

# Responsibilities in the face of intimate partner violence: the perspectives of college students as citizens and future professionals

*Compromissos diante da violência doméstica: olhar de universitários como cidadãos e futuros profissionais*

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to analyze the knowledge of college students regarding their responsibility, as future professionals and citizens, in the face of intimate partner violence. **Methods:** a qualitative study was conducted in the undergraduate residence halls at the Federal University of Rio Grande, Rio Grande, RS, Brazil, in 2019. Two men and two women from each residence hall were randomly invited, totaling 28 students. All the participants answered semi-structured interviews, and Content Analysis was used to interpret the *corpus*. **Results:** some students did not relate the topic to their undergraduate programs, but others recognized it was related to their professional field and as an important subject to be debated. As citizens, they considered being responsible for discussing it with their friends, reporting violence cases, and providing support to victims, though they had doubts about it. **Conclusion:** recognizing one's responsibilities in the face of intimate partner violence is one strategy to combat it.

**Descriptors:** Domestic Violence; Teaching; Universities; Moral Obligations; Social Responsibility.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** analisar o conhecimento de universitários sobre os compromissos, profissionais e cidadãos, diante da violência doméstica contra a mulher. **Métodos:** pesquisa qualitativa realizada nas casas do estudante da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande, em Rio Grande/RS, no ano de 2019. Foram convidados, aleatoriamente, dois homens e duas mulheres de cada casa, totalizando 28 participantes. Todos responderam a entrevistas semiestruturadas e o *corpus* foi analisado segundo a Análise de Conteúdo. **Resultados:** enquanto alguns universitários não aproximavam a temática com seus cursos de graduação, outros a reconheciam como importante tema de debate e compromisso com a formação profissional. Como cidadãos, mencionaram o dever de debater o assunto entre amigos, denunciar casos de violência, oferecer apoio à mulher; embora apresentassem dúvidas sobre essa conduta. **Conclusão:** o reconhecimento dos compromissos frente à violência doméstica contra a mulher é uma das estratégias de enfrentamento.

**Descritores:** Violência Doméstica; Ensino; Universidades; Obrigações Morais; Responsabilidade Social.

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## INTRODUCTION

The importance of discussing intimate partner violence in different contexts beyond the police and judicial spheres has never been more evident. There has been an increase in this type of violence worldwide because of the shelter-in-place orders to halt the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, discussions are aggravated by economic hardships and unemployment, which, coupled with the need to be in constant alertness due to quarantine measures, proximity with the aggressor, and decreased contact with one's social network<sup>(1)</sup>, end up culminating in the multiple facets of intimate partner violence.

An increase in intimate partner violence was observed in China, Italy, Spain, and France after shelter-in-place orders<sup>(2)</sup>. In Brazil, epidemiological data also reveal an increase in this type of violence. In April 2020, reports to the 180 hotline increased 40% compared to the same period in 2019. A total of 43 femicides occurred between January and May 2020<sup>(3)</sup>.

This exponential increase in violence harms the health and wellbeing of victims and their families. Also, it has implications for future health and well-being, considering that the intergenerational cycle increases the number of women exposed to violence and the number of potential perpetrators of domestic violence in the future<sup>(4)</sup>.

Intimate partner violence is a historical and cultural problem. It has been perpetuated due to social tolerance, structural machismo, and naturalization of victimization and aggression<sup>(5-6)</sup>. Additionally, women often fail to recognize violence, are unaware of the services available, or do not want to report aggressors due to weaknesses in the police and judicial system and support networks<sup>(7)</sup>.

Furthermore, professionals often fail to handle violence cases<sup>(7)</sup> and exercise their ethical and legal responsibilities<sup>(8)</sup> when faced with the phenomenon, which distances women from the services. Hence, a significant opportunity to prevent the perpetuation of victimization is often lost. A survey conducted among Brazilian women revealed that 81% of the participants knew nothing or very little about Maria da Penha law, even though many had already experienced violence themselves or knew someone in a situation of violence<sup>(9)</sup>.

