

# Marital violence and religiosity/spirituality

## Abstract

Religiosity/spirituality exerts an influence over conjugal relations and may represent a resource for coping with domestic violence. This study sought to identify and understand the religious and spiritualelements that play a significant role in combating domestic violence. Through qualitative interviews, comprising open questions and narratives, carried out in digital format, involving 10 Brazilian couples aged between 40 and 60, married for more than 15 years and who claimed to have some religious affiliation. The results of this study showed that religiosity/spirituality plays an important role in dealing with marital violence, mainly by highlighting the importance of social groups and in providing and motivating relational elements between spouses that generate Family Social Capital, such as: respect, belonging, tolerance, dialogue, persistence, perseverance, love, among others, enhanced and justified by what is sacred and by members of religious groups, while also taking into consideration the risk factors that these may generate.

**Keywords:** couples, spirituality, religiosity, marital violence

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## Introduction

Conjugal violence is a polysemic phenomenon that is expressed in various forms and meanings: physical, psychological and emotional, verbal, moral, disagreements over division of property, digital, among others; they are specific forms of domestic violence focusing on relationships between partners in marriage. Understanding the diverse forms of marital violence (in the plural) refers to a serious issue of multiple forms of violation of people's dignity and human rights (World Conference on Human Rights of 1993), which involve abusive behavior, which can be physical, verbal, psychological, emotional or involves sexual aggression, among others, committed by one spouse against the other. With a complex experience with various causal relationships and countless consequences, linked to concepts of gender inequality in its various guises, conjugal violence can result in illness and death in the Brazilian population, as noted in the technical memorandum issued by the Ministry of Health<sup>1</sup> as being a complex public health problem, with multiple causes and part of a cycle involving the main players (victim and victimizer) and secondary players (family, extended family and as members of social groups) that is built on inter subjectivity.

Unfortunately, conjugal violence is still present in the fabric of different cultures and societies, no longer as an intimate problem, private to the couple, as it used to be looked upon in the past, but of a social and public nature. Disrespectful mistreatment, abusive behavior, which attains broad and systemic proportions in various personal and social sectors, and can cause significant impact, not only for the victims, but also the aggressors, their relationships and society as a whole.<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon of conjugal violence is based on the conception of conjugal relations understood as a relationship composed of three distinct realities (the self of each spouse and the relationship between the two) that interact and are maintained. It is a continuous, dynamic, organizational process between two individual systems that build a relationship with common references and a conjugal identity<sup>3,4</sup> which can often be driven by a series of harmful consequences of disagreements and stress between spouses.<sup>5</sup>

Marital violence is often generated by tensions between the individual and the spouse. Building a couple requires the creation of common ground, a marital identity, the couple's common reality, the couple's desires and plans. In addition to being linked to the dynamism of conjugal relations itself, conjugal violence, with its multifaceted

specificities, is not only restricted to marital relationships, but takes into account that the relationship between the two is also built and maintained according to the context and situation in which it is immersed. A complex dual relationship with an organizational system, with developed beliefs, values and practices, directly linked to the culture and to societal transformation, as well as the family system and transgenerational transmission. Violence in the sphere of conjugal relations may also be associated with relationships of denomination and power. It is considered a form of deprivation that leads the couple to show disrespect, as it takes away the victim's rights, stripping them of a full life and reducing them to the status of an object, not in possession of their own desires and aspirations. The increasing prevalence of conjugal violence leads to a growing recognition of the need for multifaceted prevention and intervention, among many others, that of Religiosity/Spirituality (R/S) which, combined with other essential dimensions of conjugal relations, may be an effective resource in combating conjugal violence. R/S can be a resource in combating marital violence, largely due to the significant role that religion and spirituality play in contemporary societies and cultures, thus influencing marital relationships.<sup>6</sup>

Influences that, far from being static are marked by re-signification, displacement, flexibility, re-modeling and reconstruction, following a non-linear and sequential trajectory. It is understood here that there is a great lack of concepts and considerable confusion when it comes to designating R/S, as it is a cultural phenomenon. They are almost always regarded as synonyms but, in reality, they are very distinct, yet integrated and complementary, which is why separate words are used here, albeit linked by the forward slash. Spirituality may be seen as a dimension based on subjective experiences and emotions, related to values and meanings, a construction underpinned by faith, and not necessarily religious faith. Spirituality moves, drives the individual in the search for achievement and meaning; it may be related to a specific system of guidelines that involve doctrines shared by a group. We put them in the plural because they are diverse and possess many expressions of transcendence and human experience with the transcendent, not strictly one God, or Gods.<sup>7,8</sup>

