Exploring the Association Between Sexual Agency and Intimate Relationship Violence Experienced and Perpetrated by Brazilian and Portuguese Women

Andresa Pinho Soster[1,4] · Denise Falcke[2] · Alexandra Oliveira[3,4]

Abstract

Introduction Women's vulnerability to violence in intimate relationships has been negatively associated with the development of sexual agency and is not considered just an individual responsibility in the face of a series of social and economic inequalities to which women are exposed. This study aims to verify the association between sexual agency and violence experienced and perpetrated in intimate relationships, as well as the predictive role of sexual agency on violence, and compare populations with economic, social, and educational differences.

Methods A cross-sectional online survey was carried out in 2023 with 322 female university students—161 Brazilian and 161 Portuguese, aged between 18 and 29—using measures to verify sexual agency and different types of violence experienced and perpetrated by women in intimate relationships. The data were analyzed using the Mann–Whitney U-test, Spearman's correlation coefficient, and multivariate linear regression analysis.

Results Data showed Brazilian women having higher scores in all the variables of experienced and perpetrated violence. Sexual practices and refusal were negatively associated with violence experienced by Brazilian women. Refusal and pregnancy/STI prevention were negatively associated with violence experienced by Portuguese women.

Conclusions The differences between groups can be attributed to the intersecting systems of oppression—such as gender, race, and social class—that amplify vulnerabilities and limit investments in protective policies for women, as well as in educational initiatives focused on violence prevention.

Policy Implications Results suggest the development of violence prevention programs, comprehensive sexual education programs, and policies that focus on promoting women's sexual agency.

Keywords Sexual agency · Intimate relationship violence · Sexual scripts · Sex education · Women's sexual health

Introduction

Traditional sexual scripts (TSS) are social norms that guide sexual behavior and have been associated with gender inequality, as they can predispose women to a range of harms and experiences (Klein et al., 2019; Simon & Gagnon, 1984). TSS can be identified through the traditional double standard, which consists of the difference in judgment, attitudes, and behavioral norms towards the sexual practices of men and women. These differences are characterized by women being less sexually permissive and more submissive and men being more permissive, with greater sexual freedom and more decision-making power (Reiss, 1964). Patriarchy reinforces this unequal power relationship between men and women and the perception of ownership over them, which can predispose to a series of risks, such as violence

✉ Andresa Pinho Soster
apsoster@gmail.com

Denise Falcke
dfalcke@unisinos.br

Alexandra Oliveira
oliveira@fpce.up.pt

1   Faculty of Psychology, Doctoral Program in Human Sexuality, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

2   Postgraduate Program in Psychology, University of Vale Do Rio Dos Sinos, São Leopoldo, Brazil

3   Center for Psychology at, University of Porto, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

4   Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Porto, Rua Alfredo Allen, S/N, 4200-135 Porto, Portugal

(Aguiar & Pereira, 2019; Ortner, 2022). This power relationship normalizes men's violent behavior towards women and dictates the scripts of submission and devaluation of women in marital and professional contexts, among other social relationships (Aguiar & Pereira, 2019; Ortner, 2022; Schwarcz, 2019). Despite advances in sexual rights in the pursuit of equal rights in recent decades, research has shown that women who transgress TSS may be socially marginalized for going against expectations of sexual passivity (Heise et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2019; Townsend et al., 2020). In addition, adherence to TSS can make men and women vulnerable to perpetrating and experiencing violence in intimate relationships (Klein et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2020).

Violence in intimate relationships refers to the behavior of an intimate partner or ex-partner when they cause physical, sexual, moral, psychological or financial harm to the other. These behaviors include physical or verbal aggression, sexual abuse, moral or psychological abuse, threats, and controlling behaviors, as well as financial abuse (Stewart et al., 2020). The term "intimate partnership" does not require individuals exposed to this form of violence to have a history of sexual intimacy or a marital relationship and includes people who are in casual or dating relationships (Stewart et al., 2020; Stubbs & Szoeke, 2022). This type of violence can occur in intimate relationships between people of the same or different genders, but it disproportionately affects women and gender/sexual minorities (Heise et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2020). Violence brings women a series of direct and adjacent risks, such as experiencing violence and abuse, which significantly increases the risk of women experiencing physical and mental health problems and irreversible damage such as death (Stubbs & Szoeke, 2022). This constitutes a public health problem and a severe social problem which requires prevention and attention for women (Stubbs & Szoeke, 2022). Gender inequality, social inequalities, economic inequalities, income concentration, and corruption in political management are factors that corroborate disinvestment in public policies, which can also increase vulnerability to violence, as seen in underdeveloped and developing countries (Schwarcz, 2019).

In this sense, alarming data comes from Brazil, which has shown worrying rates of intimate partner violence recorded in 2023. Brazil is the country with the highest absolute number of femicides in Latin America (1467 women murdered) and is among the 10 countries in the world with the most murders of women victims of gender-based violence (Formiga et al., 2021; Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública [FBSP], 2024; Vasconcelos et al., 2021). The highest percentage of murdered women is concentrated in the 18–24 age group, with 63.6% of murdered women being black and 35.8% white. In 84.2% of cases, the aggressor was identified as a partner or former intimate partner. When we also consider family members and other acquaintances, the percentage reaches 97.3% of cases; 64.3% of the victims were

killed in their own homes (FBSP, 2024). There has been a significant increase in various types of violence against women compared to recent years. Assaults in the context of domestic violence increased by 9.8% to 245,713 cases; threats increased by 16.5% to 778,921 cases. Brazil reached a new record for rapes and completed rapes of vulnerable people (people under 14 years old or incapable of consent), with 83,988 victims in 2023 (FBSP, 2024). The victims are predominantly girls (88.2%), Black (52.2%), aged 13 or younger (61.6%), who are raped by family members or acquaintances (84.7%), often within their own homes (61.7%) (FBSP, 2024). According to the report, the hypotheses that explain the significant increase in rates stem from the de-funding of women's protection policies by the administration of former president Bolsonaro, who recorded the lowest budget allocation in a decade for policies to combat violence against women; the rise of ultraconservative hate speeches leveraged by this government, which may have increased gender inequality and, consequently, the validation of violence against women; and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's shelter and protection services, which have seen restrictions on opening hours, a reduction in service teams, or even interruptions (Bueno et al., 2023; Cerqueira, 2023). Social inequalities; the concentration of wealth, with approximately half of the country's income held by 1% of the population; and corruption that fails to invest in education and social and security programs also contribute to this scenario (Bueno et al., 2023; Cerqueira, 2023; Formiga et al., 2021; Schwarcz, 2019).

