


## ECOLOGICAL MODEL: A THEORETICAL PROPOSAL TO UNDERSTAND RISK AND PROTECTION FACTORS FOR VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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### ABSTRACT

Studying intimate partner violence against women is essential; it is defined by the WHO as a public health problem. To illustrate the seriousness of the issue, some data on violence against women (VAW) in Brazil are presented. The article aims to understand the preventive factors (risk and protection) that involve VAW aiming at the prevention of violence, through a theoretical review, exploring concepts pertinent to the theme such as diversity, intersectionality, risk and protection factors. Heise's ecological model is proposed as an essential theoretical resource to guide the understanding of VAW and the care of these women. Understanding the factors related to VAW perpetrated by intimate partners can make interventions more efficient, aiming to contribute to the construction of public policies and interventions that can contribute to the end of this reality that plagues millions of women not only in Brazil but also in the world.

**Keywords:** Violence against women. Intimate partners. Eco-friendly model. Risk and protective factors.

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## INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence against women (VAW) as

any act of gender-based violence that results or may result in physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private life (UN, 1993).

VAW is sustained by the patriarchal structure – a set of material-based social relations with hierarchical relations between men and solidarity between them, which enable them to control women. Patriarchy is the male system of oppression of women (Hartman, 1979), widely institutionalized (Lerner, 2019), including through violence.

In the evaluation of Brazilian epidemiological data, there are elements that support the previous statements. According to Ramos (2022), 1975 cases of violence against women were monitored by a specialized network in 2021. Among them, 409 are femicides. A record of violence against women was found every five hours in the last year and an 8% increase in cases, compared to 2020 figures. The 2022 Brazilian Public Security Forum (FBSP) reported a rape every 10 minutes and a femicide every 7 hours in 2021; 56098 rapes (including of vulnerable people), only of the female gender, an increase of 3.7% compared to the previous year; 1319 women victims of femicide in 2021.

The pandemic brought an aggravation to the numbers recorded, culminating in an increase in the psychosocial vulnerability of women, as addressed in several (Paludo et al., 2020; Marques et. al, 2020). In times of crisis, such as an outbreak, women and girls may be at increased risk of violence (UNFPA, 2020). In Brazil, there was a considerable loss in terms of tracking cases of such violence, due to the interruption of registration, monitoring and production of data. Some data (FBSP, 2022) revealed an increase in cases, including fatal ones. The domestic and family environment is where most cases occur and the main perpetrators are intimate partners or ex-partners of these women, which led to the creation of the term intimate partner violence (IPV), which is characterized by attitudes that, within an intimate relationship, cause physical, sexual or mental damage (Rosa et al., 2013). In addition, the dismantling of care services for women in situations or with a history of violence, the reduction of funds for appropriate public policies (Marques, 2022; Mantovani et al, 2022) and the wave of conservatism, aggravated in the last federal government (Gracino et al, 2021; Reis, 2020; Ipea, 2023), contributed to this alarming picture.

However, the history of violence does not occur in the same way for all women. This is because characteristics of the diversity of victims - such as race, sexuality, nation, class, disability and others - may be associated with other forms of violence (Carneiro, 2003;

Saffioti, 1997; Krug et al., 2002). Kimberlé Crenshaw (2002), in 1989, proposed the concept of intersectionality, as being the form

by which racism, patriarchy, class oppression, and other discriminatory systems create basic inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes, and others (Crenshaw, 2002).

In addition, it is about "how specific actions and policies generate oppressions that flow along such axes, constituting dynamic or active aspects of disempowerment" (Crenshaw, 2002, p. 177). Thus, the complexity of the intersections of discriminatory processes is embraced and from there we seek to understand the specific conditions that result from them (Kyrillos, 2020).

Based on Brazilian epidemiological and statistical data, there are data that evidence these disparities and provide guidance on attention to specific intersectional demands. In 2022, the Institute of Public Security (ISP) reports that the number of black victims was higher in all forms of violence, with emphasis on physical (56.4%) and sexual (56.3%) violence. There has been a change in the profile of the victims of moral and patrimonial violence. In 2014, white women were the main victims (51.0% and 51.4%, respectively). In 2021, black women were the biggest victims (49.1% and 51.2%, respectively).

