

Research Article

## THE GROUP “DEVICE” WITH WOMEN VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Priscilla Martins Dornelas<sup>\*</sup>, Andréia Isabel Giacomozzi<sup>\*</sup>, Adriane Roso<sup>\*\*</sup>, Ada Bicego<sup>\*</sup>,  
Patrícia Pioner Abadie<sup>\*</sup>

*Gender-based violence is a violation of human rights and a global public health issue. OMS data indicates that one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence during their lifetime, and in Brazil, the numbers are equally alarming. This study aimed to report on psychological practice in group settings regarding the support of women victims of violence and to reflect on how Psychology is involved in reflective groups of Brazilian women victims of domestic and family violence, as well as recognizing the limits and progress in the use of Psychology in this context. Using methods of direct and participatory observational case study in a support group for women victims of domestic violence, data were analyzed through a constructionist-oriented thematic analysis. The study reveals that participation in these groups provides support, the construction of new reflections, and the broadening of individual perspectives. From the perspective of Social Constructionism and authors in the field of Gender Studies, it was observed that both in-person and online groups facilitated the creation of a support network, helping participants to reframe their experiences of violence. The mirroring technique used promotes identification and solidarity among the women, which is essential for the emotional healing process. The study highlights the importance of psychologists' roles in coordinating these groups, fostering meaningful social and individual changes. In conclusion, the research reaffirms the effectiveness of reflective groups and psychological support in addressing gender-based violence, emphasizing the need for public policies that integrate multidisciplinary approaches to tackle this serious issue.*

*Keywords: Gender violence, reflective groups, psychological support*

### 1. Introduction

Gender-based violence is a widespread and devastating reality that constitutes a severe violation of human rights and a major global public health issue. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), violence against women is endemic, present in all countries and cultures. Statistics reveal that one in three women worldwide suffers physical or sexual violence, whether from partners or non-partners, with young women aged 15 to 24 being the most affected (FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014; WHO, 2021). According to Data

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<sup>\*</sup> Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC)

<sup>\*\*</sup> Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM)

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Senado (2023), 30% of women interviewed in Brazil have already suffered violence from a man, with psychological violence being the most commonly reported.

It is important to emphasize that historically, Brazil was portrayed in early 20th-century socio-anthropological scientific literature as a peaceful country inhabited by a mixed-race population characterized by cordiality and emotional expansiveness (e.g., Freyre, 2003/1933; de Holanda, 1936), which later fostered the myth of racial democracy. However, it is crucial to observe that our country was forged through various forms of violence, against indigenous peoples, black people, and women, violence that continues to persist in the relationships between social groups and against different minority groups (Assini-Meytin et al., 2023; Giacomozzi et al., 2020a; Giacomozzi et al., 2020b; Giacomozzi et al., 2021; Vitali et al., 2021; Vitali et al., 2022; Presotto et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2022), including women (Leandro et al., 2019; Roso et al., 2020; Leandro et al., 2023; Leandro et al., 2024). Such violence has intensified in a context of political polarization that has emerged in recent years in the country (Giacomozzi et al., 2022; Giacomozzi et al., 2023; Giacomozzi et al., 2024).

In Brazil, the figures related to violence against women are also striking (Pasinato, 2014; Agência Senado, 2023; Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 2024), and considering the stigmatization and underreporting of sexual violence, the numbers could be considerably higher (Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2021). Furthermore, the violence is typically perpetrated by the husband or partner, with psychological and moral violence being more common, followed by physical, property, and sexual violence (Agência Senado, 2023). The data also reveals stability in the historical series of studies, suggesting a concerning normalization of violent behavior.

All forms of violence have profound impacts on women's physical and mental health throughout their lives (WHO, 2021). Even after violent episodes have ceased, women may experience lasting consequences, such as injuries, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, emotional constriction, self-concept disturbances, sleep and eating disorders, chronic pain, and a tendency toward alcohol or drug abuse. These effects are also linked to unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and a higher incidence of suicide attempts (Koss, 1990; Karakurt, Smith, & Whiting, 2014; Ogbe, Harmon, Van de Berg, & Degomme, 2020; Roso et al., 2020; Souza, Roso, & Souza, 2022; WHO, 2021; Lorandi et al., 2025).

Beyond the individual suffering, these repercussions generate broader societal costs, affecting national budgets, social cohesion, and overall development. Therefore, understanding the biopsychosocial consequences of violence against women is essential for designing interventions that promote recovery, resilience, and social transformation.

In this regard, studies have indicated that women experience feelings of shame, guilt, and disappointment. Aakvaag et al. (2016) empirically demonstrated, in the U.S. context, that women victims of violence exhibit significantly higher levels of guilt compared to their partners, and their emotions were linked to mental health problems. Beck et al. (2024) research showed that guilt, understood as a trans-diagnostic cognitive-emotional process, is associated with difficulty resolving problems after trauma. Another interesting study conducted by Nussey (2021) among women living in the rural context of KwaZulu-Natal (province in South Africa) emphasized that the process of self-blame and the feeling of shame are related to the naturalization and non-recognition of social and economic inequalities by women victims of violence.