The comparison of violence against women between countries that have special historical relations is worth considering. Portugal and Brazil have cultural aspects in common, including the same official language, a legacy of the colonization process carried out by the European country in the 1500 s (Schwarcz, 2019). Although there are cultural similarities, recent centuries have revealed notable social and economic disparities between the countries. Portugal's Human Development Index (HDI) was relatively high in 2022, at 0.866, placing it among the top 40 nations globally (UNDP, 2022). This reflects its economic stability and low levels of poverty. Despite having a per capita income on the lower end of the spectrum compared to other affluent nations, Portugal has made significant progress in social protection, with over 90% of its population covered by social security and healthcare, ensuring a good quality of life for its citizens (UNDP, 2022). However, they share worrying rates of violence against women. Domestic violence is the most reported crime and the one that kills the most in Portugal, with violence between intimate partners responsible for 86% of total reporting records (Relatório Anual de Segurança Interna [RASI], 2022). Indexes show that more than 80% of victims of domestic violence are women, and most aggressors are spouses/partners/ex-partners (Comissão para a

Cidadania e a Igualdade de Género [CCIG], 2023). Data from the Annual Homeland Security Report shows that women have higher proportions of experiencing violence than men from all types of intimate partner violence when analyzed separately (CCIG, 2023; RASI, 2022). The greater frequency of violence against women was associated with greater family and social isolation, and issues related to gender inequality, such as social isolation, submission, and dependence, were predictors of violence experienced by women (Cañete et al., 2024). The data reflects the legacy of a dictatorship that lasted until the mid-1970s and which has repercussions today in the aggressive and ideological campaigns of the extreme right, which corroborate social and gender inequalities (Rosas, 2021). This inequality reinforces patriarchy and double standards and influences rates of violence against women in intimate relationships (Rosas, 2021; Villa & Mota, 2023). According to authors who sought to quantify an index of violence against women, capturing information on the main types (physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence), Portugal and Brazil are located at medium levels of violence, occupying positions 32 and 35, respectively, on a list from 102 countries in the world (Cepeda et al., 2022).

In the context of violence against women, social learning theory suggests that the perpetuation of gender-based violence is culturally sustained through norms and values that legitimize the use of male violence as a form of control and power (Bandura, 1977; Oliveira & Sani, 2009). This perspective aligns with feminist theories, which view patriarchy as a system of domination that employs violence to maintain social control and exploit women, particularly those from lower socioeconomic status and racialized groups (Hooks, 1984; Millett, 1970; Saffioti, 1994). Patriarchy regulates female bodies and identities in distinct yet interconnected ways, making it essential to challenge these structures through feminist resistance and the deconstruction of patriarchal norms (Alvarez et al., 2023; Butler, 1990; Saffioti, 1994). However, when violence is tolerated or inadequately punished, the aggressors' behavior tends to be legitimized and reinforced, contributing to the continuation of these acts. Likewise, social learning theory proposes that victims may internalize patterns of submission and acceptance of violence as the norm, facilitating the repetition of abusive cycles in their relationships (Bandura, 1977).

Women's vulnerability to violence has been associated with sexual agency (Bay-Cheng, 2019; Kim et al., 2019). Sexual agency has been defined as assertiveness in sexual behaviors, involving a series of skills, such as communicating desires, taking the initiative for intimate relationships, setting boundaries for the partnership, and having assertive behaviors to ensure self-care and prevent risky behaviors to physical, psychological, and sexual health (Cense, 2019; Chmielewski et al., 2020; Stubbs & Szoeke, 2022; Townsend et al., 2020). It is difficult to think of the development of sexual agency as

an individual responsibility in the face of a series of social and economic inequalities to which women are exposed (Bay-Cheng, 2019). Agency is typically associated with the capacity to make choices, exercise control, and possess individual freedom and responsibility, a concept often aligned with neoliberal ideology (Levi Herz & Rozmarin, 2023). Bay-Cheng (2019) offers a functional definition of sexual agency as the efforts made by individuals to shape their life experiences through their sexuality. The author differentiates this from related concepts such as sexual autonomy (the degree of influence and control an individual has over their sexual life), sexual assertiveness (the explicit insistence of an individual on achieving a goal while respecting sexual rights), and sexual empowerment (the process of resisting and protesting against forms of oppression) (Morokoff et al., 1997; Bay-Cheng, 2019). These definitions reveal a duality within young women's experiences of sexuality, as they are simultaneously encouraged to express their desires and make autonomous choices, while also having to navigate potential risks that may increase their vulnerability (Levi Herz & Rozmarin, 2023). In practice, it is evident that choices are constructed through life experiences and often carry inherent risks. Such decisions are neither straightforward nor immediate, and their outcomes are not automatic, as they are influenced by more than just individual discernment (Levi Herz & Rozmarin, 2023). These decisions are deeply contingent on the cultural, social, political, and economic contexts in which individuals find themselves. So, rather than simply teaching women to say no, especially in situations where they may lack viable alternatives, it is imperative to provide them with better conditions and expanded options to enable truly informed and autonomous decision-making (Bay-Cheng, 2019). Therefore, the development of sexual agency must involve initiatives in sexual education that question and flexibilize traditional sexual scripts imposed and reinforced by patriarchal society to reduce gender inequalities, as well as public policies that protect women from vulnerabilities to guarantee the preservation of health, access to rights, and citizenship (Alldred & Fox, 2019; Cense, 2019; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Heise et al., 2019; Soster et al., 2022).

