

“Be a Man”: A Psychological Exploration of 'Corrective' Homophobia Violence in Youth

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This article presents a comprehensive literature review on intrafamily violence perpetrated under the pretext of "correcting" behaviors considered homoaffectionate, mainly based on the absence of conformity with gender stereotypes, in children and adolescents. The Global status report on preventing violence against children, published in 2020, highlights that approximately 300 million children - accounting for nearly three-quarters of children aged 2 to 4 years - regularly face physical punishment and/or psychological violence inflicted by their parents and caregivers. Alongside the complex and multifaceted nature of the problem of homophobia, which lacks comprehensive public measures to address all the needs of the LGBTQ+ community, there is a growing concern about violence specifically targeted at children and adolescents. This form of violence has the potential to profoundly affect the biopsychosocial development of these individuals throughout their lives. At the time this research was conducted, with limitations in terms of time and resources, there still existed a significant gap in data collection capable of accurately quantifying intrafamily homophobia crimes, especially when directed at children and adolescents. In order to create a safe environment, much needs to be done to provide children and adolescents with the structure to grow up in a home that fosters their full development, preserving their physical and moral integrity regardless of any factor, including homophobia. This article emphasizes the urgency of addressing intrafamily violence motivated by homophobia, particularly when it involves children and adolescents, inviting heads of state, organizations, institutions, and society as a whole to mobilize efforts to combat intrafamily violence under the pretext of correcting manifestations of sexuality and gender. It is essential that society and policymakers take concrete measures to protect LGBTQ+ youth from abuse and discrimination, ensuring that they can grow up in an environment that respects their identity and sexual orientation.

Keywords. LGBTQ+ Youth, Homophobia, Child and Adolescent, Domestic Violence, Mental Health

1. Introduction

Violence is one of the major global health problems, directly impacting the psychological and social development of individuals who experience it, as well as families, communities, and even countries. This is evident as the rising cases of violence generate costs and demands for healthcare services that, for the most part, are already resource-constrained (1).

Given that violence poses numerous challenges to biopsychosocial development, its chaotic intersection with homophobia can foster stigma and prejudice, impeding an individual's ability to establish healthy relationships with themselves,

their families, and society. It can even lead them to become perpetrators of the violence they have endured or continue the cycle of victimization (2).

As an exploratory research and literature review, this production aims to shed light on and establish possible connections between intrafamily violence against children and adolescents and homophobia. It brings attention to cases like that of Alex Medeiros, who lost his life due to violence and cruelty perpetrated by his own father, who used the pretext of correction to make his son "act like a man" (3). It is of utmost urgency to draw parallels between intrafamily violence and homophobia so that assertive measures can be taken. This will enable the growing number of children and adolescents at risk

of physical and psychosocial harm to regain their right to life, freedom, equality, and security, as guaranteed by the Brazilian constitution (4).

This research calls on researchers, institutions, and government representatives to approach this issue with empathy and a commitment to the real needs of children and adolescents living in the shadow of violence. It urges them not to view the problem solely as terrifying statistics of intrafamily homophobia but to recognize it for what it truly is: an issue of the ineffectiveness of the agencies responsible for enforcing existing laws, a genuine concern for the demands of this group, and a call for urgent multidisciplinary action. It is essential to stimulate debates and measures to address this situation and eradicate intrafamily violence against children and adolescents as a "corrective" response to sexual and gender diversity.

2. Methodology

The methodology employed in this academic article consists of a comprehensive literature review with the aim of exploring the issue of intrafamily violence as a corrective measure for gender diversity, with a focus on cases involving children and adolescents. This approach seeks to emphasize the seriousness of this problem while also raising awareness about the possibility that the numbers related to children and adolescents experiencing intrafamily violence may be even higher due to underreporting and the normalization of violence as a means of correction.

