

## “Body and Soul Pain”: Conception and social support network for women who experienced marital violence

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### Abstract

Violence is a problem to be understood in an interdisciplinary way. This qualitative study aimed to understand the conception of women who experienced marital violence and structurally analyze their social support networks. Five women who reported their spouses to the Women’s Police Station (DECCM) and were being monitored by the Technical Team of the Women’s Emergency Support Service (SAPEM) were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. A constructive-interpretive analysis was performed to identify the conceptions of experience of marital violence and through the Calgary Family Assessment Model (CFAM) it was possible to make an analysis and a graphic representation of the social support network for the women participating in this study. In general, it was observed that all women understand physical violence as actions that cause damage to the human anatomical and physiological structure. However, their conceptions are not limited to physical injury; they are also related to affective issues. For the participants, conjugal violence is not fragmented into “types of violence”, on the contrary, it occurs “agglutinated”, affecting the body and soul. Regarding the development of women’s social support network, they all have a family member as support – usually sons/daughters or mothers – and most of them count on the SAPEM technical team. The police station/police is also part of the network. Therefore, these tactics used in the social support network structure have different mechanisms by which the women reorganized their stories, electing some people and/or institutions, excluding others, highlighting this or that person and/or institution to make them agents for minimizing threatening behavior to themselves and their families. These people, when called in, seem to act either to curb violence and to strengthen the couple’s marital bonds or to break these bonds.

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### **Abstract**

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most of them count on the SAPEM technical team. The police station/police is also part of the network. Therefore, these tactics used in the social support network structure have different mechanisms by which the women reorganized their stories, electing some people and/or institutions, excluding others, highlighting this or that person and/or institution to make them agents for minimizing threatening behavior to themselves and their families. These people, when called in, seem to act either to curb violence and to strengthen the couple's marital bonds or to break these bonds.

**Keywords:** Violence against women, Gender Violence, Social Support.

## 1. Introduction

Violence is a problem to be understood in an interdisciplinary way and has been a privileged object of study and for intervention in the social, legal and public health areas [1]. This is due both to the negative impact it has on the quality of life of victims and to effects on different scenarios, including legal, economic, social and health sectors.

Among the multiple forms of violence, this study focuses on conjugal violence, having as interlocutors women who have already experienced violent conjugalities. Conjugal violence occurs in love relationships and it is commonly associated with domestic and family violence, especially in the people's domestic and relational daily life [2].

This type of violence refers to an abusive pattern that occurs in practice; in a relationship of intimacy and in a supposedly protective space, the home [3]. It is noteworthy that gender relationships have shown a character of domination, in which the condition of submission is assigned to the woman, portrayed as obedience, reproduction, faithfulness, housewife, caregiver of their children's education [4].

Marital violence is also analyzed based on assumptions of systemic theories as a relational, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon experienced by the dyad in their interactions, with a dynamic developed through the relationship they negotiate in the context in which they are inserted [5, 6].

In this study, both gender and systemic approaches are taken into account; however, it will be dealt with a systemic and contextual understanding of violence experienced by women because it focuses on the social support network built by them. For this, it was assumed that the social network is a system composed of various social objects (people), functions (activities of these people), and situations (context) that provide instrumental (such as financial aid, help in sharing responsibilities, in general, and information given to the individual) and emotional support to a person; it refers to affection, approval, sympathy, and concern for others in their different needs [7].

In this sense, social support provided by social support networks has the purpose of contributing to the well-being of people, especially women who experience violent conjugalities, by performing the functions of affective exchange and social companionship, in addition to promoting the health of people participating in the network [8]. It is believed that it is at critical moments, such as in violent conjugalities, that care activities performed by family members, neighbors, and friends are of significant importance in supporting and assisting battered women.

Thus, this study aimed to understand the conception of women who experienced conjugal violence,

as well as to structurally analyze their social support networks.

## 2. Material and Methods

This is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach conducted in the city of Manaus (Amazonas, Brazil), including five women who suffered violence by their spouse and sought care to formalize the report of aggression to the Women's Police Station (DECCM in Brazil) and started to be monitored by professionals of the Women's Emergency Support Service (SAPEM).

