

## Women victims of psychological violence. When protective measures are not effective

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to analyze the protection measures provided to victims of psychological violence against women living in Cerro San Pedro, district of El Agustino, province and department of Lima. It is the result of qualitative research in the light of the Interpretative-Naturalistic paradigm. It was oriented with the phenomenological design and two techniques were applied: the interview, through a semi-structured interview form and the observation, through an observation sheet. The group of participants was made up of five victims of psychological violence, two lawyers specialized in the subject and two members of the police who are responsible for managing the complaints made by women who have been violated. The data obtained were processed with the help of Atlas.Ti software. According to the results: the impediment of harassment, free legal assistance, the withdrawal of the aggressor and the re-education of the aggressor are working for us in a sustained and effective way which leads to the exacerbation of emotional disturbance, decreased self-esteem, suicide attempts and emotional dependence that, together, directly affect them. It is concluded that the lack of timely, adequate and effective protection measures for women victims of psychological violence affects emotional health and exacerbates the thought towards suicide because they see the possibility of the perpetuity of aggressions by their partners or ex-partners and feel helpless against the possibilities of femicides.

**Keywords:** psychological violence, protective measures, vulnerable women.

### I. INTRODUCTION

According to recent estimates, 243 million women in the 15-49 age group worldwide were victims of physical, sexual and psychological violence. Every day, 137 women are killed by a family member; only less than 40% of them ask for any

help (UN Women, 2020). In Latin America and the Caribbean, it is estimated that one in seven women are victims of physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by direct relatives (Bott et al., 2019). This data becomes more worrying with information regarding psychological violence or

emotional abuse that is registered (Vale et al., 2021). The informational landscape is one of concern when it comes to psychological violence against women by their partners or ex-partners (Habib et al., 2011; Azevedo et al., 2009). Psychological violence is defined as the action or omission that causes or intends to cause harm to the person by affecting their identity, self-esteem or their own development (Ministério da Saúde, 2002). This type of violence is the most widespread in the family context, is underreported and is more difficult to identify because the victims are not usually perceived as victims (Silva et al., 2007). Many of the victims consider that this type of violence does not go beyond daily domestic arguments and more than psychological aggressions that can generate dire consequences for the aggrieved.

According to the study by Bonilla-Algovia and Rivas-Rivero, (2022), there are direct and significant correlations between physical violence, sexual violence and psychological violence, which indicates that psychological violence is not an isolated event. This result coincides with what was found by the Government Delegation against Gender Violence of Spain (2020): the majority of women victims of physical or sexual violence have also suffered psychological violence. It is possible that psychological violence is that which manifests itself after physical or sexual violence and it is difficult to detect, even more so if the victim does not report the aggression in a timely manner. The generation of violent actions occurs mainly in the conjugal sphere; couple problems incur violence if they are not controlled mainly by the aggressor and, when violence occurs, it constitutes a clear violation of the human rights of the victims (Pujol Robinat and Mohino Justes, 2019).

### **Emotional disturbance**

The different forms of violence that manifest against women constitute traumatic events for victims in dimensions: individual, social and economic (Gilbert et al., 2009); and, depending on the recurrent forms, they are evidenced in chronicles. From the perspective of emotional affectation, the consequences can be even more

serious. According to the existing literature, violence generates emotional disturbance in victims, which indicates that when there is recurrence of violence it refers to circumstances in which victims who were previously proven as such of abuse or neglect experience another incident of proven mistreatment (Fluke et al., 1999; Carnochan et al., 2013).

### **Decreased self-esteem**

Psychological violence that is difficult to make visible initially affects, among others, the self-esteem of the victims. A thorough psychological evaluation is required to determine the affectation in the aggrieved. This type of violence has recently been considered a traumatic event; is less studied compared to physical and sexual types (Dokkedahl et al., 2021).

### **Suicide attempts**

Those who suffer from psychological violence become potential suicides. According to the World Health Organization, suicide rates are estimated in developing countries (American Association of Suicidology, 2016). According to a study, a fact that draws attention is the close relationship between suicide attempts and real suicides: in the young population the proportion is 100 to 200 attempts for a completed death; in older adult society the proportion is every two or three people who attempt suicide there is a death (O'Connell et al., 2004; Pinto et al., 2007).

