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Social representations among health professionals on sexual violence against women: A study conducted in three public maternity hospitals in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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Objectives: To analyze the social representations of sexual violence against women held by health professionals in Rio de Janeiro.

Methodology: Qualitative, conducted in three maternity hospitals, of which two served victims of sexual violence. The third hospital was included in the study as a basis for comparison. Interviews with 45 health professionals (physicians, psychologists, nurses, social workers, dentists, and nutritionists) were conducted on two core themes: ideas associated with sexual violence against women, and its causes. The thematic content of the interviews was analyzed.

Results: Ideas associated with sexual violence against women were: a) suffering; mentioned more by physicians and nurses, referring to suffering in predominantly biomedical terms, such as physical and psychological harm, clearly showing reductionism. b) behavior disorders in which male sexuality is seen as a biological need and impulse, attributing a behavior disorder to the man who is unable to control his impulses and commits violence against a woman. c) forced sex, in which consent issues were mentioned. Three nuclei were identified as the causes of violence: gender relations, urban violence, and blaming women.

Conclusions: In spite of advances, sexist and reductionist viewpoints continue to predominate, with a discourse based on biomedical and commonly held beliefs. The authors conclude that pre-natal care can be used as a “gateway” to reach women victims of sexual violence, to change cultural stereotypes instead of propagating them, and to create social representations based on autonomy and the defense of women’s rights.