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Beliefs regarding domestic violence tend to normalize and render it invisible, causing many women to feel fear and shame in reporting instances of violence, which perpetuates the cycle of violence (Leandro et al., 2019; Leandro et al., 2023; Leandro et al., 2024). Group dynamics, along with a critical gender analysis, might contribute to expanding the concepts of masculinity, femininity, culture, and power dynamics (Toneli, Beiras & Ried, 2017), especially if groups are understood as “dispositive” (dispositif, in French; dispositio, in Latin—that is, arrangement or ordering), as proposed by Michel Foucault (1980). While a dispositive functions as an intervention on both the subjective and social levels, operating as a device of de-individualization, it simultaneously functions within the logic of politics, of the clinic, and therefore within a logic of (re)invention of oneself and the other(s) in terms of identity and subjectivity (see Benevides, 2009).

Our theoretical approach brings together four interconnected frameworks: social constructionism, feminist theory, gender studies, and popular education. From a social constructionist perspective (Gergen and Gergen, 2010), we understand that meanings are built through dialogue and that language has the potential to transform social realities. This epistemological stance resonates with feminist theory and gender studies (Beiras and Bronz, 2016; Toneli, Beiras and Ried, 2017), which reveal the historical asymmetries of power that sustain gender-based violence. In this sense, efforts to address violence cannot be restricted to policing alone, but must involve a broader set of coordinated strategies aimed at both responding to and preventing violence through adequate preparation and social engagement (Oeschger, Nunlall-Hiralal & Steyn, 2024). Paulo Freire’s notion of popular education (1979) further grounds our understanding of reflective groups as collective learning spaces where participants become agents of their own transformation. Together, these frameworks position reflective groups not merely as therapeutic interventions, but as psychosocial and political spaces for the reconstruction of meaning, solidarity, and social change.

There is a global concern about addressing violence against women within public policies. Given the complexity of the issue, it is common to observe a multidisciplinary approach in practice, involving not only psychologists, but also professionals from the healthcare, social services, and judiciary sectors. The Federal Council of Psychology (CFP, 2013) highlights the multidimensional nature of services for victims, emphasizing the importance of proper training, creative and ethical practices by health professionals, and the need for networking among public services to address the daily challenges.

It is important to note that the role of psychology professionals can be crucial in understanding and intervening in the field of care and prevention of violence against women. According to Aguiar (2018), psychological support can enrich the process of better understanding the family context and gaining new perspectives on the experiences that have occurred. Furthermore, this approach has been broadened to include gender studies, allowing for a more precise and singular approach within the psychological field. Psychological support provides a space for sensitive listening, helping guide and empower women to rebuild their lives from a feminist perspective of autonomy and a sense of entitlement to their rights. Thus, the importance of psychology in addressing issues related to violence against women becomes evident.

Thus, by integrating social constructionism, feminist theory, and popular education, we understand reflective groups as psychosocial devices for the reconstruction of meanings, enabling

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women to re-signify their experiences of violence and to construct narratives of resistance and autonomy.

This paper is based on observations from an initiative that promotes reflective groups for women victims of domestic and family violence, known as the Mirrors Project. The groups are facilitated by psychologists, interns, and outreach staff from the Department of Psychology at the Federal University of Santa Catarina. The project serves as a space for welcoming, reflection, dialogue, and the sharing of experiences and learnings among participants, addressing gender violence topics with a psycho-educational approach. Psychoeducation is understood as the combination of education and psychological support, with an informative and training-oriented nature aimed at action. In this context, the group's activities aim to encourage reflections that foster a better understanding of the topics being discussed. With multidisciplinary collaboration, themes related to expressions and female identity, feelings, work, emotional relationships, gender relations, motherhood, support networks, loneliness, and others of interest to the participants are addressed.

The name of the project, *Mirrors*, derives from Zimmerman (2000). The method employed is that of an open reflective group, with an approach grounded in social constructionism. Group work allows for the collectivization of individual issues and the identification of common concerns. It also serves as a place of support and collective listening for the suffering experienced, providing space for the re-signification of processes and the development of coping strategies (Gomes et al., 2022). Gender-reflective groups, in turn, are seen as tools that promote critical reflection on everyday practices that perpetuate gender norms and challenge traditional gender ideologies (Beiras et al., 2022).

Therefore, considering these aspects, this article may contribute to a deeper understanding of the effects of these practices of violence, analyzing their impact on women's mental health and the psychosocial harm caused by aggression against women. It may provide relevant information for the development of policies and measures, and for the ongoing involvement of psychology professionals in these spaces, with the aim of promoting improvements in this scenario.

It is important to emphasize that a lack of reflection on this issue can lead not only to the immutability of this situation of violence but also to its worsening, bringing consequences both at the individual and social levels. One may consider the increase in impunity, a greater impact on the mental health of victims, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, which prevent social and individual progress. Therefore, it is essential to recognize, reflect, and act to effectively combat this problem (Castro et al., 2020).

Thus, the present article aims to report on psychological practice in group settings related to the reception of women victims of violence and reflect on how psychology is involved in a reflective group for women victims of domestic and family violence, as well as specifically recognizing the limits and progress in the use of psychology within this context.

Efforts to reduce violence against women should be accompanied by multifaceted, network-based community initiatives, aligned with critical perspectives that challenge gender role norms and the normalization of violence (Di Napoli, Procentese, & Visser, 2024). Beiras and Bronz (2016) point out that the popular education described by Paulo Freire is important for the conception of group activities, as it functions as a system of teaching and learning, where participants are encouraged to think, reflect, and actively engage in the learning process. In Reflective Groups,

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this is manifested in the appreciation of creating respectful interactions and integrating various forms of knowledge, as well as formulating questions that stimulate reflections anchored in the individual experiences of each participant.