### **Emotional dependence**

The highest prevalence of violence is attributed to the female sex as a victim and is related to historical-cultural factors that have imposed conditions of exploitation, abuse, subordination and discrimination against women (Barufaldi et al., 2017; Albarran, 2015). The fact that female victims are dependent on the aggressor, either economically and socially, constitutes a factor of aggression on the part of those in power. Aggressors generally employ coping strategies to minimize their responsibility (Guerrero Molina et

al., 2020); limit aggression to the family environment and superimpose the female victim as responsible for the aggression and highlight traditional gender roles to justify violence (Echeburúa et al., 2016). Hence the consolidation of machismo as a cultural explanation for man's aggressive behavior, although not the only one. Other circumstances may be involved in violent actions, for example, the psychological profile and behavioral changes in the aggressor in relationships (Brown et al., 2015).

### **Protective measures**

Protection measures are a set of actions that guardianship institutions carry out to protect victims from their aggressors; the purpose of these measures is to neutralize or minimize the harmful effects of the violence exercised by the aggressor and allows the normal development of daily activities in the victims; It seeks to ensure physical, psychological or sexual integrity. According to Law 30364, protective measures are judicial decisions that have the purpose of protecting the integrity of aggrieved persons in accordance with the risk assessment sheet when dealing with the complaint filed by the victim (Ysidro, 2021).

### **Bullying Impediment**

Once the victims of psychological violence are identified, joint and multidisciplinary actions must be taken so that the facts are not perpetuated. Preventing the continuation of harassment is one of the main measures. As Fernandes et al. (2020) point out, preventive actions and the promotion of a culture of peace, as well as conflict mediation, restorative practices and the use of nonviolent communication are important measures to avoid the recurrence of the problem. These actions allow the reduction of the incidence of violence and are likely to generate positive reflections in the medium term (Schmidt & Coelho, 2017). It is necessary to promote intersectoral actions to articulate support networks that promote assertive practices (Linnarsson et al., 2015). What is important and necessary is to prevent the aggressor from continuing the situation through

professional intervention by the guardianship institutions.

### **Free legal assistance**

The restorative actions of legal assistance to victims of psychological violence and the family environment, the teaching of non-violent forms of communication in the environments, the rapid action of public security agencies, the mediation of conflicts through social assistance are some examples of actions that positively affect the care provider of welfare to direct and indirect victims (Ferreira et al., 2019).

### **Removal of the aggressor**

Recent studies report that caring only for victims of violence may not be successful because the aggressor may repeat violent actions without seeing them as natural or not seeing their needs or feelings accepted (Verdolini et al., 2017; Ferreira et al., 2019). In addition, the aggressor cannot necessarily be permanently and safely removed from victims as established by professional recommendations (Rigol-Cuadra et al., 2015; Verdolini et al., 2017). Another aspect to keep in mind is that there is no scientific evidence on medical interventions to care for the persistent family aggressor (Fernandes et al., 2020) which can cause the recurrence of violence especially in vulnerable people such as women. Faced with the situation of the probable recurrence of violence by the aggressors who are mostly people close to the victims, the temporary or permanent withdrawal of the aggressor is recommended so that the victim not only reduces the fear of suffering more violence but also to allow the emotional recovery of the victim.

### **Re-education of the aggressor**

Re-educating the aggressor is an important step in the reduction or elimination of psychological violence in the family. The assistance and attention provided not only to the family system, including the aggressor, prevents the aggression from being perpetuated. Medical or professional

intervention with a systemic approach and with the understanding of the habits, beliefs and myths of the family nucleus can allow a better understanding of the factors associated with aggression and achieve a better intervention (Cantos et al., 2019). According to the research of Fernandes et al. (2020), attention to the aggressor with his family is more likely to succeed because it allows professionals to understand the context, structures or family dynamics. Often, focused attention to the family nucleus and not only to the aggressor allows the knowledge of the limits and potential of each family member in the face of the event (Madalena et al., 2018). This happens in the event that the aggressor has not been removed or prohibited from approaching the victim by court order. In any case, ways would be sought to re-educate the aggressor and the family for a good understanding and for the achievement of the non-recurrence of the aggression.

## II. METHOD

The research was conducted in the light of the Interpretive-Naturalistic paradigm and addressed the Qualitative approach. The design of the study was Phenomenological, descriptive level and type of research: basic. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism that frames the qualitative study, the following itinerary was followed: a) capture, analysis and organization of the emerging information of the informants; (b) Objectification of respondents' perceptions and assessments; c) Deepening the understanding of the meaning of researcher-participant interactions; d) Understanding of the subjectivities arising from inquiry regarding the issue of psychological violence.

The participants were five women victims of violence living in houses erected in Cerro San Pedro in the district of El Agustino, province and department of Lima, Peru; two lawyers specializing in family violence and two members of the Peruvian National Police responsible for following cases of complaints of family violence.