To apply the *Calgary Family Assessment Model* (CFAM), proposed by Lorraine Wright and Maureen Leahey [10], a script of guiding questions was made with topics of structural evaluation, and a semi-structured interview method was chosen. All interviews were conducted in the SAPEM, on the days when women had a pre-scheduled meeting.

Data treatment and analysis were carried out in two stages. In the first one, the constructive-interpretive analysis method proposed by González Rey [9] was used to identify the conceptions of experience of conjugal violence. In the second stage, the CFAM was used to make the analysis and graphical representation of the social support network of the participating women. For a better understanding of the social support network constitution, an ecomap sketch was made with each participant.

The ecomap is a diagram that records the perceptions of a person or group of people about the structures and forms of participation in a given social support network [11], in addition to graphing the relationships established internally between members of a family and externally with the community [9]. The ecomap was made in digital media using the GenoPro software.

This research received the consent of the State Department of Social Assistance and Citizenship of the Amazonas State and was approved by the Ethics and Research Committee of the Federal University of Amazonas (No. 721,199) as recommended by Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council. Women victims of conjugal violence accepted to participate in this study after reading and signing the Informed Consent Form.

## 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents reports of women who experienced violent conjugalities and the social support networks they sought during this experience. For this, it was sought to hold dialogues by understanding how these women understand violence, what indicates they are feeling battered, and when it is time to ask for help and support. To describe, analyze and discuss these issues, three categories emerged and the ecomap was used to structurally investigate the social support networks.

### 3.1. *Conception of violence: an action that affects the body and soul.*

It was observed that all women understand physical violence as actions that cause damage to the human anatomical and physiological structures. However, they are not limited to physical injury but are also related to affective issues. Therefore, to hurt and hit, the cruelty, pain, and demoralization are part of this physical violence phenomenon, affecting the body and soul. As corroborated by discourses throughout the analysis of this category:

*“Hit and hurt, right?!” (Woman No. 1)*

*“It’s when they hit the person and it’s so bad to be hit by a person who is nothing to us unless this person is our father or mother, but a person who just because is a husband thinks he can hit us, it is cruel, it’s nothing good”. (Woman No. 3)*

The speeches of these women (1 and 3) reveal that the actions of physical aggression received from their spouses are based on the injuries and bruises caused in their bodies. The reports show a concept of physical violence as pointed out by Silva *et al.* [12], who defines physical violence as episode(s) of shoves, jolts, slaps, punches, kicks, beating, threat using or use weapon (bladed or fire weapons), attempt to strangle, burn, or throwing of objects, by her partner, that could hurt her.

Woman No. 3 admits the possibility of violence when it is practiced by a family member such as her father or her mother; therefore, she naturalizes this type of violence but thinks it is not right to be attacked by her spouse because he has no ties of consanguinity.

This view contradicts that reported by Menezes *et al* [13], who recorded that women with a history of family violence who witnessed violent acts tend to be more tolerant of their partners’ violence.

The speeches of the interviewed women led to more important findings, as the literature on marital violence fragments the forms of violence. Nevertheless, these women, through their speeches, make it possible to verify that, regardless of the form of violence, it always causes organic, psychological and social damage, i.e., it is complex, affecting the body and soul.

This can be corroborated by the speeches of the other women (2, 4 and 5), in which it was recorded that the violence they suffer goes beyond the anatomical and physiological dimensions, presenting a complex view. In this sense, it is analyzed that the conjugal violence is a complex phenomenon, involving several networks of care, help, and support for the attacked woman.

*“These are actions that hurt and even words that physically attack. Because words affect the soul and the body, they destroy even more than a hit”. (Woman no. 4)*

*“We suffer violence because they may not even hit, but they keep talking about things that we don’t accept, then we get to fight back.” (Woman No. 2)*

*“So, it’s hitting, hurting, and the way he said things to me. I’ve been fighting him since last year since he got involved with another woman, so he started treating me badly, telling me to get another male. We’re married for 19 years and he started beating me, this is all violence against me, he called me a thief, demoralized me, and our neighbors listened to all this. These things made me very devastated; living with a person who tells us these things hurts a lot (crying), he demoralizes me in front of everyone”. (Woman No. 5)*

In these speeches, it is clear that the aggressions are not always only physical, but it occurs by name-calling, demoralization, pain, and destruction. Therefore, for women in these situations, conjugal violence

should not be seen as a punctual, systematic and linear phenomenon. In this respect, these victims understand that in conjugal violence, types of violence are inseparable, regardless it is physical, verbal, or psychological. Violence will always be violence and will always cause harm to all biopsychosocial aspects of the person affected by it.