The forms of religiosity may be thought of as those human dispositions that may or may not lead to the practice of organized, institutionalized religion, that aim to connect, reinterpret, revisit, reestablish, reconnect the human being with the Sacred,

the transcendent (*ad extra*), or with oneself and one's personal relationships; it can also be underpinned by doctrines, beliefs and rites (*ad intra*).<sup>9,10</sup> Spirituality and religiosity are distinct terms, they are not synonymous, they differ and are distinguishable from each other. They are not contrary or polarized, but rather integrated and complementary. They are two integrated human experiences, interconnected and interrelated in their different elements. These are realities that come together and complement each other because "if spirituality makes me search for meaning in my life, in the encounter with religiosity this search also encompasses the life beyond, the ultimate".<sup>11</sup> Depending on the religious, personal, cultural or social context, R/S is capable of exerting significant, beneficial and satisfying influences on and considerable stability in marital relationships. Influences that commonly occur when they enable a set of strategies for the spouses. Thus, the adverse or stressful circumstances of life as a couple are adapted or are overcome, using tools of tolerance and respect that contribute to the redefinition and (re-)construction of the marital relationship in order to face up to the powerful elements that can generate violent relationships between spouses.

R/S acts not only as an influencing factor, so that the family can generate Family Social Capital, when the relationships between its members produce relational goods (resources) of reciprocity, trust, gratuitousness, protection, love and collaboration; resources that are necessary for the individual and important to society<sup>12</sup> but also as a resource and enabler, either directly or indirectly, implicitly or explicitly, of rules, norms of conduct, values, beliefs and models of married life. R/S can also define the way in which couples attribute meaning to the multidimensional quality of their relationships, and contribute to a stable, satisfactory relationship, even more so in Brazil where 83% of Brazilians consider religion to be very important and 37.2% attend weekly religious services, the highlight being the involvement of women and the elderly.<sup>13</sup>

Based on social layering, the stages of marital life, geographic location, characteristics of each spouse, family of origin and the sociocultural context, R/S has the ability to affect the way each spouse deals with the interpersonal demands of the conjugal relationship. It tends to be applied by its followers along with the couple's repertoire of social skills and cultural factors, which are generally passed down to their offspring.<sup>14</sup> However, it is important to consider that R/S can be a risk factor for spouses, a) when they do not benefit the marital relationship in the midst of conflict and tension, b) when they play a role in minimizing conflict, changing couples' perceptions about their problems, c) or even when the couple attributes sacred qualities to passive and resigned arrangements that legitimize machismo, violence, submission through the practice and proclaimed values of mercy, selflessness, guilt and renunciation of the other, and mutual dedication at all costs.<sup>15</sup>

R/S tends to be a multidimensional, complex resource that commonly influences spouses' daily coping. It is capable of making it easier for couples to understand and deal with the urgent and stressful demands of their own married life, in a humanizing and peaceful way, with possible changes in some behaviors and relational significance so as not to end up in a relationship based on violence.<sup>16,17</sup> It can also produce and nurture different types of violence.<sup>18</sup>

Based on the paradigm of complexity, instability and intersubjectivity of conjugal relations.<sup>19,20</sup> This study sought to visualize the various elements of R/S which, associated with marital relations, might be capable of generating Family Social Capital and assisting - or complicating - spouses in preventing and/or resolving violent conflicts, tensions and instability within the conjugal relationship.

## Material and methods (analysis)

**Participants:** The study comprised 10 Brazilian couples, aged between 40 and 60, who had been married for over 15 years and are still together, and who belong to a religious segment. These couples were invited to participate in a digital interview via the Google Meet platform. Objective questions were asked that sought to obtain sociodemographic data, and about the influence of R/S on their marital relationships, and possible domestic violence.