Maria da Penha, the main law protecting women in Brazil, proclaims that it is up to the family, society, and the public authorities to create the conditions necessary for women to exercise their rights, including specialized workers from the psychosocial, legal, and health fields<sup>(10)</sup>. Therefore, it is essential that any person, regardless of the profession or field of practice, is familiar with the law, support network devices, hotlines, ethical and legal responsibilities, and the dynamics and factors that catalyze violence to confront it. Rapid and effective action save lives, prevents re-victimization, and protects future generations from suffering the impact of violence.

These factors show a need to strengthen the discussion regarding violence in different contexts, especially within college education. Evidence shows a gap in the academia concerning intimate partner violence and in the different undergraduate programs, whether because the subject is not discussed or is not considered a topic of interest<sup>(11-12)</sup>. A study conducted with college students reveals little knowledge regarding identifying or handling intimate partner violence, that is, a lack of preparation to identify and combat this problem<sup>(12)</sup>. An integrative literature review addressing the knowledge of nurses regarding Verification of Preliminary Information (VPI) reports a gap in the training of undergraduate nursing programs, which results in ineffective responses to prevent and fight intimate partner violence<sup>(13)</sup>.

However, college training is the space where social thinking can be transformed, by promoting gender equality, reinforcing knowledge about the responsibilities of any citizen, and preparing college students for future effective professional practice, regardless of the field, to face domestic violence.

The daily increase of intimate partner violence reinforces the urgency in promoting transversal discussions in classrooms, in the different fields of knowledge, because it is a socio-environmental and public health problem. Therefore, the university can be an ally in this fight and give students the tools to strengthen critical thinking, decision-making and reinforce their commitment to exercising citizenship and ethics.

Therefore, this study's guiding question is: What is college students' knowledge regarding their professional and civil duties in the face of intimate partner violence? The objective is to analyze college students' knowledge regarding their responsibilities as professionals and citizens when facing intimate partner violence.

## METHOD

This qualitative, exploratory study was conducted with college students living in seven undergraduate residence halls at the Federal University of Rio Grande (FURG) located in Rio Grande, RS, Brazil.

The Dean of Student Affairs was asked to provide a list of all the students living in the seven residence halls located in Rio Grande/RS, providing information regarding their names, residence, and bedroom number. Four people (two men and two women) from each residence hall were randomly and personally approached, totaling 28 informants. All students were 18 years old or older. Those who lost the benefit of living in the residence halls during data collection were excluded.

Data were collected in 2019 after the participants were invited. A semi-structured interview was used and was considered an essential tool to identify the students'

knowledge regarding the phenomenon. The objective was to identify the students' general and personal perceptions and as future professionals regarding intimate partner violence. A script containing open-ended questions was used, and the individual interviews were held at the students' bedrooms or in the residences' premises away from the circulation of people, lasting 19 minutes on average. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed after the participants' consent.

Content analysis proposed by Bardin<sup>(14)</sup> was used to categorize information. In the pre-analysis stage, the material was explored to be later organized and analyzed. The themes were coded and gathered in similar groups. Finally, information was interpreted and distributed into categories.

This study is part of the macro project “*Representações sociais de universitários moradores da casa do estudante: violência nas relações afetivo-sexuais*” [Social representations of college students living in undergraduate residence halls: violence in affective-sexual relationships]. The Institutional Review Board at FURG approved the study (opinion report No. 236/2019). All the participants signed free and informed consent forms. The participants are identified by the letter S (student), followed by consecutive numbers corresponding to the order of interviews (i.e., S1, S2, S3...) and by letter M for men or W for women, to ensure their identities remain confidential.

## RESULTS

Regarding the undergraduate program, five students were attending the Licentiate degree in Language and Literature; three were attending Information Systems, and two students were attending each of the following programs: Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Law, and Visual Arts. The remaining participants were distributed in Physics, Chemical Engineering, Computer Engineering, Licentiate degree in Chemistry, Business Administration, Agro-industrial Engineering, Biological Sciences, Library Sciences, Nursing, Computational Modeling, Accounting Sciences, and Geography, with one student in each program. These programs are distributed into the following fields of knowledge: Exact and Earth Sciences (25.0%), Biological Sciences (3.6%), Engineering (25.0%), Health Sciences (3.6%), Applied Social Sciences (14.2%), Human Sciences (3.6%), Linguistics, Letters, and Arts (25.0%).

