

### Psychological violence against women: A silent pandemic





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#### **ABSTRACT**

Currently, there is a wide discussion around the issue of violence against women; it is still worrying to observe that the number of women who continue to suffer from different forms of violence continues to increase. Given this aspect, the objective of the article was to reflect, through a psychoanalytical approach, on the underlying aspects and manifestations of psychological violence directed at

women. A qualitative research, of the literature review type, was carried out based on bibliographic research carried out in the search engines: SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), BVS (Virtual Health Library) and Lilacs (Latin American and Caribbean Literature). in Health Sciences), using the following descriptors: psychoanalysis, women and violence against women. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were used, including the publication period of the analyzed materials (2018 to 2023) and Portuguese and English language. The results indicate that psychoanalysis reveals that this violence is linked to factors such as: narcissistic traits in the aggressors and fragility in the victims' self-esteem, influenced by ingrained gender norms and power inequalities. Cultural normalization of violence and stigmatization of victims also perpetuate the problem. Addressing violence requires a multidisciplinary approach involving mental health, public policy, education and awareness, which is vital for a just and safe society for all women.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Women, Violence against women, Gaslighting.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Violence directed at women has deep historical roots, dating back to the dawn of society. It has been shaped by a system of power relations that establishes a hierarchy of domination and subordination, influencing the roles assigned to each gender. This dynamic is underpinned by subjective constructions, cultural representations, and patterns of behavior that originate from essentialist discourses. These discourses often perpetuate the idea that biological characteristics determine in an undeniable and immutable way the way women feel, think and understand the world (Siqueira; Rocha, 2019).

Psychological violence against women is a global phenomenon that transcends cultural, economic, and social boundaries (Almeida, 2020). Although often associated with physical aggression, an equally destructive and often cunning form of violence occurs in the psychological and emotional

domains. This form of abuse, called psychological violence, acts as a silent pandemic, eroding the mental health and dignity of women around the world (Riguini; Marcos, 2019).

Psychological violence may not leave visible bruises, but its emotional and mental scars are intense and long-lasting. Controlling behaviors, manipulation, humiliation, verbal threats, and isolation are weapons often used to contain and dominate women (Alves; Targino, Oliveira Junior, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic and social isolation measures have deepened women's vulnerability to this form of violence, since the safe space that should be home has often become an emotional prison (Vieira; Garcia; Maciel, 2020).

The problem question that supported the study was: How do psychological, social and cultural aspects contribute to the perpetuation of psychological violence?

Psychological violence is a reality that affects millions of women around the world, leaving profound consequences on their mental and emotional health (Siqueira; Rocha, 2019). In view of this, the work is justified by the need for a psychoanalytic approach to understand the complex and often subtle aspects of this form of abuse, allowing a deep analysis of the unconscious dynamics and relationship patterns that sustain it. Therefore, it is relevant to understand these aspects that contribute to the development of strategies for prevention and intervention, in addition to promoting awareness and empowerment of women.

This article is structured in four chapters, each analyzing a fundamental aspect of psychological violence against women. Chapter 1, entitled Introduction, provides a comprehensive presentation of the scope of the research, contextualizing the importance of addressing the topic.

Chapter 2, in turn, is dedicated to detailing the methodology used in this study. In it, the procedures carried out are meticulously exposed, from the definition of methodological guidelines to the collection and analysis of data.

Chapter 3 is an essential theoretical pillar, comprising several sections that explore the underlying theory of psychological violence against women. The first section introduces the basics of this form of abuse, providing a solid foundation for understanding the dynamics involved. The psychoanalytic approach is especially noteworthy, as it offers deep insights into the unconscious motivations behind this aggressive behavior.

In the second section of Chapter 3, the analysis deepens by exploring the psychological, social, and cultural factors that contribute to the perpetuation of psychological violence. In this regard, emphasis is placed on the influence of the unconscious, as well as the entrenched gender norms and toxic relationship patterns that often perpetuate this form of abuse.

In the third section of Chapter 3, the focus is on the profound impacts that psychological violence has on women's mental and emotional health. Using the lens of psychoanalytic theory, this section seeks to comprehensively analyze the long-term repercussions of this silent pandemic,

providing an enriching understanding of the consequences for victims. The fourth and last chapter of this study presents the discussion of the research carried out. In this segment, the findings and results obtained throughout the investigation are described and analyzed.

The objective of this study was to reflect, through a psychoanalytic approach, on the underlying aspects and manifestations of psychological violence directed at women. The specific objectives are: to analyze the psychological, social and cultural factors that contribute to the perpetuation of psychological violence; Identify the impact of psychological violence on the mental and emotional health of affected women. Discuss possible intervention and prevention strategies based on the psychoanalytic perspective.