Intersectionality appears in the phenomenon of violence against women also in access to justice. Silveira & Nardi (2014) analyzed police reports and lawsuits of women who suffered violence in Porto Alegre, a city in the south of the country. A greater number of reports made by black women was registered, but on the other hand, the continuity of their lawsuits drops by half when compared to white lawsuits, indicating that there is no parity between black and white women in access to justice at more advanced levels, even more so in a very racist country.

These data also bring the need to consider diversity in the expansion of the sample of women studied and assisted in research, public policies and clinical interventions, as well as it is essential to think about the diversity present in the female herself, in order to design more effective public policies. The diversity of the sample makes it possible to generalize data in a more reliable way, because the more the sample of the studies resembles the real world, diverse in terms of race, gender, social class and other ways, the greater the possibility of success in the proposals for solving the diseases studied.

In view of these facts, the need for a change of logic in the approach to the VAW phenomenon is defended. We will propose the ecological model as a theoretical basis, allowing the training of agents and the creation of more effective public policies in the containment of the damage of violence and prevention.

## ECOLOGICAL MODEL, RISK AND PROTECTION FACTORS FOR VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

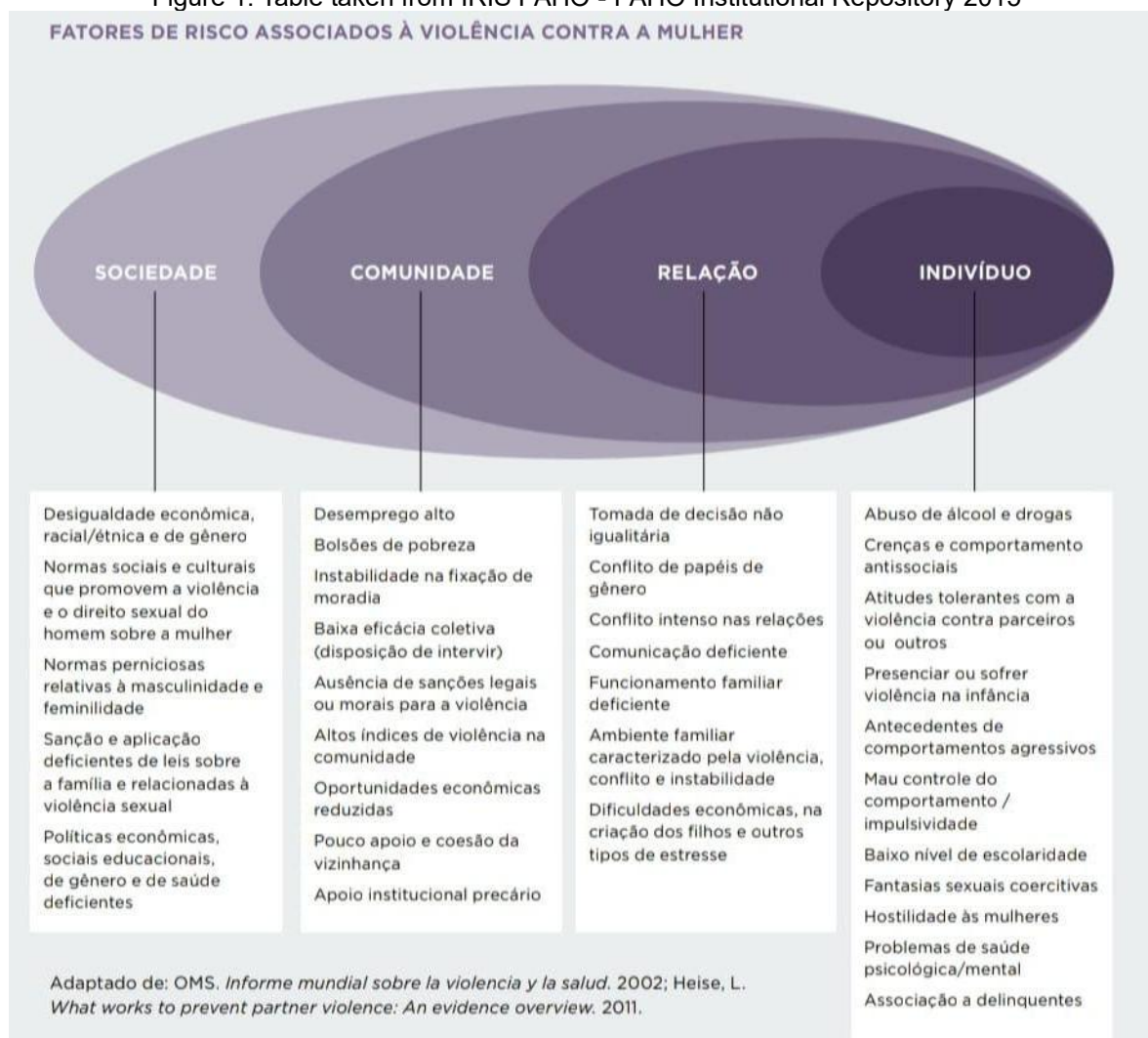
This model proposes an integrated ecological framework, suggesting that VAW is influenced by a complex range of interconnected factors at the individual, relational, community, and macrosocial levels (Heise, 1998/2011). The model focuses on violence in the interaction that occurs between its different levels, with intertwined levels of causality, where there is not a single determinant, but an interaction of factors, favoring violence or protecting the individual against it. These causal factors and their interactions need to be known in their different contexts and cultural environments in order to identify points of weakness and ways to advance in the prevention of violence and in specific interactions (Ramírez, 2001). The ecological model, classified into four levels, allows the analysis of the factors that influence people's behavior and the factors that increase the probability of people becoming victims or perpetrators of violent acts (Casique & Furegato, 2006).

