

Press Release

The first study on extreme “vicaria” violence in Spain analyses 51 cases of child murder from a sample of 400 cases

The study about this type of gender violence by proxy, which is aimed at harming a partner by inflicting damage on their children, explains with data the characteristics of this violence, which is increasing significantly in the country, in order to prevent it

"Vicaria" violence is a concept coined and defined in 2012 by Sonia Vaccaro, clinical psychologist and legal expert, specialist in victimology and violence against women, their daughters and sons; as violence against the mother that is exercised to the daughters and sons with the intention of harming her through an intermediary person. Sonia Vaccaro is the author of the first study in Spain on extreme vicarious violence coordinated by the Women's Association of Feminist Psychology, 'Vicarious violence: an irreversible blow against mothers', with the collaboration of Margarita Castillo Cardona, Cristina Mena Casero, Gemma M^a González García and María Sierra Carballo.

The research sample created a database with 400 judicial sentences related to violence against women or minors, extracted from data from the Judicial Power (Cendoj) and information from newspaper archives, "it happens that many of the murders are not kept in the judicial register because the murderer kills himself and the case lapses legally", Vaccaro points out. Of the 400 cases of murders of minors, the authors detected 51 as cases of extreme vicarious violence "cases in which we have verified this nexus of co-causality in which the intentionality is based on wanting to harm the mother", pointed out Sonia Vaccaro. The study also included questionnaires and interviews with victims of vicarious violence, with mothers whose sons and daughters had been murdered, and set up a focus group with experts in the field of violence against women to interpret the data and discuss the conclusions of the project.

The study aims to empirically understand the social reality of murders committed in the context of violence against women, as Vicarious Violence in Spain, from 2000 to December 2021; and responds to the need to investigate new forms of gender violence to adapt it to the current context and introduce legal reforms to deepen equality policies and eradicate gender violence in our society, from a feminist, cross-sectional and intersectional approach. The aim is to shed light, explain and understand the characteristics of this violence which, according to the data, is increasing significantly. For Mariló Rubio, president of the Women's Association of Feminist Psychology, "the work identifies the threats and situations of risk and danger for minors, which institutional and judicial mechanisms do not seem to detect".

The findings indicate, in most cases, that the perpetrator was a middle-aged man, between 30 and 50 years of age, mainly of Spanish nationality. 82% were the biological father of the children they murdered. When the crime is committed, the couple is separated and not much

time has passed since the separation. No intellectual or physical disability is observed in the murderer, and the cases with a previous diagnosis of a mental disorder or illness are residual. The majority of the sample did not have a criminal record and if they did, 60% of them had a criminal record for crimes related to gender violence. The same proportion of aggressors had expressed their intention to harm the mother or the children before committing the crime, threatening with phrases such as: "I will take the children away from you", "you will see what happens to the girls", "I will take away what you love the most". Cases in which the murderer kills himself or tries to kill himself after committing the crime account for 48% of the sample. In 12% of cases the murderer denies the acts committed. Even in the face of evidence, he blames other people or claims not to remember anything he did.

The most murders occur when the fathers are in sole care of the children (48%), either because they are in the exercise of visitation (44%) or joint custody (4%). Only in 18% of the cases, the crime is committed during cohabitation. The place of the murder is mainly at the murderer's home (42%), without the presence of other people (68%). The aggressors mostly use a sharp weapon (knife) to carry out the crimes; the type of weapon, bought specifically to commit the murder, and the body contact indicate not only the lack of empathy towards the victims, but also the aggressor's control of the scene with the consequent vulnerability of the victims. In none of the cases analysed was there a protection order for the children and the victims are usually minors between 0 and 5 years of age (64%). In 14% of the sample the children showed symptoms of being abused. These symptoms/signs were mainly behaviour changes and complaints about the perpetrator's attitude. In 96% of the sample there was no assessment by a professional (psychologist, social services, etc.) about the state of these children, or at least no record is made in the court cases/newspaper archive.

The researchers highlight the absence of data on the girls and boys murdered, their behaviour, the emotional link with the aggressor, etc., which are not visible in the cases brought to trial or in the newspaper archives. Sonia Vaccaro and her team denounce that "children are invisible in these cases, they do not exist, they are not considered, they do not have a voice and therefore the protection that the State in general and the institutions in particular should be able to give them fails. Their words are devalued, to the point of being silenced, and flagrant discrimination is committed because of their age, forgetting that they are legal beings with rights". They advocate that the killing of children can and must be prevented; action must be taken to ensure that it does not happen and they hope that the legislation on the subject will be applied and "lead to effective protection, making it possible that no violent man can use them as objects to continue harming the mother. No action is of any use after the death of vulnerable creatures who could neither choose nor make themselves safe from the hands of their murderer. Nothing can make up for the pain of these women, nothing will bring back their children. An abuser is not a good father, and as long as his rights are privileged over those of the victims, justice cannot be served," the report concludes.

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