Analysis of the respondents' profile shows that ages ranged from 18 and 38. Most reported being Caucasians. The predominant sexual orientation was heterosexual with 17 participants, whereas seven were bisexual and four were gay. Regarding marital status, 15 reported dating at the time of the study. Nineteen of the participants reported that their primary income was the scholarship provided by the university, followed by eight students who received financial

support from parents/family, and only one had his own source of funding.

Following, we discuss the two empirical categories that emerged from the analysis: (Un)Commitments toward intimate partner violence as professionals and (Un)Commitments toward intimate partner violence as citizens.

### (Un)Commitments toward intimate partner violence as professionals

This category addresses the students' knowledge regarding their duties as future professionals toward intimate partner violence. The participants' opinions were divided between the topic having nothing to do with their undergraduate program, responsibility should be delegated to other fields, and the topic is also their responsibility.

The following excerpts reveal opinions that the undergraduate program is not linked to the subject at hand.

*I guess so [I have responsibilities], but I think that in my program, **computer sciences**, I believe there is absolutely zero material addressing it in my field. I guess there is very little research and applications in the area, so I don't know. (S21M)*

*There have never been these discussions because it is an exact sciences program, **Chemistry**, and perhaps even the professors at the university, from the institute, do not prioritize it... I believe that if it were a student in the program, he'd not know about this discussion, would not prioritize it. (S7M)*

Others acknowledged their responsibility toward intimate partner violence as future professionals, even if their programs were from the fields of Exact Sciences and Engineering.

*I believe so; I have a responsibility because my program is in **Information Systems**. So, we can get these data and transform them, put them in a database, and analyze the results that may impact society (S1W).*

*Yes, absolutely; above all, we need to debate it in the university despite the program. We are human beings and need to discuss the problems because we are developing as humans, not only getting professional training. I guess that you enter a university, you leave a completely different person; you need to transform, see things from a broader perspective, beyond being a good professional, being a good person. (S7M) [Chemistry]*

*I am the only woman in the **Mechanical Engineering** program, not the only woman, but I was the only woman in the mechanical engineering vocational school. I know how it is; it is complicated being respected. Like, if you*

*smile, it's because you're having sex with the boss. As a future professional, I see myself standing up for others and myself; if I see abuse, I'll not remain silent. I'd try to stand up for myself, help other people get away from the problem, and deal with the situation. (S4W)*

There were those who reported the possibility of taking actions and being active after graduating, considering the relationship of the topic with the program.

My commitment to art, and art has the power to promote empathy. Depending on what you present, depending on how you address a subject, you can make people reflect, connect with something, and reflect upon it. So, I guess we have this power when we do art, a way of taking, connecting, showing feelings to people; I suppose that we can address the subject. (S25W) [Visual arts]

So, I guess that even as a language and literature teacher, I can address these subjects because literature has room for it, to show that nobody owns anyone, there's no need for jealousy, no need for aggression, dialogue can solve many problems. I guess that working it within the classroom would solve a lot of problems. (S20W)

Yes, absolutely, business administration is a social science, not exact sciences; it's changing. So, it's clear that I'll witness it at some point in my life, at my company, some employee will harass a female employee, or harass someone else, moral harassment, other types of harassment. I guess that I'll have to deal with this at some point in my life; unfortunately, I'll probably witness violence. If everyone was considerate and well informed, I guess we could create a movement and help to reduce domestic violence. (S10M)

I guess that we have to ask questions, try to find a way for people to open up because victims of violence probably suffer psychologically. Hence, we have to help them to open up and tell what is happening. (S16W) [Nursing]

### **(Un)Commitments toward intimate partner violence as citizens**

This category refers to the students' knowledge regarding their duties as citizens. The arguments consider responsibility in discussing the subject in the society, with friends, from an educational perspective, including home. The students talk about reporting aggressors, so they are appropriately punished, and finally, the responsibility of providing help and supporting women in a situation of violence.

