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Police officers' discourses about male victims of intimate partner violence in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Intimate partner violence is a well-known social, criminal and health problem. The victim's characteristics have been changing in the last years, however, intimate partner violence against male victims has not yet been the subject of sufficient social or scientific attention. The police, for many victims, is the first contact when calling for help. The present study analyses the discourses of police officers on male victims of intimate partner violence and explore their experiences and difficulties when men are the victims. In depth interviews with police officers ($n = 11$) were conducted and data was analyzed according to content analysis which allowed the identification of three major themes: IPV in general, IPV against males and the role of the police officers. The findings showed that police officers have an adjusted knowledge on the phenomenon (e.g., prevalence; types of violence; characterization of IPV; reasons for female aggression; role of police). Yet there seems to be some grey areas when it comes to more specific questions (e.g., characteristics of the perpetrators; impact on the victim; *coping* strategies to deal with violence), which can contribute to difficulties for male victims to report intimate partner violence and receive a helpful service. The practical implications of these qualitative findings for police, male victims and the scientific community are discussed.

1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) includes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse among heterosexual or same-sex couples (see e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Centers for Disease Prevention and Control, 2015). IPV represents a major social, criminal and health problem (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Centers for Disease Prevention and Control, 2015).

In the last decades, there were numerous studies focusing on IPV, but these have prioritized violence against women (e.g., Dobash and Dobash, 2004; Busch and Rosenberg, 2004). This "public story of IPV" – as a phenomenon almost exclusively perpetrated by heterosexual males against heterosexual females in defense of the patriarchy, has consequences at individual, interpersonal and socio-cultural levels, permeates society and affects the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of professionals who intervene with IPV (e.g., Lourenço et al., 2018).

However, in the past few years, the approaches to IPV have changed, evidencing different realities, namely the increase of cases in

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which the victim is a man (e.g., [Hines and Douglas, 2011a](#); [Machado et al., 2016a](#)). These cases have been neglected throughout the years at social, political and scientific levels, rarely being the target of social and scientific attention (e.g., [Corbally, 2015](#); [Mele et al., 2011](#)). Portugal is one of these countries where the phenomenon is almost invisible ([Machado et al., 2016a](#)). Despite IPV is acknowledged as a notable problem since the 90's (e.g., National Plans against violence - the political action support tools to prevent and intervene in VD; Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality, 2015) as well as the fact that Portuguese law is gender neutral ([Penal Code, 2014](#)), the phenomenon of IPV against men remains an under developed research area.

Even so police have evolved and have taken positive steps in the knowledge of IPV, mainly due to investment in training and in the creation of specific structures such as the Nucleus for Research and Support to Specific Victims (NIAVE) of domestic violence (these professionals have specific training in IPV, only work on matters related to violence against women, children, and other groups of specific victims, and are the responsible to conduct the investigation on IPV cases). However, there is a lack of knowledge on how the police officers perceive males as victims of IPV and research has demonstrated that help-seeking males often have negative experiences when seeking help through formal channels, such as police (e.g., [Douglas and Hines, 2011](#); [Huntley et al., 2019](#); [Machado et al., 2009](#); [Walker et al., 2020](#)). Therefore, the objective of the present study is to analyze the discourses of a group of police officers about IPV against males and to explore the difficulties felt by these professionals in interpreting and implementing the laws and legal procedures when males are the victims.

1.1. IPV against males

Males are also victims of IPV (e.g., [Hines and Douglas, 2011a](#); [Machado et al., 2016a](#); [2016b](#)). In fact, the literature review of [Desmarais et al. \(2012\)](#) reveals that one in each five males is an IPV victim. In Europe, [Costa et al. \(2015\)](#) revealed that men and women present similar prevalence rates of victimization and perpetration, except for sexual coercion that is mainly perpetrated by males. In Portugal, according to the Annual Report of Internal Security (*RASI – Relatório Anual de Segurança Interna, 2019*), in 2019 there were in total 9143 males victims of IPV. Additionally, between 2013 and 2018, 2745 males victims sought help in the services of the Portuguese Association of Victim Support (*APAV – Associação de Apoio à Vítima, 2018*).

IPV presents a risk to males' physical and mental health ([Bates, 2020](#); [Berger et al., 2015](#); [Hines and Douglas, 2011a](#); [Machado et al., 2016a, 2016b](#)). Several studies report that male victimization has a significant psychological impact and may lead to feelings of confusion, frustration, anger, pain or disappointment, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) or high levels of depression and anxiety (e.g., [Hines and Douglas, 2011b](#); [Hines and Malley-Morris, 2001](#); [Randle and Graham, 2011](#)). [Hines and Malley-Morris \(2001\)](#) reported injuries, weight loss, psychosomatic symptoms, fear and a high level of stress.