Also, according to the discourse of woman No. 5, violence has interfaces with an extramarital relationship, which also causes suffering when her partner says “get another male”. It was also observed that women do not always passively suffer aggression, because there comes a time when aggression is so severe that they start to fight back, in an attempt to defend themselves against aggression, as identified in the speech of woman No. 2

**3.2 Women’s conception indicators when they feel battered by their spouses**

When asked about when they feel battered by their spouses, it was possible to establish three main indicators from their speeches.

Table 1: Summary of Indicators

Indicators	Construction Themes	Relevant Aspects
<i>When he hurts me</i>	<i>Punches me Pulls my hair Throws something at me Hit me in the face</i>	<i>“When he hurts me, punches me, pulls my hair; throws something at me. I think that’s it.” (Woman No. 1) “The first time he slapped me, I was taking a shower, then two months ago he got worse, he gave me a shove in the shower and I hit my head on the air conditioner box, he’s already hit me 3 times.” (Woman No. 5)</i>
<i>When he drinks</i>	<i>Friendships Leaves home Comes back aggressively Violence and drink</i>	<i>“His friends influence a lot because before he drank, he came back home, looked for food and went to bed. But after he got involved with his friends, everything changed. He left home and didn't even want to work anymore. I left for work and when I arrived, he was with his friends drinking and I get angry with that”. (Woman No. 2) “My husband only gets violent when he drinks, so he tries to beat me.” (Woman No. 3)</i>
<i>When he offends me</i>	<i>Offenses Insults Rudeness Bad conduct Lack of respect Undervalued</i>	<i>“He verbally attacks me. There are many words that are more painful than a punch, what he says hurts me a lot”. (Woman No. 3) “When he treats me rudely, with words, with misconduct, disrespect, when I feel like I’m not being respected when he tells me and does the lowest things a husband can do to his wife. When he does that, I get sad.” (Woman No. 4) “For me, it’s like this, I’d prefer he beats me rather than keep saying these things to me (crying) because I feel worthless.” (Woman No. 5)</i>

### 3.2.1 When he hurts me

Acts of physical violence are highlighted in women's perceptions when men hurt them. The physical aggressions reported by these women are characterized by acts of pulling their hair, "slap" in their face, and shoves, i.e., actions that hurt and leave physical marks on them. Here understood by actions "when he hurts me".

This indicator is too late to prevent more serious acts of violence. It has been identified that the act of hurting is repeated and takes on varying and wider dimensions of hurting.

### 3.2.1 When he drinks

This indicator has a linear cause and effect relationship, in which women attribute drinking as a cause of violence. Alcohol becomes a "device" of violence; however, this fact excludes the possibility of men's responsibility regarding his conduct in the face of the act of violence.

The finding of this indicator reinforces the study by Adeodato *et al* [14] when they found that partner's alcoholism was identified as one of the main triggering factors of aggression. According to Araújo *et al* [15], the higher the intake of alcoholic beverages, the higher the chances of someone suffering or committing violent acts; however, given the complexity of this relationship, this tendency should not be restricted to the consumption of alcoholic beverages only.

According to Menezes *et al* [13], alcohol can corroborate violent conduct; however, not directly, but possibly because it interferes with behavior patterns, facilitating violence, as it accentuates the imbalance of control and power exerted by the partner.

### 3.2.3 When he offends me.

Offenses, insults, and verbal expressions that intensify psychological violence against women are other indicators that deserve attention.

However, these types of violence considered as indicators are an establishment of pacts between the couple. Moreover, hostile treatments are often agreed between man and woman, starting as natural until they reach the point of aggression.

So far, we have attempted to present the conceptions of women who have already experienced conjugal violence. Then an effort will be made to describe the way these women structure their social support networks to ask for help and support.

## **3.3 It is time to ask for help and support: understanding social support networks**

This section is divided into two dimensions. The first one addresses when it is time to ask for help and support, and the second one presents a graphical representation of the social support for help. In the first dimension, three moments were identified: "*When hope is lacking*"; "*When peace and freedom are lost*"; and "*When there is no love*".

