

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: AN ANALYSIS OF BRAZILIAN PUBLIC SOURCES

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ABSTRACT

This study has the objective of to collect Brazilian public data on sexual violence complaints against children and adolescents, from 2012 to 2021, and to evaluate whether the data sources allow a historical, systematically standardized and qualified analysis, which protect and promote the fundamental rights of children and adolescents. It was possible to verify the difficult it is to

make a historical and reliable epidemiological survey of the reality of violations. It is necessary to overcome moral barriers to protect of the vulnerable, assuming the responsibilities and provide actions that aim to engage everyone to respect human dignity and build a society that does not allow or legitimize violence.

KEYWORDS: Childhood, Human Rights, Gender Violence, Vulnerability, Bioethics.

VIOLÊNCIA SEXUAL CONTRA CRIANÇAS E ADOLESCENTES: UMA ANÁLISE DE FONTES PÚBLICAS BRASILEIRAS

RESUMO

Este estudo foi realizado com o objetivo de levantar dados públicos brasileiros de notificações de violência sexual contra crianças e adolescentes, entre 2012 e 2021, e avaliar se essas possibilitam uma análise histórica, sistematicamente padronizadas e de qualidade, que proteja e promova os direitos fundamentais das crianças e adolescentes. Foi possível verificar a dificuldade de um

levantamento epidemiológico histórico e fidedigno à realidade das violações. Faz-se necessário ultrapassar barreiras morais para proteção dos vulneráveis, assumindo responsabilidades e ações que visem o comprometimento de todos no respeito à dignidade humana e com uma sociedade que não permita e legitime a violência.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Infância, Direitos Humanos, Violência de Gênero, Vulnerabilidade, Bioética.

1 INTRODUCTION

Scenes of violence sometimes permeate our daily experiences and are even deeply ingrained in our culture. Violence is a multifaceted phenomenon observed in almost all communities since ancient times. It stems from individual, collective, social, and cultural interactions within societies (Sanches, Ramos, Araújo, Zaleski, & Rozin, 2019a). While violence is not a new phenomenon, research on its causes and consequences have only emerged the past two decades (Ferreira & Azambuja, 2011).

In daily life, violence becomes tangible, manifests itself, and affects everyone, thereby perpetuating and establishing new social barriers to human emancipation. In their modes of coexistence, individuals give form to multiple dimensions of intersecting violence, each with varying degrees of objective and subjective implications for both the perpetrators and recipients. These manifestations occur within historical contexts defined by prevailing societal norms (CEEVSCA & SEASTER, 2021).

Violence is understood as a sociocultural phenomenon that can lead to social, physical, emotional, psychological, and cognitive consequences. Hence, it can impact both collective and individual health throughout one's lifetime (Sanches, Araújo, Ramos, Rozin, & Rauli, 2019b). It represents a multifaceted issue deeply rooted in cultural traditions, touching upon the realms of morality and safeguarding of human rights (Trindade, Linhares, Vanrell, Godoy, Martins, & Barbas, 2014). Violence can be defined as any breach of a victim's integrity, be it physical, psychological, sexual, or moral (Saffioti, 2004).

Moreover, violence is multifaceted, not singular. Deriving from the Latin word *vis*, which means strength, it encompasses notions of coercion and the exertion of physical dominance over another. Violent events are related to conflicts of authority, power struggles, and desires to dominate, control, or annihilate another or their possessions. The perceptions of these violent actions vary; they can be either approved or disapproved, considered legal or illegal, or based on established social norms upheld by traditional customs or by societal legal structures. A primary challenge in conceptualizing violence lies in the fact that it is an experiential phenomenon and violent events are subjected to society's moral judgment (Minayo, 2005).

Behind acts of violence lies a cultural mindset that objectifies others for personal pleasure, labeling certain individuals as "inferior". In turn, this fosters a culture that especially trivializes sexual violence. Violence directly conflicts with ethical principles because it treats rational and sentient beings, equipped with language and freedom, as mere objects who are irrational, insensible, silent, and passive. As ethics is inherently tied to a rational, willing, free, and responsible individual, regarding them as lacking reason, will, freedom, or responsibility essentially means dehumanizing them and treating them as mere objects. Violence strikes at the very core of ethical discourse, which is the common good, as the aggressor imposes on their victim something they would not wish upon themselves (Chauí, 2017).

Although violence against children has become commonplace, the vulnerability associated with it must be acknowledged, not denied or suppressed (Sanches *et al.*, 2019a). According to Bressan and Loch (2018), situations of violence involving children and adolescents are directly linked to power dynamics (adult/child and male/female) situated within the temporal and intrafamilial social contexts. We must interrupt the cycle of violence and deconstruct these culturally ingrained relationships of inequality.

The historical yet unnatural asymmetrical relationships between men and women, and adults and children manifest in interpersonal and family dynamics through an education rooted in adult-centric (emphasizing the adult's superiority over the child), phallocentric (highlighting unequal gender relations within the family), and androcentric (overvaluing the male) perspectives (Vieira, 2018).