The research also examines the discrepancies in numbers presented by unofficial reports from organizations combating LGBT+phobia, such as the Grupo Gay da Bahia and the Associação Nacional de Travestis e Transexuais. These disparities in statistics underscore the issue of underreporting and the absence of official data on the subject.

The data used in this research were collected from various sources, including reports, articles from scientific journals, undergraduate, master's, and doctoral theses. Academic productions by students and professionals in the fields of health, especially psychology, and law were particularly emphasized. Additionally, news articles published in major Brazilian media outlets were considered, excluding those that did not identify the victim. This exclusion posed challenges in obtaining specific and objective data, as in many cases, the names of underage victims are withheld.

Furthermore, the research utilized international reports from organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) to broaden the discussion of the Brazilian issue to a global context. This allowed Brazilian statistics to serve as an example for other countries to act upon in order to prevent even graver consequences than those addressed in this report.

The combination of various data sources, including academic, news, and international reports, provided

a comprehensive analysis of the issue of intrafamily violence directed at children and adolescents due to gender diversity, highlighting its severity and the need for effective prevention and intervention measures.

3. Results

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized violence as one of the major global public health issues, as well as its immediate and long-term impact on the psychological and social development it poses for individuals, families, communities, and countries. (1).

This article aligns with the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of what constitutes violence (1).

"The intentional use of physical force or power, whether actual or threatened, against oneself, another individual, or a group or community, resulting in or having a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, developmental impairment, or deprivation."

In addition to the issue of what constitutes violence and the urgent need for resolution measures, we add the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations (UN):

"Obtaining international cooperation to address international economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian issues, and to promote and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of race, sex, language, or religion" (5).

Regarding the Brazilian Constitution, we have Article Five which defines:"

"All persons are equal before the law, without distinction of any nature, guaranteeing to Brazilians and to foreigners residing in the country the inviolability of the right to life, liberty, equality, security, and property" (4).

In addition to ensuring equality for all before the law, Article 5, Section III deserves special attention for the construction of this article, as it prohibits the practice of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, establishing them as non-bailable crimes that are not subject to pardon or amnesty. It also establishes that public security is the duty of the State, with the guarantee of preserving public order and the integrity of individuals.

Having thus established a solid foundation on what constitutes violence and the urgent need for heads of state to act for its resolution, it is necessary to delve into the scenario of horrors perpetrated within the family context against children and adolescents. Out of respect for families and, most importantly, for the young lives lost, this article constructs its hypothesis that the application of violence, in any form, should

not be normalized, let alone practiced, as a corrective measure for any issue, including homophobia. For this research, a significant amount of data was collected and analyzed. However, three very important names with short and tragic life stories deserve a closer look in order to highlight the extent and severity of the problem while respecting the many other names, young individuals, and families who have experienced the hardships of violence and homophobia on a daily basis. With deep sorrow and respect for these young individuals, as well as for the families who continue to live with this loss every day, I highlight the cases of:

- Alex Medeiros, an 8-year-old boy, was brutally beaten to death by his father in Rio de Janeiro. The father justified this act as a "disciplinary measure" intended to make his son "act more like a man." (3);
- Itaberli Lozano, a 17-year-old, reported his mother for not accepting his sexuality before he was brutally beaten and fatally stabbed by her in the countryside of São Paulo. Following his death, his body was set on fire in a sugarcane field. (6);
- In the USA, 7-year-old Gabriel Fernandez was tortured and killed by his mother and stepfather, with his siblings testifying in court that he was beaten while being called "homosexual." (7).

Roughly half of the children worldwide, which amounts to approximately 1 billion individuals, experience physical, sexual, or psychological violence annually. This leads to injuries, disabilities, and even death due to the ineffective implementation of protection strategies established by countries. (8).

It is important to note that these types of violence are not limited to the most heinous cases but also encompass the so-called "corrections" applied by parents in response to any behavior or expression by the child that displeases a family member. According to the same report on child violence, approximately 300 million children (almost three-quarters of children aged 2 to 4 years) regularly suffer physical punishment and/or psychological violence at the hands of parents and caregivers (8).