The comparison between Portugal, a developed country where sex education has been mandatory since 2009, and Brazil, a developing country where sex education is not mandatory, can contribute to a deeper understanding of the shortcomings of issues related to TSS, women's sexual agency, and gender-based violence (Araujo et al., 2019; Secretaria de Comunicação Social, 2023; Ministério Português da Educação, 2009). In both countries, there are challenges concerning the effective implementation of sex education and the training of teachers and professionals in the field. There is a challenge to expand the spaces for sex education and the topics covered (Alldred & Fox, 2019; Araujo et al., 2019). Topics such as consent, gender, diversity, sexual

rights, desire, and sexual pleasure continue to be poorly addressed, especially in women's sex education (Najmabadi & Sharifi, 2019; Soster et al., 2022).

Studying women is essential for understanding the phenomenon of violence, as it is women who disproportionately suffer the most negative consequences worldwide (Stewart et al., 2020; Stubbs & Szoeke, 2022). Studying women seeks to identify underlying vulnerabilities to violence and understand the different forms that violence can take, to contribute to developing effective prevention and professional training strategies, as well as public policies that promote safety and rights for all (Alldred & Fox, 2019; Najmabadi & Sharifi, 2019; Stewart et al., 2020; Stubbs & Szoeke, 2022). So, this study aims to verify the association between sexual agency and violence experienced and perpetrated in intimate relationships, as well as to verify the predictive role of sexual agency on violence experienced and perpetrated in the populations investigated (Brazilian and Portuguese women).

Methods

Design

This is a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational, and comparative study to meet the aforementioned objectives. It is cross-sectional because we analyzed data from a representative population subset at a specific and delimited time; correlational because the variables sexual agency and violence were correlated to verify the association between sexual agency and violence experienced and perpetrated in intimate relationships; and comparative because the data obtained was compared between the Brazilian and Portuguese populations.

Participants

Through disseminating the study on social media and in universities, 1,095 university women responded to the online research survey, 193 Brazilian and 902 Portuguese. The inclusion criteria for the sample were being a woman, being a university student, and being between 18 and 29 years old, an age range corresponding to emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2018). The initial analyses revealed significant differences between the descriptive characteristics of the samples (age and marital status). This led to the need to use the sample pairing technique to reduce bias, which is an efficient way to correct for differences in the distributions of predictors between groups. *Matching* is a direct approach in which individuals are selected and grouped so that each individual in one group has a similar counterpart in the other group based on one or more key variables. The key variables used to pair

the groups were the participants' age and marital status. This resulted in a total sample of 322 participants, 161 Brazilian and 161 Portuguese, aged between 18 and 29.

The descriptive analyses showed that the majority of participants in both groups were cisgender (BR 95.7%; PT 95%, $\chi^2 = 1.003$, $p = 0.606$), lived with family members (BR 51.6%; PT 65.2%, $\chi^2 = 13.061$, $p < 0.01$), had no defined religion (BR 35.4% PT 50.9%, $\chi^2 = 65.621$, $p < 0.01$), have Catholic parents (BR 41.9% PT 87.6%, $\chi^2 = 85.932$, $p < 0.01$), are currently dating (BR 44.7% PT 50.9%, $\chi^2 = 5.256$, $p = 0.154$), and have already had some kind of professional experience (BR 82.6% PT 74.5%, $\chi^2 = 3.117$, $p = 0.77$). Most Brazilian women share financial responsibilities with their families (BR 39.8% PT 28%, $\chi^2 = 29.074$, $p < 0.001$), while most Portuguese women have their financial needs taken care of by their families (BR 35.4% PT 47.2% $\chi^2 = 29.074$, $p < 0.00$). Regarding sex education received throughout life, more Portuguese participants (BR 87% PT 95.7%, $\chi^2 = 71.599$, $p < 0.00$) showed that they had received some kind of sex education. School (BR 32.3% PT 75.8%, $\chi^2 = 71.599$, $p < 0.00$) was indicated as the main source of sex education by the Portuguese, to the detriment of family, friends, and other institutions. The Portuguese participants consistently used condoms more than the Brazilians (BR 32.9% PT 52.2%, $\chi^2 = 12.209$, $p < 0.00$). Brazilian women were more likely to attend gynecological appointments (BR 86.3% PT 55.3%, $\chi^2 = 48.460$, $p < 0.00$) and preventive gynecological exams (BR 77% PT 44.1%, $\chi^2 = 51.704$, $p < 0.00$). Most participants in both groups masturbated (BR 73.3% PT 75.2%, $\chi^2 = 0.168$, $p = 0.919$) and had only had a sexual experience with men (BR 60.9% PT 71.3%, $\chi^2 = 13.291$, $p = 0.004$). The groups had similar characteristics regarding having orgasms (BR 39.8% PT 44.7%, $\chi^2 = 1.172$, $p = 0.948$).

Measures

Sociodemographic Data Questionnaire

The authors constructed this instrument to explore the sexual history, sexual behaviors, sexual education history, and sexual health of university students. Data was collected on schooling, age, nationality, religion, their own and their parents' religion, relationship status, professional data, clinical data, self-care behavior and sexual and gynecological health habits, and sexual behaviors.

Sexual Double Standard Scale (SDSS)

The Sexual Double Standard Scale (SDSS) was developed by Muehlenhard and Quackenbush in 1996 to measure respondents' adherence to the traditional sexual script. This instrument makes it possible to assess traditional sexual scripts by measuring the double standard in university students.