### 3.3.1 When hope is lacking

The first moment is when the woman loses hope and prospects of her spouse improving his behavior. This is highlighted in the following speeches:

*“In my case, it had already happened several times, but as I have two daughters with him, I shrugged it off to see if he would calm down. But he didn't change for the better; so I had to look for help.” (Woman No. 1)*

*“He always does that, when he drinks and says he will change. We have been married for 30 years. And I think: hey, will it be possible? I try to talk to people, to someone older; they always tell me to take a break, wait and pray. I get this hope that he changes and then I realize that I've waited too long and now I am determined to put an end in this story.” (Woman No. 4)*

*“I said if he hit me again, I'd put him in jail, so he got scared, but now he verbally assaults me a lot.” (Woman No. 5)*

In the above statements, it is evident that the women's hopelessness and confidence feeling in the face of her spouse's violent behavior is justified by the recurrence of his acts over time.

### 3.3.2 When peace and freedom are lost

The second moment is when the woman realizes that she has lost peace and freedom in her daily life. As identified in the following speech:

*“I have known him for 28 years and I have lived with him for 18 years. There was a time that I sought help because I wanted freedom with my daughters because we have no peace at home.” (Woman No. 2)*

In this report, it is clear that the couple's coexistence time and the constant acts of violence against the woman consist of a systemic approach since the couple's daughters are influenced by being in a hostile and suffering environment.

### 3.3.3 When there is no love

The third moment the woman realizes she should ask someone for help and support is when she feels that there is no love for her spouse anymore, as the following speech reveals:

*“I was shrugging it off, until the moment I said it wouldn't be possible anymore, that I couldn't put up with that situation anymore. I'm not made to live with him or him with me, because he offends me so much, so my patience is over. He has the right to be happy and let me be happy. My love for him is over.” (Woman No. 3)*

In the speech above, it is evident that the violence suffered by the woman caused her to stop loving her spouse. Thus, in this third moment, there is a junction of all moments mentioned in this study. The following is the second dimension, which is the graphical representation of the help and support of the interviewed women.



### 3.4 Women’s social support network

The importance of social support networks is reinforced by the existence of social isolation which battered women are subjected to, with little access to information, support services, and interaction with their family and friends [12]. The social support network is a protective factor against exposure to traumatic events in the lives of battered women, protecting them from the negative effects of violence on their mental health [16].

The women interviewed here felt the need to ask for help and support, and through the ecomap, it was possible to structurally represent the forms of the established help relationships. The social support networks of the 5 battered women are shown below.