It is important to note that adults who have experienced 4 or more Adverse Childhood Experiences, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, are at a 7 times higher risk of involvement in interpersonal violence, either as victims or perpetrators, and have a 30 times higher likelihood of attempting suicide. These data underscore the crucial importance of addressing and combating violence and discrimination from childhood to prevent severe consequences in adulthood (8).

Violent deaths against homoaffectionate groups involved different methods, with 28% of them occurring through sharp weapons such as knives,

machetes, scissors, and hoes, with extreme cases involving up to 95 stabbings. Next, 24% of deaths resulted from firearms, while 21% were caused by beatings and strangulation, including suffocation and torture. There were also reports of deaths caused by intentional vehicular collisions (9).

Intrafamily homophobia refers to attitudes, behaviors, and expressions of prejudice, discrimination, and rejection that occur within the family environment towards non-heterosexual sexual orientations. This form of homophobia can be particularly harmful to young lesbians and gays because it happens within the context of their closest and most intimate relationships. Rejection and lack of acceptance from parents and relatives can have significant consequences for the mental, emotional, and physical health of these young individuals (2). LGBT youth can experience rejection, verbal or physical violence from parents or other family members, which can result in feelings of helplessness, loneliness, and lack of emotional support. Intrafamily prejudice can lead to a range of negative impacts such as mental health issues, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, social isolation, and feelings of shame and guilt. Additionally, intrafamily prejudice can negatively affect the young LGBT individual's process of identity and self-acceptance. The fear of being rejected or judged based on their sexual orientation can lead to internal conflict and the suppression of their identity, resulting in challenges in the healthy development of their sexual identity and self-expression.

These psychosocial impacts can have long-term consequences for the health of these young individuals, affecting their quality of life, interpersonal relationships, academic performance, and future prospects. (10). Therefore, it is essential to recognize and address intrafamily homophobia, promoting awareness, respect, and support within families. Psychosocial interventions and support programs can be implemented to help LGBT youth cope with prejudice and develop healthy coping strategies, strengthening their resilience and emotional well-being.

4. Discussion

When it comes to homophobia, a closely related concept is the expectation created around the idea of being a "boy" or a "girl" and their respective roles. Long before it manifests as prejudice, aggression, or even death, homophobia arises when this expectation of parents and society is broken. It is necessary to reestablish the understanding of what is known about gender and sexuality here so that we can proceed with the developments of homophobia.

"The concept of gender identity is linked to a person's relationship with their own body. There are individuals who are biologically born as women, for example, but do not identify with that gender since childhood, which creates an internal conflict. On the

other hand, sexuality relates to whom someone is attracted to. A person can have relationships exclusively with individuals of the same sex, making them homosexual, or have relationships with people of the opposite sex, making them heterosexual, and even have relationships with both, in which case they are considered bisexual.” (11).

Having clarified the basic premises about the difference between gender and sexuality, this article intends to focus on children and adolescents who, by not conforming to an intrafamilial heteronormative expectation, end up in situations of risk that can even lead to the loss of their lives. This raises a red flag for a subject that is not often found in academic discourse. There are indeed works that discuss the process of discovering one's sexuality and "coming out" (12), articles that will address the homophobia perpetuated by society towards individuals who are exploring their sexuality or have already assumed their sexual identity (13), however, little is said about intrafamily violence towards children who, long before they have reached certain cognitive faculties that could enable them to discover their gender and sexuality, have had their lives taken away for not conforming to the gender roles assigned to them.