The literature revealed multiple reasons for the female partner aggression: expression of negative emotions, self-defence, control, jealousy and intimidation (e.g., [Bair-Merritt et al., 2010](#); [Elmquist et al., 2014](#); [Muller et al., 2009](#); [Stuart et al., 2006](#)). Other variables, for example, substance abuse by both the abuser and the victim may also be of importance in IPV aggression (e.g., [Busch and Rosenberg, 2004](#); [Hines and Douglas, 2010](#); [Stuart et al., 2006](#)). The meta-analysis of [Bair-Merritt et al. \(2010\)](#) revealed that self-defence and retaliation were the most frequent factors in the examined studies. Several studies have suggested that self-defence was the main motive for female aggression (e.g., [Busch and Rosenberg, 2004](#); [Dobash and Dobash, 2004](#); [Feder and Henning, 2005](#)). However, a growing body of research reveals that women can initiate physical aggression motivated by several different reasons similar as men, such as: to express their frustration, to communicate, as a form of control, or moved by the desire for retaliation (e.g., [Muller et al., 2009](#)). Additionally, some studies revealed that aggressive women tend to have a history of trauma, mental illness, suicidal ideation, homicide and substance abuse ([Hines et al., 2007](#)). In Portugal, [Machado et al. \(2018\)](#) studied the perceived motives for partner's aggression with a group of male victims. The results, which revealed four factors (Family roles and dependencies, Difficulties of the dyad, Obsession and retaliation and Structural and external problems), demonstrated that males attribute the violent behavior of their partners mainly to "Difficulties of the dyad" (e.g., partner's personal characteristics, power/control) and to the "Obsession and retaliation" of the partner (e.g., partner's jealousy/distrust, partner's obsession ([Machado et al., 2018](#))).

The studies that explore the reasons for males to stay in abusive relationships revealed different factors (e.g., [Hines and Douglas, 2015](#); [Machado et al., 2018](#)). For instance, in the study of [Hines and Douglas \(2015\)](#), participants said they would not leave the abusive relationship because of: concern with their children; belief that "marriage is for life"; "love"; belief in the change of the partner; feelings of shame, such as more practical issues. It is important to highlight that in a study of [Hines and Douglas \(2010\)](#) victims disclosed their fear that the partner may kill them if they leave the relationship. In the study of [XXX \(2016a\)](#), the fact that the victims did not recognize themselves as such, in addition with their feelings of shame, distrust in the justice system, fear of not being believed and fear of retaliation from the partner, were presented as reasons for not leaving the abusive relationship. Additionally, in another study of [Machado et al. \(2018\)](#), commitment to the relationship (e.g., love, emotional dependence) was the component most endorsed by the males for not leaving their relationship, followed by "Beliefs about family stability" (e.g., concern for the well-being of children, believe that marriage is for a lifetime).

All these issues make criminal complaint difficult, by exacerbating levels of fear and shame, as well, as the fear of being discredited and humiliated by others (e.g., [Bates 2020](#); [Hines et al., 2007](#); [Huntley et al., 2019](#); [Tsui et al., 2010](#); [Walker et al., 2020](#)). Furthermore, societal view of males as "economically, socially and politically dominant" ([Hines and Malley-Morris, 2001](#), p. 76) prevents male victims from reporting the abuse they are suffering ([Randle and Graham, 2011](#)). In addition, prevention campaigns and supportive responses are almost exclusively female-oriented, including shelters (e.g., [Dutton and White, 2013](#)), which can also contribute to the maintenance of males in their abusive relationships.

1.2. Police: role, perceptions and intervention with male victims

Police is, for many victims, their first contact when seeking help, and also an opportunity to receive support and assistance (Barkhuizen, 2015; Russel and Light, 2006). The victims need emotional support, to be heard, and also counseling and information on how to keep themselves safe (McGregor et al., 2013; Machado et al., 2016a). However, according to the existent studies, the legal system is not recognized by males as a useful and effective resource, which exacerbates their victimization (e.g., Douglas and Hines, 2011; Machado et al., 2016a, 2016b).

Several studies were performed on police officers' perceptions of women victims of IPV, and revealed negative or stereotypical views (e.g., DeJong et al., 2008) and significant differences in arrest outcomes. However, only a few international and national studies were conducted on the discourses of the police officers regarding IPV against males (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2015; Carvalho, 2016; Russel and Light, 2006). We understand that discourses and the underlying perceptions can play a vital role in the way police officers dealt with the phenomena and the potential victims. Individual's knowledge of a particular topic or subject may be positively associated with the outcome of an issue (as cited in Fernandes et al., 2020). Besides, attitudes are influenced by one's perceptions; if perceptions are erroneous, the individual will be uncertain as to what is relevant and can even not realize that a problem exists, consequently ignoring it or not prioritizing it (Lourenço et al., 2018).