At the first level (individual), biological and personal history factors are identified; with emphasis on personal and demographic characteristics, history of aggressive behavior or self-devaluation, psychic or personality disorders and drug addiction. The second level (relationships) includes the closest relationships such as those maintained between couples and partners, other family members and friends. It has been observed that these increase the risk of suffering or perpetrating violent acts. Having friends who commit or incite violent acts can increase the risk that a young person will suffer or carry them out. At the third level (community) the community contexts in which social relations develop are explored, such as schools, workplaces and neighborhoods. Characteristics of these environments are identified that can increase the risk of violent acts, influenced by factors such as mobility of place of residence, population density, high levels of unemployment, and the existence of drug trafficking. The fourth level (society) is focused on factors of a general nature, related to social structure. They contribute to creating a climate that incites or inhibits violence, such as the possibility of access to weapons. These include those that prioritize the rights of parents over the well-being of their children, consider suicide a personal choice rather than a preventable act of violence, reaffirm male domination, support the excessive use of police force, or support political conflicts. At this level, there are also other factors such as health, economic, educational, and social policies, which contribute to maintaining economic or social inequalities between groups.

Heise (1998) proposed an integrated ecological framework specific to violence against women. The revised version of the model (Figure 1) was strengthened by updated

evidence on risk and protective factors related to IPV and empirical evidence from low- and middle-income countries (Heise, 2011).

Figure 1: Table taken from IRIS PAHO - PAHO Institutional Repository 2015



The proposal of the centrality of the ecological model is also reiterated to avoid the fragmentarity of actions, which can further penalize these women. It is not uncommon for them to find agents who guide their practices from reductionist explanations for a phenomenon that is multifactorial, multicausal. Likewise, public policies can be ineffective in not accounting for the complexity of the phenomenon that involves community, institutional, biological, psychological and other factors.

## RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

From the ecological model and a complex approach, some protective and risk factors associated with IPV are raised. Well-established studies report that children exposed to violence are more likely to perpetrate violent behaviors in intimate relationships in

adulthood (Ende et al., 2016); thus, it is also associated with a higher risk of experiencing IPV in adulthood (Chiang et al., 2018). Some factors are involved in the possibility of revictimization in adulthood, such as negative role models learned in childhood, trauma from witnessing violence with another family member, and the normalization of violence as (a) a characteristic of masculinity, (b) a way of regulating gender norms in the family, and/or (c) punishment for children's behaviors considered wrong (Namy et al., 2017).