The SDSS consists of 26 items, using a 5-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Six individual items compare the sexual behavior of women and men in the same item (for example, "A man should be more sexually experienced than his wife" or "A woman having casual sex is just as acceptable to me as a man having casual sex." Twenty items occur in pairs, with parallel items about the sexual behavior of women and men (for example, "A girl who has sex on the first date is 'easy'" and "A guy who has sex on the first date is 'easy'"). From the 26 variables of the scale, Muehlenhard and Quackenbush (1998) calculated a global index of the sexual double standard, adopting the following criteria: the six comparison items (after inverting the negative items) are summed to the differences between the ten pairs of equivalent items between men and women. The total score of the scale can reflect the acceptance of greater sexual freedom for men than for women, i.e., the traditional double standard (maximum score of 48); identical standards for men and women, whether restrictive or permissive (score 0); or the acceptance of greater sexual freedom for women than for men (score − 30). As for internal consistency, calculated based on the 26 items of the scale, the Cronbach alpha index found was 0.656, considered acceptable.

Sexual Attitudes Scale (SAS)

The Sexual Attitudes Scale was developed by Hendrick and Hendrick (1987) and validated for Portuguese by Alferes (1999). This scale is made up of 43 items that assess sexual agency, through four subscales, related to the following attitudes: *sexual permissiveness* (items 1 to 21), this scale reflects attitudes towards casual sex, sexual experiences without commitment, and the diversity and simultaneity of sexual partners; *sexual practices* (items 22 to 28), this dimension reflects attitudes towards sexual health and assertive sexual behaviors, such as concern about birth control, gauging the importance of sex education and normalizing the practice of masturbation; *communion* (items 29 to 37) reflects attitudes related to the perception of sex as an intimate physical and psychological experience, sharing, involvement; and idealism; and *instrumentality* (items 38 to 43) reflects attitudes towards sex aimed at seeking pleasure. The EAS uses a 5-point scale for responses ranging from *totally disagree* (1) to *totally agree* (5). The result is verified by adding up the answers for each subscale. The scores on the subscales can vary in *sexual* permissiveness (21–105), *sexual practices* (7 to 35), *communion* (9 to 45), and *instrumentality* (6 to 30). As for internal consistency, calculated based on the 43 items in the scale, Cronbach's alpha index found was 0.779, which is considered satisfactory.

Sexual Assertiveness Scale (SAS)

The Sexual Assertiveness Scale was originally developed and validated by Morokoff and collaborators in 1997. It is a self-reported measure of individual behaviors associated with initiating sex, related to sexual agency, consent, and violence prevention, based on the Sexual Experience Scale (Brady & Levitt, 1965). The aspects of sexual assertiveness in women assessed by the scale include communication about sex with an intimate partner and condom use. The scale has 18 items, which are separated into three subscales: *initiation* (items 1 to 6), *refusal* (items 7 to 12), and *pregnancy and STI prevention* (items 13 to 18). The SAS uses a 5-point scale for responses ranging from *never* (1) to *always* (5). The subscale scores can be obtained by adding up the individual items of each subscale, with the need to previously invert the values of items 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 13, 14, and 16. In its original version, the scale obtained good reliability with a value of 0.82. The cross-cultural adaptation of the scale for the Brazilian population was carried out by Pereira and Souza (2021). The SAS for Women was translated, its content validity was assessed and tested in a pilot group, the final version was applied to 935 women using online forms, and exploratory factor analysis was carried out. The results showed that the original three-factor model did not fit perfectly, but presented satisfactory results, explaining 46% of the variance, with adequate factor loadings, total Cronbach's alpha of 0.81, and alpha for each factor ranging from 0.69 to 0.81. In this study, calculated based on the 18 items of the scale, the Cronbach alpha value found was 0.788.

Relationship Conflict Inventory

The Relationship Conflict Inventory is an adaptation of the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (CADRI), developed and validated in 2001 by Wolfe et al. (2001). This is a self-reported measure comprised of 70 items that make it possible to assess assertive and abusive conflict resolution strategies in intimate relationships, distinguishing between one's own behavior (35 items) and that of the partner (35 items). The questionnaire was filled in by women describing their own behavior and the behavior that their partner, whether casual or fixed, tends to behave towards them. The instrument specifies the occurrence of specific forms of abuse, such as threatening behavior, relational abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional or verbal abuse that can be perpetrated by the woman or experienced by her. The instrument was validated for the Portuguese language by Saavedra, Machado, Martins, and Vieira in 2008 and adapted for the population over the age of 14 with current or experience of involvement in relationships (Saavedra, 2010). In this study, for the scale's internal

consistency, calculated based on its 70 items, the Cronbach alpha value was 0.919.

Data Collection and Ethical Procedures

The university students were invited to participate in this study via social media and the institutional emails of the Brazilian and Portuguese universities. They were sent a link to an *online* platform containing a questionnaire with the study instruments. They took around 40 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Participation in the study only took place after they had accepted the informed consent form, which informed them of all the stages of the study they were taking part in, as well as the time taken, risks, and data return.

This study was designed in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and obtained a favorable opinion from the FPCEUP Ethics Committee (Ref. 2021/08-04b). Data collection complied with data protection law, and the data obtained was stored securely, with the participants' identities kept confidential and the databases password protected. The university women were invited to participate in the study and did so voluntarily. They were informed that they could withdraw at any time. They were given clear and explicit instructions in the informed consent form about their participation in the study and, if they had any questions, the coordinating researchers were available to contact them if they needed any clarification. The forms were written in a way that was compatible with the participants' understanding, with the language and expressions of each country (Portugal and Brazil), and pilot studies were carried out beforehand with the research surveys before they were applied to the participants.