The systemic, ecological, and complex perspective enables a broad, relational, and contextual view of gender relations, highlighting the multiplicity of issues surrounding the subject. Based on this proposition, we are not dealing with a simple cause-and-effect relationship but rather an intricate set of elements, events, objects, and interconnected dynamics that mutually influence each movement in an interactive and networked process. The groups should be seen as a system, with their forms of interaction, in which the facilitator is also part (Beiras & Bronz, 2016).

In this way, the group tool can and should be used as a psychosocial intervention possibility, where welcoming and reflective group listening allows participants to express what is difficult to verbalize in their daily lives, and their perspectives on the topics brought up, thus creating a space for sharing experiences and working on them to produce reflection on what has been said. The group device can function as a tool to expand reflective perspectives and increase sensitivity to the concepts presented (Gomes et al., 2022). This tool has proven effective and efficient both in face-to-face and online modalities (Lopes et al., 2021).

For this group tool to be successful, it is important to have a good group coordinator, who, according to Gayotto et al. (2003), acts in the group as a guardian, meaning they are responsible for taking care of a field of lived experiences of people who together build a way of operating and move toward a common goal-set-contract established together. The coordinator's goal is to ensure that the group achieves the expected results, facilitating the group members to become aware of their issues, leading to transformation critically.

Finally, gender studies and feminist theories are theoretical fields that bring debates, tensions, and various perspectives. It is important to understand the concept of gender in a political and feminist way, going beyond stereotypes and simplistic domestic tasks. In the Reflective Group, this enables dialogue, new discourses, and narratives about gender relations, challenging inequality and male domination (Beiras & Bronz, 2016).

Given the previous discussion, the Gender Reflective Groups aim to act as a tool in combating domestic and family violence, focusing on providing support for the challenges that arise after the act of reporting, such as the separation process and family relations. Reflective groups are viewed as instruments for destabilizing gender norms and violence, promoting critical reflection on everyday practices that perpetuate gender norms and questioning traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity, domestic tasks, emotions, and gender ideologies. Within the group, it is expected that throughout the meetings, there will be teaching and learning processes among the participants on topics of gender and violence, in addition to reflection and re-signification of their lived experiences of violence.

As previously mentioned, the theoretical foundation of gender-reflective groups is based on Social Constructionism, which highlights language as a producer of realities. In social constructionism, language is conceived as a shared system of meanings that emerges and develops within the context of dialogue, and it is crucial to understand it in its relational dimension rather than individually. Within this framework, language games emerge, highlighting how words are intrinsically intertwined in systems of shared rules and conventions that govern the specific ways of life of particular groups (Gergen & Gergen, 2010). Since language plays a

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fundamental role in the construction and influence of relationships, all values and beliefs, regardless of whether they are considered "good or bad," are also shaped through language. Therefore, effective interventions to promote changes in individuals' ways of life often occur through language, as "it is the narratives present in conversations that link and give meaning to lived experiences and offer other meanings, thus allowing other 'truths' to be constructed" (Costa, 2010, p.100).

Additionally, this theoretical perspective allows us to reject the idea of an absolute truth. Thus, it is feasible to conduct a sensitive analysis of the concepts that define gender relations, and everyday relationship concepts that perpetuate gender stereotypes (Beiras et al., 2022).

Gergen and Gergen (2010) point out that social constructionism is based on a relatively simple idea, but as we explore its implications, this simplicity fades. This happens because social constructionism, the idea the author initially calls simple and clear, forces us to reassess almost all the notions we have been taught about the world and ourselves. When reconsidering these understandings, we are prompted to adopt new and provocative approaches to action, producing new meanings. The ideas of constructionism promote pluralism, encouraging the coexistence of different versions of reality, negotiated among peers. Beiras and Bronz (2016) emphasize that this mediation and the production of new meanings are elaborated by the psychologist during the reflective work within the group interaction space.

Social constructionism guides us to understand that certain discourses are privileged and valued more than others, with this dynamic being constructed and agreed upon socially through power relations. The group facilitator will enable a joint reassessment and transformation of the existing reality. This approach gives voice and visibility to various versions and alternatives of the same issue. Thus, based on these theories, we emphasize the importance of focusing on the relationship, narrative, and facilitation of reflective processes in group and community practices. Each participant in a group contributes with their story, perspectives, and understanding of the experiences lived, enriching the relational process, considering that the constructionist discourse clarifies the role language plays in the construction and production of identity characteristics and ways of acting in the face of situations and experiences, thus further enabling the work of the group facilitator (Beiras & Bronz, 2016).

Beiras and Bronz (2016) guide the facilitator regarding the management of groups from the ideas of social constructionism, in which the facilitator should direct attention within the group to the relationship and reflection, focusing on the process of negotiating meanings and establishing connections with the individual experiences and perspectives of each participant. It is essential to always be attentive to the discourses, narratives, and language, carefully choosing words, voices, and contexts.

From the perspective of community psychology, reflective groups are understood as participatory and community-based interventions that seek to promote both individual and collective transformation. This approach aligns with the field's historical commitment to social justice, empowerment, and the strengthening of community networks. The psychologist's role in this context moves beyond the traditional position of an individual therapist to that of a facilitator of collective reflection and social change, working alongside participants to co-construct meanings and strategies for action, particularly regarding gender relations. In this sense, reflective groups embody the principles of community psychology by combining critical awareness,

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participatory dialogue, and emancipatory practices aimed at transforming the social conditions that sustain gender-based violence. Building on this framework, the present study examines how reflective groups foster processes of meaning reconstruction among women who have experienced domestic and family violence and how these collective practices contribute to transforming narratives of victimization into narratives of resistance and empowerment.