The World Health Organization's (WHO; 2002) declaration in its World Report on Violence and Health holds true even today: violence is among the most significant public health challenges globally. The report defines violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, whether threatened or consumed, against oneself, another individual, or against a group or community, leading to or with high potential for injury, death, psychological harm, developmental disability, or deprivation of rights. Meanwhile, the WHO (2002) defines violence against children as abuse and neglect towards individuals under the age of 18. This includes all forms of physical and psychological maltreatment, sexual violence, neglect, and commercial exploitation or anything else that may harm a child's health, development, or dignity, or endanger their survival within the context of a relationship characterized by responsibility, trust, or power. While twenty years have passed since this report's release, minimal tangible action has been taken by society to eradicate this infringement on the rights of children and adolescents.

Violence against children is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that takes place globally and is connected to a myriad of cultural, social, and economic factors. In Brazil, it impacts thousands of children and youths daily, often insidiously, thereby undermining their quality of life and physical, emotional, intellectual, and social development (Childhood Brasil, 2020a). Studies on childhood violence typically show that violence against children can adversely impact their psychophysical development, increase their vulnerability, and lead to increased social isolation. The severity of the damage from violence is partly contingent upon factors such as the child's age and gender, nature of the violence, intensity and frequency of the abuse, and identity of the perpetrator, among others (Colonetti, 2019).

In Brazil, sexual violence ranks as the second most prevalent form of violence against children. It is defined as the exploitation of a child or adolescent for the sexual gratification of an adult or older adolescent. It encompasses any sexual act or game in which the perpetrator seeks to sexually stimulate the child or adolescent, or uses them for their own sexual satisfaction (Jorge, Waksman, Pfeiffer, & Harada, 2018). Such acts can occur regardless of the relationship between the perpetrator and victim, and can happen in various settings, including domestic and educational environments (Da Silva & Oliveira, 2017). Sexual violence can include specific forms of violence, such

as sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, child pornography, and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes.

Sexual violence deprives children and adolescents of their status as rights-bearing individuals, thus undermining their inherent human dignity. This type of violence objectifies children and adolescents, turning them into mere objects and their bodies into commodities to fulfill the desires and fantasies of adults, often for financial gain. Sexual violence is the concealed and trivialized facet of violence because it targets individuals who mostly are unable to fully articulate their fears, pain, and expose situations which infringe upon their rights and degrade the human condition (Vieira, 2018). The power dynamic is a defining feature of abusive relationships, wherein the aggressor exploits economic, temporal, or physical advantages to manipulate a situation and derive sexual pleasure from a victim who lacks the psychological and physical capacity for such acts (Dos Santos, Pelisoli, & Dell'aglio, 2012).

Domestic violence, for example, does not have its amount fully known, since, in most cases, it is restricted to the limits of households and families, not reaching the attention of the authorities, since the official information systems still provide a summary description of these events without allowing to know in detail the profile of the victim and her possible aggressor (Jorge et al., 2018).

In Brazil, the mandatory reporting of violence against children and adolescents was established by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA), enacted by Law No. 8.069/1990. In 2001, the Ministry of Health issued Ordinance No. 1,968, which mandated notifying the appropriate authorities about suspected or confirmed cases of abuse against children and adolescents served by Health Unic System institutions (Brazil, 2016).

Identifying cases of violence against children underscores the need to protect them. This endeavor formally begins with the mandatory notification. This notification enables the investigation of various violence-related factors, thereby making it a potent tool for public policy (Cabral, Mendonça & Rodrigues, 2021). Therefore, the process of completing the notification form is of utmost importance. Importantly, it should be done not with insensitivity, but with an ethical approach, symbolizing a moment of attention and care for the victim. This notification helps connect the health sector and legal system, promoting the development of a multidisciplinary and inter-institutional network committed to safeguarding the rights of children and adolescents (Sanches *et al.* 2019a).

Data and report records are important tools for planning public and social policies aimed at addressing sexual violence. However, Brazil currently has no unified database which captures the prevention or mobilization processes that track actions against sexual violence towards children and adolescents. Furthermore, a consolidated system is missing which logs notifications, treatments, and referrals from medical, social, psychological, legal, or police domains in response to incidents of violence. This shortcoming stems from a lack of intersectoral actions, collaborative and interdisciplinary planning, and financial investment geared towards addressing sexual violence against children and adolescents (CEEVSCA & SEASTER, 2021).

Despite the obligation to report cases of child sexual abuse, working with data in Brazil has historically been a challenge. This is due to difficulties in obtaining and centralizing information. Consequently, the available data often do not accurately reflect the true extent of the issue in society (Childhood Brasil, 2020a). Moreover, quantifying and characterizing this form of violence remains a challenge, as much of the data are not systematically collected and standardized (UNICEF, 2021).

Given the alarming numbers of notifications of sexual violence against children and adolescents coupled with high underreporting rates and devastating consequences for victims, this study gathered public data on reports of sexual violence against children and adolescents over the past 10 years in Brazil. The goal was to determine whether these data sources provide a systematically standardized and high-quality historical analysis that safeguards and promotes the fundamental rights of children and adolescents.