**Proposed methodology:** By means of a quantitative/qualitative methodology, the interview instrument was used in digital form, which enhanced the process of data collection:<sup>21</sup> the first part of the interview dealt with sociodemographic data, with questions related to the characterization of the couples participating in the study, which helped to establish their profile and, subsequently, open questions, narratives, with the aim of understanding and interpreting the experiences sustained by the participants in the cultural and social perspectives and settings in which they are immersed.<sup>22,23</sup> This work represents a qualitative study, developed by way of interviews (Appendix 2), with Brazilian couples, and using digital media. The sociodemographic data underwent statistical treatment, in the course of their investigations, using the *IRAMUTEQ* data analysis software<sup>24</sup> which possesses among its tools the ability to tabulate data that can be expressed in the form of graphical representations and uses basic statistics, such as percentages. All responses obtained will be analyzed in due course.

The interview carried out with both spouses together was divided into sections: 1) presentation of the study and its objectives, 2) ICF (Informed Consent Form) with virtual acceptance, a copy of the ICF signed by the participant and sent by email or post, already containing the signature of the researcher, 3) 11 items comprising sociodemographic data in respect of age, education, profession, occupation, region of Brazil in which they live, monthly income of each spouse, length of time married (to each other), religion and/or spirituality and the degree of active participation of each family member, religion and/or spirituality of the family of origin, 4) six open questions on the proposed topic, namely, on the meaning of R/S; the association between R/S and marital relations; R/S and domestic violence. With the approval of the Research Ethics Committee (REC), under reference number 079461/2021, the subjects of the interviews, previously advised by the individuals who intermediated the contact with the researchers, were contacted by telephone by the researchers who, having confirmed they satisfied the required profile, scheduled the interviews which were subsequently carried out on the agreed day and time. The interviews were recorded using the Google Meet platform. The responses were organized in an electronic spreadsheet, in ascending order of date and time, also following the structural order of the questions.

## Data analysis methodology

After duly tabulating and organizing the data in an electronic spreadsheet, the process of qualitative analysis began. The data were collected and analyzed according to a mixed methods research model, seeking to understand the influence of R/S on marital relationships and its role in the face of domestic violence. The main function of the analysis was to enrich and evoke other reflections on marital reality and domestic violence, based on integration with existing data, obtained through other systematic research processes, seeking to understand the various nuances of the multifaceted reality of the influence of R/S on marital relations and domestic violence.<sup>25</sup> Firstly, a pre-analysis was carried out, aiming to operationalize the initial ideas by selecting the

location from which the analyzed contents were taken. Subsequently, by exploring the selected content, the analysis itself was initially performed qualitatively, grouping together the topics and categories addressed in the text, aiming to organize categories based on what is found to be convergent among the different respondents to the instrument and, finally, excerpts were selected to illustrate each of these categories.<sup>26</sup>

The sociodemographic data aimed to understand the sample distribution according to the following criteria: age, length of time married, religion/spirituality, children, and sought to characterize the participants, in terms of sociodemographics, in line with the objectives of the study. This initial stage only permitted a general overview to be established of the distribution of participants in the regions of Brazil and a list of some of the couple characteristics. The answers to the essay questions underwent content analysis, with the aim of arriving at categories that describe the perceptions of these couples together about the influence of R/S on their marital relationship. The core analysis of this study, carried out in a systematic fashion, considering the study of the meanings attributed to R/S in marital relationships and domestic violence, allowed us to explore the singularities of the perceptions of the participating couples and establish intersections between them with regard to the objective proposed herein. Based on the answers to the six open questions in the interview about R/S and the influence on the marital relationship and domestic violence, these were analyzed in accordance with the content study procedures. Given the scenario of marital relations, the initial conclusion is that R/S does influence marital relations, and vice versa, and can help generate Family Social Capital. Due to multidimensional and “polymeric” challenges, R/S can either promote or prevent the processes of domestic violence, depending on the context and the subjects involved. Ultimately, we hope to understand the elements of the couple’s R/S that may or may not contribute to either promoting or preventing domestic violence in marital relationships.

## Results and Discussion

### Conjugal relations

Conjugal relations were described by participating couples as a complex, unstable union between two different people sharing one life; a relationship in which both assume common goals and plans, including starting a family, in other words, a man and woman who raise children.