## 2. Study Structure and Procedures

This manuscript is presented as a Report of Community Practices, a format that aims to systematize and critically reflect on professional and community-based intervention experiences. In accordance with this perspective, and drawing on the methodological considerations proposed by Sanfelici and Figueiredo (2014), the present study is characterized as an experience report developed within the context of a supervised basic internship in Psychology at a university in the Southern region of the country. The empirical material derives from participant observations conducted during group dynamics, held both in person and online, as well as from supervisory meetings related to the *Mirrors Project*, a reflective group for women in situations of domestic and family violence. The project is coordinated by the faculty supervisor responsible for the initiative and the last author of this study.

The Mirrors Project was inaugurated in August 2023 through a technical cooperation agreement between the Court of Justice of Santa Catarina (TJSC) and the City Hall of Florianópolis. The university was represented by Prof. Dr. Andreia Giacomozzi from the Department of Psychology, while the TJSC was represented by the Coordinating Body for Women in Situations of Violence (CEVID) and the Specialized Central Service for Victims of Crimes, Offenses, and Domestic and Family Violence (CEAV). Part of the project's activities are interconnected with an international project entitled “Violence Against Latin American Women: A Transcultural Study in Light of Gender Studies and Social Representations Theory”, funded by MCTI/CNPq Notice No. 14/2023. In summary, this project aims to analyze narratives about violence against Latin American women.

The in-person meetings take place in the auditorium of a Polyclinic operated by the City Hall of Florianópolis. The auditorium was adapted for these meetings and organized in a circular layout. The Polyclinic provides specialized services in women’s and children’s health, including multidisciplinary care such as pediatrics and gynecology, as well as diagnostic tests and a vaccination reference center, among others. The online meetings were held via the Google Meet platform.

The participants, during the period referred to in this experience report, were women over 18 years of age, in situations of domestic violence and/or who have previously experienced violence; women who have witnessed domestic violence situations involving close individuals – family, friends. The predominant age range of participants was between 20 and 64 years old. The number of participants changed and varied at each meeting, with an average of 2 to 11 participants in the online group and 1 to 5 participants in the in-person group. Women’s registration for participation occurred through a Google Forms questionnaire.

The team facilitating the project consisted of a doctoral student and a master’s student from the Graduate Program in Psychology at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), seven

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undergraduate psychology students, five interns, and two outreach students, all supervised by the faculty member responsible for the project. Additionally, the project involved the participation of the multidisciplinary team from the Coordinating Body for Women in Situations of Domestic and Family Violence (CEVID/TJSC), consisting of three law graduates, one administration graduate, one psychologist, and one social worker.

For participant registration, the project team developed a form using the Google Forms platform. The invitation for participation and form completion occurred spontaneously and was also offered at healthcare services, the city hall, police departments, CEAV service at TJSC, among others.

Weekly direct and participatory observations were conducted of the orientations, group dynamics of both the online and in-person groups, which were characterized by an open and voluntary format. The field contact occurred between March and July 2024. There were 15 observations in the online group, 14 observations in the in-person group, and 15 observations of supervision with the professor throughout 2023 and 2024.

The observations were guided by the project coordinator and monitored by the local supervisor. The facilitation, management, selection of themes, and participant attendance in the groups were coordinated by the doctoral student and master's student with the support of the interns.

Each session was collaboratively documented by the team through meeting minutes recorded during the activity. These records provide a literal account of the session's structure, as well as the main discussions and interventions that took place. As a research method, the case study is suitable for exploring, describing, and analyzing complex situations that involve groups and the interactions that occur within the dispositive. According to Yin (2010), the case study method involves asking 'how, why?' questions, focusing on contemporary events and "dealing with the operational links that need to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidences" (p.30, Authors' translation), thus not requiring control of behavioral events.

The reflective team was composed of extensionists and interns, and one of its theoretical foundations was Social Constructionism (Gergen and Gergen, 2010), as well as literature from the field of Gender Studies (Beiras, et al., 2022; Beiras et al., 2022; Beiras & Bronz, 2016) and practices proposed by Matos, Machado, Santos, and Machado (2025).

During each session, the reflective support team took concise field notes in real time, focusing on participants' verbal interactions, emotional expressions, and the dialogical exchanges between participants and facilitators. Immediately after the conclusion of each meeting, these notes were expanded and systematized in a debriefing session held by the research team, where observations were discussed collectively and organized into a unified record. The participatory observation process implied an active and situated presence: observers were not external or passive, but rather members of the reflective team who occasionally contributed to group discussions when invited by the facilitator, assisted in managing group dynamics, and participated in post-session reflections. This dual role, as observers and co-participants, allowed for a deeper understanding of the relational, affective, and communicative dimensions of the group process. The material generated was analyzed through a qualitative, constructionist-oriented thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining inductive coding with theoretical sensitivity to categories related to gender, power, and transformation. This iterative analytic process involved

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identifying recurring themes, refining them through team discussions, and selecting representative excerpts that best illustrated the reflective processes and meanings emerging within the groups. Researcher positionality and reflexivity were central to this approach: as psychologists, women, and feminist scholars directly engaged in facilitation and observation, the authors continually examined how their involvement, emotions, and professional backgrounds shaped interpretation, striving to maintain a critical, ethical, and participatory stance consistent with community psychology principles and in accordance with feminist standpoint epistemology, the authors use their lived experiences as resources for embodied analysis and as tools of resistance to patriarchal hegemony. (see Brooks, 2007; Hussey, 2020).