These studies on police discourses about male victims indicated that police officers hold a stereotyped view of IPV, which may interfere with victim attendance, support (e.g., Russel and Light, 2006; Russel and Light, 2006) and arrest based on sex-based rationales. Barkhuizen (2015) revealed that male victims felt despised and that violence episodes reported by them were trivialized by the police. In addition, males who are victims of IPV do not have the same protection mechanisms as females (e.g., Cheung et al., 2009; Muller et al., 2009). For example, data collected by Feder and Henning (2005) also confirmed that female offenders are less prone to prosecution. Several studies have also found that some male victims were accused of being the perpetrators by the police or by protection institution exclusively directed to women victims (e.g., Bates 2020; Cook, 2009; Hines et al., 2007; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2016a; McCarrick et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2020). Literature review indicates that men who are involved in IPV are disadvantaged and treated less favorably than women by the criminal justice system. Moreover, the criminal justice system tends to minimize the potential seriousness of IPV incidents, or fails to intervene with men as victims or to arrest female perpetrators (e.g., Russel and Light, 2006).

The literature also reveals that males are reluctant to report their victimization, even when dealing with severe violence (e.g., Carmo et al., 2011; Machado et al., 2016a; Muller et al., 2009). The non-reporting is also exacerbated by the fact that males are less likely to self-identify as victims of IPV (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2015; Machado et al., 2016b). The negative discrimination of the male victims seems to be associated with the patriarchal paradigm that influences the beliefs of police officers about the nature of IPV and the characteristics of its victims (e.g., Hines and Douglas, 2011b; McCarrick et al., 2015; Muller et al., 2009; Russel and Light, 2006). The police reluctance to consider IPV against males as a serious problem also works as an obstacle to the criminal complaint of males (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2015; Randle and Graham, 2011).

According to Dixon and Graham-Kevan (2011), it is essential that the police perceives IPV as a form of violence that can be perpetrated by both males and females, and thus, looking beyond the sex and severity of the aggressions. According to McCarrick et al. (2015), an undifferentiated and positive attendance by the police officers has a significant impact in the *empowerment* of the male victim. Barkhuizen (2015) argues that the lack of knowledge on IPV against males increases the stigma over these victims. The same author also suggests that, without training, these stigmatization practices tend to continue.

At a national level, Carvalho (2016) analyzed police officers perceptions about IPV and marital homicide (when the victim is a man) and found that participants had a general adjusted perception about IPV against males. However, they also had ambiguous perceptions regarding the characteristics of the victim, the severity of the violence suffered and self-recognition as a victim. Another study (Matos and Cláudio, 2010) revealed that members of police ($n = 308$) did not legitimize IPV, they presented a less adjusted perception about the phenomenon (Matos and Cláudio, 2010). Another national study (Machado et al., 2009), which aimed to characterize the beliefs of diverse professionals involved in the support services for victims of IPV (response and/or prevention), showed, in general, low values of legitimation for IPV, however, the group of police officers revealed a higher value of legitimation of IPV, which raises some concerns.

2. The current study

Male victims of IPV are secluded victims (e.g., Shuler, 2010). Few men report their abuse to police due to the fear of disbelief and the negative evaluation of the services provided (e.g., Bates 2020; Cook, 2009; Hines et al., 2007; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2016a; McCarrick et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the request for support to the police has been registering a significant growth, namely in Portugal. However, limited research has been conducted on the perceptions of police regarding IPV against males. This is internationally understudied, especially, there is a lack of qualitative studies on this field. We need that qualitative attention to be paid to in order to capture deeper understandings of those perceptions. The perceptions of these professionals are important because, as previously highlighted, these may influence the likelihood of the victims to disclose and decide to make a criminal report by IPV, as well as the request for formal help. The more knowledgeable these professionals are about these phenomena, better able they will be to provide adequate assistance to the victim, stimulate their collaborative stance in the collection of criminal evidence, increase the successful criminal process and, as some authors argue, to combat the high attrition rate in these crimes of IPV that reach the justice system (Fleming and Franklin, 2021). This study about the police perceptions can also inform future potential interventions and possible training improvements in the way that

these victims are evaluated and targeted on intervention. Finally, this study is crucial within the Portuguese context, considering that previous studies (e.g., Machado et al., 2016a, 2016b) suggested that the country does not seem to be prepared to deal with male victims (e.g., Machado et al., 2016a).

Therefore, the following research questions were defined: 1) Which are the main discourses of the police officers on IPV in general?; 2) How do the police officers perceive IPV against males?; 3) How does the police officers characterize their role in dealing with IPV against males?; 4) Do the police officers perceive themselves as being prepared to intervene with male victims?; and 5) Is professional training perceived by these professionals as sufficient to intervene with this specific group of victims? The answer to these questions may inform public policies in this field.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants were 11 police officers (8 males and 3 females), aged between 36 and 57 years ($M = 40.2$, $DP = 7.9$). The professionals were members of the National Republican Guard (GNR), from the North of the country. They had different years of professional experience, ranging from 14 to 30 years ($M = 17.6$, $DP = 6.3$). The majority of the participants ($n = 9$) had direct experience of attending victims and had specific training in IPV (i.e., belonged to the Nucleus of Information and Support to Specific Victims - NIAVE). Table 1 presents this information in detail.