Table 1 Research participants

No.	Participants
5	Victims of psychological violence
2	Lawyers specialized in psychological violence
2	Members of the Peruvian National Police responsible for following up on complaints of psychological abuse

The technique of in-depth interviews was applied using a semi-structured questionnaire and observation through a file. Initially, seven women were considered as participants and later three more were increased until reaching the saturation point in the information obtained. The process of analysis and structuring of the information obtained through the interview and observation

followed: transcription of the data in a matrix; data reduction and coding; content categorization and analysis. Atlas.Ti software was used for qualitative data analysis. The categories and subcategories are shown below:

Table 1 Categorization matrix

Categories	Subcategories
Psychological violence	Emotional disturbance

	Decreased self-esteem
	Suicide attempts
	Emotional dependence
Protective measures	Bullying Impediment
	Free legal assistance
	Removal of the aggressor
	Re-education of the aggressor

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Results and discussion of the category: psychological violence

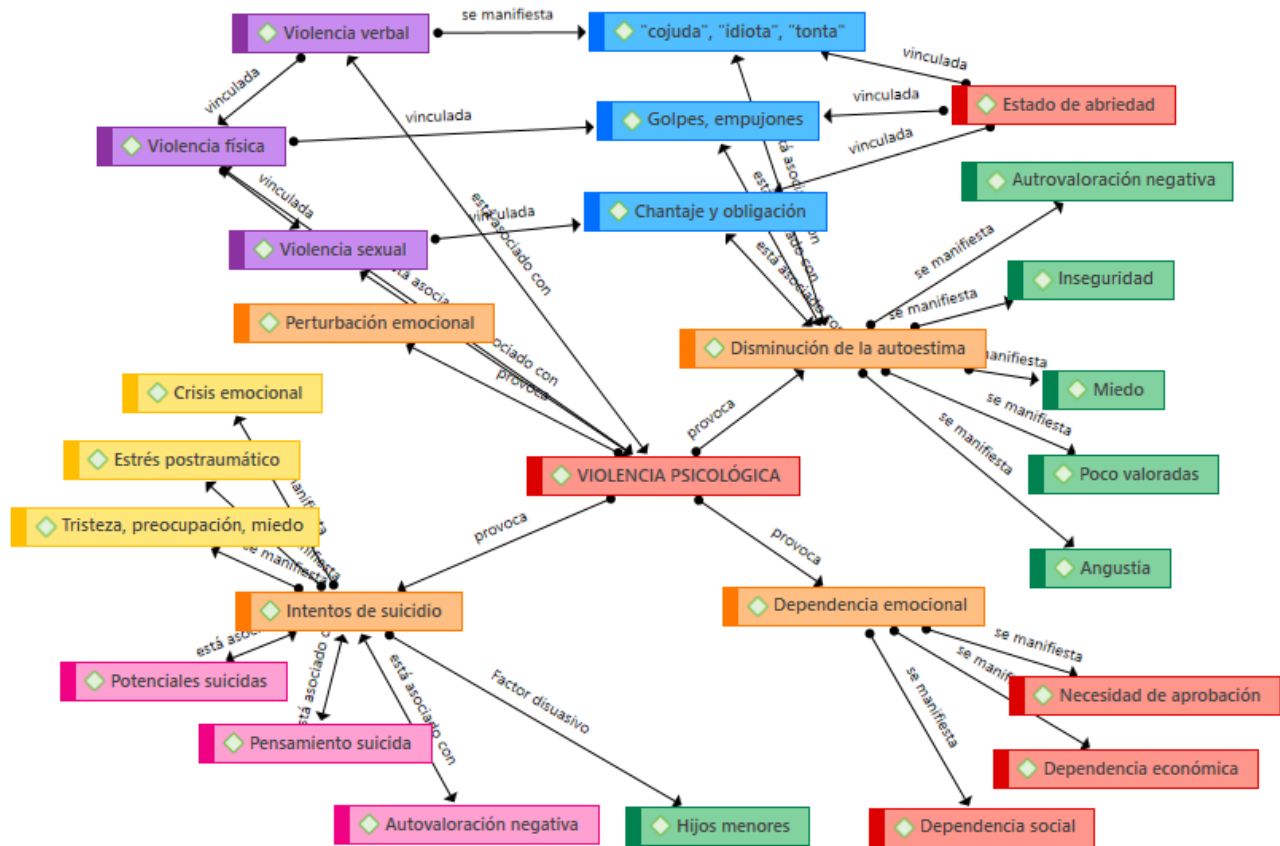


Figure 1. Psychological violence in vulnerable women

With regard to the category psychological violence, according to the results of the research carried out on the victims, it was reported that they