### **3. Results and Discussion**

The following analysis goes beyond a descriptive account of group activities to explore the psychosocial and dialogical mechanisms that emerged during the sessions. Drawing on social constructionism, feminist theory, and community psychology, we interpret participants' narratives as processes of collective meaning-making, where experiences of violence were re-signified through dialogue, recognition, and solidarity. This section reflects on the narratives constructed by the participants during the groups, focusing on the psychologist's handling of the situations and emotions experienced by the participants, as well as the common feelings associated with domestic violence. The monitoring of group management and participation in supervision took place in practice, with guidance provided by the Project coordinator. Thus, the following results and discussions were structured around the perceptions derived from the group activities in both modalities: online and in-person.

The statements were extracted from detailed notes taken by the interns during the sessions, which documented observed interactions. Selection of excerpts was based on qualitative content analysis, focusing on identifying narratives that illustrated the central themes of the discussions and the most significant reflections for the case study. This approach allowed for highlighting accounts that best represented the reflective processes experienced within the group.

#### **3.1 Reflective Groups: From Online to In-Person Modality**

Reflective Groups are a technique in which multiple narratives about how we relate to each other are presented and confronted, where language and dialogue are essential to the work. According to social constructionism, there is a correlation between the way we speak and act upon things, and by actively participating in this process, one can change how we relate to the world. The group is typically coordinated by two people who act as facilitators, guiding the meeting, and two others who are part of the reflective team, which, at the end of the sessions, will bring reflections on what was said, seeking to highlight the new meanings and insights brought by the group (Beiras & Bronz, 2016).

It is important to highlight that the work of authors Beiras and Bronz (2016) on reflective groups focuses on groups for men who have committed violence. However, the methodology and theoretical foundations of reflective groups extend and apply to groups for women in situations of domestic violence. This technique combines the theoretical foundations of social

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constructionism, popular education, systemic, ecological, and complex perspectives, as well as gender studies and feminist theories. Social constructionism recognizes language as a creator of realities. Its analysis opens the space for potential social transformation in contexts related to violence. Additionally, this theoretical perspective leads us to question the existence of an absolute truth. Therefore, it is possible to conduct a sensitive analysis of what it means to "be a man" and what is considered to "be a woman" for participants, through work that raises awareness of everyday language that perpetuates gender stereotypes (Beiras et al., 2022).

The Mirrors Project is characterized as a group modality through coordination, as it involves a plural number of participants, common goals, temporality, an offered space, and a context (Andaló, 2006). The offered modalities, whether online or in person, are chosen based on the interest and possibility of the female participant, reflecting the characteristic of being a group for Women in Situations of Violence. Considering the immediate referrals that arise in services for women's protection, there is a constant demand for the integration of new participants. Furthermore, the freedom of participation also fosters the cultivation of a welcoming environment for learning and the exchange of experiences.

Psychology, including community psychology, has been attentive to the transformations of the contemporary world and has therefore invested in online modalities as a tool for expanding care. The digital environment has become a legitimate space for listening, building connections, and reconstructing narratives. The online format offers important advantages, such as greater accessibility and the inclusion of more people in care processes, fostering the participation of women from different regions. Connected devices not only mediate relationships but also reshape identities and bonds (Sarmiento, 2021).

During the implementation of the groups, greater participation was observed in the online group compared to the in-person group, due to the absence of travel and the ease of adapting to daily routines. Some participants even joined from their vehicles on their way home. According to the team's observations, women with longer work hours or commutes tended to prefer the online format.

To better contextualize the dynamics carried out in the meetings and subsequently present the participants' statements, it is important to revisit the theoretical frameworks of this study. This section analyzes how women's participation in reflective gender groups contributes to the development of support networks, critical reflections, and the re-signification of experiences. The reflections were guided by social constructionist and feminist perspectives, and the analysis uses dialogue, shared experiences, and collective reflection as means of coping, breaking isolation, and developing strategies to deal with and overcome the cycle of violence.

In both groups, both in-person and online, a strengthened support network was observed, with particular emphasis on the greater welcoming of participants in the in-person group, where it was possible to observe participants arriving together, engaging in conversations, inviting each other to cultural events in the city, and other more personal invitations. Furthermore, it was noted, according to the participants' accounts, that participation in the reflective gender groups and the collectivization of demands enabled the construction of new reflections and an expansion of perspectives. One participant from the online group emphasized the importance of these exchanges:

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*"I want to thank XXX, who gave me a piece of advice last week that really helped me deal with the conflict at work." (P1, online group)*

In a conversation about confronting violence against women, some participants highlighted the group as an important strategy:

*"As part of taking care of my mental health and self-awareness, I believe that individual therapy, physical exercise, and the group help me a lot." (P2, participant of both online and in-person groups, recorded in the online group).*

Among the factors that contribute to women staying in abusive relationships, the feeling of isolation stands out, which can be a subjective feeling and/or a controlling tactic by the abuser, often leading to feelings of incapacity to break the cycle of violence. As said by one participant:

*"When I was with my ex, he manipulated everyone, others would say: you always seem fine." (P3, online group)*

Another participant added:

*"Outside, they are very nice, but only those who live with them know." (P4, online group)*

The group practices proposed by the group encourage the reflection that the woman who has survived violence is not alone, thereby expanding the possibilities for breaking the cycle of violence.