3.2. Instrument

The instrument for data collection was a semi-structured interview considering that it appeared to be the most adequate to respond to the study objectives. The interview is a qualitative methodology technique that tends to be the most used, as it is a way of exploring the phenomenon in question, based on the reality of each participant (e.g., Adhabi and Anozie, 2017). In addition, it gives the researcher greater flexibility, as they can interact with the participants to ensure that they understand what is being asked (e.g., Adhabi and Anozie, 2017). The script was originally produced for these research purposes and consisted of 32 open questions, subdivided into six thematic areas: a) Professional experience and qualification (e.g., qualification; skills, level of preparation); b) General reflection on the phenomenon (e.g., impact; reasons, needs); c) Rate of criminal complains (e.g., barriers in the seeking help process; police officers strategies); d) Role of police officers (e.g., type of support); and e) Protection of the victim (e.g., policies to combat IPV; legislation).

3.3. Procedures

After obtaining approval by the Ethics Committee of the University of Minho, a formal request was sent for the participation in the study of the different police institutions in Portugal, namely GNR (Guarda Nacional Republicana - National Republican Guard), PSP (Polícia de Segurança Pública - Public Security Police) and PJ (Polícia Judiciária - Judicial Police). The institutions that demonstrated willingness to participate, agreed to disseminate the study among its members, and were then requested to identify the members that demonstrated availability to participate in the study. Only GNR was willing to participate in the research. After formal acceptance of collaboration by the GNR, participants who were from the North region of the country and were willing to participate were contacted by the second author. Previously to data collection, the objectives of the study and the voluntary nature of participation were clarified. Interviews with all members of GNR that were willing to participate were conducted individually, at each participant's workplace (i.e., police station) during office hours. The interviews were recorded in audio support and later transcribed integrally to the *Microsoft word*.

3.4. Research methodology

A qualitative methodology approach was chosen as it appeared to be the most suitable to respond to the objectives of the study. In

Table 1
Characterization of participants ($n = 11$).

Participants	Sex	Age	Habilitations	Experience (Years)	Function	No of male cases
P1	M	36	Degree in Psychology	15	Criminal Inspector	≤4
P2	M	57	Master in Criminal Justice	30	Adviser of the Operational Command	0
P3	M	44	Degree in Criminology	21	Chief at NIAVE	3
P4	M	52	High School	27	Chief at NIAVE	≥30
P5	F	36	Middle School	15	Inspector at NIAVE	≤4
P6	F	37	High School	14	Inspector at NIAVE	0
P7	M	41	High School	17	Inspector at NIAVE	≤6
P8	M	38	Master in Forensic Science	17	Chief at NIAVE	≥10
P9	M	37	Degree in Psychology	15	Chief at NIAVE	>5
P10	F	32	High School	12	Inspector at NIAVE	1
P11	M	32	High School	10	Inspector at NIAVE	1

this sense, interviews were analyzed with a social constructivist lens, through content analysis, which can be defined as “a research technique that, through an objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communications, has the purpose of interpreting these communications” (Bardin 2013, p. 38). The basic assumption of this technique is that it allows us to organize words/phrases/ideas (content units) into categories (Coutinho, 2011).

The three fundamental phases of content analysis are: a) Pre-analysis. At this stage, the interviews were analyzed and fully transcribed. In that manner, the corpus of research was constituted (Bardin, 2013). We respected the relevant rules for this stage of pre-analysis, namely: exhaustiveness (all elements of the corpus have been considered); homogeneity (data is allusive to the same theme and to uniform procedures); exclusivity (each data unit can only be classified into one category); and, finally, the rule of relevance (data are adapted to the objectives of the study; Bardin, 2013; Coutinho 2011); b) Exploring the Data. This step involved coding, i.e., raw data was transformed and aggregated systematically into units, which accurately described the characteristics of the content (Bardin, 2013). It comprised 3 stages: 1) Clipping: selection of units (e.g., phrases); 2) Enumeration: choice of enumeration rules; and 3) Classification and aggregation: choice of categories (Bardin, 2013); c) Treatment of results, inference and interpretation. This phase was the description and discussion the results.

In order to assure results' validity and the credibility, an independent coder (the second author) analyzed 40% of the interviews, randomly assigned. After independent review by the co-coder, the formula proposed by Vala (1986): $F = 2(C1,2)/C1 + C2$ was used to assess the intercoder reliability. The number of agreements between the coders was divided by the total categorizations performed by each coder. An index of: $F = 2(351)/368 + 361 = 0.96$ was obtained, indicating a very high agreement (Guest et al., 2006; Martins and Machado, 2006). This value results from the discussion of the coding discrepancies, which were discussed and solved by the coders through consensus. A senior researcher (third author) audited the coding process.

