

Children should not be mothers!

This editorial on “gender violence” addresses two core issues: the first being a study that highlights around 12 thousand instances of pregnancies among children under 14 years of age every year in Brazil. The majority of cases are black girls, living in the northern region, with the worst outcomes in prenatal care, childbirth and the conditions of live births (low birth weight and Apgar score). Most cases involved victims of presumed rape who did not have access to legal abortion, which has been sanctioned by law since the Civil Code of 1940. The second is the emergence of conservative movements attempting to limit women’s rights, especially in the field of reproductive and sexual health. Many do so by invoking the name of God! For example, the Chamber of Deputies is urgently pushing through Draft Bill of Law 1,904/2024, which sentences cases of abortion to the death penalty, predominantly penalizing girls between the ages of 10 and 14, who are already vulnerable due to the double burden of sexual violence and unwanted pregnancy¹. Fortunately, there is an upsurge of social movements against this retrograde measure and in defense of girls and women.

This thematic issue is, however, much broader in scope. It deals with gender-based violence against women as a complex phenomenon that portrays the dynamics of society, related to social inequities and profound inequalities that limit their access to the notion of dignity². A study of rape victims in Minas Gerais between 2013 and 2021 reveals that the State has reduced access to emergency treatment, with the “Minute-After” Law enacted in Law No. 12,845/2013, and has decreased the likelihood of minors and indigenous people molested by acquaintances receiving treatment. Despite all the progress, Brazilian society continues to be dominated by machismo and structural racism, which is the backdrop to the deplorable retrograde steps.

Research of a qualitative nature investigating the perceptions of victims of violence indicates worsening health, depression, panic attacks, insomnia, eating disorders and alcohol beverage consumption. Analysis of obstetric violence highlights the fact that the occurrence of these events is permeated by issues of race, gender and class. For example, low-income women who practiced self-induced abortion delayed seeking services and were subjected to aggressive, embarrassing and judgmental attitudes from healthcare professionals.

This edition also includes studies on the National Adolescent School-based Health Survey (PeNSE), with a sample of more than 150,000 adolescents, which reveal other contemporary forms of violence, such as cyberbullying, reported by 13.2% of students. This type of aggression occurs more frequently with girls and is associated with a worsening of mental health and the use of drugs and tobacco. The results are a warning sign of an increase in the prevalence of smoking among students, due to the availability of products such as electronic cigarettes and hookahs. In this respect, the law advocated by the industry to allow the sale of electronic cigarettes is perceived as a future menace.

The contributions in this thematic issue provide further evidence on several points that require action by the health sector and society, with a view to meeting the commitments of the UN’s 2030 Agenda, which proposes the elimination of all forms of violence against girls and women! It is imperative to move forward in defending their rights, structuring policies for protection, prevention and access to legal abortion services. For all the above reasons, it is urgent to defeat Bill 1,904/2024, which is currently before the National Congress. “*Children should not be mothers!*”! They are human beings with rights that must be protected by the family and by the State.

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