*"When you stay isolated for too long, it's hard to believe in your own truth, you start to doubt yourself" ... "I see the groups as a support network." (P5, online group)*

These accounts illustrate the mechanism of collective witnessing that characterizes reflective groups. From a social constructionist and feminist perspective, sharing experiences within a dialogical space allows participants to reconstruct meaning through the acknowledgment of others' narratives. What begins as isolation gradually shifts toward belonging, transforming silence into speech and vulnerability into connection, a process consistent with Freire's notion of "conscientização" [conscientization] (Freire, 2008) and with feminist understandings of empowerment as relational rather than individual.

### ***3.2. Reflective Group as a Facilitator of Care for Women in Situations of Domestic Violence***

#### ***Footnotes***

In the face of violence, therapeutic groups are considered an essential support, often offering psychoeducational and reflective approaches to participants. Through group meetings with participants and their narratives, it became evident that participating in the group and being in contact with other women who had gone through similar situations of violence helped in the process of improving mental health. After a few meetings, we encountered testimonies such as:

*"I am focused on my healing, I've put myself first. The starting point is to respect yourself." (P2, participant of both online and in-person groups, recorded in the online group)*

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“I raised my children, and I know who I am. I want to stop caring about what others think and live in peace.” (P5, online group)

As previously mentioned, the name of the project derives from the technique of mirroring, precisely to facilitate identification among participants. During the meetings, the women precisely expressed the feeling of seeing themselves in a mirror when hearing the accounts of other group members.

*“I really identified with XXX’s story from a few meetings ago. I’ve been strengthening myself to face the challenges.”* (P6, in-person group). After sharing this account, the participant became emotional and received a hug from the person she was referring to.

*“What you said made me realize that the first relationship we have is with ourselves, the first relationship we need to take care of and be well. You’ve said that here. Thank you for reminding me.”* (P1, online group)

With this in mind, the importance of this process for the creation of bonds is reflected upon, which, as explained by Gayotto (2003), is essential for the proper functioning of the group and for the group mediator to make an effective intervention. This reflective group model "constitutes a space for the inclusion of feelings, subjectivity, and relationships within a group system of coexistence and reflection" (Acosta, 2004, p. 23). It is not a therapeutic work per se; however, it has therapeutic outcomes, as the group allows for an exchange of common experiences and shared stories, creating a space for welcome, identification, and consequently the construction of alternatives for situations of domestic violence (Acosta, 2004).

The mirroring process described by participants can be interpreted as a form of collective reflexivity. When one woman recognizes her own story in another’s narrative, the relational dynamic enables both identification and differentiation, expanding the possibilities for self-understanding. This resonates with feminist epistemologies that value intersubjectivity and with community psychology’s emphasis on solidarity as a foundation for healing and social change.

Regarding the technique of reflective groups, which is based on the theoretical foundations of popular education, Freire (1979) emphasizes that a distancing from the object is necessary to develop a critical perspective and reflect on reality. Therefore, it is understood that when participants distance themselves from their reality, they are able to observe it and, thus, transform it. It is precisely in the group that these women can develop a different and critical perspective on their reality. By hearing the stories of other participants who are in situations similar to theirs, they can reflect on their own reality and experiences, distancing themselves from them to better transform them (Ramos & Oltramari, 2010).

Moreover, a support and care network is created among the women through the empathy and welcoming movement that arises during the exchange of experiences and dialogues that occur in the group.

*“Thank you for this group existing. In the last meeting, I was in crisis, and the meeting was very important because on Monday and Tuesday I was feeling extremely bad, but on Wednesday (after the group) I woke up feeling better.”* (P1, online group)

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Ramos and Oltramari (2010) point out the importance of this support network for reflecting on mutual grievances, enabling participants to learn new ways of thinking and acting in response to the dynamics of violence. In this regard, our legislation identifies the group-based approach as an effective and crucial strategy to provide support in the post-reporting phase, during separation processes, and in the formation of a support network (Brazil, 2006).

### **3.3 The role of the psychologist in Group Coordination**

As mentioned earlier, the coordination of the group plays a fundamental role in ensuring the effective functioning of the group. According to Gayotto et al. (2003), the coordinator acts as a guardian, taking care of the shared experiences and guiding the group toward a common goal. The coordinator facilitates the members' critical awareness, promoting transformation and ensuring that the expected outcomes are achieved.

In this regard, throughout the Mirrors group's meetings, starting from the participants' narratives, the coordinators were able to "seamlessly" connect the reported situations with reflections on violence, gender issues, machismo, and any topics that could contribute to the discussion, always bringing it back to the group as a whole, synthesizing everything, and offering the group a reflection.

At the end of one in-person meeting, the coordinator highlighted the difficulties of the challenges faced in rebuilding life after experiencing violence and asked the participants what gave them hope, what motivated them to continue in the healing process.