4. Results

The content analysis allowed us to identify 3 major themes (Favorable social representation of women as a victim of IPV, characterization of IPV against males and police officers' role when males are the victims). From these themes, 16 general categories (see Table 2) emerged, as well as 69 subcategories of primary order and 100 subcategories of second order.

4.1. Favorable social representation of women as a victim of IPV

Women vs men as victims. Different perceptions of the participants were observed regarding the victim, the justice system and socio-cultural issues (subcategories of second order). The discourse was marked by the perspective that IPV is a transversal phenomenon in terms of sex (e.g., “It is a transversal situation that occurs both in males as in women” P11) and that it is a standardized phenomenon, involving women as victims (e.g., “The typical cases are with women as victims and this cases are much more noticeable because there is a pattern of male violence against women and there is not a very standardized thing regarding males as victims” P1). The participants stated that despite the constant evolution of the police (e.g., “I've been in the criminal investigation for 10 years, specifically in the IPV for 4 and it is clear that there is a huge improvement of what was the IPV 10 years ago and the way we see IPV today” P10), there is an empathy with women as a victim (e.g., “While for women, people feel sorry and say ‘poor thing about you that you are a victim’. For man, it's worse, it's worse” P11).

Perspectives on IPV based on victim sex. Sex differences are subdivided in second order subcategories: available responses, victim, justice system and influence of sociocultural issues.

The majority of the participants considered that the available answers are directed at women (e.g., “The system itself is set up to care for female victims more than male victims, you see?” P1). Most respondents mentioned that the law is gender-neutral (e.g., “The law does not distinguish with respect to sex and the answers have to be the same” P5), however, they considered that there is a more favorable social

Table 2
Codebook.

Themes	General category
Favorable social representation of women as a victim of IPV	Women vs men as victims Perspectives on IPV based on victim sex
Characterization of IPV against males	Prevalence Types of violence Perpetrators Victimization Impact Reasons for men victims to stay in the abusive relationships Reasons for female perpetration against men Helpseeking by male victims Explanatory factors of men victims non-reporting Complaint and decision-making process on men victims Victims Coping Victim's Needs
Police officers' role when males are the victims	Difficulties in their duties Psychosocial and technical roles of police officers Suggestion for improvement

representation of the woman as a victim (e.g., "(...) society does not look at a man who is a victim of IPV with respect" P4). Nonetheless, only some participants have pointed out that self-perception as victims is different in male and female victims (e.g., "It is important to realize that males do not see crime in the same way, it has a lot to do with what the social roles that are attributed to women" P8). Additionally, some participants mentioned the non-existence of intervention for female perpetrators, considering this an important gap (e.g., "What is curious, however, is that there are no programs of intervention for a female perpetrator" P8).

4.2. Characterization of IPV against males

Participants highlighted some topics that characterize this phenomenon, namely:

Prevalence. Most of the participants rated the prevalence of IPV against males as hidden (e.g., "I think it's hidden. There's a lot of male violence hidden, a lot, a lot, a lot!") and rare (e.g., "Criminal complaints of IPV of males remain rare" P4).

Types of violence. Participants emphasized the psycho-emotional violence suffered by male victims as the most common type of violence (e.g., "But it was psychological aggression, he was a victim of psychological aggression, he was constantly humiliated, insulted ..."). They also referred physical violence (e.g., "Take a stick and beat them up, etc ... " P3).

Perpetrators. When asked about the characteristics of the female perpetrators, the participants were not unanimous in their perceptions and it was notorious the difficulty in defining their characteristics. About half of them reported the lack of a typical "profile" (e.g., "There isn't a standard profile, is it?" P1). Others reported some individual characteristics, such as personality traits (e.g., "Women tend to be manipulative ... " P10) and substance abuse (e.g., "For the cases I had, women had drinking problems" P3).

Victimization Impact. Most of the participants had difficulties in describing the impact of IPV on male victims (e.g., "I can't answer that question. I don't know ... " P3). Those who were able to describe it were vague in their responses, however psychological impact was the most mentioned (e.g., "low levels of self-esteem and their masculinity is wounded ... " P7).

Reasons for female perpetration against males. There were several reasons pointed out for female perpetration, including retaliation (e.g., "Many women, for example, may beat a man because they are fed up with being beaten too"); power (e.g., "It will be a way for the woman to show superiority towards the man, showing who is the one who commands, who is the one who controls the house ... " P11) and the instrumental objective (e.g., "Sometimes there are situations that can be somewhat manipulated. Let's say that the complainant could have other intentions " P7).

Help seeking by male victims. Regarding the request for help by male victims, four topics emerged: a) characteristics of the complaint; b) motives; c) objectives; d) complaint against complaint. Concerning the characteristics of the complaint, about half of the participants assumed that the complaint normally appears as a complaint against a complaint (e.g., "And there is also a lot of complaint against women in which the woman previously made a complaint against the husband" P5). In these cases, participants reported cases where the woman was the primary aggressor (e.g., "It depends on the situation, but we sometimes have cases where the victim is a woman and during the investigation we have come to the conclusion that she is not. Maybe he is more a victim than she is" P5).