This study's insights can be used to advance the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹, with a particular focus on two goals: ODS 5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in both public and private spheres, including trafficking as well as sexual and other forms of exploitation; and ODS 16.2: End abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence and torture against children.

2 METODOLOGY

This is a descriptive mixed methods study of the epidemiological profile of sexual violence against children and adolescents based on documentary evidence and a mixed-method approach (quantitative and qualitative). Data were collected from public records from 2012 to 2022, including information on reported cases of sexual violence against children and adolescents in Brazil.

The following steps were taken: identifying which public sources provided data on notifications of sexual violence against children and adolescents between 2012 and 2022; determining the type of information offered; examining the consistency of information across sources; assessing the feasibility of producing a reliable historical mapping of the notifications; and discussing whether these data support or hinder the protection of children.

¹ <https://brasil.un.org/pt-br/sdgs>

Table 1

Public sources of notifications of sexual violence against children and adolescents analyzed

Websites	Data from the National Human Rights Ombudsman (<i>Ouvidoria Nacional dos Direitos Humanos</i> , ONDH – Dial 100) ²
	DATASUS (SINAN) ³
	ABRINQ Foundation - Observatory on Child and Adolescent Rights ⁴
	Safernet (Childhood Brasil): Reports on online child pornography ⁵
Reports	ONDH - Human Rights Helpline (Dial 100) 2017 Report - Ombudsman Overview (Ministry of Human Rights) (Brazil, 2018)
	ONDH - Human Rights Helpline (Dial 100) 2019 Report (Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights) (Brazil, 2019)
	Childhood Brasil (data from the Human Rights Helpline (Dial 100) (Ministry of Health and Public Security) (Childhood, 2020c)
Booklet	Human Rights Helpline (Dial 100): 2021 Maio Laranja (Orange May) Campaign Booklet (Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights) (Brazil, 2021b)
Yearbooks	2020 Brazilian Public Security Yearbook - Sexual Assault of Vulnerable Individuals (FBSP, 2020)
	2021 Brazilian Public Security Yearbook - Sexual Assault of Vulnerable Individuals (FBSP, 2021)

Notice. Produced by authors, 2023.

3 RESULTS

We analyzed 10 public data sources containing number of reports on sexual violence against children and adolescents from 2012 to 2022 and identified 304,942 reported cases. Clearly, the number of reports across and within different sources vary significantly. These numbers do not present a consistent, systematized, and standardized overview of the reports in recent years, which hinders a comprehensive analysis of this issue.

Table 2 shows the number of reports from (highest reporting rates from each source) and years covered by each source.

² <https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/ondh/painel-de-dados>

³ <http://tabnet.datasus.gov.br/cgi/tabcgi.exe?sinannet/violencia/bases/violebrnet.def>

⁴ <https://observatoriocrianca.org.br/cenario-infancia/temas/violencia>

⁵ <https://new.safernet.org.br/>

Table 2

Notifications of sexual violence against children and adolescents from public sources by year.

PUBLIC SOURCES/YEAR	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
ONDH									24,504	18,784	18,869
DATASUS	22,327	26,281	27,689	27,820	31,122	37,379	42,085	45,878	29,116	20,251	
ABRINQ Foundation	17,336	20,561	21,361	21,165	23,493	27,971	31,800	34,711	29,116		
2017 Report					15,707	20,330					
2019 Report							19,771	21,740			
2021 Booklet									14,621		
2020 Yearbook								49,395			
2021 Yearbook									33,974		
2022 Yearbook										45,994	
Dial 100 - Childhood	37,842	32,261	22,836	17,133	15,692	24,736	17,073	9,552			
Ministry of Health - Childhood	17,336	20,557	21,274	21,353	23,751	23,456					
Safernet - Childhood	74,146	54,221	51,553	24,049	20,195	31,279	57,851	75,621			
Public Security Data - Childhood									25,984		

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The National Ombudsman for Human Rights (ONDH) serves as a communication channel between civil society and the government, with the aim of receiving reports concerning human rights violations. One of the reporting mechanisms is the Human Rights Hotline, also known as Dial 100.⁶

The ONDH data panel provides data on sexual violence against children and adolescents for the years 2020 and 2023. This data pertains to the profiles of both the victim and suspect, and includes aspects such as age range, gender, ethnicity, level of education, income bracket, nationality, country of origin, and the relationship between the victim and suspect. In 2020, the total number of reported cases of sexual violence against children and adolescents aged 0 to 17 years

⁶ This was established in 1997 by non-governmental organizations dedicated to the protection of children and adolescents. The "Disque-Denúncia" or "Helpline" became fully operational in 2003 under the direct oversight of the Federal Government. In 2006, it was granted the emergency public utility service number "100," valid across the country.

was approximately 24,510. This number was 18,784 and 18,869 in 2021 and 2022, respectively. The data for 2023 covers only the months of January and February, totaling 4,537 cases.