*“Marriage for us means this sharing of life. It’s living intensely this relationship that we chose as a family” (Hilda).*

*“We are unique beings, two different people who come together to experience this conjugal love, and who come from different families” (Zeca).*

For the study participants, coexistence as a couple is a relationship built over time, experiencing different stages of personal and relational development, an alliance that binds them through mutual understanding while preserving the individuality of each spouse.

*“Living together, getting the best out of each other, respecting individuality, coming together, living in communion, they go through various life stages” (Zaza).*

*“We get to know each other and manage to give direction to life, then we need to continue the marriage throughout the stages of life, which change as people grow older” (Binho).*

Couples’ relationships were characterized by a commitment whereby the spouses decide for themselves to establish, even when

conditioned by the culture and context, to share life through conjugal love, which underscores the sexual dimension, trust, dialogue, mutual understanding, companionship, understanding, respect, as well as the financial partnership between spouses.

*“They are two people who wish to live together; they try to experience union, mutual understanding, partnership, trust, support, love and sex... Kindness, affection” (Duda).*

When responding about life as a couple, most of the participants used the first person plural in their speech, that is to say, “we” or “us”. Perhaps due to the length of time spent together as a couple, it assumes a character that is less individual and more of a dual relationship.

The interviewed couples reported that their marital relationship was marked by personal and relational tensions and conflicts that changed over time; some of these were overcome and other couples simply learned to live with them. Some couples explained that, at the beginning of their marriage, fights and arguments between them were more intense and frequent, mainly due to adaptation to life as a couple, to the need to understand each other’s way of being, the stresses of work and the lack of time to forge a relationship.

*“I think that, in the past, how we did things then was completely different from today. Today it seems to have a better flavor, a better dosage” (Beto).*

*“We get married to an idealized person and then you discover that this person doesn’t exist, then we need time to accept, wait and forgive” (Zinho).*

### Spirituality, religion and religiosity

The couples interviewed belonged to Christian religious denominations. Eight couples practiced the same religion. The interviewees lived and shared the same marital space, connected by homogamous, religious ties. The homogamous, religious setup lent itself to the presentation of similarities and confluences in terms of understanding the content presented about spirituality, religion and religiosity. In two cases, the spouses were of different religions, but as they were both Christians (Catholic and Evangelical), there were no significant divergences or disagreements noted in the reports.

*“I am Christian, a Catholic, and I have been attending the Evangelical Church for three years, while he is Catholic” (Clara).*

Seven of the participating couples made no distinction between spirituality, religion and religiosity; the three words and realities were regarded as one, without distinction, in the religious universe. These couples attributed the meaning of spirituality, religion and religiosity to their experiences with God and the attributes they know about him, as well as to their religious segments. They described spirituality, religion and religiosity maintaining that the connection with the Sacred benefited their personal and conjugal life, in which it was possible to provide meaning to their personal and conjugal life through self-knowledge, the divine presence and protection that accompanied them, as well as the motivation to care for and love others, and also the reality of the continuity of life after death.

Three couples did make a distinction between spirituality, religion and religiosity (Lúcia and Zinho, Flora and Fred, Clara and Flavio). They considered spirituality as transcendent and personal realities and experiences, linked to religion, as well as an encounter and relationship with the Sacred that fills the void and promotes happiness. Meanwhile, religion was defined as a set of doctrines and rules, and religiosity the practice of religion.



The participating couples were actively involved in religious activities in their segments, which is perhaps why they highlighted the religious environment they frequented as a meeting place and, above all, a place that helped them get to know each other better as a person and as a couple, a place of refuge from problems, conducive to practicing personal and collective spiritual activities, which helped to further and better develop the skills of family members. They considered that the religion they followed provided them with the conditions to develop a healthy, loving relationship, and also a place for help and support with their material needs and with the conflicts experienced in the marital relationship.

*“When we became attached to religion, we started to pray together, have a spiritual life, support from the community, and we started to see this other side, and things started to improve in our lives” (Beto).*

They were unanimous in believing that R/S, as well as religion, is beneficial to the couple's life, encouraging the practice of prayer, love, patience, forgiveness, renunciation.

### Marital violence

The couples conceptualized marital violence as an act, gesture or word that attacks and harms the dignity of the person with whom they interact. It may be physical or verbal and even extend to and with their children. It is commonly built and fueled by feelings of hostility and power, potentially leading to violent and intimidating behavior and advances, including threats, exposure, humiliation, oppression and coercion towards the spouse.