According to Hotelling and Sugarman (1986), 94% of the empirical studies reviewed found a significant association for men between having witnessed violence against their mothers and subsequent abuse of their partners. One possible explanation is that violence in adult relationships is partly a learned response from young boys who grew up in an abusive home. Heise (1998) states that in numerous longitudinal studies, sexual victimization in childhood appears as a significant risk factor for future sexual assaults on women. Some prospective studies have demonstrated an association between physical abuse in childhood and a higher risk of exhibiting chronic aggressive behavior in childhood, delinquency in adolescence, and violent criminal offense in adulthood.

Social learning theory suggests that modeling adult behavior and learning the instrumentality of violence as one of the means of getting what you want, are parts of the learned response model that allows us to understand having experienced situations of violence as a risk factor (O'Leary, 1988). It is also possible that early victimization leaves emotional and developmental marks that impair the development of the sense of self, and can influence not only behavior through a modeling process but also the child's developing personality.

Other associated factors at the individual and relational level are having lower socioeconomic status, lower education (Ogum Alangea et al., 2018), income, and family standard of life such as having access to resources such as water and housing (Rao, 2020). Women's lower education has an important relationship with poverty when considered as a risk factor for IPV (Amegbor & Rosenberg, 2019). Having more education enables access to jobs and better income, promoting more financial autonomy and access to protective devices (Schuler et al., 2017). Being part of ethnic and/or social minorities can also be considered a risk factor (Garcia & Silva, 2016; Gillum, 2019).

In addition, the abusive use of alcohol by the partner, ex-partner or the woman (Araújo et al., 2018) and the abuse of other drugs by the perpetrator (Moraes et al., 2018) are considered risk factors for IPV. It is worth emphasizing, however, that these are factors that can potentiate violent situations, not being configured as the cause of violent behavior. One of the scholars' hypotheses is that alcohol operates as a situational factor, increasing



the possibility of violence by reducing inhibitions and clouding judgment, in addition to other impairments (Abbey, Ross & McDuffie, 1995; Birkley et al, 2013; Costa et al, 2015; Choenni V, 2017; Santos et al, 2019). In addition, men are more likely to act violently because they do not feel that they will be held accountable if they are drunk (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969; Gelles, 1974; Velleman, 2001).

At the second level (relationships), one factor found in the literature was that male economic and decision-making authority in the family was one of the strongest predictors of societies with a high rate of violence against women. Frieze and McHugh (apud Frieze & Browne, 1989) found that the most violent husbands tended to make decisions about the family's finances and strictly controlled when and where their wives could go.

A study by Yllo and Straus (1990) suggests that the relationship between patriarchal family structure and violence may be partly fueled by social norms that approve of male dominance in the family. There is also considerable evidence that men raised in patriarchal families (which most encourage traditional gender roles) are more likely to become violent adults, rape women they know, and assault their intimate partners than men raised in more egalitarian households (Stockard & Bohmer, 1987; Fagot, Loerber & Reid, 1988; Friedrich et al., 1988; Gwartney-Gibbs, Koss & Dinero, 1989; Riggs & O'Leary, 1989; Malamuth et al. 1991).

With regard to community aspects related to intimate partner violence, they include poverty and high unemployment rates (WHO, 2019). It is worth mentioning that there may be a bias at this point, since most of the research uses sources such as police stations, public assistance services and the like, which serve the most impoverished in greater numbers. Another community aspect refers to places that have few protection policies and/or support services for women who are experiencing IPV (WHO, 2019). In rural environments, the scarcity of specialized network services or access to places with greater structure, in urban centers, are factors that hinder the confrontation of violence (Grossi & Coutinho, 2017).

In the societal spheres, the factors associated with higher risk of IPV are related to countries where there is greater income inequality among the population (Yapp & Pickett, 2019); to places where there is greater gender inequality (Willie & Kershaw, 2019; WHO, 2019); where there is greater cultural acceptance of IPV and in places where there is a lack of legal support and policies aimed at reducing intimate partner violence (WHO, 2019).