#### 3.4.1 Social Network: Woman No. 1

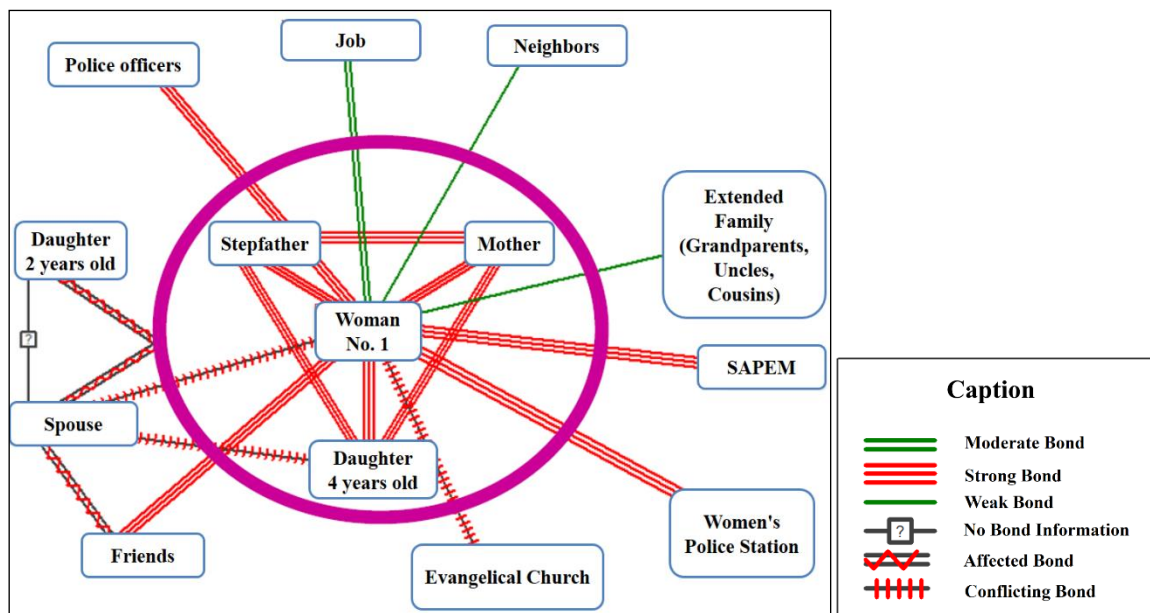


Figure 1. Configuration of help and support social network. Woman No. 1. Manaus, 2014.

This woman is divorced from her husband and has two minor daughters. She currently lives in her mother’s and stepfather’s home, having strong bonds in the intrafamilial context. As reported below:

*“I talked more often to my mother and stepfather to help me.”* (Woman No. 1).

Even divorced, this woman has a conflicting bond with her ex-husband, her two-year-old daughter is under his care; therefore, she does not know how the relationship between her ex-husband and her two-year-old daughter is like because she has no contact with her child. The daughter who is under the care of this woman has no contact with her father. In this context, ties with the other family members are broken, which during their relationship was no longer strengthened. The following speech addresses this situation:

*“My mother never accepted my relationship with him, got it? By the fact she realized that he was violent.”* (Woman No. 1).

The help and support network for this woman is structured from weak ties with members of an extended family (grandparents, uncles, and cousins). An extended family consists of the participation of

the origin family and procreation family, including grandparents, uncles, cousins, and other relatives [10]. Nevertheless, there is a strong bond regarding the support of friends. With regard to her marital relationship, woman No. 1 counted on two women friends, in particular, who gave her advice on her relationship. As highlighted in the following report:

*“I used to talk to two of my closest friends; thus, they gave me strength, they said that I should not accept that situation and that sort of thing. Because in fact, friends should give that strength”.* (Woman No. 1)

The woman’s spouse has relationship difficulties with her friends. The woman claims to have weak bonds with her neighbors, meaning they do not offer her help and support significantly.

The bonds established in her workplace are moderate. According to her, she is afraid because her spouse has already gone to her workplace and tried to attack her. As explained in her speech below:

*“If he comes with a knife or a gun? Yesterday, he even wanted to beat me at my job, even with a gun he got there.”* (Woman No. 1)

This woman attended the evangelical church, and this connection became negative because she was afraid that church members found out that she was beaten by her spouse, so she was afraid of being subjected to unwanted comments.

After reporting him to the Women’s Police Station, she was assisted by professionals of the Women’s Emergency Support Service, which contributed significantly to overcome the violence caused by her spouse. Regarding the police, it would be available if the woman needed any help in the face of new aggression. She could immediately call in the police officers. The woman’s trust in a policewoman is evidenced in the following speech:

*“In fact, the support they give is a preventive measure, so that he doesn't come up. It's just because if something happens, I can call the police.”* (Woman No. 1)

Through this woman’s ecomap, it was evidenced that she has weak ties because, in interpersonal contact in which she protects herself, she hesitates to reveal the violence caused by her spouse. On the other hand, women who acquire confidence and reveal the situation experienced, start having strong ties and count on help and support.