When asked about the reasons for help seeking, the majority of the participants referred to reaching the limit as the trigger for the complaint (e.g., "I think when the man comes to report he is already in the last line ... " P10).

About the aims for requesting for help, the following stood out: seeking help for the partner (e.g., "Because they do not get other answers in the area of health or in the various institutions they have appealed to and are forced to present a criminal complaint to see if anyone does anything" P10) and the cessation of the perpetration from the partner (e.g., "For me, it is usually done as an attempt to correct some problems and not break with the relationship ... " P6).

Explanatory factors of male victims non-reporting. Some aspects related to individual, sociocultural and justice system factor emerged. Regarding the first factor, participants referred some intra-individual factors, such as the feeling of shame (e.g., "The fact that criminal complaints are still residual in relation to males still leaves many of them ashamed" P11); the "macho view" of males (e.g., "The man hides, tries to hide so he does not look bad within society, towards friends, towards family members, because people still think it is shameful for a man to be a victim from a woman" P10); the fear of being ridiculed (e.g., "But I think it is more because of social shame. They will think everyone will laugh of them, they will be victims twice." P6) and the preservation of masculinity (e.g., "I believe there are probably more, but the male virility problem prevents them from seek for help." P1). Finally, participants pointed out that non-denunciation would be fueled essentially by fear of the justice treatment (e.g., "And there is much fear in males as to how they will be received by the authorities" P4).

Complaint and decision-making process on male victims. Participants suggested that there are some issues interfering with the complaint and the underlying decision-making process. Most of these are related to the process of present a criminal complaint: psycho-emotional (e.g., "(...) it is difficult for a man to come to the GNR station in his area of residence, knowing even the guards there: "Look, I came here to say that my wife gave me two slaps in the face" (...) The man feels embarrassed, because we live in a world of males, don't we?" P3) and the social pressure (e.g., "I think it's a very big burden for a man to assume himself as a victim towards the friends and the family, because they have that idea: you're a man, you are a superior being regarding to the woman, you should not be a victim, you should be able to react!" P11).

Reasons for male victims to stay in the abusive relationship. Some participants claimed that males do not stay in abusive relationships (e.g., "If he wants to divorce or leave the house, he can. Males are faster. They end up getting a friend and that's it!"). Other participants presented a set of reasons for male victims staying in the abusive relationships, including emotional dependence (e.g., "Emotional dependence, because they really like the partner (...) It applies to both sexes: emotional dependence is often what leads most people to staying in an abusive relationship " (P10), economic dependency (e.g., "If I am economically dependent I do not leave to be worse." P5), conformism, children (e.g., "Fear of losing children." P11) and, finally, cultural issues (e.g., "Some say: "I am married, so I am married for life!" P2).

Victims' Coping. Participants reported coping strategies used by the male victim and differentiated these strategies in maladaptive

coping and adaptive coping. An example of maladaptive coping was aggressive reactions to partner violence (e.g., *“And the man reacts violently (...)”* P5); and an example of adaptive coping was “going to the coffee” (e.g., *“(...) you’re going to piss me off now because of this, I’m going to coffee!”* P3).

Victim’s Needs. Concerning the needs, there seems to be no agreement among participants, other than the need for more answers (e.g., *“There is a need to create more support, without a doubt. I think in this aspect, the masculine elements are being a little forgotten”* P9) and the need for police officers being trained and a target of awareness to this phenomenon (e.g., *“It is the way that has to be done to try to raise awareness, first internally, to the people who are in charge of the services that must receive the victims (...)”* P4).

4.3. Police officers’ role when males are the victims

Difficulties in their duties when male are the victims. All the participants suggested that the attendance of the victims was undifferentiated regarding their sex (e.g., *“What matters is that if it is a victim, he/she must be taken care of and that he/she must be addressed and treated as a victim (...) not depending on whether it is a man or a woman.”* P4). However, the majority demonstrated more sensitivity to female victims, denoting a negative discrimination against males (e.g., *“I attend them in the same way, but maybe with women I’m more careful, because I know she’s a more sensitive person than a man, isn’t she?”* P1). Regarding the demands on attendance, although participants reported a high degree of preparation (e.g., *“For me, our staff is prepared for it”* P7), some mentioned some difficulties and related it with: the lack of responses (e.g., *“Where are we going to put males? Because, at the moment, I do not know even one shelter for males”* P1); the justice system (e.g., *“The complaints and the label they attribute to complaints, almost always, when the victim is a man, is the crime of offense to physical integrity or (...) Criminal complaints of males tended to be labeled as a minor crime and not as IPV”* P10); and the professional (e.g., *“There is still a lot of prejudice against males, and that goes from the police officer to the top of the hierarchy”* P5). Moreover, some participants referred the difficulties alluding to the victim (e.g., *“I had a case where I may constitute the woman as the perpetrator, because she has a stick to beat him. But the man doesn’t want to continue with the criminal complaint ...”* P3) and the culture (e.g., *“The question of the victim being a man is extremely complicated, because there are a lot of stigmas associated and a Portuguese well known say: Don’t go between the dog and the tree”* P3).