Data Analysis

When analyzing the data distribution, it was observed that it did not follow a normal distribution. In this situation, it was decided to use non-parametric measures to analyze the data. Frequency and percentage measures were used for categorical variables and means and standard deviation for numerical variables. Comparisons between categorical variables were made using the chi-square test. The means of the variables were compared using the Mann–Whitney U-test. Correlations between numerical variables were calculated using Spearman's correlation coefficient. To assess the relationship between the independent variables and the outcome variable violence experienced by women and the outcome variable violence perpetrated by women, multivariate linear regression analysis was used, with a stepwise criterion for selecting the variables. These models included the following independent variables: sexual double standard (relating to sexual scripts), the dimensions of the sexual attitudes scale (sexual permissiveness, sexual practices, communion,

instrumentality), and the dimensions of the sexual assertiveness scale (initiation, refusal, and pregnancy and STI prevention). Separate models were tested for Brazilian and Portuguese university students. A significance level of 5% was adopted for the statistical tests, i.e.; $p < 0.05$.

Results

When the scores of Brazilian and Portuguese women were compared using the Mann–Whitney U-test, as described in Table 1, there were significant differences between Brazilian and Portuguese women in the dimensions of sexual agency: *instrumentality*, in which Brazilian women had a higher score (BR 28.725; PT 23.278; $U = 10.237$, $p < 0.01$); *refusal*, in which Portuguese women had a higher mean (BR 22.720; PT 29.283; $U = 9.679$, $p < 0.01$); and *prevention of pregnancy and STIs*, in which Portuguese women had a higher mean (BR 22.34; PT 25.03; $U = 9.695$; $p < 0.01$). When comparing the variables relating to violence, there were significant differences in the scores of Brazilian and Portuguese women in most of the variables investigated, except in relation to total violence experienced, physical violence perpetrated by the partner, and physical violence perpetrated by the woman to the partner. Brazilian women had higher scores in all the violence variables investigated, both in relation to violence experienced and violence perpetrated.

When we compare the associations between the dimensions of violence experienced and perpetrated by women and sexual agency, as shown in Table 2, we see that in the group of Brazilian women, the violence experienced is negatively associated with the dimensions of sexual agency (*sexual practices*, *refusal*, and *initiation*). On the other hand, the act of perpetrating violence against a partner was positively associated with the *double standard* and *instrumentality* variable and negatively associated with the dimensions of sexual agency (*sexual practices*, *initiation*, and *refusal*). In the group of Portuguese women, the violence experienced was positively associated with the *double standard* and *permissiveness* dimensions and negatively associated with the *refusal* and *initiation* dimensions. The act of perpetrating violence against a partner was positively associated with the variable *permissiveness* and negatively associated with the dimensions *refusal* and *pregnancy and STI prevention*.

The multivariate linear regression analysis (stepwise method), shown in Table 3, showed that in the group of Brazilian university students, the *sexual practices* dimension was a predictor of experiencing sexual, physical, verbal, relational, and threatening partner violence. This procedure provided a coefficient of explained variance (R^2) of 0.323, which means that the independent variable selected explained 32.3% of the act of experiencing partner violence. The dimensions *refusal* and *sexual practices* were the

Table 1 Comparison of means, standard deviations, medians of sexual agency and violence, and Mann–Whitney U

	Brazilian women (n = 161)					Portuguese women (n = 161)					Comparison between groups			
	M	Min	Max	SD	Md	M	Min	Max	SD	Md	Mann–Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	p
Sexual agency														
Double standard	8.34	−5	30	5.01	8	8.22	−4	17	3.73	8	12,674.5	25,715.5	−0.344	0.73
Permissiveness	62.47	32	87	9.95	63	62.36	37	82	8.28	63	12,622.5	25,663.5	−0.405	0.69
Sexual practices	32.81	14	35	3.43	34	32.85	23	35	2.62	34	12,392.5	25,433.5	−0.717	0.47
Communion	34.86	14	45	5.96	35	35.11	19	45	5.74	35	12,720	25,761	−0.288	0.77
Instrumentality	17.71	7	30	4.43	18	16.15	7	30	4.2	16	10,237	23,278	−3.27	0.00*
Initiation	21.74	13	30	4.19	22	22.13	6	30	4.45	23	11,968	25,009	−1.191	0.23
Refusal	24.99	11	30	4.73	26	26.84	11	30	4.29	29	25,009	22,720	−4.002	0.00*
Pregnancy and STI prevention	22.34	6	30	6.18	23	25.03	11	30	4.96	26	9695	22,736	−3.944	0.00*
Violence														
Total violence perpetrated	33.28	25	75	8.84	31	30.64	25	53	5.45	30	10,547	23,588	−2.899	0.004*
Total violence experienced	34.18	25	76	9.13	31	31.91	25	62	5.70	30	11,475.5	24,516.5	−1.784	0.074
Sexual violence perpetrated	4.39	4	12	1.19	4	4.1	4	6	0.34	4	11,979.5	25,020.5	−2.029	0.042*
Sexual violence experienced	4.70	4	12	1.44	4	4.37	4	11	0.99	4	11,740.5	24,781.5	−1.946	0.051*
Physical violence perpetrated	4.35	4	16	1.5	4	4.16	4	7	0.55	4	12,772	25,813	−0.454	0.649
Physical violence experienced	4.31	4	16	1.43	4	4.15	4	9	0.6	4	12,838	25,879	−0.30	0.764
Relational violence perpetrated	3.32	3	12	1.26	3	3.03	3	4	0.19	3	12,042	25,083	−2.463	0.013*
Relational violence experienced	3.31	3	12	1.46	3	3.23	3	9	0.92	3	11,774	24,785	−2.416	0.015*
Threat perpetrated	4.49	4	14	1.56	4	4.13	4	8	0.47	4	11,774	24,815	−2.380	0.017*
Threat experienced	4.57	4	14	1.61	4	4.18	4	11	0.71	4	11,706	24,747	−2.492	0.013*
Verbal violence perpetrated	16.70	10	38	5.66	16	15.2	10	31	4.84	14	1077.5	23,818.5	−2.623	0.008*
Verbal violence experienced	16.44	10	35	5.92	15	15.07	10	32	5.11	14	11,240.5	24,281.5	−2.06	0.03*