*“Violence is any act, gesture or word that attacks and violates another person, affecting their rights and freedom, failing to respect, attacking... a range of things... I don't see violence as a physical act, I see violence as a series of situations, where often in everyday life we can attack without uttering a single word” (Fred)*

*“...it may be physical or verbal aggression. The word violence is very all-embracing. Sometimes it is in a gesture, in a word, in a way to coerce the other, repressing ...” (Carolina).*

The ten couples described two types of marital violence, physical and verbal, and it is understood that there are three underlying subtypes: sexual, psychological and deprivation or neglect. In Brazil, this goes against the common view which associates marital violence with physical violence. Perhaps this is because the study participants had not directly experienced physical violence, with the exception of one couple, or even because surveys on situations of marital violence are carried out, for the most part, based on data from the Police Stations and the Judiciary, highlighting only one side of the violence, most of it physical.

*“Psychological violence, where a husband imposes certain situations on his wife where she feels belittled, undermined, disempowered, discredited. Physical violence... needs no explanation” (Zinho).*

*“We immediately think of marital violence as aggression, a man hitting a woman, but I think there are other types of violence: verbal, verbal aggression” (Carolina).*

However, there was agreement among seven participating couples that the marital violence, heard about, witnessed or even experienced by them, was committed by men who attacked their wives. The explicit gender distinction shows that marital violence, whether verbal or physical, still falls more heavily on women than on men, probably the result of a historical Brazilian culture that is permissive and which legitimizes the use of violence against women, and that the “weaker

sex” does not have the capacity and conditions to react, finding itself forced to submit to and tolerate the aggression, facilitating male domination.

*“Cowardice It's usually the man against the woman. Men have more physical resources to attack women” (Eduardo).*

Only one woman reported having used violent physical acts against her spouse during a fight with him, slapping and punching him. The remainder of the couples admitted that they had used verbal violence in some specific, limited instances, when living as a couple, usually when they were experiencing a lack of satisfaction with the quality of the marriage, as well as in situations of personal, relational and/or financial difficulty. Two couples explained that the beginning of their marriage was marked by many fights and conflicts, perhaps generated and motivated by the way of being of each of them and by stressful situations at the beginning of their marriage, but that this mutual aggression diminished over the years.

*“When we got married, I was very immature. We would fight about anything at all. Today we think, reason, have dialogue” (Beto).*

The couples realized that, when they lost control of their own limits and emotional and relational stability, they resorted to verbal aggression, as they were unable to control their anger and indignation, and did not have the emotional maturity to discuss the realities that generated and motivated the aggression.

*“I tend to be the more aggressive one. I talk too much. I'm careful not to incite his anger. I try to keep quiet so we can calm down and then talk. When we are angry, we end up having a slanging match and hurting others. We have the power to hurt someone else's ego. This really disrupts marriages. We say a word, this word hurts the other and the other tries to find a way to exact revenge... We try to keep quiet so the fight doesn't escalate to the next level” (Carolina).*

The couples interviewed considered that marital violence has roots which may be an important factor in the repetition of violence, when they are in violent environments and when living with violent people. One of these spaces could be in the family of origin, where the children, either directly or indirectly, witnessed their parents attacking each other, or even when the children themselves were objects of mistreatment. Two of them described seeing their parents attacking each other with violent words and gestures such as: shouting, slamming doors, punching tables, among other behaviors.

*“...(violence) may involve family baggage: children growing up in violent homes, lack of self-knowledge and not respecting one's own limits” (Sandro).*

According to the couples, the dynamics of marital violence generally reveal a process which is cyclical, relational and progressive; they realized in their parents and in themselves that violence was initiated and sustained by pettiness, gestures and aggressive acts, such as: shouting, harsh, rude or indirect words, as well as the gestures of pushing, pinching, lightly pulling the hair, attitudes of disdain and contempt, among others, which with time and frequency assumed greater and more dangerous proportions for the entirety of marital and family life, rendering it acceptable and even part of the family routine.