show and confirm feelings of sadness, post-traumatic stress, boredom, overwhelmed; some of them carry their child in their arms and cling to it

stating that having it is the best thing they have at times when they are going through an emotional crisis. There are no smile and gestures of well-being on their faces; There is a lost look as if in a trance. The victims as a whole agreed that their partners react violently by verbally assaulting them and getting annoyed by the mere fact that they watched television or did not prepare food well for lunch or dinner. "He beat me because he didn't prepare lunch well" (E3). "... She tells me that I'm a bad mother and also that they're a bitch..." (E1); "He yells at me a lot when I ask him for his diary for my children" (E2). These violent manifestations are defined as psychological violence that is added to physical and verbal abuse. According to the police interviewed only in the area of Cerro San Pedro, district of El Agustino, a population that belongs to the low socioeconomic level, between four and six complaints of psychological abuse are received at the police station daily. On weekends this figure grows: 10 complaints on average. The identification of psychological abuse is done through a risk assessment sheet and through a psychological evaluation that the victim must present as part of the reporting process. According to the police officers interviewed, the victims manifest pain, sadness, nervousness, anger, despair, lack of money; These and other negative feelings are consistent with the victims. According to specialist lawyers, victims take a long time to report their aggressors because of the shame they have, the fear that the problem will worsen.

With regard to subcategory 2: emotional disturbance, the psychological violence that manifests itself in the victims of the study leads to this specific problem because there are signs of discomfort, fear, anguish, negative assessment of herself, appreciation that her partner or ex-partner does not value it, among other indicators: "... I feel very uncomfortable and afraid, I would like someone to help me" (E2). While they don't feel guilty about their partners' negative reactions, they nevertheless claim to have negative feelings. According to the study by Costa et al. (2022) although recurrent violence is associated with the characteristics of victims, aggressors and events, however, violence in its various forms, especially psychological, is crucial and develops the emotional disturbance of victims. The study by

Villarán and Ayala (2019, as cited in Ysidro, 2021) showed that victims of psychological violence have developed mental disorders such as depression, anxiety and acute stress; These emotional manifestations are severe and irreversible that directly harm the victims in terms of their development in family and social environments.

Regarding subcategory 2: decrease in self-esteem, according to the results, victims state that they feel undervalued because they receive humiliation from their children and other relatives, either during family visits or social events. Violent demonstrations are more pronounced when the aggressors are intoxicated. Some of the victims claimed that their partners forced them to have forced sex, previously blackmailed or forced. The victims' low self-esteem is manifested in the sense that many of them forcibly agreed to have sex for fear that he would continue to mistreat her or to prevent him from continuing to drink liquor. In addition, they consider that they need the approval of other people and recognize that they have low self-esteem; they manifest insecurity even when answering the interview. "My self-esteem is in tatters..." (E2). Regarding the impact on self-esteem in victims of psychological violence, the research by Guerrero and Horna (2019) reported that this type of violence leaves sequelae, traces or severe damage that are destructive for women and, in some cases, are irreversible. In the context of the recent pandemic caused by covid-19, gender inequalities have deepened and violence against women has intensified (UN Women, 2022) with serious impact on self-esteem.

The victims interviewed state that they have suicidal thoughts (subcategory 3) but that they stop to specify because they have small children; the thoughts of suicide are nevertheless alive as evidenced by their statements. Although the presence of minor children makes them desist from suicidal actions, however, it cannot be ruled out that later they can resume these thoughts and get to realize them in case the aggression by their partners or ex-partners continues. According to the study by Silva de Sousa et al. (2018), those who suffer from psychological violence are more likely to commit suicide. This social scourge



safeguard the emotional and physical integrity of the aggrieved. According to the specialist lawyers interviewed, the protective measures seek to cut the vicious circle of violence against women, even if only for a short time because the measures are transitory and not definitive. The problem lies when, on the one hand, they are not effectively enforced and expire in a short time. Although the protective measures given after a psychological evaluation and it is verified that the victim presents evidence of this type of aggression then four main aspects are determined: the impediment of harassment, that is, cutting off continuity through the measures; free legal assistance to victims and their families if required; the temporary or permanent removal of the aggressor from the environment where the aggressions occur; and, re-education of the aggressor. However, in reality, the victims point out that the protective measures are not working well because the aggressor does not withdraw or if he withdraws he returns after a while, so the victim lives with the idea that the aggression will continue and this idea causes generalized discomfort, manifesting anxiety, worry, fear, insecurity, among others. These results coincide with what is reported by (Etxebarria, 2019) in Spain there are no sustained monitoring mechanisms for the protection of victims of psychological violence, so the reduction in aggression rates in the family environment is far from materializing.