### 2 METHODOLOGY

To investigate the theme of psychological violence against women, a qualitative approach was chosen, specifically through a literature review. According to Gil (2019), this is a systematic process of analysis and synthesis of information available in bibliographic sources, such as: scientific articles, books, theses, dissertations, and other academic materials related to a given research topic. It seeks to identify, evaluate and integrate existing knowledge on the subject, in order to provide a critical and consolidated view of the current state of knowledge in the area in question.

Data collection was carried out through bibliographic searches in the following search sites: SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), VHL (Virtual Health Library) and Lilacs (Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature).

To guide the search and selection of materials, the following descriptors were used: psychoanalysis, women, *gaslighting* and violence against women. These keywords were selected based on the central theme of the study and the psychoanalytic approach adopted.

The selection of materials was carried out according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies published in the last five years were included, ensuring the relevance and timeliness of the contents addressed. In addition, only studies available in Portuguese and English were considered, to enable the analysis and comprehension of the materials. Studies that had the descriptors in the abstract or in the title, available in full and free of charge, were also included.

Studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria and that presented characteristics such as: publication date greater than five years, languages other than Portuguese and English, absence of research descriptors in the abstract or title, and paywall were excluded.

The material selection process followed careful steps. First, searches were performed in the search engines using the previously defined descriptors. Then, the titles and abstracts of the articles were analyzed to assess their relevance to the study. Subsequently, the selected studies were read in full, considering their adherence to the research objectives.



Chart 1 presents the 8 studies that were selected for the development of the research:

Chart 1 – Description of the studies selected for literature review

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		violence against		understanding of the
		women.		distinction between the
				feminine and femininity.
Ferreira;	Psychological	To investigate	Case Study	Many issues influence a
Danziato	violence in	the reasons that		woman's decision to stay
(2019)	women under the	determine why		in a violent relationship,
	light of	some women		leading her to neglect
	psychoanalysis: a	remain in		protective measures such
	case study.	marital		as femininity and
		relationships in		masochistic traits.
		which they		
		experience		
		psychological		
		violence.		
Alencar	Psychological	Investigate the	Qualitative and	Concerns about honor
(2019)	violence in the	case	quantitative	and emotional
	couple: gender,	of psychological	research	suppression moderate the
	honor culture and	violence by an		relationship with
	emotional	intimate partner,		psychological violence,
	regulation	in its relational		with concerns about
		character.		honor showing an inverse
				moderating effect: greater
				adherence to cultural
				honor norms increases
				the likelihood of an
				abusive response to
				psychological violence.
		Course outhers (	2022)	

Source: authors (2023).

The selected materials were submitted to a qualitative analysis, seeking to identify patterns, trends and relevant knowledge related to psychological violence against women. The psychoanalytic approach served as an interpretive lens to understand the underlying aspects and complex dynamics involved in this phenomenon.

### 3 PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

It should be noted that there are several types of abuse against women, among them the following stand out: physical, psychological, sexual, patrimonial, moral, institutional violence, among others (Silva, 2022). However, this research has psychological violence as its object of study.

Before, the only mechanism to combat this type of abuse was the Maria da Penha Law, recently, Law No. 14,188/2021 came into force, which brought modifications to several legal provisions, including the Maria da Penha Law. This new law introduced Article 147-B, which addresses the concept of an act of psychological violence against women. In this context, the article states that:

Article 147-B Causing emotional harm to women that harms them and disturbs their full development or that aims to degrade or control their actions, behaviors, beliefs and decisions, by means of threats, embarrassment, humiliation, manipulation, isolation, blackmail, ridicule, limitation of the right to come and go or any other means that causes harm to their psychological health and self-determination. Penalty - imprisonment, from 6 (six) months to 2 (two) years, and fine, if the conduct does not constitute a more serious crime (Brasil, 2021)

Thus, from the analysis of this device, it can be concluded that there are several manifestations



that are configured as acts of psychological violence directed at women, resulting in the restriction of these victims through several different approaches.

#### 3.1 **FOUNDATIONS** PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE: OF **PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE**

Psychological violence is a type of aggression that almost always manifests itself through verbal, emotional, or symbolic behaviors that aim to cause emotional, psychological, or mental harm to a person. Unlike physical violence, psychological violence does not involve direct physical aggression, but instead uses tactics of manipulation, intimidation, humiliation, control, and threat to exert power and control over the victim (Ferreira; Danziato, 2019).