Another source of data is the Informatics Department of the Unified Health System called DATASUS, which provides access to records from the Notifiable Diseases Information System (SINAN) on Domestic, Sexual, and Other Interpersonal Forms of Violence. The data pertain to the number of cases of sexual violence against children and adolescents reported each year; age group, gender, and ethnicity of the sexually abused children; location of the incident, residence, and report; type of sexual violence; and the relationship or degree of kinship to the likely perpetrator of the violence. This platform has data from 2009 to 2021. The DATASUS records reveal 309,948 cases of sexual violence against children and adolescents (aged 0 to 19 years) between 2012 and 2021.

The ABRINQ Foundation provides a virtual platform that facilitates access to key social indicators directly and indirectly related to children and adolescents in Brazil. This platform reports the absolute number of reported cases of sexual violence against children and adolescents (aged between zero and 19) between 2009 and 2020 within specific geographical boundaries and age groups of the victims. The available data encompass sexual violence, sexual harassment, rape, and sexual exploitation by age group, gender, ethnicity, and educational level of the victims. From 2012 to 2020, the total number of notifications on this platform was 227,514.

Next, the 2017 Report (Brazil, 2018), 2019 Report (Brazil, 2019), and 2021 Maio Laranja Booklet (Brazil, 2021b) provide data related to the services provided by Dial 100. The 2017 Report only discloses the aggregate total of reports of violence against children and adolescents for the years 2016 and 2017 (15,707 and 20,330, respectively). In contrast, the 2019 Report not only reveals the total number of reports for 2018 and 2019 (17,073 and 17,029, respectively) but also details such as the profiles of the victim and suspect (age group, gender, and ethnicity), relationship between them, and location of the violation. However, when we examine the total reports by age group in the same report, this number drops to 15,420 for 2018 and rises to 17,288 in 2019. When we categorize the reports based on the victim's ethnicity, the numbers rise to 19,677 for 2018 and 21,740 for 2019. Again, this reveals discrepancies in the data.

The 2021 Maio Laranja Booklet (Brazil, 2021b) presents data on reports of violence against children and adolescents in 2020 by type of violation: physical violence, psychological violence, physical sexual abuse, rape, and sexual exploitation. A child subjected to one form of violation may concurrently experience other types of violence. Consequently, the numbers may not accurately reflect the actual situation. The Booklet reveals 14,621 reports of physical sexual abuse, rape, and sexual exploitation in 2020.

The 2020 and 2021 Brazilian Public Security Yearbooks (FBSP, 2020, 2021) provide data on police reports from police stations across Brazil. The 2020 edition reveals 49,395 reports of rape involving vulnerable victims aged 0 to 17 years in 2019, while the 2021 Yearbook indicates 33,974 reported cases in 2020. The 2022 Yearbook notes 35,735 reports of rape against girls aged up to 13 years. The Yearbooks detail these numbers by age group, gender, victims' ethnicity, percentage distribution of suspects by gender, victim-to-suspect ratio, and the number of reports by state.

Documents from Childhood Brasil are another data source.⁷ A 2020 report (Childhood Brasil, 2020a) compiled data from multiple sources, including Dial 100, the Ministry of Health, Public Security Data, and Safernet⁸ (a private law civil association dedicated to the promotion and defense of Human Rights on the Internet in Brazil), on sexual violence against children and adolescents. Data pertaining to the Dial 100 hotline included information from 2012 to 2019 categorized by the victim's age group and location of the violation. In contrast, although the data from the Ministry of Health spanned the same years, it was not categorized by age group or other parameters. The Public Security data focused exclusively on the year 2019, revealing a total of 25,984 reports of sexual violence against children and adolescents between 0 and 19 years old. This dataset also categorized the data by the victim's gender and ethnicity.

Finally, Safernet has reports of child pornography on the internet, showing 75,621 reports in 2019 alone in Brazil; clearly, this is a problem in Brazil. According to Childhood Brazil⁹, child pornography is a form of sexual exploitation characterized by the production, use, display, and sale of materials (such as photos, videos, drawings, etc.) that show explicit sexual scenes involving children and adolescents, or have a sexual connotation related to a child's genitalia. As stipulated by Brazilian law in under the Child and Adolescent Statute (ECA), child pornography is a crime and punishable under the law (Article 241 of the Child and Adolescent Statute). According to Safernet, 98,244 anonymous reports of internet pages containing child pornography were received in 2020, which is a 102.24% increase above the numbers reported in 2019. This was a historic high since records began in 2006.

4 DISCUSSION

The difficulties in accessing data on the issue in Brazil, underreporting, and cultural matters stand out.

4.1 The Difficulty of Accessing Data in Brazil

The legislative initiatives focused on child protection in Brazil are recent. The Federal Constitution recognized children as rights-bearing individuals who deserved comprehensive protection due to their unique stage of physical, psychological, cognitive, and social development only in 1988 (Ferreira & Azambuja, 2011). Furthermore, the history of efforts addressing family violence in Brazil is recent. A significant need exists for widespread awareness, considering the country's vast size and varied knowledge across different regional and cultural groups (Deslandes, Assis, & Santos, 2005; Costa, Reis-Netto, & Miranda, 2020). Moreover, despite the strategies implemented by the National Plan for Confronting Sexual Violence Against Children and Adolescents (PNECSCA) and various social programs, public policies, and the efforts of civil society, the rates of

⁷ Organization created in 1999 by the Queen of Sweden, which aims to protect children and adolescents against sexual violence.