*“Violence begins with small gestures and tends to grow from there...it becomes more serious, physical. Moral violence, verbal violence, the violence of not accepting the other, of not respecting the other; ends up hurting and harming people a lot” (Rose).*

*“Extreme violence begins with small acts of violence. Violence stems from lovelessness” (Zaza).*

Marital violence, even when practiced verbally by couples, not always mutually between the spouses, was considered unacceptable and unjustifiable, as it is a factor of disrespect that negatively affects the spouse and their freedom.

### The influence of R/S on the marital relationship and on domestic violence

The couples spoke about religiosity but said almost nothing about spirituality, perhaps, as we saw previously, they do not distinguish between these two elements, or even because violence is heard about and/or experienced as a concrete reality, not an abstract one, finding in religiosity, but not in spirituality, practical concordance and responses. Or even because they consider religiosity to be a product of spirituality. The couples were unanimous in considering R/S to be a resource that prevents, deals with and confronts marital violence. They stressed that, through religious and spiritual experiences in religious groups, they obtained clear and defined guidelines and objectives for life as a couple, especially for the moral experience of what is right and what is wrong. In this way, they obtained more resources when in contact with situations of greater conflict and tension between them. Religion, according to Hilda and Beto, is so intimately linked to marital and family life that it becomes a third person in domestic relationships.

*"...(R/S) helps to connect with God and find peace and balance in self-control. Which helps prevent you from acting crazy. Avoiding domestic violence" (Flora).*

In the Christian religious context, violence is not acceptable. On the contrary, it is condemned. The couples also looked to biblical teachings as principles and values for life and relationships, especially the scriptures in the New Testament. Sacred and unquestionable teachings, given by the divinity itself, to guide, lead, limit, restrain couples when there are signs of violence, mainly in respecting the other as their fellow man and tolerating the limits of the relationship and of the other. An unquestionable personal and collective lifestyle to be lived, thus accepted and followed as a truth to be obeyed. Five couples reported that they do not always follow all of the biblical teachings, but they are aware of them and make every effort to put them into domestic practice on a daily basis.

*"The Bible gives us principles, gives us guidance and prevents us from using violent acts. ...we learn not to use bad words...we try to live according to what it teaches us" (Flora).*

*"Without God we cannot live anywhere. The Bible talks of principles, respect, not doing harm to others. Respect, a common resource for family life" (Binho).*

R/S helps to confront conjugal violence by encouraging personal, psychic maturation, as well as relational maturity between spouses, through understanding, direction and mystique in the way of feeling, thinking and acting within the boundaries and the potential of the conjugal reality.

*"The more we delve into religion, the more we acquire maturity in marriage" (Lourdes).*

The respondents reported that religion and religiosity, through prayer, spiritual exercises, readings, breathing and meditation, among others, promote the means and conditions to curb and prevent petty acts of violence from assuming larger proportions, especially physical violence.

*"It helps by fostering fear, concern about not wanting to hurt your spouse in any way, physically or morally, so as not to displease God. This fear of God preserves the relationship" (Carolina).*

The religious and spiritual practices carried out by the interviewed couples were, for the most part, conducted with both spouses present. The potential space to be together provided impetus for the two, which would theoretically encourage them to spend more time together, with each other, and with other couples. The time they spent together made it easier for the spouses to build and commit to dialogue, living together and understanding each other better and better, as well as assuming together the ideal of marriage and family proposed by the religious system. In addition to the relational aspect, religious and spiritual practices, when the spouses are present together, provided considerable symmetrical, personal and marital maturity, which helped in coping with the challenges and conflicts. They emphasized that R/S empowers spouses to face domestic violence through the human/sacred and experiential encouragement of dialogue, respect, patience, persistence and perseverance, optimism, love, caring for one another, and creates conditions for a healthier married life. The sacred acts as an enhancer and legitimizer of practices considered healthy in personal experience and as a twosome. They highlighted prayer as the most commonly employed coping mechanism and that it plays a role in centralizing the lives of the spouses.