#### 3.4.2 Social Network: Woman No. 2

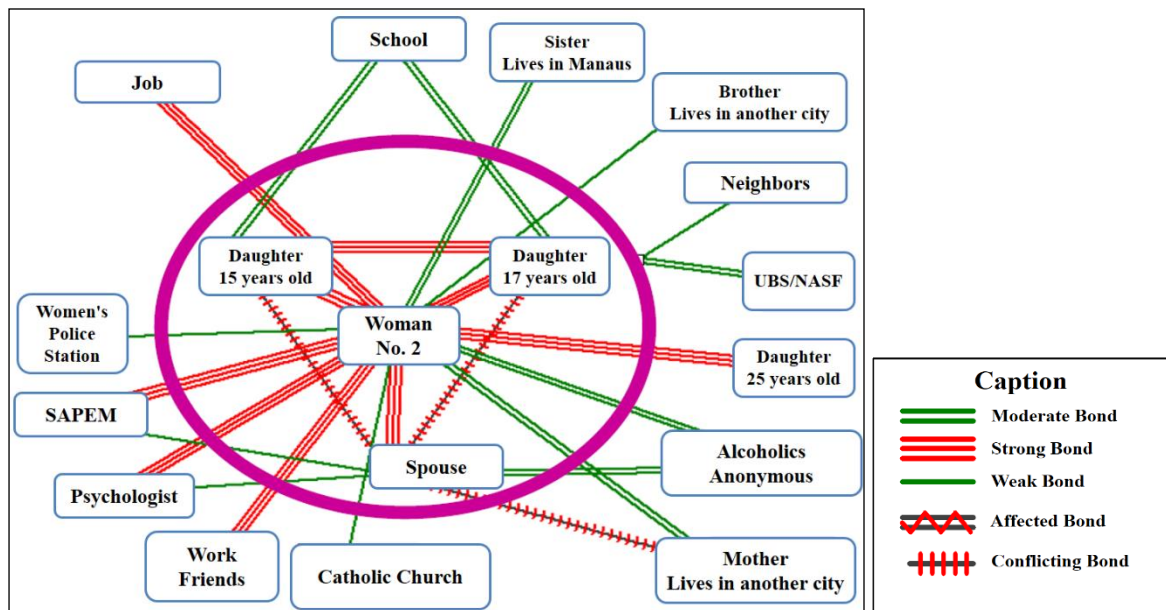


Figure 2. Configuration of help and support social network. Woman No. 2. Manaus, 2014.

Currently, this woman lives with her spouse and their two minor daughters. She can establish strong bonds within the family; however, there is a conflicting relationship between her spouse and their daughters, due to the scenario of family violence. The following report shows the conflict experienced in her family:

*“The first time he came to hit me I had to fight back. He drinks and wants to take advantage of this and all this get to me and to my daughters at home who get disgusted.”* (Woman 02)

This woman counts on the help and support of her oldest daughter. She has restricted contact with her mother and brother because they live in another city. There is a conflicting relationship between her mother and her spouse. She has moderate contact with her other sister who lives in the city of Manaus. This woman is supported by professionals who work in the family health strategy unit near her house. She has a superficial contact with her neighbors but has a strong bond with her work friends. According to her speech, she has a good friend who became her confidant.

*“I have a work friend who’s like a sister to me and she said I have to try to do something in my life.”* (Woman 02)

This woman counts on the help and support of the women’s support and protection network in the state of Amazonas. Her experiences in the SAPEM made possible the monitoring of her spouse by a psychologist and his participation in a support group for Alcoholics Anonymous since most of her complaints about aggression is because of her spouse drinks.