"My mind, I am studying a lot to improve myself." (P7, in-person group)

"My son, I want to be more actively involved in his life as a mother." (P8, in-person group)

"My life is my most valuable asset, I want to treat myself well, as I deserve, even though my family doesn't do the same." (P9, in-person group)

In another meeting, a dynamic activity was carried out on the theme "violence and male chauvinism in everyday life." The team prepared and presented some popular phrases based on the supervision sessions, such as "without me, you have no one else" and "if you don't have sex without a condom, I'll find someone who will." The participants were asked to read the phrases and discuss whether they had ever heard or said any of them, how they felt hearing them, and whether they considered them violent. During the dynamic, the participants themselves identified these phrases within the context of their abusive relationships. After some interventions by the coordinator and the interns who were part of the reflective team, the women were able to reflect on how these phrases blamed them for their partner's violent behavior and affected their own behavior and feelings.

In another meeting, held in the online group and addressing a similar theme, the coordinator shared the importance of deconstructing the male identity and reflecting on how the traditional male performance opposes the feminine, feeding into violence. In this discussion, the participants shared:

"A lot of the violence I suffer is directed at my daughter. Men are not naturally taught to care, but I can't accept that he doesn't care about their basic health needs. The child

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protection advisor said I should create a step-by-step guide for him because taking care of health is not 'a man's thing.' (P10, online group)

"Men escalate in brutality, they are not brutal by nature, but I am shocked by the brutality... there is a clear escalation of violence." (P5, online group)

The coordinator emphasized that one of the main challenges in facing violence against women is dealing with the feeling of injustice. She highlighted that becoming informed, getting to know oneself, and engaging in the process are ways to resist this reality.

Kaufman (2001) discusses how the demands and structure of patriarchal societies favor the manifestation of violence, which functions to maintain power and privileges directed toward the male population. It is essential to recognize that the objective of all forms of violence is to maintain one group's power and control over another, and the violence of men against women follows this reasoning. According to Lima et al. (2007), it is through violence that men attempt to assume or maintain control over the relationship, even when such control is merely illusory.

According to Andersen (2002), through group dialogue, the coordinator can explore new ways to describe the experience, facilitating the re-signification of the narrative. In this context, these conversations brought up feelings of anger, guilt, and regret, which were addressed by encouraging reflections to reinterpret these experiences, emphasizing the impossibility of changing the past, but the freedom to work on the present.

Finally, the coordinators' actions align with the perspective of Gayotto and colleagues (2003) regarding the role of the coordinator. She intervenes by identifying when the group needs her guidance to ensure the continuity of the group's goals. In several meetings, the psychologists encouraged reflections and questions about different ways of interpreting their experiences, stimulating the transition from a victim role to a more active posture, taking responsibility for their own lives. After all, as pointed out by Roso, Souza, and Santos (2022), instead of being victims, they are survivors, and by valuing proactivity, we are promoting mental health.

### **3.4 Psychosocial Effects of Gender Violence**

The psychosocial effects of gender violence were identified throughout the group sessions, confirming existing literature and the experiences shared in this account. Feelings of guilt, fear of engaging in future relationships, self-blame, emotional dependence, low self-esteem, risk behaviors, social isolation and avoidance, substance abuse, psychiatric hospitalizations, and diagnoses of depression and anxiety demonstrate the impact of gender violence on the participants' mental health.

The feeling of guilt, in particular, emerged repeatedly in the narratives of different participants, showing psychological distress and a sense of victim-blaming. Women reported various nuances of guilt, sometimes felt naturally and at other times influenced by friends, colleagues, family, children, or even the perpetrator of the violence.

"I feel guilty for the time that passed, the relationships I had, the distance from my children. It's not exactly a feeling of guilt, but a sense of loss." (P3, online group)

Among the stories, the guilt for staying in the relationship, forgiving the perpetrator, repeatedly engaging with violent men, neglecting their own life, losing precious time, breaking

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up with the abuser, reporting the violence, or affecting their children's relationship with their father, stood out.

"I feel guilty for having put the protective measure in place and then going back home. For distancing the child from their father." (P11, online group)

The recurring theme of guilt reveals the moral and emotional dimensions through which patriarchy regulates women's subjectivities. Within the group dialogue, guilt was not treated as a symptom but as a shared cultural narrative open to deconstruction. By naming and questioning it collectively, participants engaged in a process of re-signification that transformed personal suffering into political awareness, reflecting the constructionist idea that new meanings emerge through dialogue and reflexivity.

It is important to note that maternal and romantic love are cultural artifacts (see Badinter, 1981; Zanello, 2020) that often contribute to a woman's decision to remain in an abusive relationship. Once chosen by a man, she feels the responsibility to maintain the relationship, and as a mother, her first concern is her children. All these cultural demands fall on the woman (Dornelas, 2019), making it more difficult for her to leave the violent relationship (Nieswald & Giacomozzi, 2024).

Another recurring feeling is fear. Participants reported the desire to establish new, healthy relationships, but most expressed difficulties in doing so.

"Now that I'm single, I catch myself wondering about: I'm with one guy, then another, what will others think?" (P2, participant of both online and in-person groups, recorded in the online group).

In this sense, violence against women is the result of a process determined by education, often beginning in childhood, representing part of male socialization. Certain educational features contribute to forming ideas of power inequality between men and women, as well as justifying privileges for men. For example, sexuality is encouraged in men and repressed in women, and boys are encouraged to be more autonomous and have more freedom (Lima et al., 2007).

The lack of confidence and fear of being in another violent situation causes some women to choose not to enter new relationships, once again reflecting the scars of violence and assuming a kind of self-blame for the violence they experienced (Diniz & Angelim, 2003).