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Table 2 Spearman's correlation among the variables of violence and sexual agency

	Initiation	Refusal	Pregnancy and STI prevention	Permissiveness	Sexual practices	Communion	Instrumentality	Double standard
Brazilian women								
Sexual viol. perpetrated	−0.024	−0.130	−0.024	−0.096	−0.326**	−0.115	0.086	0.161*
Sexual viol. experienced	−0.246**	−0.257**	−0.056	0.018	−0.209**	−0.133	−0.008	0.106
Physical viol. perpetrated	−0.167*	−0.023	−0.141	−0.018	−0.229**	−0.109	0.044	0.195*
Physical viol. experienced	−0.106	−0.058	−0.068	0.021	−0.152*	−0.062	0.051	0.153*
Relational viol. perpetrated	−0.114	−0.139	−0.074	0.080	−0.078	−0.153*	0.095	0.125
Relational viol. experienced	−0.141	−0.181*	0.010	−0.069	−0.088	−0.110	0.035	0.086
Threat perpetrated	−0.129	−0.065	−0.083	0.003	−0.056	0.066	0.199*	0.071
Threat experienced	−0.079	−0.086	−0.019	0.004	−0.105	−0.100	0.031	0.067
Verbal viol. perpetrated	−0.168*	−0.304**	−0.134	0.011	−0.126	−0.121	−0.039	−0.007
Verbal viol. experienced	−0.116	−0.244**	−0.055	0.003	−0.127	−0.150	0.014	0.061
Portuguese women								
Sexual viol. perpetrated	−0.032	−0.271**	−0.157*	0.140	−0.147	0.024	0.087	0.013
Sexual viol. experienced	−0.158*	−0.311**	−0.004	0.120	−0.113	−0.071	0.001	0.123
Physical viol. perpetrated	0.036	−0.108	−0.050	0.162*	−0.079	0.008	−0.003	0.005
Physical viol. experienced	0.085	−0.052	−0.071	0.153*	−0.093	0.070	0.024	0.026
Relational viol. perpetrated	0.027	−0.073	−0.057	0.032	−0.073	0.079	−0.046	0.059
Relational viol. experienced	−0.107	−0.081	−0.026	0.037	−0.093	−0.131	−0.122	0.219**
Threat perpetrated	0.089	−0.122	−0.170*	0.103	0.042	−0.056	−0.150	−0.017
Threat experienced	−0.063	−0.165*	0.017	0.055	−0.074	−0.121	−0.064	−0.036
Verbal viol. perpetrated	−0.151	−0.261**	−0.189*	0.207**	−0.038	0.068	0.048	−0.079
Verbal viol. experienced	−0.067	−0.240**	−0.153*	0.210**	0.007	−0.014	0.032	−0.038

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

predictors related to the act of perpetrating partner violence. This procedure provided a coefficient of explained variance (R^2) of 0.376, which means that the independent variables selected explained 37.6% of the act of perpetrating partner violence in the group of Brazilian women. In the group of Portuguese women, the dimensions *permissiveness* and *refusal* were predictors of experiencing sexual, physical, verbal, relational, and threatening violence perpetrated by the partner. This procedure provided a coefficient of explained variance (R^2) of 0.286, which means that the independent variables selected explained 28.6% of the act of experiencing partner violence. The dimensions *refusal*, *permissiveness*, and *pregnancy and STI prevention* were predictors of the act of perpetrating violence against the partner. This procedure resulted in an explained variance coefficient (R^2) of 0.338, which means that the independent variables selected

Table 3 Multivariate linear regression of sexual agency variable predictors for perpetrated and experienced violence by women

Groups		Variables	R	r^2	B	SE	β	t	p
Brazilian women	Total violence perpetrated	Sexual practices	0.376	0.141	−0.763	0.192	−0.296	−3.965	0.00**
		Refusal			−0.359	0.139	−0.192	−2.578	0.01**
	Total violence experienced	Sexual practices	0.323	0.104	−0.861	0.200	−0.323	−4.300	0.00**
Portuguese women	Total violence perpetrated	Refusal	0.338	0.114	−0.262	0.097	−0.206	−2.694	0.00**
		Permissiveness			0.127	0.050	0.193	2.569	0.011*
		Pregnancy and STI prevention			−0.180	0.084	−0.164	−2.146	0.033*
	Total violence experienced	Permissiveness			0.162	0.053	0.236	3.085	0.002**
		Refusal	0.286	0.82	−0.234	0.101	−0.176	−2.307	0.022*

*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$

explained 33.8% of the act of perpetrating partner violence in the group of Portuguese university students.

Discussion

This study aimed to verify the association between sexual agency and violence experienced and perpetrated in intimate relationships by Brazilian and Portuguese women, as well as to verify the predictive power of variables related to sexual agency for experiencing and perpetrating violence in a relationship with a fixed or occasional partnership. The data showed that there was a significant difference between the groups in most of the violence variables investigated, with Brazilian women having higher scores in all the variables related to violence, both concerning experiencing and perpetrating partner violence. In this context, integrating feminist theories with social learning theory provides valuable insights into the cultural differences and similarities between Brazil and Portugal.
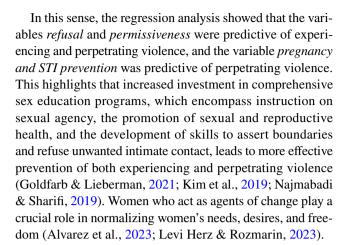
In Brazil, intimate partner violence is associated with younger, lower-income black women (FBSP, 2024; Vasconcelos et al., 2021). The country's social and economic inequalities have always contributed to high rates of violence among the population, but the COVID-19 pandemic and the ultraconservative policies of the Bolsonaro government appear to have been critical determinants of the increase in violence against women (Aguiar & Pereira, 2019; Bueno et al., 2023). Under his government, several political attempts were made to discredit arguments about gender equality or the gendered nature of violence, spreading the belief that a specific group deserved rights and other groups did not (Aguiar & Pereira, 2019). This has led to policies aimed at assisting and protecting women being deprioritized by the government, which contributed to validate violence perpetrated against minorities. (Bueno et al., 2023; Cerqueira, 2023; Schwarcz, 2019). This scenario, which combines social, racial, and gender vulnerabilities, appears to overlap systems of oppression and justify the increase in