As a citizen, I, as a social being, try to reprimand my friends and share texts, share my opinion with them, show that in reality, an attitude, a speech, or specific comments within a circle of friends may be machismo, homophobia, it's violence. Whether it's only a little joke, a nickname, it matters; it also hurts. So, my position, actually, is that I can influence my social circle, my friends. Saying: "explain it to me, because I don't understand..." So, you change the conversation, and the person will become uncomfortable and unsure what to do. (S3M)

Yes, I guess that as a citizen, I can contribute by talking to people about it and making them understand that a simple phrase can carry violence. For instance, those old sayings that women have to stay at home cooking, while men do not... there is violence right there. I guess there is psychological violence because people think that women have to stay at home doing the laundry and men simply get home and read the newspaper. And warn about machismo, oppressing victims. So, I guess that as a citizen, I have to warn, show that this is machismo and can also become violent. (S18M)

Reporting aggressors was also mentioned as a responsibility of society, though there are misconceptions and doubts about its efficiency.

If the person is a minor, you have the responsibility to interfere, call the police. Or call 180 for Maria da Penha or the police. (S19W)

Society's responsibility is, for instance: people say, if you are suffering aggression and I call the police, you [victim] don't have to report. I can make a report as a citizen, and you're going to be supported, and he [aggressor] will be arrested. But in reality, If I call, you [victim] still have to do a police report; you have to represent yourself. My call won't matter, and it should (...) so the society tries to do it, but it's not effective (S27)

Reporting. I guess that the only thing citizens can do, I suppose that we have to try to break up a fight. But, it's probably not what they advise you to do. I've never heard that we should break up a fight; the only guidance I've heard is reporting. (E24M)

Some participants also reported the need to support women in a situation of violence by talking about the subject, showing their rights, as the following excerpts show.

*My responsibility is to provide guidance to the victim so she can seek her rights, not keeping silent in the face of violence.*

*Let her know that she has to expose it and not let the aggressor intimidate her. I don't know if I can talk, try to appease... (S10M)*

*As a citizen, I guess that we always have to support the victim and find the means for the aggressor (female or male) to face the consequences, don't get away with it. (E13W)*

*I think it's imperative that society does not remain oblivious and stop saying that nobody should step into a husband and wife's fight. [...] Sometimes you avoid helping, and something worse happens, so sometimes you can go and say: Hello, is everything ok? What's happening? Try to identify the problem, not taking sides, but always trying to appease both sides. (S6W)*

## DISCUSSION

This study shows evidence not previously found in the literature of perspectives concerning intimate partner violence. It reports the opinions of students attending different undergraduate programs from a citizen and professional perspective.

The students were young; most were Caucasian and heterosexual, followed by bisexual individuals. The low economic level was a common characteristic, which is a requisite for living in the university's residence halls, but with different levels of masculinities and femininities, breaking barriers that previously legitimated programs as being for women or men. This diversity strengthens the discussion regarding intimate partner violence according to different facets.

Regarding their responsibilities from a professional perspective, some students did not relate the subject to their undergraduate programs or knew little about their responsibilities. On the one hand, the arguments reveal that Exact Sciences and Engineering cannot address social issues. On the other hand, the responsibility of professors for not addressing the topic in these fields is apparent.

There is a mistaken popular notion; something people perhaps do not think about, that gender and related subjects should not be discussed. This notion was apparent in the reports of students from Engineering and Exact and Earth Sciences when they criticize the weak debate during undergraduate studies, which may hinder understanding the phenomenon. This notion is partially due to the culture that the police and judicial spheres and health workers are responsible for dealing with domestic violence<sup>(11)</sup>. However, there are also weaknesses and a lack of training in these fields for workers to handle intimate partner violence properly<sup>(7,13)</sup>.

A study also reports a lack of sensibility on the part of professors for not including the topic in university education,

even though it is of academic interest<sup>(11)</sup>. Evidence was provided by a student from the Geography program. She reported that she searched for an advisor to supervise her final course paper to address why women remain in relationships even after experiencing violence. She considered that the topic was clearly related to her program, considering that geography includes knowing social spaces and relationships to understand phenomena; however, many professors and classmates insisted that it was not related to her field and even despised her choice<sup>(11)</sup>.

On the other hand, dissociating the topic from specific fields occurs because of the traditional model of education that aims only to meet the demands of the job market, tending to a technocratic and operational education<sup>(15)</sup>. The university is a legitimate training field that goes beyond professional practice. Therefore, professors are supposed to weave the threads that enable moral education, inviting students to identify and recognize, improving themselves, and becoming transformation agents<sup>(16)</sup>, based on global, economic, social, environmental, and cultural aspects that impact the lives of people, regardless of their educational background.

