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VIOLENCE IN DISASTER SITUATIONS: THE CASE OF RIO GRANDE DO SUL - BRAZIL IN THE MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Factors such as social inequality, poverty, and spatial vulnerability contribute significantly to increased violence and insecurity in natural or induced disasters, especially in already marginalized communities. This study aims to analyze the most frequent vocabularies in media reports dealing with violence during the 2024 floods in Rio Grande do Sul. **Methods:** Documentary research with a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach, using reports from newspapers with wide circulation in Brazil. **Results:** twelve lexicons were identified with the highest frequency: shelters, people, violence, women, crimes, looting, security, tragedy, sexual, children, abuse and rape. **Discussion:** Media coverage influences the social construction of catastrophe. Likewise, the presence of electronic media and the dissemination of daily visual coverage of events, the selection of reports and testimonies from those affected, make it possible to follow events practically on the spot. **Conclusions:** Violence predominated among women and children, in shelters that were supposed to be safe places in the face of the catastrophe. Media plays a fundamental role in publicizing cases of violence, making governments act effectively to prevent and manage violence. Furthermore, the disaster scenario requires increasingly active multi-professional action, given the complexity involved.

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INTRODUCTION

Factors such as social inequality, poverty, and spatial vulnerability contribute significantly to increased violence and insecurity in natural or induced disasters, especially in already marginalized communities (Carvalho and Oliveira, 2020). The scientific approach suggests the need for public policies aimed at emergency responses and preventive and mitigation actions, focusing on reducing inequalities and strengthening local support networks. These preventive initiatives aim to transform the culture of "risk management" into a culture of coping, addressing the social and economic roots of disasters (Melo and Santos, 2011). Another relevant aspect in the literature is the psychosocial impact of disasters, in which the increase in stress and tension can lead to higher rates of interpersonal violence and even domestic violence (Manfrini et al., 2023). Information communication and the media play an important role in all phases of disasters. Taking advantage of their authority and emotional resonance, opinion leaders direct the user's focus toward specific information (Shi et al., 2024).

A bibliometric study revealed that there is a high level of interest in media and disaster research in the last 20 years (1996 to 2016), on the part of the scientific community (Reis et al., 2017). This is justified by the media's influence on public decision-making. It is possible to understand how journalistic discourses reflect relations of discrimination, social inequality, violence, power, and social control manifested in language. Discourse not only reflects realities, it also participates in their construction (Shi et al., 2024). Thus, in a major disaster situation, such as the floods that recently hit Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, affecting more than two million people and forcing thousands to leave their homes, they impact both the Brazilian and international populations. They began to see the event through the journalistic discourses produced, and these discourses also influenced those affected by the disaster. In other words, the media not only defines which significant events will be publicized but also offers interpretations of how these events can be understood (Conjo et al., 2021). In view of the above, this study aims to analyze the most frequent vocabularies in media reports dealing with violence during the 2024 floods in Rio Grande do Sul.

Missing people... One of the tasks carried out by the police since the start of the rescue has been to help locate missing family members. As of Sunday morning, 125 people were considered missing in the state. The Civil Police reinforced the team at the Police Station for the Investigation of Missing Persons (*Delegacia de Investigação de Pessoas Desaparecidas*, DPID). The police station now has four teams, one coordinated by a police authority. (R9)

There were many problems in all areas. Loss of life, total and partial destruction of cities, neighborhoods, houses, businesses, and belongings. Destruction of transport infrastructure, health, education, crops, settlements, places of work and income, and the network of care for women victims of violence. (R13)

The words “*violência*” and “*crimes*” were clearly used to report all cases of violence during the flood period in the state. Among the main crimes committed during the period were “*saques*”, which appeared 201 times, assaults, robberies, murders, and “*sexual*” violence.