Protection and intervention measures are essential to equip perpetrators with the necessary skills to address psychological violence and reduce incidence rates (Arce et al., 2020; Cantos et al., 2019). Protection measures are not sufficient if they are not accompanied by multidisciplinary and psychosocial interventions for victims and perpetrators in order to improve effectiveness in outcomes. Faced with the problem, it is necessary to promote training actions for professionals so that they, in turn, provide advice and knowledge to victims of violence (Saxton et al., 2020). Professionals who provide legal and emotional advice to assaulted women should apply active listening and be empathetic to detect and manage emotions, recognize trauma, and work to reverse it (Fariña et al., 2020).

According to the results, the impediment of harassment to the victim (subcategory 2) through the determination of the non-approach of the aggressor constitutes, according to expert family lawyers, an improvement in the emotional recovery of the victim, especially self-esteem, as long as you have the necessary tools and conditions to keep the aggressor as far away from his victim as possible. However, reality shows that this is not feasible because, on the one hand, the police institution does not have sufficient human personnel to assume these needs and, on the other hand, the documents that determine the removal of the aggressors from the victims follow a bureaucratic process and delay in being executed and, if executed, it is not carried out with due process. Meanwhile, the victim is in a state of helplessness and highly vulnerable. The need to prevent harassment is corroborated by the study by San Segundo and López (2022) highlights the importance of generating mechanisms for immediate detection of situations of violence, removing the aggressor from the victim, studying possible reactions in a comprehensive way, coordinating to provide protection to victims in the best possible way.

Free legal assistance (subcategory 2) for victims of psychological violence and their families is an aspect that the current legal regulations consider; The same expert lawyers and police consider it of great importance to help victims so that they can organize themselves and make timely and appropriate decisions; However, according to the victims interviewed, they receive counseling, but they consider that it is not enough, that is, it is not given in a sustained manner over time. They need legal attention throughout the lengthy reporting and recovery process. Sometimes some of them stop attending attendance meetings for work or family reasons. This result contradicts the findings of Evans et al. (2020) in that women are more afraid of the law than their aggressors because they considered the women participating in the study that the legal sector was ineffective and felt that laws regarding violence against women offer little impact or, On the contrary, they exacerbate violence. The women consulted have lost confidence in their justice operators.



According to the specialists interviewed, the removal of the aggressor from the victim (subcategory 3) depends on the magnitude of the violent acts and the conditions of the women assaulted. However, as it has been known from the victims, many of them continue to live with their aggressors and if, on occasion, they have withdrawn them, they have returned showing much more violent attitudes and behaviors, which determines that the victims are at risk of becoming potential victims of femicide. The removal of the aggressor should be done in the context of interventions with normative and public policy support to strengthen the institutional response and the protection system and, particularly, the inter-institutional and intersectoral articulation to provide a comprehensive response to victims in accordance with respect for their constitutional rights (Gómez, 2022).

With regard to subcategory 4: re-education of the perpetrator, research shows that victims continue to have toxic relationships with their perpetrators, regardless of whether they are the parents of their children and who mostly maintain their homes. Since the removal of the aggressor does not work well, and that the protection measures do not work effectively and that the aggressor cannot be practically removed from the victim, then women who suffer from psychological violence because they are defenseless are potential victims of femicide. Faced with this situation, the regulations specify as another measure the re-education of the aggressor, which consists of raising awareness and developing a level of knowledge regarding the legal consequences of their actions and the emotional damage, among others, caused to their victim. However, according to the results of the study, re-educating the aggressor in these cases is nothing more than mere indications in the documents. In practice, according to the victims, it does not work because there is no sustained follow-up on the part of the guardianship institutions and, on the other hand, because the aggressors have neither the attitudes nor the predisposition for it. This should be accompanied by awareness-raising actions for aggressors focused on changing attitudes to understand egalitarian styles between men and women (Fariñas et al., 2021).

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The lack of timely, adequate and effective protection measures for women victims of psychological violence in Cerro San Pedro in the district of El Agustino, province and department of Lima affects emotional health and exacerbates the thought towards suicide because they see the possibility of the perpetuity of aggressions by their partners or ex-partners and feel helpless against the possibilities of femicides. Victims report that they do not trust protection measures because they are not effectively enforced. The impediment of harassment, free legal assistance, the removal of the aggressor and the re-education of the aggressor are working for us in a sustained and effective way which leads to the exacerbation of emotional disturbance, decrease in self-esteem, suicide attempts and emotional dependence that, together, directly affect them.

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