*"The minimal lack of spirituality and religiosity will generate violence because that's when respect ends, forgiveness ends, patience ends and, as a consequence, violent acts and aggressions ensue. R/S is necessary to prevent acts of violence" (Clara).*

The participants listened to case histories and had friends who were couples who had suffered domestic violence, where R/S enabled them to get through it and re-establish healthier marital relationships. In the religious settings they received instruction, attention, incentives and also the means and tools that provided and facilitated the practice of dialogue and forgiveness. The religious group created support networks and resources that helped people who suffered domestic violence to change their lifestyle. Living with other members of the Church helps the couple take more care of their marital life and be able to turn to them for moral, religious, psychological and financial help. Clara and Binho turned to other couples for help, because they almost separated and were becoming aggressive towards each other. The sacred contributes, both through the clarity of what needs to be done as well as how the couple could seek strength and be able to count on divine grace to follow the new domestic dynamic with spiritual and divine assistance, enabling spouses to forgive and rekindle the marital relationship, thereby generating Family Social Capital.

*"Forgiveness taught in religion, spirituality, helps to offer another chance and to believe in the person. We all make mistakes" (Sandro).*

*"Sometimes we have disagreements, but the disagreements do not go too deep ..... She gives in more, there are times when I give in*

*more. One gives in, the other gives in and so on. We don't get to the point of abusing each other; but I think that it does exist. We pray, that's why we don't abuse each other" (Paulo).*

The issue of gender was brought up again when Duda said that religion has the "strength to help women not be so submissive and to get out of abusive relationships". This statement is interesting because it contradicts a common view in Brazilian society that the Judeo-Christian religion has well-defined roots in the submission of women to men. However, the same interviewee cautioned that religion can promote violence when its leaders and members encourage women to endure violence in order to maintain their marriage and family. And Lúcia noted that R/S "is a double-edged sword". It can help to prevent

violence, but it can also encourage it, when leaders or members of certain religious segments advise women in situations of violence to be submissive to their husbands and endure it for the love of God. Even when R/S helps with coping and is equipped with resources to prevent marital violence and even though it may not translate into the domestic context, the interviewees reported that it can be harmful to the couple and the family, where the conception of the ideal marital relationship for this religious segment intimidates the couple into exposing what they are going through in the real world of the relationship and, thus, they tend to mask and hide the violent reality out of shame or fear of failure.

“It can get in the way when we are in a spiritual environment and we have an image of being married. We have the idea that a couple

who live their life in God is perfect. Violence can happen and the couple may end up not wanting to show what is happening in the marriage so as not to expose themselves, out of shame, especially having an active role in the Church” (Ricardo).

The religious ideal of marriage presented by religions may be a motivator of harm to couples who exercise some form of leadership in religious segments, in which the conjugal union is seen as eternal and sacred. They assume the responsibility and role of exemplifying the ideal conjugal relationship and begin to conceal tensions, conflicts and stress, even situations of violence they may be experiencing.

“A person who is too religious can become anyone’s executioner. Fanaticism can get in the way by not respecting differences of opinion (Sandro).

“I have also seen a case of a couple in which the husband had an important role in the Church and cheated on her a lot, he was abusive. She didn’t tell anyone and didn’t have the courage to abandon the marriage because she belonged to God and had a family. Her husband wanted her to hide everything so he could keep his image intact (Carolina).

Another factor presented by the interviewees, relating to marital violence and the religious marital ideal that they follow or should follow, is the comparison that couples make with each other, a kind of contest about who would be more in harmony with the marital and family ideal proposed by the religion they follow.

R/S can promote domestic violence when spouses with more radical religious views, alienated from the real world, lose respect for each other and for other couples, with regard to imposing the marital and family ideal on the spouse and on other couples, as professed by their religious segment, disregarding the actual, true reality of domestic relationships and environments. There is a tendency to dominate others, asserting their will at all costs.

“The allegiant spouse who clings to the Word in order to impose their position, their will, while the other feels coerced into agreeing, which ends up leading to religious and psychic violence” (Zinho).

“Maybe in a very radical situation. If a person is too radical in imposing the faith, it can reach the point of disagreement... because then there is no respect, forgiveness ends, patience ends and, consequently, violence and aggression ensue” (Binho).

For some homogamous couples, it is even easier to use religion for a healthy, married life. Religious heterogamy and obliging the other to adhere to their religion disadvantages the relationship. Binho considers that when she radically insists on taking him to her religious activities, the relationship becomes more tense and creates stress.

“When the two are on the same wavelength, with the same religiosity, it certainly improves - the marital relationship” (Eduardo).