⁸ <https://new.safernet.org.br/content/denuncias-de-pornografia-infantil-cresceram-3345-em-2021-aponta-safernet-brasil>

⁹ https://www.childhood.org.br/publicacao/Navegar_com_Seguranca.pdf

such violence in Brazil remain high. Moreover, such incidents are substantially underreported (Da Silva & Oliveira, 2017).

Costa, Barreira, Barros, and Jerônimo-Souza (2021) conducted field research in Fortaleza, highlighting the discrepancies and manipulation of heterogeneous data. Furthermore, the authors revealed strategies that cause child and adolescent sexual abuse, framed as a "social issue," to either be present or absent from official records. The authors' analysis further showed that underreporting is not solely due to structural issues but also results from bureaucratic daily practices, which may account for the high rate of dropouts in the services provided.

The challenge of accessing data in Brazil results in difficulties in profiling the victims. All sources that provided data on the victim's ethnicity indicate that the majority are either white or brown victims. However, a significant number of respondents in some sources did not declare their ethnicity, which could skew the results. In more than 80% cases, the suspects of aggression are males predominantly in the age group of 31 to 50 years. They are often known to the victims, especially fathers and stepfathers.

Notably, the sources neither have a standard subdivision by age groups nor do they specify the age cut-off for defining adolescents. For instance, some consider adolescence to extend up to 17 years old, while others extend it to 19 years old. This makes standardized data analysis challenging. Still, the age group with the most reports ranged from 10 to 13 years old. Female victims predominated in all age groups, representing more than 80% cases.

Furthermore, public sources often did not provide systematically organized and standardized data, making it challenging to conduct a reliable historical epidemiological study that accurately reflects the reality. In some sources, the data are inconsistent, while others lack information on the age groups of the victims. Some sources categorize the age group as 0 to 17 years, while others use 0 to 19 years. Few sources specify the type of sexual violence committed against children or adolescents.

Information gaps may arise from issues related to filling notification forms, digitizing data, organizing the database, or even extracting information and reporting to reports (Unicef, 2021; Costa *et al.*, 2021). Thus, the numbers recorded by public policy institutions may represent only the tip of the iceberg of daily acts of violence which actually occur and are recognized as such. Beneath this visible data, a vast number of daily violent acts never see the light of day, and thus, never come to the attention of public authorities and are considered in public policies. Underreporting can also happen, whereby an act of violence is known to public authorities but no mandatory reporting is carried out due to technical inefficiencies or simply negligence (Waiselfisz, 2012).

Importantly, challenges exist in developing systems that consolidate information. Furthermore, the prevailing culture in Brazil for evaluating and monitoring public and social policies is ineffective, and fails to accurately represent the actual needs of ongoing processes. Specifically, on addressing sexual violence against children and adolescents, the data lack an appropriate scope as no unified system captures the provided services or gradual implementation of the actions

outlined in the intervention plans, whether at the federal, state, or municipal levels (CEEVSCA & SEASTER, 2021).

4.2 Underreporting

Several studies emphasize the notably low number of reported cases in Brazil, leading to significant underreporting. The most recent national victimization survey found that only approximately 7.5% of sexual violence victims report to the police (Bueno, Pereira, & Neme, 2019). According to Childhood Brasil (2019),¹⁰ only 10% of sexual abuse and exploitation cases against children and adolescents are actually reported to authorities. The Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA; Brazil, 2014) similarly puts its estimate at 10%.

Another reason for underreporting is that cases of sexual violence often occur within the family setting, highlighting the domestic nature of such violence. Some analyzed sources revealed that approximately 70% of sexual violence cases against children and adolescents take place in the victim's or the perpetrator's home, with the primary aggressors being the stepfather and the father.

Fathers may view sexual violence as a disciplinary measure for their daughters and may not even recognize the immorality of their behavior. Moreover, they resort to denial as their primary defense mechanism, even when the evidence is undeniable. Consequently, intra-family child sexual abuse underscores the child's inherent vulnerability, making them even more susceptible. A child must feel secure, loved, and protected with the home (Sanches *et al.*, 2019b).

Such instances of violence often manifest in a subtle and ongoing manner, as the aggressor is typically known to the victim. The victim, in turn, typically becomes confused, which consequently hampers confrontation and reporting (Werner & Simão-Silva, 2017). Furthermore, since the home is a private space, both the child and events within the household are enveloped in an atmosphere of familial and societal secrecy. In such scenarios, sexual violence incidents are typically kept under wraps. This is partly because the ties of affinity and blood relation between abused children or adolescents, and their aggressors lead to complacency among other family members. Moreover, the aggressor often holds moral, economic, and disciplinary authority over the abused child (Childhood Brasil, 2020b).

Thus, the high prevalence of sexual violence within the family setting suggests that the actual number of reported cases does not truly reflect the reality. Many individuals are hesitant to come forward due to fear. Furthermore, professionals often avoid reporting this form of violence largely because they lack the proper training to handle such conflicts (Da Silva & Oliveira, 2017; Costa *et al.*, 2021).