The cases of Itaberli Lozano and Alex Medeiros illustrate the horrors and depict the sad Brazilian reality that requires attention and more effective measures. Even though there are laws that partially meet the needs of this group, their implementation has not been sufficient when we look at the statistics year after year. Measures such as awareness campaigns, debates, access to care services, and inclusive education can be the gateway to a safer space, both for the victim and the aggressor, who also lacks means to address the issues that drive them to commit violent acts. Incorrect application of the law can normalize violence, giving a sense of impunity to both the victim, who may choose to remain silent, and the aggressor, who believes they have a 'free pass' to 'correct' what displeases them.

The contextualization of the Brazilian scenario regarding issues such as sexual and gender diversity is always very striking, if not shocking. Despite having a reality far removed from dictatorial countries, cultures deeply rooted in religious premises, Brazil remains the country that most kills the LGBT+ population, with one death every 29 hours (9).

It is important to bring forth a relevant reflection here regarding the 316 LGBT+ individuals who died violently in Brazil in 2021, as evidenced by the dossier produced by the Observatory of LGBTI+ Deaths and Violence in conjunction with Acontece LGBTI+ and Grupo Gay da Bahia, in contrast to the 41,100 violent deaths of the general population (14). For many, especially non-LGBT+ people, it may seem like an exaggeration to bring up such a "small" issue when compared to the total number of violent murders. However, it's important to emphasize here

that these murders in 2021 refer to the most heinous acts committed against these minorities, as can be seen day after day through reports from family members or close friends of LGBT+ individuals who are burned alive, assaulted, sexually violated, and have their lives brutally taken away, tearing apart all dignity and the right to life, which, as stated in the constitution, is the right of every citizen. Thus, we are not talking about individual crimes but hate crimes. Highlighting the seriousness of the problem and the extent of the cruelty in these acts is an invitation for there not to be issues for LGBT+ people and issues for non-LGBT+ people; this issue requires joint action, regardless of how someone identifies or any separatist factors that might suggest that one individual's problem does not affect the collective.

"Hate crime is a form of violence directed at a specific social group with specific characteristics. In other words, the aggressor chooses victims based on their prejudices and, guided by these prejudices, behaves hostilely toward a particular way of being and acting typical of a group of people. The groups affected by this discriminatory offense are as varied as possible, but hate crimes occur most frequently with so-called social minorities. Social minorities are considered those groups of individuals who have historically and socially suffered notable discrimination. Examples include victims of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, religious intolerance, and prejudice against people with disabilities." (15)

Being LGBT+ in Brazil carries enormous risks because the simple expression of sexuality and gender that differs from social expectations and norms can put the individual in danger for their entire life. It's important to note that in Brazil, there isn't a specific law for the criminalization of homophobia. However, through a decision by the Supreme Federal Court (STF) in 2019, this act can be classified under Law 7716/89, known as the Racism Law, because in its origin, it only addressed prejudices based on race or color (16). The discovery of a baby's sex, usually determined through ultrasound between the 18th and 22nd week of pregnancy, is a moment filled with great anticipation for parents for various reasons. It is within the womb and through the parents that societal roles, limitations, and expectations are imposed and demanded. Even before birth, the developing fetus has its story already set in stone, subject to the horrors that this article aims to highlight. It is precisely this expectation, built upon unfulfilled dreams of parents, society's moral judgments, the roles of "man" and "woman," and sexual organs, that homophobia takes root. Despite all the progress made in recent years, one thing has remained the same: the struggle. Every LGBT+ individual has always had to fight, whether it's against religious, cultural, familial, or economic issues. At certain points in history, some of these "monsters" have

grown larger than others, diversifying the struggle that each LGBT+ person has had to face ad infinitum, unless the voices of these minorities are heard in a way that understands their demands, their seriousness, and how interdisciplinary measures can be taken to eradicate intrafamily violence against children and adolescents as a "corrective" measure.