The understanding of the foundations of psychological violence has a new dimension when analyzed from a psychoanalytic perspective. Psychoanalysis, developed by Sigmund Freud, offers fundamental information about the unconscious processes that relate to human behaviors, including those linked to psychological violence (Rodrigues, 2022).

From this perspective, psychological violence is not just a set of superficial actions, but is driven by dynamics intensely rooted in the unconscious (Alves; Ta; Oliveira Junior, Teodoro, 2022). It can be rooted in power issues, inferiority complexes, unresolved traumas, emotional repressions, and unworked psychic conflicts. Psychoanalysis reveals that, many times, those who perpetrate psychological violence may be projecting their own insecurities and anguish onto the victim, thus seeking to relieve their own emotional tension (Rodrigues, 2022).

In addition, psychological violence is intrinsically linked to cultural and social norms that reinforce gender stereotypes, traditional roles, and social expectations. The psychoanalytic perspective analyzes how these external influences can shape patterns of behavior and thought, often leading to abusive and disrespectful behavior (Simon; Santos, 2023).

Thus, by adopting a psychoanalytic approach, it is possible to assess the dense categories of the human psyche that contribute to the perpetuation of psychological violence. This analysis not only sheds light on the underlying causes, but also offers information on possible therapeutic and preventive strategies (Simão; Santos, 2023).

The understanding of the psychoanalytic foundations can contribute significantly to the creation of more effective interventions, prevention policies and support for victims of psychological violence, thus promoting a healthier society free from this type of aggression (Ferreira; Danziato, 2019).

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## 3.2 PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS IN THE PERPETUATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

The complex phenomenon of psychological violence against women is influenced by an intersection of psychological, social and cultural factors that intertwine and contribute to its perpetuation. Understanding these factors is essential for a complete analysis and an effective search for prevention and intervention strategies (Ferreira; Danziato, 2019).

According to Ferreira and Danziato (2019), psychological, social, and cultural factors play a fundamental role in the perpetuation of psychological violence against women, interacting in a complex way to maintain this harmful pattern. Psychoanalytically, these are: psychological factor – narcissism and control; low empathy and fragility of self-esteem.

Alves, Targino and Oliveira Junior (2022) point out that the social aspects involve: gender norms, power inequality and social isolation. Cultural sexism, on the other hand, include: cultural machismo, naturalization of violence, and esteem and shame.

In the psychological factor, psychological violence reflects imbalances of power and control. Individuals who perpetrate this type of violence may experience a desire for domination over the victim as a way of dealing with their own insecurities and weaknesses (Chagas; Martins, 2022).

Unresolved internal conflicts, low self-esteem, and emotional management difficulties can manifest themselves through manipulative, humiliating, and coercive behaviors. Psychological violence can be an attempt to compensate for a feeling of powerlessness by projecting the feeling of control onto the victim (Alencar, 2019).

On the social level, the influence of cultural norms and standards plays a significant role in the perpetuation of psychological violence. Gender socialization, for example, can result in the internalization of stereotypes that praise male dominance and reinforce female submission. This cultural dynamic can contribute to attitudes of devaluation of women and to the belief in the acceptability of violence as a way to maintain control (José; Santos, 2021).

According to Ferreira and Danziato (2019), it is essential to highlight the influence of the culture of silence that often surrounds psychological violence. Social norms that minimize the impact of this form of abuse can make it difficult for victims to seek help, perpetuating their vulnerability. The perception that psychological violence is less visible or less serious than physical violence may contribute to its underreporting and, consequently, to its perpetuation.

Today, Chagas and Martins (2021) point out that psychological violence is called by the *gaslight phenomenon*, which indicates psychological manipulation. Therefore, it is a form of psychological abuse in which there is false information that leads the woman to doubt her own memory, perception and analysis. "It is a subtle aggression against the woman where the aggressor manipulates, deceives, confuses, hides, disrespects, has aggressiveness and intoxicates the identity of

the victim" (Chagas; Martins, 2021, p. 1).

Reflecting on these factors, it is important to consider how they intertwine and reinforce each other. A critical analysis of the psychological, social and cultural dynamics behind psychological violence against women makes it possible to question power structures and the need to promote profound changes in society (Cunha; Valiense, 2021).

For Alves, Targino, and Oliveira Junior (2022), awareness and education are essential steps to challenge harmful norms, empower women to recognize and confront psychological violence, and thus work to eradicate this silent pandemic. Effective transformation requires the collaboration of all of society, including institutions, support systems, and individuals, in the pursuit of equitable and healthy relationships.

### 3.3 IMPACT ON WOMEN'S MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH: A PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS

The impact of psychological violence on women's mental and emotional health is profound and long-lasting, leaving invisible scars that can reverberate over time. A psychoanalytic analysis reveals the complex interactions between the emotional traumas caused by violence and the psychic structure of the victims (Silva, 2022).