According to Da Silva and Oliveira (2017), the pact of silence between the parties involved is an insurmountable barrier. Mothers withhold their voices out of fear of ending a relationship, being abandoned by their partner or husband, and facing both the aggressor's family and their own. The

¹⁰ <https://www.childhood.org.br/a-violencia-sexual-infantil-no-brasil>

child remains silent due to fear, threats, an inability to discern if such behavior is normal, or fear that their words might not be believed.

On the one hand, society is actively engaging with public administration to ensure the protection of children and adolescents against sexual violence. On the other hand, the cases reported to the responsible authorities are not only underreported but also reveal the consistent violation of the rights of children and adolescents (Instituto Alana & MPSP, 2020).

Furthermore, quantifying sexual violence is a complex and challenging task, as it encompasses cultural taboos, power dynamics within households, and the tendency to blame victims. Consequently, statistics from the health system and police departments may be underestimates (Minayo, 2001). The 2021 Brazilian Public Security Yearbook (FBSP, 2021) emphasizes that underreporting appears to be an even bigger issue with respect to boys. Some studies suggest that this trend is tied to societal perceptions of virility and sexual initiation regarding men, rather than viewing it as violence.

Notably, in 2020, a year defined by the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of reported cases of sexual violence decreased slightly. However, month by month data reveal that compared to historical standards, the decrease can be mainly attributed to the low number of reports between March and May 2020. This was precisely the period when social isolation measures were most stringent in Brazil. Given that sexual violence is predominantly a domestic issue, we cannot dismiss the possibility that the number of reported cases decreased, irrespective of the actual incidents that occurred. That is, this decline likely signifies an increase in underreporting rather than an actual reduction in incidents. Although quantifying the exact number of crimes that went unreported due to the social isolation measures is challenging, reported sexual violence crimes may have been significantly impacted by an increase in underreporting (UNICEF, 2021).

In a violent context such as Brazil's, the limited statistical data on the topic is alarming. We must urgently address it to understand the true nature of what is being confronted and the best ways to address it. To tackle this issue, the national government must begin with an accurate diagnosis of the factors surrounding sexual violence against children and adolescents, which can then serve as a foundation for the formulation of appropriate and effective public policies (Brasil, 2021a).

Protecting children and adolescents requires coordinated actions with synergy, dynamism, creativity, and an understanding of the realities where the many facets of sexual violence manifest. Yet, responses are typically marked by fragmentation, compartmentalization, and centralized hierarchical practices. Furthermore, in today's societal context, we cannot discuss measures to counteract sexual violence without highlighting the crucial role of active civil society involvement. This means fostering social engagement on the matter, sensitizing society about the significance of safeguarding the rights of children and adolescents, and challenging prevailing notions that perpetuate the imbalanced and oppressive dynamics in relationships—whether adult/child, male/female, black/white, or any other form of domination and violation (Vieira, 2018). To classify an incident as child and adolescent sexual abuse, an extensive process is required where the sexual

situation is disclosed, reported, scrutinized, categorized, enumerated, and recorded, as outlined by Costa *et al.* (2021).

It is important to note that within the historical-social context of endemic violence, where sexual violence is embedded, a culture of domination and discrimination—be it social, economic, gender-based, or racial—prevails. However, the paradigm of a rights-based society challenges these age-old patterns, advocating for the creation of a new culture that respects and protects the human rights of children and adolescents. This involves fostering relationships characterized by emotional exchanges and learning, curbing abuses, confronting threats, safeguarding vulnerable individuals, supporting witnesses, and ultimately holding perpetrators accountable and providing psychosocial services to those who commit sexual violence (Childhood Brasil, 2020b, p. 17).

Crucially, prevention should be prioritized to address situations of violence, and suspected or confirmed violations. This should be carried out by trained and qualified professionals capable of "developing the skills necessary for prevention, identifying evidence, diagnosis, and addressing all forms of violence against children and adolescents" (ECA – Article 70A – III) (Alana Institute & MPSP, 2020).

Strategies to address sexual violence against children and adolescents include raising societal awareness about the issue of violence and its consequences, advancing legislation, establishing prompt and effective support structures. Furthermore, we must recognize that children and adolescents, being fragile and vulnerable, require enhanced protection and care that will influence their future growth and development (Sanches *et al.*, 2019a). Finally, a key strategy to safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable groups is to reaffirm the pursuit of dignity, care, and protection as fundamental human values, and the responsibility of all social actors.

4.3 Violence and the cultural context

Sexual violence against vulnerable individuals underscores the cultural factors that predispose them to it, such as the unbalanced relationship between adults and children, objectification, premature adultification, ethnic prejudices, and gender inequalities. This form of violence affects all social strata and can occur in various settings, such as within the victim's home, in schools, in care institutions, and even in the digital realm, where crimes of sexual violence, such as child pornography, are increasingly prevalent. Consequently, innovative prevention methods and coordinated efforts for its mitigation are needed (Instituto Alana & MPSP, 2020).