### 3.4.3 Social Network: Woman No. 3

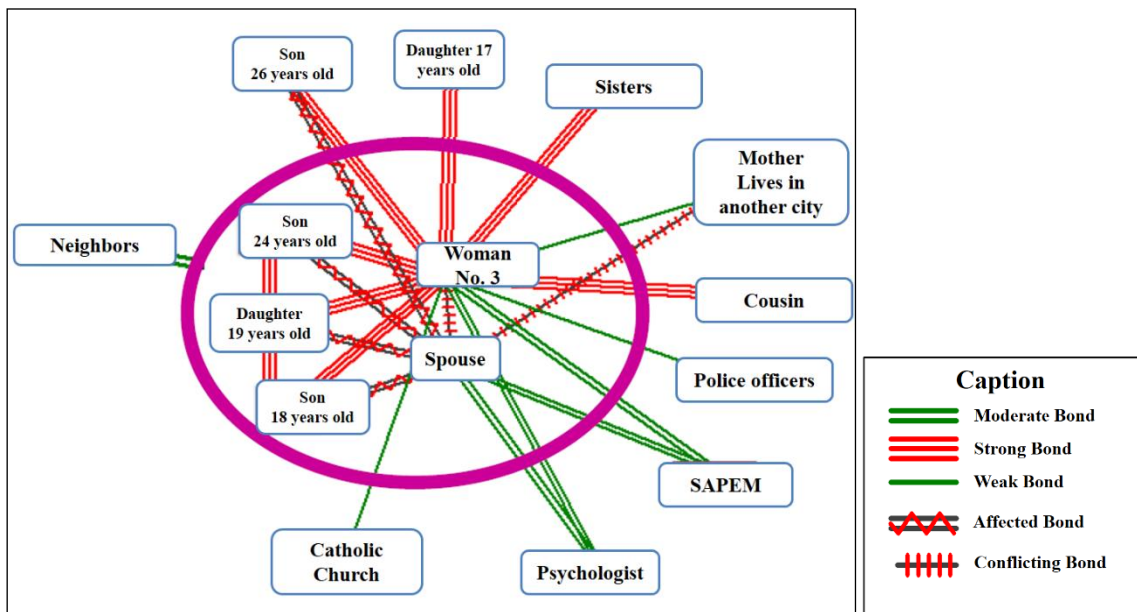


Figure 3. Configuration of help and support social network. Woman No. 3. Manaus, 2014.

Woman No. 3 lives with her spouse and their three sons. All children have strong bonds with their mother but have difficulties in establishing a bond with their father. For this woman, specifically, the ecomap showed she has a social support network based on her internal and external family members. She has moderate contact with institutions that offer support and protection to women. It is noteworthy that her spouse participates in the monitoring of services offered to her.

3.4.4 Social Network: Woman No. 4

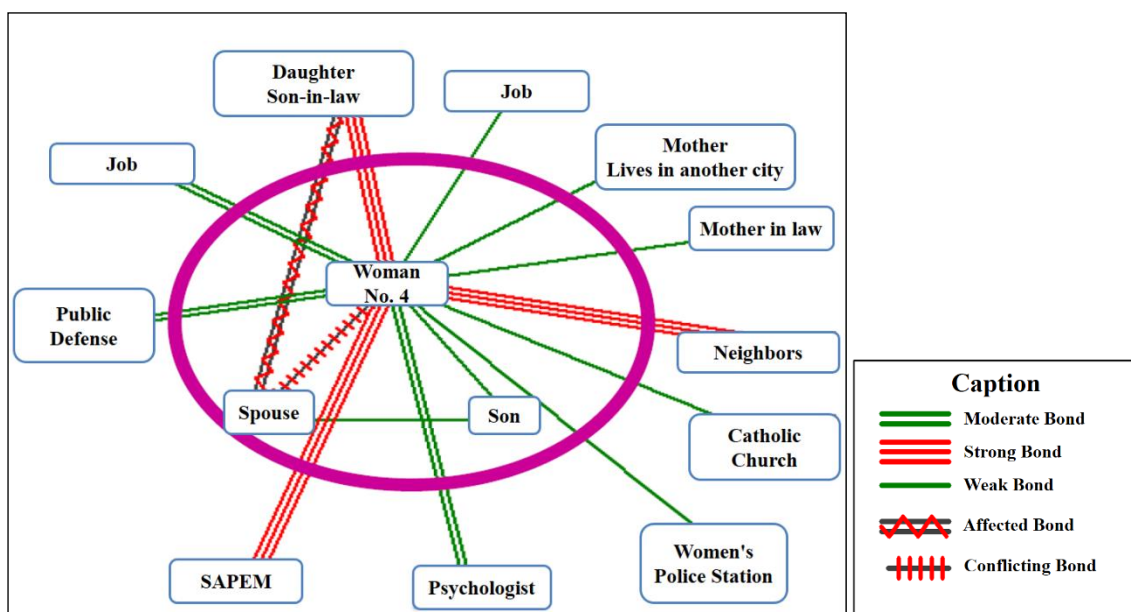


Figure 4. Configuration of help and social support network. Woman No. 4. Manaus, 2014.

The social network of woman No. 4 has weak and conflicting family bonds regarding her spouse and her son. The child prefers to stay away from parental matters. This woman is supported by a daughter who is married and lives in another house. She has superficial contact with her external family members.

However, her neighbors consist of an important social support network. The violence caused by her spouse has already led her to ask for help from the lawyers' services of the public defender's office. Currently, she has a quite strong bond with the services offered by the SAPEM.