Psychosocial and technical roles of police officers. Most of the participants acknowledged the importance of the police intervention, clarifying the two roles/functions – i.e., the psychosocial and technical roles - inherent to this profession as different, but complementary (e.g., *“I think it is an important role, because we are the first to arrive, usually. We are the first to have contact with the victim, and at that time is when victims decide to stay in the relationship or to leave”* (P5). When asked about the skills required for an intervention with male victims, almost all participants referred the importance of both professional and technical skills (e.g., *“Knowledge: to be able to do their part, they have to know where to refer a victim, have to know all the resources in the community to know where to refer them”* P2) and interpersonal skills (e.g., *“I highlight the ability to listen, verbalization is also important, but mainly listening or knowing how to listen.”* P9).

Suggestion for improvement. Participants listed strategies at macro and micro levels. At the macro level, emphasis was placed on continuous training (e.g., *“We are constantly receiving training and updating information (...)”* P4). Only two participants discarded the need for specific training for the attendance of male victims (e.g., *“Treatment of male victims? I don’t think so”* P1). At a micro level, emerged, among others, the greater sensitization of GNR to this phenomenon (e.g., *“We still have a long path ahead of us in order to look at a male victim of IPV and look at him as a victim”* P8) and the “Education for citizenship” in general (e.g., *“Children have to be prepared from very young, since kindergarten, is not it? All this cultural part, if we prevent it since primary school, in a few years we will be getting much more benefits, educating children for equality between males and women ...”* P7).

5. Discussion

To the authors’ knowledge, this is the first study aiming to gain in deep knowledge of the discourses of the police officers regarding male victims of IPV. Our findings suggest that the discourses of these sample of professionals were globally adjusted according to the literature on IPV (e.g., prevalence; types of violence; characterization of IPV; reasons for female aggression), however, there are specificities of the phenomenon where most of the participants revealed discrepancy and dispersion in their knowledge (e.g., characteristics of the perpetrators; impact on the victim; coping strategies). In general, participants presented a gendered discourse that spread throughout the interview, revealing a more favorable social representation for women as a victim. Regarding the attendance of victims, besides the discourse that it was undifferentiated regarding their sex, participants revealed more sensitivity to women. Additionally, most respondents considered that the available answers are directed at women and mentioned the non-existence of intervention for female perpetrators, considering this an important gap.

Concerning the first research question - Which are the discourses of the police officers on IPV in general? - the results revealed that the police officers consider IPV a transversal phenomenon, however, the participants reported some difficulty in focusing on the male victim in their discourse, using the majority of the time women as a reference to mention victims. This standardized view of women as victims, invisibles and dismisses the potential danger of IPV against male victims and limits the support provided to male victims.

Regarding the second research question - How the police officers perceive IPV against males? - police officers recognize males as victims of IPV, although they realized the phenomenon as hidden and residual in terms of reporting rates. Several studies demonstrate a low rate of reporting/criminal complaint, compared to the occurrence of the phenomenon (e.g., Machado et al., 2016a; 2016b). Additionally, the literature alludes to several reasons for female aggression (e.g., retaliation, power, self-defense; Bair-Merritt et al., 2010; Elmquist et al., 2014; Muller et al., 2009; Stuart et al., 2006), which are shared by the majority of participants. The police officers defended that a woman attacks in response to past and/or current violence, but also to try to obtain benefits, whipping the partner while expecting him to react to provocations. This seems to constitute the legal administrative abuse found in other studies (e.g.,

Machado et al., 2016b; Hines et al., 2014). The majority of the participants also revealed an adequate knowledge of the reasons for males to stay in abusive relationships. The only reason that police officers were not able to identify was fear of partner retaliation, which is also referred in the literature, as a motive for maintaining aggression (e.g., Hines and Douglas, 2010; Machado et al., 2016a). It is possible that the perception that the violence suffered as essentially psychological, contributed to this disregard, as well as to a reluctance of the police officers of this sample to consider IPV against males as a serious case (Barkhuizen, 2015; Randle and Graham, 2011). Furthermore, the participants listed a number of barriers that males face when reporting, including lack of adequate responses, possible stigmatization (by the professional and/or the justice system), cultural factors and characteristics of the victim, influence of social pressure, and psycho-emotional issues in the process of requesting help – all of them consistent with the literature review (e.g., Bates, 2020; Dutton and White, 2013; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2016a; 2016b; Walker et al., 2020).