Furthermore, we need to be alert to certain stigmatizing views of the "normalization" of sexual violence. Here, the child or adolescent is blamed for the crime, or such a crime is simply regarded as "normal." According to Childhood Brasil (2020b), any claim of consent by children and adolescents in sexual practices should always be scrutinized and contextualized, given that their capacity for autonomy to give or withhold consent is still under development.

Social mobilization related to sexual violence against children and adolescents began to have political expression in the 1980s, when the topic was included in the civil society agenda as a matter intertwined with the national and international fight for human rights. This commitment to human

rights was enshrined in the Brazilian Federal Constitution (1988),¹¹ International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989),¹² and Statute of the Child and Adolescent - ECA (Law No. 8.069/90)¹³ (Childhood Brasil, 2020b).

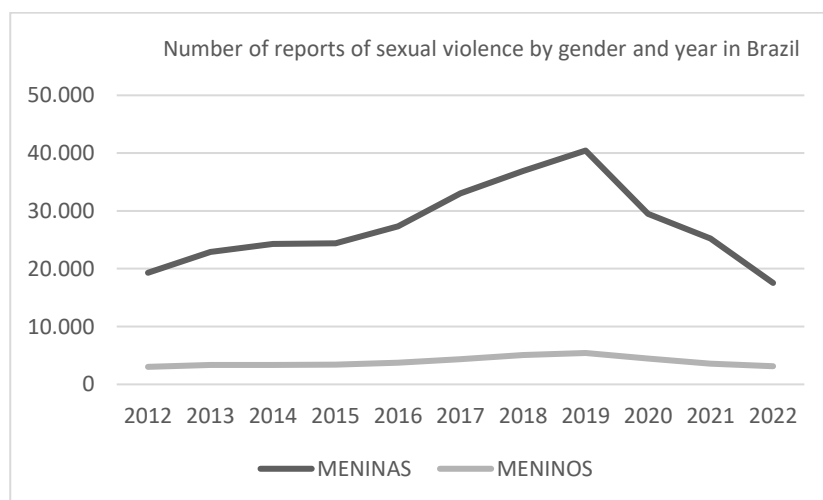
Among the cultural issues in Brazil, gender violence stands out and requires particular attention. All sources analyzed from 2012 to 2022 indicate that the majority of sexual violence victims are female and potential aggressors are male. Moreover, no noticeable shift in trends has been observed, underscoring that sexual violence against girls can indeed be categorized as gender violence. This is a result of the historic inequality between men, women, and girls in our society.

Childhood Brasil (2020c) reveals that according to the Ministry of Health, between 2011 and 2017, 84.9% of children and adolescents who were victims of sexual violence were female, while 15.1% were male. Public Security data from 2019 put these numbers at 85.7% and 14.3%, respectively.

The following graph highlights the large discrepancy between reports of sexual violence against girls and boys (the highest rates of reports from each source were selected).

Graphic 1:

Reports of Sexual Violence in Brazil, by gender and year.



Notice. Produced by authors, 2023.

Sexual violence is tied to male chauvinistic, patriarchal, and sexist patterns of segregation and discrimination against women and children. These normative standards dictate behaviors and values in our society, leading to the occurrence and perpetuation of gender and sexual violence in

¹¹ http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/constituicao/constituicao.htm

¹² <https://www.unicef.org/brazil/convencao-sobre-os-direitos-da-crianca>

¹³ <https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/centrais-de-conteudo/crianca-e-adolescente/estatuto-da-crianca-e-do-adolescente-versao-2019.pdf>

interpersonal relationships (Vieira, 2018). According to Vieira (2018), the inequalities evident in sexual violence against children and adolescents are not limited solely to generational differences, such as physical, psychological, and sexual development. They can encompass gender differences. This is perpetuated by a male chauvinistic and patriarchal culture that underscores stereotypes of female inferiority compared to men. These factors amplify the phenomenon, resulting in female children being the most common victims of sexual crimes.

According to Faleiros (2007), in a patriarchal, adult-centric, male chauvinistic, authoritarian, and unequal society such as Brazil, some people still resist the idea of equal rights for all citizens or that their rights should be assured. Unsurprisingly, in Brazil, children, women, male homosexuals, transsexuals, and transvestites face challenges in exercising their already established identity, social, and political rights. Due to this lack of citizenship, violence against these groups often goes unacknowledged, becoming commonplace and nearly invisible.

This "erasure" or invisibility of the reality of gender-based violence is predicated on the need for "validation" from those who are not its victims. Thus, testimonies and reports of such violence are routinely dismissed, thereby upholding familial, community, institutional, and societal agreements of approval or tolerance, silence, and impunity regarding the various forms of violence and crimes committed against non-male genders (Faleiros, 2007). Furthermore, gender-based violence is more prevalent among women and girls exposed to a diverse range of social and economic vulnerabilities. This makes it challenging to recognize male behavior as violent and/or confront and escape the situation. The very context of violence amplifies existing vulnerabilities and introduces new adverse impacts on the life, well-being, and physical and mental health of women and girls who are victims (UN, 2020).