According to Silva (2022), there are many impacts on women's lives, some of them are: low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, social isolation, trauma, feelings of guilt, shame, sleep disorders, difficulty in relationships, among others; varying from person to person.

Continuous exposure to psychological violence can trigger a range of psychological symptoms, such as: anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorders, and low self-esteem. Women who suffer this type of abuse often experience a state of constant hypervigilance, anticipating imminent threats and experiencing a state of constant emotional tension (Chagas; Martins, 2022).

The psychoanalytic approach considers the defense mechanisms that victims can develop as a way to cope with violence. Denial and repression can be used as strategies to avoid direct confrontation with emotional pain, allowing victims to continue to function in their everyday lives. However, these defense mechanisms can come at a cost, contributing to the accumulation of anguish and the maintenance of the cycle of violence (Vasconcelos *et al*, 2021).

In addition to emotional symptoms, psychological violence can have an impact on identity construction and the formation of interpersonal relationships. The internalization of messages of devaluation and control can lead to a distorted perception of oneself, damaging self-image, and self-confidence (Silva, 2021). The ability to establish healthy bonds and trust others can also be affected, as traumatic experiences shape the way women relate to the world around them (Simão; Santos, 2023).

Psychoanalytic analysis leads to reflection on how psychological violence can penetrate the depths of the unconscious, influencing dreams, fantasies, and thought patterns (Silva, 2021). Understanding these internal processes can provide data for effective therapeutic interventions, allowing victims to work on the elaboration and transformation of the traumas experienced (Ferreira; Danziato, 2019).

In this context, the importance of psychological and therapeutic support is evident. Through the exploration of the underlying meanings of psychological violence, women can rebuild their self-esteem, process trauma, and develop healthy coping strategies (Alencar, 2019). Psychoanalytic analysis offers a sensitive lens through which to understand the complex interactions between the psychic and the emotional, providing a space for healing and resilience (Ferreira; Danziato, 2019).

Reflecting on the impact on the mental and emotional health of women who are victims of psychological violence, it is essential to consider the need for a holistic and compassionate approach. According to Chagas and Martins (2022), understanding the psychoanalytic implications can inform more effective support practices, restoring emotional well-being and building healthy and empowering relationships.

### **4 DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the discussion of the studies analyzed, approaching psychological violence as a complex phenomenon that involves intricate dynamics and implications for the mental and emotional health of women who are victims of this practice. The categories of analysis of the results include: the manifestations of psychological violence, the underlying factors and the importance of the intervention of psychoanalytic therapy.

### 4.1 MANIFESTATIONS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

The results of this study corroborate the investigations of Ferreira and Danziato (2019), who explored psychological violence in women from a psychoanalytic perspective. The manifestations of psychological violence include behaviors of control, manipulation and humiliation that compromise the victim's autonomy and self-esteem.

When compared to other types of violence, psychological violence occurs primarily in the domestic environment and is predominantly perpetrated by family members or acquaintances of the victims (Siqueira *et al*, 2018).

Chagas and Martins (2022) described the *gaslight* phenomenon, highlighting how psychological manipulation affects women and how female empowerment can emerge from this context. The need to recognize and confront this insidious form of violence is important, since the manifestations can lead to irreparable damage, such as suicide or femicide.

Psychological abuse, while common, is often more challenging to recognize. Without leaving physical evidence on women's bodies, these forms of aggression are hidden behind actions such as: jealousy, manipulation, depreciation, belittling, coercion, sarcasm, and insults (Ferreira; Danziato, 2019).

According to Silva (2022), the vivid expression of psychological violence goes far beyond communication, including the multiple dimensions of women's lives. From blatant exploitation to subtle criticism of sexual performance, from the curtailment of their individual freedom to the implementation of constant surveillance, from acts of confinement to strategies of deprivation of essential resources, this toxic manifestation occurs through the perpetuation of repeated verbal offenses. Such situations add to the deep understanding of the manifestations of psychological violence, further broadening the understanding of its devastating and subversive nature.

### 4.2 UNDERLYING FACTORS OF ABUSE

The analysis of the dynamics underlying cases of psychological violence provides a significant deepening of the understanding of this phenomenon. Pinheiro's (2023) research highlights the presence of narcissistic traits in aggressors, perceived through the psychoanalytic perspective. The role of these narcissistic traits is essential in the search for power and control in relationships, as evidenced by Ferreira and Danziato (2019) in their exploration of psychological violence in women.