According to the Rio Grande do Sul Public Security Secretariat (*Secretaria de Segurança Pública*, SSP-RS), 43 of the detainees were caught for theft and the rest for looting, drug trafficking, and illegal possession of weapons. In addition, 41 people were arrested in shelters, 13 of them for sexual harassment. (R20)

Criminals have taken advantage of the darkness in cities without electricity and the emptying of entire neighborhoods to commit thefts. Numerous videos on social media have captured cases of violence. One of them, in the Mathias Velho neighborhood, in Canoas, recorded the sound of gunfire in the neighborhood, on Sunday night. (R26)

Faced with the chaotic scenario that has taken hold, the word “*segurança*” has taken center stage. The mobilizations became more constant with the help of all the country's public security forces.

Secretary Sandro Caron explained that in the first few days, rescue operations were a priority to save lives, but from the fourth day onwards, the demand for rescues decreased and the firefighters took on this responsibility. The police were then assigned to patrol the shelters and the streets. According to Caron, the situation has been under control since the beginning and all police forces are on the streets. (R20)

Dozens of civil and military police officers were deployed to monitor the scene, which also included cars from the Federal Police and the National Force. A team from the Shock Battalion patrolled the waters in a boat, and at least one officer accompanied rescuers on a jet ski, those who were still out rescuing people. (R26)

“*Mulheres*” were the most prominent victims in the news reports, demonstrating that the “*tragédia*” became even greater because it aggravated the already existing vulnerability. In addition to crimes of theft and looting, abuses of all kinds were reported, both inside and outside the shelters.

In shelters and places where the displaced live together, they take advantage of this to attack women and vulnerable individuals. Reports of sexual abuse in shelters have unfortunately become increasingly frequent in recent weeks in Rio Grande do Sul. (R35)

The complaints resulted in the creation of shelters exclusively for women and their children in several cities: Porto Alegre, Viamão, Canoas, Novo Hamburgo, and Santa Cruz do Sul. Some were created on the initiative of The State Public Defender's Office, the Public Prosecutor's Office, City Halls, and others exclusively by NGOs and civil society organizations. The point is that the shelters reflect what happens in society, in other words, the violence that occurs daily, especially against certain groups –

women, children, the LGBT population, and the black population – is reproduced within these collective spaces. (R7)

The floods of May 2024 in Rio Grande do Sul once again highlighted how gender-based violence can be exacerbated in exceptional situations. Thousands of homeless people were housed in gymnasiums that had been improvised to serve as their homes for an indefinite period. Men, old people, women, and children living under the same roof, without walls, without privacy, without even knowing each other. (R7)

The “*crianças*”, like the women, were victims of violence inside the shelters. The “*abusos*” and “*estupros*” were widely reported in the national press.

“In the vast majority of abuse cases, the perpetrator was a relative of the victim, and the abuse had happened before. But when they happened at the shelter, the police were there and they were arrested”, says the secretary. (R34)

“The bigger the shelter, the more dangerous it is”, says Adriane, referring to increasingly recurrent robberies and abuse. As the shelters are not constantly policed, this opens the door to theft and violence among the victims. The nurse explains that many people have preferred to stay in smaller shelters, in the homes of other families, or even in properties that weren't completely flooded. (R4)

After many complaints, including on social media, about violence in the shelters, shelters were set up exclusively for women and children. However, this happened after strong popular pressure.

After the arrest of 6 people on suspicion of sex crimes in shelters on Thursday (May 9), the government set up an exclusive space for women and children in Porto Alegre. (R5)