Another factor mentioned by some sources relates to ethnicity. However, one must clarify the difference between the terms "race" and "ethnicity."

The concept of "ethnicity" emerged to replace the dubious classification of "race," which is now overwhelmingly proven to be an unscientific fallacy. Despite its lack of scientific validity, the concept of race continues to have profound ideological, political, economic, and social implications and has been used to justify prejudice, discrimination, dominance, and the extermination of individuals, groups, and populations perceived as "different." In contrast, the notion of ethnicity - rooted in the cultural domain - was defined by Anthropology as a classification related to one's place of origin. This definition also includes broader somatic (physical appearance), linguistic, and cultural attributes (Porto, 2008, p. 25).

Clearly, while biology refutes the classification of humans into races, the concept of race persists as a social construct. The mere existence of racism and anti-racist laws suggests that some societal perceptions and practices classify individuals based on characteristics deemed racial. Therefore, identifying people by ethnicity or "skin color" alludes to the intricate discussion of ethnic-racial attributes in Brazil.

While the majority of statistics indicate that the victims are white or brown, ethnic data must be approached with caution. For instance, the ethnicity field is frequently left blank, making it

challenging to determine if there are biases causing a particular ethnic group to be underreported or overreported (UNICEF, 2021). According to a study conducted by UNICEF with the Public Security Forum, there has been a rising prevalence of black victims over the years. In 2020, data from a larger number of states revealed that the percentages reversed compared to the average, with blacks constituting the majority of victims. However, one must ascertain whether these trends will persist in the upcoming years or if they are phenomena linked to social distancing measures and the COVID-19 pandemic (Brandão, 2021).

Reflecting on the image of women is a crucial part of addressing discriminatory stereotypes that enable violence. Specifically for black women in Brazil, these stereotypes are intensified by the historical legacy of slavery, marked by objectification and subjugation, which reinforced racist myths, such as that of the ever-available hypersexualized black woman (Instituto Patrícia Galvão, 2021). Furthermore, in discussions in the context of sexual violence, black men and boys are often perceived as the aggressors, not as victims of violence or sexual exploitation by both men and women in their communities and surroundings (Curry & Utley, 2018).

It is hard to accept that people can ignore or even isolate themselves from discussions about violence when violence happens against a specific gender, ethnicity, or skin color in parts of the world. This is especially true when violence is motivated by ideological, nationalist, or religious issues, among others. We can truly address the issue of violence at its core by only altering behaviors stemming from distortions of the mental system or prevailing values, which hinder the development of critical consciousness (Berlinguer, 2015).

5 FINAL REMARKS

Sexual violence against children and adolescents is a pervasive issue in Brazilian society, influenced by historical and cultural factors that perpetuate it and hinder a true understanding of its extent. Underreporting frequently stems from certain cultural attitudes that objectify children (predominantly girls) and trivialize their suffering, "normalizing" a violation that brings numerous, often indelible, consequences to the victim's life.

Creating strategies to address sexual violence requires heightened awareness, and consequently, a break from historical patterns of oppression: men over women, whites over blacks, and adults over children. Clearly, we need to redefine interpersonal relationships with human dignity as a fundamental premise. Others must be seen and respected in their entirety, and not as someone or something to be dominated, belittled, or used for one's narcissistic and egocentric desires. Furthermore, sexual violence is a violation that impacts human dignity, and the physical, mental, social, spiritual, and moral integrity of victims. Therefore, coordinated and effective measures must be urgently developed to combat such practices that infringe upon the fundamental human rights of thousands of children and adolescents.

We find that that public data sources on sexual violence in Brazil do not enable a systematically standardized analysis. This makes it challenging to conduct a historical and rigorous epidemiological study on the realities of these violations. Furthermore, the country lacks a unified

system that consolidates information on reports of child sexual violence, and monitors public and social policies related to addressing such violations.

The limited availability and decentralized nature of public data accessible to society, challenges associated with analyzing data from a historical perspective, and inability to fully grasp the national landscape of violations hinders effective action and prevention against such violations. Thus, we must urgently invest in monitoring and generating evidence to gain a deeper understanding of the true national landscape of violence. Data and records of reports are crucial tools in addressing sexual violence. However, accurately assessing the scope of such violations is essential. This can serve as the foundation for devising effective public and social policies for preventing and combatting sexual violence.

Despite the various gaps in the data from the documents analyzed, it is possible to observe the complexity of the phenomenon of sexual violence, its magnitude in terms of numbers and consequences for the victim, and the numerous challenges to ensuring the protection of the rights of children and adolescents in our country. The need for studies that can adequately situate the impact of socioeconomic issues on sexual violence is emphasized, a task not undertaken in this article.

To prevent and treat the consequences of sexual violence against children and adolescents, joint efforts (family, State, society), inter and multidisciplinary efforts are needed that aim, above all, to raise awareness of everyone's responsibility, in order to break with the conditions and contexts in which this violence occurs and is maintained. It is necessary to overcome moral barriers to protect the vulnerable, assuming responsibilities and actions that aim at the commitment of everyone to respect human dignity and to a society that does not permit and legitimize violence.

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