“If one half of the couple is religious and the other is not, and mocks, there may be violence. One of the spouses needs to bear witness to attract the other” (Márcio).

## Considerations

Marriage is a complex, unstable union between two different people who, over time, and at different stages, conditioned by the culture and context in which they are immersed, share their life through trust, dialogue, mutual understanding, companionship, understanding, respect, financial partnership, sex, among others. The non-linear dynamism and character define the marital relationship, which is why we understand it as consisting of three independent realities that come together and form an “us”: the individuality of each member of the couple and the relationship built. An “us” that changes and gives new meaning depending on the length of time of coexistence, and adaptation, a dynamism of the relationship, when comparing the beginning of the marriage to the phase in which they now find themselves. The “conjugal us” with its monogamous setup, even without making a distinction between religion and spirituality, when it can rely on religious/spiritual homogamy, in other words, both are affiliated with the same religion/spirituality, tend towards a similar, convergent narrative, when referring to the marital relationship. The religiously “homogamy” Christian couple, as well as those of other religious denominations, predominantly develop and maintain a personal and social repertoire oriented and associated with the same norms, precepts and beliefs, based on the same religious teachings to which they profess. Religion appears to be a factor that conditions personal and dual behavior, as well as morality and the performance of marital roles in homogamous couples.

The religious/spiritual axis was more associated with the marital relationship when, in addition to being affiliated, both practicing the same religion, they can also count on the support, assistance and “protection” of members of the religious community, as well as the religious institution itself. And they may also resort to the religious/spiritual Sacred as an urgent request for strength, grace and blessings that the spouse can turn to. Conjugal violence is still seen through the lens of physical abuse and aggression, which often overlap with other complex ways of manifesting and interrelating, such as violence which is verbal, psychological, sexual, financial, institutional, gender-oriented, digital and social in nature. However, it is the verbal violence between couples that seemed to attract most attention and become part of the zero-tolerance agenda.

Verbal violence characterized by chronicity, durability, intensity and blaming can take various forms in conjugal relationships, such as: swearing and insults, verbal threats, belittling and disrespect through words and facial expressions, constant, destructive criticism, excessive control, manipulation, and verbal humiliation. In addition to the harm it causes, it has great potential to impact people’s mental health and psychosocial dimensions, especially if the words and actions are full of prejudice, stereotypes or discrimination. R/S impacts marital life, whether Christian or not, a “sacred” resource that helps prevent violence between couples and provide tools to combat it. Mainly by considering the human dignity of each spouse as the image and likeness of God, therefore, respecting the other as one would oneself, using the practice of dialogue, tolerance, patience, persistence and perseverance, hope, love. These practices are enhanced and justified by the Sacred, present in biblical teachings and in the references to Jesus Christ, with his commandment of “love your neighbour” and



in the lifestyle presented to his followers. The aspect of belonging to a group that favors the development of R/S meant that spouses could count on emotional and social support, which can facilitate a more stable, lasting and meaningful relationship, as well as shaping their behavior, emotions and personal and relational thinking.

R/S helps people create a space to speak and be heard, in search of commonality - the Sacred, the religious, the spiritual - which often builds and breaks down entrenched, rigid concepts and actions, as well as empowering couples to deal with life in the generation of Family Social Capital. Hence the importance of understanding that R/S is a question of personal and marital identity, much more than a doctrine or religious practice, and is deeply intertwined with all other aspects such as culture, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation and political orientation. R/S is not only a powerful and promising resource in combating conjugal violence, it influences married life and contributes to the generation of Family Social Capital, mainly by promoting the means and conditions to curb and prevent minor violence, regarded as "sins", which can take on increasing proportions. Such as teachings of peace and love, prayers, spiritual exercises, readings, breathing, meditation, psychosocial support and protection networks, among others. However, R/S can promote conjugal violence when it justifies acts of violence, when it justifies the submissiveness of women, when its leaders encourage enduring conjugal violence to maintain the ideal of "indissolubility" (in the Judeo-Christian case), intimidating spouses to mask and hide, out of shame, disputes between ideal couples, or the fear of failure, the real violent and abusive situations. As the couples did not demonstrate any religious or spiritual differences between them, the research was limited to Christian marital homogamy, which could be a springboard for further investigation that could stimulate other reflections.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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