Domestic violence is not supposed to become a topic in the curricula of Exact Sciences or Engineering. Instead, the proposal is a topic discussed across academic education, showing the impact of this problem on society. With this expanded perspective, some college students recognized their responsibilities, considering their future professions, suggesting the topic to be further explored within the institution to discuss responsibilities that can and should be assumed to prevent and eradicate this type of violence.

In this sense, students from a Brazilian university located in Chapecó, Santa Catarina, attending Computer Sciences and Information Systems programs, developed four projects to conclude their programs to help women in a situation of violence<sup>(17)</sup>. The projects included a website, educational game, panic button, and Chabot to provide guidance regarding support services. The professors responsible for advising the students in partnership with the city hall believed that it is crucial to involve the academic community with social issues to improve professional competencies and hold society accountable<sup>(17)</sup>.

The women attending these programs experience machismo and prejudice, as one of the interviewees reported. She considered important to discuss the subject during her undergraduate program, especially in spaces that are culturally assigned to men, because they are usually belittled in environments not considered proper for women.

A study was conducted in a public university in São Paulo, addressing students from the Exact Sciences, Technology, Education and Human Sciences, and Biological and Health Sciences programs to map gender violence and verify the likelihood of students becoming victims. The study reports

that psychological violence was the primary form of violence – listed as humiliation, insults, threats, and stalking; sexist comments regarding women’s intellectual capacity, the way they dressed and/or styled their hair, and being kissed or caressed without consent. The environments where these events most frequently occurred were dorms, followed by classrooms and open areas on the campus<sup>(18)</sup>.

Additionally, violence is also present in students’ dating relationships<sup>(19-20)</sup>, configured as intimate partner violence, demanding the planning of preventive and intervention programs against violence within the university<sup>(19)</sup>. Therefore, the need to bring the discussion into academia is apparent, considering that it is a subject concerning gender equality and, therefore, has repercussions in different contexts.

The students from the language program found a closer relationship with the topic, reporting their responsibility within the school environment. In practice, they sought to demystify gender stereotypes and overcome resistance to discussing violence, gender, and sexuality. However, the students themselves suffer the impact of this gap, considering the difficulties in including the subject in education<sup>(21)</sup>. As future educators, they were concerned in promoting a culture change to promote gender equality.

The students from the Health Sciences, Arts, and Applied Social Sciences programs also saw their professional responsibility associated with the program’s specificities. However, they did not deepen the discussion regarding professional responsibility. Many studies report a weakness in how the topic is addressed, especially in the health field<sup>(13,22)</sup>, reflecting on little knowledge on how to identify and handle intimate partner violence, communication problems, and lack of compulsory reporting<sup>(7-8,13)</sup>.

Nurses play a crucial role in fighting domestic violence, as they welcome these women in primary health care services, accompany those requiring hospitalization 24 hours, and play an educational role in the various settings. Therefore, undergraduate students attending health programs need to have the tools to skillfully and competently identify, approach and welcome these women in health services, complying with all the ethical and legal requirements their practice demands<sup>(8,12)</sup>.

Therefore, the university community is supposed to resignify teaching, contributing to provide information that meets social needs, understanding the importance of multiple actions and different types of knowledge when dealing with the population’s demands<sup>(21)</sup>, such as intimate partner violence.

Regarding responsibilities toward intimate partner violence as citizens, evidence shows a broader discussion involving gender equality, respect for others, machismo, and homophobia. The students believed that, regardless of one’s educational background, everyone is responsible

for discussing this issue with their friends and reprimand discriminatory behavior against women. Additionally, they mentioned the need to delegitimize gender stereotypes, promoting discussions regarding aspects that also configure violence.

In this sense, various initiatives give visibility to violence against women and call on citizens to commit to fighting against this type of violence. One of which is HeForShe, a movement promoted at the world, national, state and city levels. It is promoted by UN Women and consists of inviting men and other people to promote women’s rights and gender equality. Brazilian universities, public and private companies, artists, soccer clubs, among others, participate in this campaign, proposing projects and discussions to encourage society to think about intimate partner violence, machismo, discrimination, and prejudice.