DISCUSSION

Media coverage influences the social construction of catastrophe. Likewise, the presence of electronic media and the dissemination of daily visual coverage of events, the selection of reports and testimonies from those affected, make it possible to follow events practically on the spot (Marchezine, 2014). Concerning the violence experienced in temporary shelters, it is expressed as a process of deterritorialization of families, the practice of which is reflected in the confinement of several families in places of public use (Marchezine, 2014). In the humanitarian logistics management scenario, several challenges stand out, such as managing the volume and types of donations in response to meeting the initial needs of those affected (Gunter, 2017). In this study, gender-based violence, especially against women, featured prominently in the media reports analyzed. In shelters, the closer and more present coexistence between family members, and the generally cramped accommodation shared with other people, contributes to increased tension, stress, and violent situations (Parkinson and Zara, 2013). Shelters must take privacy into account and must allow community surveillance to be organized to increase the sense of security for all members of the community (Aryanti and Muhlis, 2020). A study pointed to the psychological challenges faced by shelter occupants and staff in the aftermath of the disaster, especially difficulties with sleep, anxiety, and depression. Positive aspects of the shelters that helped the occupants and teams were: forming groups based on similarities, obtaining information about the storm (Hurricane Irene in the USA, in this case), having good food, staying busy, and receiving support from each other and the team among themselves (Basile, 2020). A systematic review of the literature identified some hypotheses that corroborate the discussion presented so far, related to the increase in violence against women during and after disasters. Exposure to disasters is associated with an increase in stressors that trigger violence against women; an increase in environments conducive to violence against women, and an exacerbation of the underlying factors of violence against women

(Thurston *et al.*, 2021). Disasters are adverse events, largely of climatic origin, which generate situations in which the action of psychology can be fundamental (Federal Psychology Council, 2015). Initial psychological care is designed to address acute symptoms using techniques such as active listening, in addition to promoting a welcoming and safe environment. In the long term, psychological work is aimed at readapting to reality, together with the work of accepting and dealing with everything that has happened (Tanatta and Lopes, 2024). Temporary emergency shelters have an impact on the psychological health of those they shelter and their volunteer helpers. Women, children, and people of other genders are among the most vulnerable groups, being exposed to high risks of violence and violation of their rights (Costa *et al.*, 2024). Some psychology professionals have discussed the term “eco-anxiety” and the importance of seeking support in these cases, highlighting psychotherapy as an essential resource. Also called “climate anxiety”, eco-anxiety is defined as the chronic fear of facing an environmental disaster when observing the impacts of climate change, generating concerns about one's future and that of the next generations (Silva *et al.*, 2024). In this sense, the role of the media includes: providing complete and reliable information; organizing a space for discussion on issues that generate public anxieties and concerns; acting as a “vigilant” on the performance of government power centers and large corporations (Silva *et al.*, 2025).

However, repetitive exposure to disaster media plays a critical role in exacerbating the impact of indirect trauma on mental health, which points to the importance of psychological assessment for the entire population that experiences disaster in different ways. In today's technological age, traumatic scenes are brought directly to families, potentially affecting everyone. Therefore, the use of the media in times of disaster should be limited to avoid future psychopathology (Oz and Cona, 2024). Disasters are marked by their immediacy, unpredictability, systemic nature, and damaging consequences, posing challenges not only to the fields of medicine but also engendering unprecedented infodemic phenomena in the realm of information dissemination, creating an information crisis of historic proportions. Since the onset of COVID-19, online social media platforms have allowed the infodemic, which is characterized by false, misleading, and malicious information, to spread around the world. However, the proliferation of false information can lead to an increase in fear and panic, causing individuals to misinterpret the seriousness of the situation and adopt harmful behaviors based on misinformation (Shi *et al.*, 2024). In disaster situations, violence emerges for the most vulnerable, children and women (Arendt, 2023). An analogy can be drawn with the climatic event in Rio Grande do Sul, in which shelters were the scene of violence against the most vulnerable. The problem that arises is the result of the absence of a state to make effective changes in dealing with disasters. In these terms, Arendt (2023) states that the practice of violence, like any action, changes the world, but the most likely change is towards an even more violent world, and this provokes questions that need to be reflected on today, such as the naturalization of violence and the influence of the media in shaping opinion in the face of catastrophic scenarios.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion is that when analyzing the information reported about cases of violence in shelters during the floods in Rio Grande do Sul, violence predominated among women and children, in shelters that were supposed to be safe places in the face of the catastrophe. The study also shows that the media plays a fundamental role in publicizing cases of violence, making governments act effectively to prevent and manage violence. Furthermore, the disaster scenario requires increasingly active multi-professional action, given the complexity involved. For this reason, new studies and interventions are necessary and require the participation of different professional areas, for real practical change in the protection and recovery of populations affected by disasters.

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