"I haven't dated since I separated in December 2016, though I met some guys, I couldn't commit to any relationship. I have this tendency to attract problematic people." (P10, online group)

It's understood that feelings of guilt, fear, and anxiety are deeply influenced by the social and cultural structures perpetuated by patriarchy. There is often the diffusion of the idea that women are responsible for maintaining romantic relationships and family unity, even in abusive situations, and this responsibility is internalized, causing guilt and psychological distress.

The approach taken by the facilitators aimed to present new ways of dealing with different situations through the exposure of feelings and collective reflection. Each meeting offered guidance and coping strategies. From these approaches, it was possible to access reflections and change proposals made directly by the participants. For example, the conclusions drawn by participants, after clarifications and dialogues, on how to cope with the feeling of guilt. In this meeting, we began the discussion with the phrase "I feel guilty for" and followed up with "How

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can I empower myself to cope." As empowering strategies, they mentioned: self-care, discipline, balanced nutrition, emotional cleaning, understanding life's purpose, not abandoning themselves, and putting themselves first.

"The main role of guilt is in having abandoned myself. After today's meeting, I realized that I need to reconnect with myself. Re-signify. It teaches me: there are things that are impossible to change, you can't save people." (P3, online group)

Empowerment emerged not as a linear outcome but as a dialogical process rooted in mutual recognition and action. Through reflective dialogue, participants reconstructed their sense of agency, shifting from internalized blame toward collective awareness of structural oppression. In this sense, empowerment operated as both an individual and collective process of social transformation, aligning with community psychology's commitment to critical consciousness and participatory change. In this sense, Paulo Freire's term "conscientização" seems more holistic for accounting for the phenomenon involving the effects of reflective groups.

Across these themes, the reflective group functioned as a psychosocial and political space that bridged the individual and the collective. Language and dialogue, as emphasized by social constructionism, were not mere communication tools but the very medium through which participants recreated meanings and identities. The processes of witnessing, mirroring, and empowerment reveal how change occurs in reflective groups, not through therapeutic correction, but through the co-construction of narratives that transform isolation into solidarity and vulnerability into collective strength.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The analysis of the reflective groups from the Mirrors Project highlights the complexity of gender violence experiences and the plurality of perspectives that provided an opportunity to expand knowledge on how gender relations manifest and can affect subjectivity.

The results obtained align with the theoretical foundation and literature presented on the effectiveness of reflective groups and mirroring techniques in the emotional support of victims of gender violence. It was also observed that the psychosocial impact on the participants' individual stories reflects the social and cultural structures influenced and perpetuated by patriarchy. Furthermore, the depth and variety of experiences confirm the importance of analyzing multidisciplinary approaches based on a dynamic perspective with a plurality of meanings, such as social constructionism.

The findings of this study highlight the relevance of reflective groups as psychosocial devices for collective meaning-making, emotional support, and empowerment among women who have experienced domestic and family violence. Beyond their therapeutic dimension, these groups function as community-based interventions that foster solidarity, critical awareness, and agency. The project demonstrates the potential of universities to act as mediating institutions in local protection networks, linking academic training, research, and extension activities to public policies for the prevention of gender-based violence. This partnership between higher education and the justice system illustrates how academic institutions can contribute to community development through participatory and dialogical methodologies. For community psychology,

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such initiatives underscore the value of collaborative models that combine education, reflection, and social action as tools for transformation.

While the open group format fostered accessibility and inclusiveness, it also presented important challenges for the depth and continuity of the reflective process. The constant turnover of participants, differences in levels of engagement, and the heterogeneity of experiences made it difficult to sustain collective narratives and to evaluate the long-term effects of group participation. Attendance varied considerably across meetings, ranging from two to eleven participants online and one to five in person, which meant that some women were observed multiple times while others participated only once. This variability enriched the diversity of perspectives but limited the representativeness of the findings and prevented longitudinal analysis of individual change. The dual role of facilitators as both researchers and practitioners required ongoing reflexivity to balance care ethics with analytical distance. Another limitation was the insufficient exploration of intersectionality. Although the project acknowledged Brazil's structural inequalities and its history of violence against women, particularly Black and Indigenous women, the sessions did not explicitly examine how race, class, and ethnicity intersect with gender in shaping experiences of violence and access to support networks. Future cycles of the project should include intersectional dialogue, strategies for participant continuity, and targeted outreach, ensuring that reflective group practices more fully represent the diverse realities of women affected by domestic and family violence in Brazil.

This study also invites reflection on the positionality of the research team. The project involved undergraduate and graduate psychology students, interns, extensionists, and a supervising professor, working in collaboration with professionals from the court system. This collective configuration shaped both the process and the outcomes of the intervention. The combination of academic training, professional practice, and institutional partnership demanded constant negotiation of roles, power dynamics, and ethical responsibilities within the team. Acknowledging these positionalities reinforces transparency and aligns with community psychology's emphasis on reflexive, participatory, and contextually grounded research. Finally, future research should explore possibilities for scaling up similar interventions, integrating reflective groups into broader public policies, and evaluating their long-term impacts on women's empowerment, community resilience and in the process of "conscientização".

As contributions of this study, the importance of psychological support, group support, protective measures, educational public policies, and networked work in the recovery of domestic violence victims can be highlighted. For future studies, it is suggested to include a longitudinal follow-up to evaluate the long-term effects of the interventions and the creation of, simultaneously, closed groups with long duration. Additionally, we believe that exploring new psychological support techniques and integrating digital technologies to reach a larger number of participants can further increase the positive impact of these initiatives.

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