Taken together, these are encouraging findings, revealing a clear perception of the problem by the police officers, and an *a priori openness* to reflect on these issues. These findings also allow us to make some reflections: first, the transversally nature of the phenomenon (as claimed by the participants), makes it possible to transpose their knowledge about the subject when the victim is a woman for the cases when the victim is a man; secondly, specific training may enable greater diversity and competence in the responses given.

Regarding our third, fourth and fifth questions - the role and preparation/difficulties in dealing with IPV against males - most of the participants have already dealt or worked at some point with this population. However, the number of cases was scarce. Despite their limited experience, as previously mentioned, participants tend to sustain adequate perceptions of the phenomenon. One possible explanation for this result may be the specific and continuous training that, specifically, this group (NIAVE), as a special unit, has undergone – as a specific unit for IPV cases. This result was also expected having in consideration the educational level and professional experience of the participants, and in line with a previous study that stated that participants' adjusted perception is influenced by professional experience: as higher the professional experience, as lower the tendency of misperceptions (Carvalho, 2016).

Participants also highlighted that it is essential that the conditions of the victims' attendance service (e.g., logistic, attitudinal) are adequate, to minimize perceived losses of the male victims with respect to the police and, thus, increasing criminal complaint rates. While the police officers emphasize its importance as a supportive body, they are aware that if the first contact for sought help fails, the entire process of presenting a criminal complaint will eventually break down and the victim might not seek help again. Thus, participants mentioned the importance of investing in enhancing the *skills* of police officers (e.g., empathy, active listening, emotional support, "know-how"). Other difficulties mentioned were the lack of responses and the justice system. Once again, these results are consistent with the barriers faced by man victims in the process of seeking help (e.g., Bates, 2020; Dutton and White, 2013; Hines and Douglas, 2011a; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2016a; 2016b; Walker et al., 2020).

Finally, concerning the needs of male victims, several participants have emphasized the importance of specific training, as well as programs for raising awareness and citizenship education (the latter more preventive and community-based). Most of the participants stated that there was a need for specific training regarding this phenomenon. According to Barkhuizen (2015), training can avoid the second victimization that male victims experience when seeking formal help. The police officers suggest a wider variety of responses to male victims (e.g., prevention campaigns), as well as specialized support (e.g., psychological support) and/or social support (e.g., not being ridiculed), among other measures, all consistent with the literature (e.g., Bates, 2020; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2016b; Walker et al., 2020).

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The first is related to the sample, its size and homogeneity in terms of sex. Officer gender has proven to be an important factor in officers' beliefs, stereotypes and reactions to IPV. Another limitation refers to the fact that the sample is comprised mostly by members of NIAVE, which have undergone specialized training on IPV. A study with members of the police without this specific training on IPV could had found different results. A more diverse sample could allow group comparisons. Therefore, a suggestion for future studies would be to explore the discourses of elements of the "first line" of the police who, typically, are the first ones to attend the victims and do not have the specific training that NIAVE members have. Moreover, collect and compare male and female police officers would also be important. Finally, although the interview allows the collection of deep and rich data (Knox and Burkard, 2009), it can also stimulate social desirability. Another suggestion for future studies would be to compare the perceptions collected from police officers and the perceptions of the male victims who were helped by them, aiming a critical reflection between the perceived reality by each group and the extent that these resemble and distinguish themselves.

6. Conclusion

This study is innovative and contributes with important data for the scientific knowledge on IPV against males. In general, police officers have adequate perceptions about the phenomenon according to the literature (e.g., prevalence; types of violence; characterization of IPV; reasons for female aggression), however, they also revealed some less adequate perceptions (e.g., impact and victim's characteristics). The unifying and transversal vision of IPV presented by the police officers may invalidate the idiosyncratic characteristics of male as victims. Additionally, it should be noted that the low recognition of the male victim as an 'authentic' victim of IPV adds to his invisibility and vulnerability, requiring a careful, empathic, and sensitive intervention. Although the participants recognized that there is much to be done, they presented a differential treatment for males and women victims of IPV, considering the latter more in need of technical and psychosocial support. Males should not be victims of a negative discrimination, and services should, as law, be neutral regarding the sex of the victim. Consequently, these considerations are important. These qualitative findings can be integrated in order to provide training to police officers regarding the specificities of this phenomenon (e.g., characteristics of the perpetrators; victims coping and needs) – less adequate perceptions could contribute to a worse attendance of male victims. Police training on handling cases involving male victims would be important (Shuler, 2010). In fact, police must look beyond gender

stereotypes to ensure victim and police safety in order to provide support and greater sensitivity to underserved victims of IPV. This could also shape better institutional police policies, preparedness and responses to these victims. Finally, there is also a need to develop more public policies in order to guarantee responses and protection measures for males, as well as more education and prevention campaigns – it is urgent to break the myth that violence against males is less serious than violence against females, or that women victims are more vulnerable than men victims.

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