Resuming the case of Alex Medeiros in Rio de Janeiro, who was brutally beaten by his own father under the pretext of "correcting" behavior he deemed inappropriate solely based on gender stereotypes and considering data like those presented in the WHO report, we can observe a bleak reality. In this sad equation, the combination of intrafamily violence and homophobia inevitably results in long-term impacts on the lives of children and adolescents who, in their homes, presumed sources of reference and support for healthy development, face true tormentors who let prejudice distort any emotional bond with their children.

In 2022, the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) released its first survey on homosexuals and bisexuals in Brazil. It is alarming to consider that the IBGE has existed since May 1936 and only conducted its first survey on the LGBT+ community in 2022. This underscores the lack of attention given to this significant public health issue.

The data presented in 2021 by the researchers who compiled the GGB dossier were mainly collected from sources such as newspaper reports, social media, and online portals (9). This in itself highlights the lack of focus on a significant issue. Moreover, it indicates that, even though the numbers may seem alarming, there is still a significant gap due to underreporting. This underreporting can be seen as a form of indirect homophobia since the "silence" of authorities is equally problematic as the violence and the aggressor themselves. The lack of recognition of this real problem results in a lack of prioritization of public and governmental measures to estimate its true extent and, even more importantly, to seek effective solutions.

According to the data collected by GGB, generally, gays and lesbians are killed in domestic settings, while transvestites and transgender individuals are killed on the streets (9). Such information emphasizes how this issue demands larger-scale research to understand the phenomenon, as even though the LGBT+ acronym encompasses various gender and sexual orientations, each subgroup requires a certain type of special attention.

5. Conclusion

Bringing to light the cruel reality of prejudice experienced by these minorities, until the homophobic scenario is effectively combated, GGB recommends a text called "Gay Vivo Não Dorme com o Inimigo" ("Gay Alive Does Not Sleep with the Enemy"), providing suggestions in the form of a "survival guide" to guide LGBT+ individuals to avoid putting themselves at risk. This manual strongly

reinforces the urgent need for public measures, such as sexual and gender education at the basic levels of education, promoting an education that encompasses different ways of being and encouraging respect and empathy. It is imperative to recognize that homophobia should not be simply equated with racism as a form of prejudice subject to punishment. These are different groups with different demands that require distinct studies and measures that address the specificities of each, even though hate crimes can cross both the gender/sexuality and racism lines, such as black gay men (9).

For Alex, Itaberli, and so many other children and adolescents in Brazil, it will not be possible to provide care and support to deal with the pain they suffered, as their lives were violently swept under the rug of a society that refuses to see that homophobia is a crime that is growing at unimaginable rates and affects both the intrafamily context and broader structures. May measures be taken to address the multiple faces of violence, especially concerning experiences within the family context; otherwise, more and more cases will continue to be reported, shocking some, but never going beyond that: shock. It is hoped that society, collectively, interdisciplinarity, and engaged, will demand public measures that protect the lives of children and adolescents, enforcing laws that should be more comprehensive and properly applied. Unfortunately, Alex, Itaberli, and many others have lost their tomorrows and become numbers that only continue to grow. May it be possible to light a candle in memory of those whom society considered sick and tried to "correct." May the flame of this candle illuminate the path of those who have already gone and become a beacon for those who still resist toward a future where they will no longer need to fight.

6. Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Mrs. Maria, who has always supported me in all aspects of my life. I'd also like to express my gratitude to my family for always encouraging me, to my boyfriend Pedro H. Campos Finotelli for listening to me repeatedly as I poured out my thoughts about my academic journey, motivating me to move forward, and engaging with my ideas. I'd like to extend my thanks to my research advisor, Maria Cristina Zago Castelli, for all the learning I gained as her student; without you, I wouldn't have had the slightest idea and passion to conduct research. I can't forget to mention my former boss and a friend for life, Ana Luísa Neri Salvador Menck, who always believed in me and supported me; without you, I wouldn't have had the opportunities in my professional field. You undoubtedly leave your mark on my life and drive me to keep moving forward. May I always be a source of pride for you, just as you are the fuel for my journey that is only just beginning.

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