual stimulation<sup>10</sup>.

The acts that define sexual abuse can range from the manipulation of genitalia to fondling, voyeurism, exhibitionism, and intercourse, with or without penetration<sup>11</sup>. Contextually, sexual abuse can occur both in and outside the family environment<sup>12</sup>.

In most cases, extrafamilial sexual abuse involves individuals whom the victims do not know.

Intrafamilial sexual abuse, on the other hand, is mostly perpetrated by people close to the child, their supposed caregivers<sup>13</sup>.

That the aggressor exploits the closeness and the bond he has with the child to commit such violence triggers grave social, emotional and cognitive complications, which, according to the literature used in this work, its victims can manifest in the short or long term. Noteworthy among its possible consequences are mood disorders, anxiety, dietary changes, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder<sup>14</sup>.

Furniss<sup>15</sup> elucidates that the psychological effects caused in children are related to seven factors, namely: age at the onset of abuse; duration of the abuse; degree of violence, or threat thereof; age difference between the person who committed the abuse and the child who suffered it; how closely aggressor and child are related to each other; absence of protective parental figures; degree of secrecy between the adult and the victim.

When consulting the literature for the development of the article, it has been noted that in cases of intrafamilial child sexual abuse, the main perpetrators are the fathers and stepfathers. There are studies showing a converging trend with respect to the main abusers. Baptista<sup>16,16</sup> Baptista RS et al. Characterization of sexual abuse in children and adolescents notified in a Programa Sentinela.

Literature indicates that in cases of intrafamilial child sexual abuse, the main perpetrators are fathers and stepfathers. Some studies show converging trend as regards the main abusers. Baptista<sup>17</sup> in research conducted through an analysis of documents registered by the Programa Sentinela in the city of Campina Grande from January 2005 to December 2006, found that of 27 cases of intrafamilial abuse, the main offenders were the stepfather (33.3%) and father, composing (29.7%) of the notifications.

The intrafamilial child sexual abuse is considered one of contemporary society's great evils. It is a complex public health problem that affects children all over the world<sup>17</sup>, a circumstance that requires the analysis of family components, as well as the mother's role, or lack thereof, or even her silence toward the problem.

In families where child abuse is present, "mothers usually take on the role of the non-abusive parent. This role's protective function is crucial when there is prolonged sexual abuse" (p. 53)<sup>18</sup>. In this conception, even in the absence of social, or legal, support, "mothers are valued according to their driving toward, or away from, this ideal of care that is associated with motherhood" (p. 574)<sup>17</sup>.

The analysis on the mother figure is of particular importance in view of its role as primary adult in the protection of her offspring, and her potential as an abuse reactor as one of the key factors in the child's recovery.<sup>19</sup> The objective of this study therefore is to analyze motherhood, when confronted with cases of intrafamilial child sexual abuse.

## METHODS

A qualitative approach has been used, by means of literature and law reviews. Firstly, scientific articles in journals were gathered, with an attention to keywords related to the understanding of the phenomenon (motherhood; sexual abuse; child protection; family). The Scielo<sup>20</sup> and Dialnet<sup>21</sup> databases were searched, giving preference to post-2005 publications. Secondly, the Google Scholar portal<sup>22</sup> was searched for the specific items that appeared as references in the articles surveyed. Finally, the literature review encompassed books related to the subject under review, in an attempt to make the research whole. The special legislation for the protection of children and adolescents has been examined throughout this article.

This study is a non-systematic literature review, therefore statistical data and tables have not been included, as several sources were surveyed in order to better comprehend the object. The article is organized into: an introduction, which addresses issues on motherhood in the present day and the ascription of care toward children, especially in adverse circumstances such as in the occurrence of intrafamilial sexual abuse, via conceptual notions on sexual abuse. At the end are the results and discussion, interwoven, as the subject is discussed on the basis of the collected material (articles, studies, books etc.), featuring the diversity of maternal responses, as well as the difficulties encountered by mothers when attempting to secure a protective bosom in cases of sexual abuse against their offspring.

## ARGUMENT

Despite her social and legal attributes to family balance and conflict mediation, the mother figure presents a range of possibilities, responsewise, to the knowledge of sexual abuse against her offspring. Researches indicate that the mother figure plays the role of an active participant in the context of sexual abuse, as an accomplice or a facilitator of violence.<sup>23</sup> Mothers in these circumstances are seen as neglectful and permissive, thus failing to perform her duties of care for, and protection of, their children.

In this scenario, the mother is present in sexual abuse cases, which suggests that she knows about the violence. This configuration ultimately becomes "a perverse collusion with the father" (p. 169)<sup>19</sup>, for silence is a way of supporting the aggressor. It should be noted, however, that on a large scale, the mother is financially and emotionally dependent on the aggressor, and is therefore compelled to participate in abusive practices. In circumstances like this, the role of the mother, as a performer of the sexual function, shifts, and is occupied by the daughter<sup>24</sup>.

Upon learning of the abuse, the mother can take, however, a socially-expected stance of care and protection. This demeanor may be translated into the later filing of criminal charges for the commission of the crime, which engenders the intervention of the public sphere into the private environment, at one's own home, thereby advancing the removal of the abuser and granting attention to the victim, who should be included in a treatment program, so that he or she may be cared for and protected, growing up in dignified conditions of existence (Article 7 of the ECA).