Reporting crimes was also considered a civil responsibility intended to support women and punish aggressors. However, many students reported doubts, misconceptions, and fear. Some believed that only the victim could report violence; that is, someone else’s reporting would not be valid or that the victim would have to authorize others to file a police report. Other studies also show that professionals’ or the community’s perceptions negatively impact the combat of violence, such as blaming women, devaluating the police work, or the inefficiency of police stations, and ineffectiveness of laws, and misconceptions that violence is a private matter, which reveals a sexist society<sup>(7,22)</sup>.

According to the literature, any individual can report violence anonymously. Individuals can call 190, the police stations specialized in women violence, or the Maria da Penha Patrol, depending on the services available in each city<sup>(23)</sup>, or call 180 - women’s helpline, a public and confidential service that is free of charge and refer reports to the local support network. Reporting is highly relevant because women often fail to report violence for fear of their aggressors, which perpetuates abusive relationships.

Note that any person can report violence, and in situations considered severe, reporting does not depend on the victims. In these cases, the state itself files a public action against the aggressor<sup>(23)</sup>. Therefore, cases of intimate partner violence that end up in the legal system may originate from different channels, such as police stations, hotlines, prosecutors, or public defenders, which reinforces the role of citizens.

There are also numerous campaigns reinforcing that intimate partner violence is a societal problem. The campaigns *Máscara Roxa* [Purple Mask] and *X Vermelho* [Red X] circulate in Rio Grande do Sul among participating drug stores to support women, victims of intimate partner violence. Within the academic milieu, a university in São Paulo launched the campaign “*a USP mete a colher na VD*” [USP steps in intimate partner violence], among students’ dorms to unveil

and provide guidance on gender violence. Another university located in the extreme south of Brazil has promoted many actions within the campus, warning about the various forms of violence, the women's social rights, and about the local support network.

Finally, the students also reported the need to support women experiencing violence, encouraging them to report violence and providing guidance regarding their rights. Women need to be aware that there is a support network and laws that protect them, considering that knowledge and information tends to increase reporting<sup>(7,24)</sup>. The Maria da Penha Law exists for more than 10 years, and even though the population knows about its existence, people are unaware of the rights it provides to women experiencing violence<sup>(9)</sup>.

Compulsory isolation determined by partners, shame, and fear of exposing the case, coupled with a lack of financial conditions to find a service, often impedes women from seeking help<sup>(24-25)</sup>. Therefore, having the support of a formal network represented by the police and judicial services and health and social assistance services is essential. Additionally, an informal network composed of neighbors, friends, family members, and socialization spaces such as churches plays a vital role. Many women manage to break the cycle of violence with the support of networks, dialogical care, and emotional support; otherwise, they become increasingly more vulnerable to aggression.

## CONCLUSION

Students from the Exact Sciences and Engineering programs found it difficult to relate this subject to their undergraduate programs and future professions, justifying that professors do not address this subject during the undergraduate program and lack specific material in the field.

Others mentioned a need to debate violence within these professions, considering it is a societal problem, and therefore, the university should implement humanistic training. Women in these fields were also more sensitive to the topic, either because they had already experienced violence themselves or recognized their vulnerability.

Students from the Language, Health, Applied Social Sciences, and Arts acknowledged their responsibilities, considering the proximity of the topic to their programs, even though they showed superficial knowledge.

The responsibilities of citizens in the face of domestic violence included the need to debate the topic among their peers, reprimanding machismo and discriminatory behaviors against women, and demystifying gender stereotypes that culminate in violence. Additionally, the students mentioned the need to report violence and support the victims.

Thus, evidence shows that the students, in general, understand their social responsibility, whether as students,

future professionals, or citizens. Hence, it shows that college education can transform the mindsets of people. The nursing field, being a profession responsible for providing care and education, finds fertile ground for dialogue within the university, making students from various fields become transformation agents, seeking a more equal and humanistic society to fight this form of violence.

This study's limitation refers to the fact that the perception of students attending different programs brings a more generic approach, without addressing specificities of ethical and legal duties of each field, a fact that encourages further studies to address these aspects.

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