In addition to narcissistic traits, other psychological, social, and cultural factors contribute to the perpetuation of this type of violence. Azevedo and Telles (2023), when analyzing the role of the psychiatrist in addressing psychological violence, highlight the importance of early identification and psychiatric support for victims. This point highlights the interconnection between individual psychological factors and the manifestation of violence, demonstrating how emotional vulnerabilities can be exploited by aggressors.

Chagas and Martins (2022) described the *gaslight* phenomenon, revealing psychological manipulation as a central mechanism in the perpetuation of abuse. Victims' meticulous manipulation of reality and deliberate confusion not only erode self-esteem, but can also make it difficult for victims to perceive their own abusive situation, contributing to their continued vulnerability.

In considering the intersection between gender and culture, Alencar (2019) highlights how cultural norms and conceptions of honor can play a key role in perpetuating psychological violence. The influence of these social and cultural factors can shape the expectations, behaviors, and dynamics of relationships, establishing a fertile ground for the manifestation of violence.



### 4.3 PSYCHOANALYTIC INTERVENTION

The application of psychoanalysis as an intervention and therapy in psychological violence has shown to be a promising approach to understanding, treating, and preventing this type of abuse. The principles of psychoanalysis offer insights into the underlying dynamics, toxic relationship patterns, and psychological factors that contribute to the perpetuation of psychological violence (Souza; Cunha, 2018).

One of the therapeutic approaches that stands out is psychoanalytic psychotherapy, which focuses on exploring the unconscious and bringing out intense and repressed aspects of the victim's psyche. Through analysis of internal conflicts, past experiences, and interpersonal relationships, this approach can help victims understand the patterns of behavior that keep them trapped in abusive relationships. Psychoanalytic therapy can also provide tools to increase self-awareness, promote self-esteem, and develop healthy coping mechanisms (José; Santos, 2021).

In addition, José and Santos (2021) highlight psychoanalytic intervention for aggressors, with the aim of exploring the deep roots of abusive behaviors. Understanding the narcissistic traits, underlying insecurities, and unconscious motivations of abusers can offer a foundation for behavior change and accountability. Psychoanalytic therapy can help abusers face their own internal issues, promoting empathy and understanding of the consequences of their actions on victims.

The inclusion of couples therapy or family therapy can also be beneficial, as it addresses the relational dynamics that underpin psychological violence. This approach can help identify dysfunctional communication patterns, promote healthy expression of emotions, and develop conflict resolution strategies that do not involve manipulation or humiliation (Souza; Cunha, 2018).

According to Azevedo and Telles (2023), the psychiatrist plays an essential role in treating the consequences of psychological abuse, offering pharmacological and psychotherapeutic support to victims. In addition, they provide emotional support and guidance in situations of reporting or ending the relationship. Due to the association with substance use disorders among offenders, the psychiatrist is essential in rehabilitation programs, preventing recurrences of aggression.

Therefore, José and Santos (2021) point out that interventions and therapies based on psychoanalysis offer a holistic approach to dealing with psychological violence. By exploring the unconscious, emotional, and relational aspects involved, these approaches have the potential to promote healing, empowerment, and transformation for both victims and perpetrators, thereby contributing to breaking the cycle of abuse and establishing healthier, more equitable relationships.

### **5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

One of the most frequent forms of psychological violence against women is known as "gaslighting". The term refers to a manipulation strategy in which the aggressor uses words and

behaviors to distort the victim's reality, leading them to doubt their own perception and memory. This practice has serious detrimental consequences for the victim, who may experience confusion, anxiety, depression, and even the loss of their self-confidence and autonomy.

Psychological aspects represent an essential factor, showing how narcissistic traits in aggressors can motivate the search for power and control in relationships. In addition, the fragility of victims' self-esteem makes them more susceptible to manipulation and emotional weakening, perpetuating the abusive dynamic.

In the social sphere, gender norms and power inequality play an important role. The persistence of traditional ideas that emphasize female submission and dominant masculinity strengthens behaviors of control and humiliation. Lack of support networks and social isolation also contribute to keeping victims trapped in abusive relationships.

Culturally, the normalization of violence and the stigma associated with victims perpetuate the occurrence of this phenomenon. The naturalization of violence and the reluctance to report it due to fear of social judgment contribute to the invisibility of psychological violence.

Thus, it is evident that psychological violence is a complex problem that extends to several layers of society. Addressing it requires multidisciplinary actions involving mental health professionals and the implementation of policies that challenge harmful gender norms, including the support of psychoanalysis.

Education and public awareness also play a key role in deconstructing these cultural patterns and creating a more equal and violence-free society. Understanding these factors and coordinated actions are essential to effectively stop the perpetuation of psychological violence against women.

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