Clinical and quantitative data suggest that social isolation is both a cause and a consequence of wife abuse (Gelles, 1974; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). In a study by Nielsen, Russell and Ellington (1992), regression analyses showed that battered women are more

isolated from interaction with friends and neighbors, family and family participation in public places. More advanced analysis revealed that isolation from the woman and her family preceded the beating, although isolation tended to increase as the relationship became more violent.

It is worth noting that one of the strongest predictors of societies with low levels of violence is whether family and community members would interfere if a woman was being beaten or harassed. In cultures with high levels of violence against women, family members are isolated and the relationship between husband and wife is considered out of public scrutiny.

Peer group behaviors and attitudes appear to play an important role in encouraging sexual assault, especially among adolescents (Alder, 1985; Frank, 1989 apud Malamuth et al., 1991; DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993). DeKeseredy and Kelly (1993) found that male peer support, defined as attachment to male peers who encourage and legitimize the abuse of women, is a statistically significant predictor of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse by men in college dating relationships.

According to the cross-cultural literature, one of the most enduring factors that promotes violence against women is a cultural definition of masculinity that is linked to male dominance, toughness, or honor (Sanday, 1981; Counts et al., 1992). Research suggests that where masculinity is associated with male dominance and honor, rape and sexual coercion are more common (Sanday, 1981). It is possible to affirm that, during their youth, men are encouraged to adopt behaviors socially attributed to the "masculine universe", in the resolution of stereotyped conflicts related to "hypermasculinity" (Barker, 2008; Taylor et al., 2016) – a term coined by Mosher and Sirkin in 1984. Throughout the socialization process, boys are encouraged to adopt behaviors that employ the use of physical force, aggressiveness, violence and demonstrations of virility (Silva et al, 2007). The consequent development of personality may produce a need to risk danger by arousal, lack of empathy, and propensity for sexually coercive conduct. Violence is considered by these men as an activity that validates their masculinity (Heise, 1998).

Macho socialization works to increase violence by amplifying anger and decreasing empathy in response to distress or threat. Mosher and Tomkins (1988) suggest that hypermasculine people respond to situations that distress or threaten them as a pretext to amplify emotions considered stereotypically masculine, such as anger, and inhibit emotions considered unmasculine, such as empathy or compassion.

Several lines of research suggest that adherence to rigid gender roles – whether at the social or individual level – increases the chance of violence against women. Another



point found in the literature is a shared sense of male property rights over women. Most cultures approve of corporal punishment of women and/or children under certain circumstances. They usually follow clearly defined rules about who has the right to hit whom, under what circumstances and to what degree. If punishment is deemed culturally acceptable, then the abuse is considered justified and others will not intervene. Any transgression of a gender norm can be considered just grounds for abuse – from adultery to late dinner preparation. If it is outside the rules, either because it is someone who has no perceived right to punish or the beating is excessive, then the behavior is subject to public sanction.

In two cross-cultural studies (Sanday, 1981; Levinson, 1989) the authors found that violence against women was much more likely to occur in cultures that tolerate the use of force as an adult means of resolving conflicts. Acceptance of interpersonal violence was one of three factors that strongly discriminated against sexually aggressive men from non-aggressive men (Koss & Dinero, 1989).

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The theoretical article sought to understand the phenomenon of violence against women in the context of intimate partners from the perspective of the ecological model in order to understand the possible factors associated with this phenomenon in order to prevent violence. It is strongly suggested that this model be a guide for professional training and public policies that understand VAW in a more complete way, in order to have preventive and interventional proposals that can be more effective and effective, even more so in countries with severe cases of violence such as Brazil.

VAW is a multifactorial, multicausal phenomenon, and professionals and teams must account for its complexity and multiple etiology. Understanding the possible risk and protective factors listed in the literature from the ecological model is essential for the creation of public policies, clinical interventions, and effective institutional practices, so that we can not only reduce damage in cases where VAW has already occurred, but also prevent its occurrence.

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