rates of violence against women (Hooks, 1984; Millett, 1970). The political discourses of the far right, aligned with patriarchal culture, reinforce the practice of violence by legitimizing male sovereignty that uses violence as a means of control and domination and regulating female bodies and identities in distinct and interconnected ways (Bandura, 1977; Butler, 1990; Oliveira & Sani, 2009). The lack of education on gender equality as a measure to neutralize the culture of female subjugation can be reflected in the violence suffered and the blaming of victims of intimate partner violence (Formiga et al., 2021). Therefore, it becomes necessary to challenge these structures through feminist resistance and the deconstruction of patriarchal norms (Butler, 1990; Saffioti, 1994).

In addition, there were significant differences in the *instrumentality* variable, in which Brazilian women had a higher score, and in the variables *refusal* and *prevention of pregnancy and STIs*, in which Portuguese women had a higher score. Based on these data, it is already possible to reflect on how sex education can promote the development of skills and sexual agency in women and contribute to preventing violence and reducing the risks to their integrity (Araujo et al., 2019; Najmabadi & Sharifi, 2019; Stubbs & Szoeke, 2022), considering that Portuguese women reported having had greater access to sex education, especially in the school environment. The ability to refuse, which refers to the ability to give or not give sexual consent, according to the recognition of one's rights and desires, is fundamental to preventing situations of violence (Bay-Cheng, 2019; Najmabadi & Sharifi, 2019). The higher refusal scores may be reflected in the lower rates of violence in the group of Portuguese women, compared to the group of Brazilian women. This data may be related to the higher rate of sexual education received by the Portuguese population, which may also be reflected in the higher score for the variable *prevention of pregnancy and STIs*, which concerns the ability to negotiate safe birth control practices and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, such as the requirement to use condoms

(Araujo et al., 2019). Despite the challenges regarding the effective implementation of sex education and the training of professionals in the field, the measures can be effective in developing basic agency skills to refuse risky situations and increase self-care in sexual health (Alldred & Fox, 2019; Soster et al., 2022).

We found that in the group of Brazilian women, violence experienced and perpetrated was negatively associated with *sexual practices*, *refusal*, and *initiation*. In this sense, we can see that greater sexual agency is related to lower rates of violence experienced and perpetrated. In the group of Portuguese women, violence experienced was negatively associated with *refusal* and *initiation*, and violence perpetrated against a partner was negatively associated with *refusal* and *pregnancy and STI prevention*. These data highlight the need for and effectiveness of promoting sexual agency as a way of preventing different expressions of violence in relationships, confirming the literature in the area (Cense, 2019; Chmielewski et al., 2020; Stubbs & Szoeke, 2022; Townsend et al., 2020). However, despite the higher rates of sexual education in the Portuguese population, both countries share very high rates of violence against women (Aguiar & Pereia, 2019; Cerqueira, 2023; Rosas, 2021; Villa & Mota, 2023). What both countries have in common is a patriarchal social structure, which may be reinforced by ultraconservative political movements that endorse traditional sexual scripts (Aguiar & Pereira, 2019; Rosas, 2021; Millett, 1970; Ortner, 2022; Villa & Mota, 2023), a variable that showed no significant difference between the groups. Adherence to these beliefs based on gender inequality threatens women's integrity in intimate relationships, which is why the promotion of women's sexual agency must be achieved with public policies aimed at promoting gender equality and protecting women (Cense, 2019; Alvarez et al., 2023; Chmielewski et al., 2020; Bay-Cheng, 2019). Tackling gender-based violence and systems of domination requires policies that involve the dimensions of work, family, access to health, education, and other opportunities necessary for the development of women of all ages, colors, or social classes (Dalouh Ounia et al., 2023, 2024; Ortner, 2022; Schwarcz, 2019). On the other hand, this data demonstrates that individuals who develop sexual practices based on sex education and cultivate agentic capacity to recognize desires and refuse unwanted advances also prevent themselves from experiencing or perpetrating violence. This is a significant finding for both countries, including Brazil, which, despite having higher rates of violence, sees reduced risks and lower incidence among women who have internalized agentic and educational practices. Sex education may help women avoid internalizing social rules and resisting submission to patriarchal oppression, making them more open to challenging norms that tend to place them in positions of subjugation and vulnerability (Alvarez et al., 2023; Butler, 1990; Saffioti, 1994).

In this sense, the regression analysis showed that the variables *refusal* and *permissiveness* were predictive of experiencing and perpetrating violence, and the variable *pregnancy and STI prevention* was predictive of perpetrating violence. This highlights that increased investment in comprehensive sex education programs, which encompass instruction on sexual agency, the promotion of sexual and reproductive health, and the development of skills to assert boundaries and refuse unwanted intimate contact, leads to more effective prevention of both experiencing and perpetrating violence (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Kim et al., 2019; Najmabadi & Sharifi, 2019). Women who act as agents of change play a crucial role in normalizing women's needs, desires, and freedom (Alvarez et al., 2023; Levi Herz & Rozmarin, 2023).