### 3.4.5 Social Network: Woman No. 5

Woman No. 5 is currently divorced, living alone since she got her divorce after suffering violence. Her children have already built their own family, and the established bonds are weak.

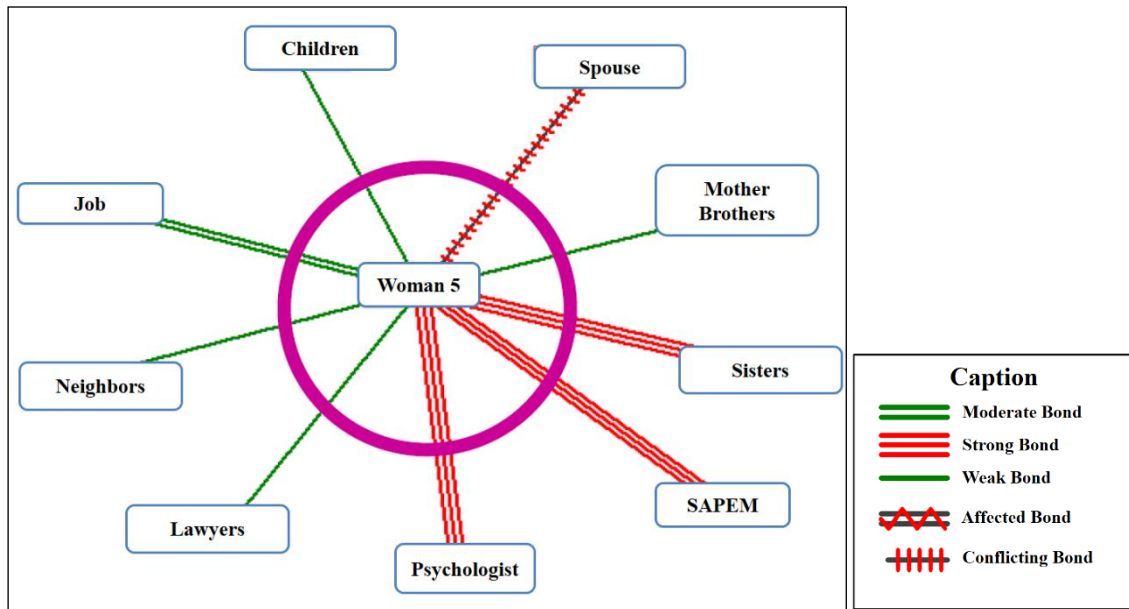


Figure 5. Configuration of help and social support network. Woman No. 5. Manaus, 2014.

For this woman, her sisters constitute an important social support network. Psychology and other services provided by the SAPEM consist of another network with strong bonds, which offers help to her.

All tactics used by these 5 women for building social support networks have in common a family member to give them support – usually a child or a mother – and most of them count on the SAPEM technical team. The police/police station is also part of the network. Therefore, these tactics used to structure the social support network have different mechanisms by which these women reorganized their stories, electing some people and/or institutions, excluding others, highlighting this or that person and/or institution to make them agents for minimizing threatening behaviors to themselves and their families. These people, when called in, seem to act either to curb violence and to strengthen the couple's conjugal bonds or to break these bonds.

## 4. Conclusion

These women's conceptions of violence bring together types of violence as a single independent experience, regardless it is physical, psychological, sexual, etc. This is a phenomenon that causes pain in the "body and soul". As for the social support network, it is observed it is essential. In the cases of the two divorced women, there are stronger bonds with their extended family (sisters, parents) and with support institutions such as the SAPEM. Even in the case of the two non-divorced women, their spouses participate

in some activities in the SAPEM, which demonstrates the importance of this service in supporting women victims of conjugal violence. Except in one case, because they live far away, the support of the extended family, whether sisters or parents, is very significant.

Both in the case of women who got a divorce because of marital violence and those who continue to live with their spouses, there are very weak bonds with their children in all cases, either due to the non-acceptance of such violence or to the experiences resulting from it, which deepens the perception that marital violence extends on and strongly affects children and their relationships with their parents, demonstrating the need for a systematic support for these children.

It is observed that the more society knows and realizes the importance of support networks against conjugal violence, the better will be the conditions for supporting victims of this type of violence, which requires more effective actions to raise awareness of this phenomenon.

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