Regarding child protection through the complaints against the aggressor, there is a study made from the analysis of violence cases that have been filed by the Initiative of the Prosecution Offices Specialized in Childhood and Youth in the city of Porto Alegre between 1992 and 1998.<sup>25</sup> Through the analysis of 71 files, it has been noted that complaints of sexual violence were filed by the mother in 37.6% of the cases, which indicate, in this study, greater diligence on the mother's side, as in 29% of the cases, it was the victims who filed complaints; in 15.1%, other relatives; and in 6.5%, complaints were made by institutions such as schools or hospitals.

An opposing view is offered in the study by Martins and Jorge<sup>26</sup> – an analysis of the medical records and reported cases of sexual abuse in the Brazilian city of Londrina in 2006 – in which, out of 186 notifications, 67.2% were made mainly by family members such as uncles, brothers, cousins or and in-laws, whereas mothers come up with 8.1% of the complaints, followed by the school principal, the father and health professionals.

In a study by Pires Filho<sup>27</sup> (2009) in the Metropolitan Region of Recife, with semi-structured interviews with seven psychologists working in institutions that provide care to children who are victims of sexual abuse, four participants indicated the mother as the sole person who most often files complaints, thereby allowing the abuser to be removed from the family environment. The study also includes the participants' perception about the difficulties faced by the family. For when families file complaints, they are faced with survival issues, as the abuser is often the very provider in their homes. The author explains, however, that in certain cases, the abuser is protected by the family, which denies that violence ever took place, for several reasons, including the perception of the abuser as an ill person who needs care.

The survey allows an emphasis on the complaint as an initiative that is often difficult to be taken, both by the mother and other family members. The information about the event to the competent authorities may not occur at first, when adults first know of the sexual abuse, which indicates the difficulty the mother faces to file a complaint and break the cycle of violence.

Supporting this view is the research conducted through the analysis of reported cases

between 1992 and 1998 in the city of Porto Alegre<sup>28</sup>, which shows that in 61.7% of the 71 files identified, there were reports in which violence was known but no complaints were filed. Out of the 61.7% figure, 55.2% encompassed mothers who had knowledge of the abuse; 54.3% for brothers; and 10% included others who were not part of the family. Such sums point out the difficulty not only for the family but also for society to report suspicions or occurrences of sexual abuse.

Regarding the difficulty for mothers to adopt a role of care and protection, such as the filing of a complaint, studies indicate that although most mothers trusted, at least relatively, the accounts of their children, "some could not deliver support and protection responses, showing ambivalence or inconsistency" (p. 86-87)<sup>29</sup>. The fact that little credibility is given to their child's report shows there is no constant in the field of mothers who believe in their children's revelations, regardless of their being protective or not. Believing the story does not imply a diligent attitude. Even silence and condonation may ensue. Protection must be understood as a proactive role that brings security to victims, and the immediate cessation of the abuse.

Other elements, such as "the awareness about the mother's role" (p. 91)<sup>30</sup> and certain concepts and aspects that are related to motherhood, may influence mothers' responses. When the mother acts but does not acknowledge the abuse, she seeks to maintain the apparent balance and family security, "for revealing it would acknowledge her failure in her role as wife and mother" (p. 251)<sup>31</sup>.

It has been found that when assuming a position of inferiority in the marital relationship, "the women themselves delegate powers to their husbands, partners and parents" (p. 9)<sup>32</sup>, thus allowing abusive demeanors. Other factors, such as threats, the fear of losing one's family, or issues regarding financial dependency on the abuser, end up contributing to the mother's omission to the duty of filing complaints, affecting her guarantee as a protective bosom.

Other factors may favor the mothers' fear to file complaints. Among these, the fear of severance from family members and acquaintances may prevent a mother from taking action. The fear for her future life, to be faced without the help of her husband or partner, who is often the abuser, is added to others fears, which might make taking action difficult for the mother<sup>33</sup>.

A study carried out by Santos and Dell'Aglio<sup>22</sup> presented interviews with 10 mothers to sexually abused girls who were being treated by a public hospital program in a Porto Alegre. In eight out of ten cases analyzed, the mother was the first person to be informed about the abuse. For the authors, this shows the importance of the mother, not only as a person who reports the violence, "but also to offer support and be able to help the victim deal with the repercussions of the abuse" (p. 89).

It has been noted in this same study that the mothers' responses following the information regarding sexual abuse against their daughters occurred exclusively in two realms: credibility and action. Credibility's reach is connected to the belief, or lack thereof, toward sexual abuse as reported by children. Action's reach, on the other hand, is related to the initiative, or lack thereof, to file a complaint. It is possible to see, given this reduction to a double-realm response formula, that there is no direct relationship between believing a child's report and taking a protective stance such as the removal of the abuser or the filing of a complaint.

The analysis of the collected research material points to the lack of a uniform conduct by mothers regarding this type of violence. They may surface as abuse participants or perpetrators, and they may be diligent, which favors the breaking of the cycle of violence. Noteworthy is the importance of the creation of help programs that support mothers and provide them with financial support so that they can autonomously file and pursue complaints, and are thereby granted the protection strength for their daughters, who deserve and need their protective mother's bosom and active voice.

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