In the Brazilian population, the act of perpetrating intimate violence was positively associated with double standard variables. In the Portuguese population, the double standard was positively related to the violence experienced in the relationship, confirming data in the literature that shows that factors related to gender inequality, such as social isolation, submission, and dependence, are predictive of the violence experienced by Portuguese women (Cañete et al., 2024). In other words, these data may indicate that the greater the adherence to traditional sexual scripts, the greater the likelihood of perpetrating violence against the partner and also of suffering violence in the relationship, which shows that adherence to these sexual scripts has dire consequences, as it generalizes the phenomenon of violence and predisposes women to the roles of victims and aggressors, which demonstrates the urgency of making these patterns more flexible (Cañete et al., 2024; Formiga et al., 2021; Heise et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2019; Vasconcelos et al., 2021). It is noteworthy that *instrumentality* was positively associated in Brazilian women with perpetrating threats to the partnership, and *permissiveness* was positively associated in Portuguese women with perpetrating physical and verbal violence and experiencing verbal violence. Given these variables, which reflect the orientation of sex towards the pursuit of pleasure and the search for diversity of sexual experiences without commitment, and the diversity of sexual partners respectively, the act of perpetrating violence may be related to the fact that liberal sexual behavior is marginalized by society (Heise et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2019). Deviating from the passive and monogamous sexual pattern still predisposes women to stigma and threatens their social reputation, which can cause ambivalence between obtaining pleasure and feeling fearful of judgment and between experimenting with a diversity of experiences and bonding affectively with a partner (Soster & Castro, 2018). This can generate a psychological vulnerability in which the feeling of threat can lead to perpetrating violence in reaction to this social, psychological vulnerability in the face of the threats experienced (Heise et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2019; Townsend et al., 2020). In addition,

characteristics such as sensation-seeking and impulsivity have already been associated with women who engage in casual sex (Soster & Castro, 2018; Zuckerman & Kuhlman, 2000). Therefore, difficulties in managing impulsivity may lead women to commit violence, including as a response to violence experienced by the woman.

Limitations and Future Directions

In this study, we applied measures to investigate sexual agency, violence, and sexual double standards. However, there is a need for in-depth data on family, peer, religious, social, and cultural influences in Brazilian and Portuguese women. A lack of such cultural data may limit the understanding and discussion of the current data obtained.

We suggest that future research delve deeper into the cultural factors involved in differences between groups, especially those related to the development of sexual agency and its impact on the predisposition to violence, as this study shows that greater sexual agency is associated with lower rates of violence. Future research involving in-depth data collection or individual or group interviews is suggested to explore in depth the factors involved in these differences and, mainly, look for variables that may increase the predisposition to risks related to violence or decrease the agency of these women. Another exciting outcome emerging from the results providing indications for future research is the suggestion of the bi-directionality of interpersonal violence in participants' experiences. Future investigations should try to comprehensively understand this phenomenon from an ecological perspective, focusing not only on the macro-level instances but also on the micro-level and the interpersonal dynamics surrounding interpersonal violence.

Conclusion and Implications

This study showed that there are associations between violence in intimate relationships and sexual agency in Brazilian and Portuguese women. Variables such as sexual practices, refusal, and initiation were negatively associated with violence experienced and perpetrated by Brazilian women. Portuguese women showed a positive association between violence experienced and double standards and permissiveness and a negative association with refusal and pregnancy and STIs and a negative association between violence perpetrated and refusal and a positive association with permissiveness. The results suggest the importance of developing violence prevention programs, comprehensive sexual education programs, and policies that focus on promoting women's sexual agency. The differences between groups can be attributed to the intersecting systems of oppression—such as

gender, race, and social class—that amplify vulnerabilities and limit investments in protective policies for women, as well as in educational initiatives focused on violence prevention. This may suggest why Brazilian women have the highest scores on the variables of violence, both experienced and perpetrated, and how the Portuguese policy of mandatory sexual education, combined with social protection policies, is reflected in the higher level of sexual education of Portuguese women and in their lower rates of violence compared to the Brazilian population. However, this is not enough to reduce adherence to traditional sexual scripts that threaten women's integrity in intimate relationships.

In this context, the development of sexual agency proves to be more challenging in the face of intersecting systems of oppression that normalize violence against women. These systems perpetuate and reinforce male dominance over women's bodies, hold women accountable for the violence they endure, and provide men with unchecked power to abuse women and girls within their own homes. Even amidst progress in women's rights and strides towards gender equality, such oppressive structures often respond with violence as a means of resistance, aiming to roll back these progressive achievements.

Based on the data from this study, it is evident that the promotion of women's sexual agency can only be realized if public policies are designed to promote equal opportunities and provide support. Addressing gender-based violence, prejudice, and discrimination necessitates comprehensive social and economic policies that address multiple dimensions and offer opportunities to all women. There remains a significant journey ahead in cultivating sexual agency, as well as in equipping professionals to address diverse issues such as consent, intimate partner violence prevention, healthy relationship development, child sexual abuse prevention, and respect for diversity, sexual rights, and citizenship. As decisions related to agency are shaped by the cultural, social, political, and economic contexts in which individuals live, it is essential to provide women with improved conditions and broader choices, empowering them to make truly informed and autonomous decisions.

The complexity of the relationship between traditional sexual scripts, sexual agency, and violence in intimate relationships highlights the importance of educational approaches and public policies that promote gender equality and prevent violence. Thus, we conclude that sexuality education that promotes sexual agency should contribute to preventing violence against women, especially if it focuses on communication skills, setting limits, and preventing risky behaviors. To achieve this, it is necessary to expand spaces for sexuality education and to start integrative and inclusive sexuality initiatives early, which can be a significant challenge, especially given the need to address issues related to gender and diversity, sexual rights, and consent.

Data Availability The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author, APS, upon reasonable request.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto Ref.ª 2021/08-04b.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for Publication The authors affirm that human research participants provided informed consent for the publication of the data collected in this study.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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