



# Intimate Partner Violence Directed at Men: Experiences of Violence, Help-seeking, and Potential Gender Role Conflict Among Portuguese Men

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## Abstract

Recent research has shed light on how men in same-sex and different-sex relationships experience Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), and how it may contribute to their Gender Role Conflict (GRC), through which men face a dissonance with their gender roles. However, knowledge on these topics is still lacking. We aim to better understand men's experiences of violence in their same-sex or different-sex relationships by identifying their dynamics and the specific barriers and facilitators to seeking help. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 adult men (Heterosexual, n=6; Gay, n=5; Bisexual, n=2; Not disclosed, n=1) who self-identified as having been targets of IPV. The interview protocol considered the literature on IPV and the feedback from stakeholders in victim support services. The results were analyzed following the principles of Content Analysis. Our findings suggest that men are negatively impacted by their abusive relationships, with physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence having been perpetrated by their same-sex or different-sex partners. Some men reported being further stigmatized in their help-seeking experiences. Gay and bisexual men indicated specific processes that played a significant role in their experiences. Some men revealed discomfort with the identity of “victim”, which may be linked to possible GRC processes. In sum, IPV impacts men in different-sex and same-sex relationships, and our findings provide new insights about how violence and help-seeking are experienced in the Portuguese cultural setting. Future efforts should focus on assessing possible GRC processes in this population and provide adequate information and tailored services to the specific needs of these men.

**Keywords** Intimate Partner Violence · Help-seeking · Masculinity · Gender Role Conflict · LGBT

## Introduction

According to Heise & García-Moreno (2002), intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to the victimization of a person by someone with whom they have or had an intimate relationship, possibly resulting in both immediate and long-term physical, psychological, and sexual health problems. IPV has been traditionally associated with women experiencing violence in their different-sex intimate relationships (Hamberger & Larsen, 2015), and the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have exacerbated pre-existing tendencies in this regard, with severity of violence and novel cases of IPV potentially increasing (Lyons, et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, research in the past few decades has shown that men in different-sex and same-sex relationships experience IPV as well (Edwards, et al., 2015; Scott-Storey, et al., 2022). Additionally, help-seeking in these populations seems to have different specificities that should be identified to raise awareness and better inform help services (Huntley, et al., 2020). Nevertheless, more research is still needed on the study of this phenomenon (Edwards, et al., 2015; Machado, et al., 2018).

## Prevalence and Nature of Violence Directed at Men

Recent research indicates that about 1 in 3 men in same-sex relationships has experienced some form of IPV in their lifetimes, and this prevalence is comparable to, or higher, than IPV prevalence for men in different-sex relationships (Liu, et al., 2021; Rollè, et al., 2018). Similarly to women, men may be the targets of physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence, leading to significant health consequences, such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and serious physical injuries (Longobardi & Badenes-Ribera, 2017; Scott-Storey, et al., 2022).

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people can also experience different minority stressors that may play a role in their experience of violence (Meyer, 2003). These can be expressed in factors such as degree of outness, stigma consciousness, internalized homonegativity, and discrimination (Meyer, 2003). These factors seem to potentiate both the victimization and the perpetration of violence in same-sex relationships (Longobardi & Badenes-Ribera, 2017; Stiles-Shields & Carroll, 2015), which may be linked to the invisibility of same-sex IPV or to disregarding its severity (Rollè, et al., 2018). There are also specific expressions that violence in same-sex relationships can assume, such as being threatened of being “outed” without consent, and non-consensually disclosing a positive serological status (Edwards, et al., 2015; Stiles-Shields & Carroll, 2015).

## IPV as a Gendered Experience

Gender has been posited to be a mutable social construct that is ever-changing in accordance with a given social and historical context (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinities, in turn, refer to the way that gender is socially constructed and perpetuated among men in different contexts, set on underlying power and dominance dynamics, as well as other factors (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Traditionally, men may be pressured to conform to hegemonic masculinity norms, such as being

emotionally resilient, physically strong, and dominating, while rejecting notions that may be traditionally consonant with femininity (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; McClellenen, et al., 2002).

Deviating from or breaking traditional gender norms surrounding masculinity has been found to be emotionally harmful for men, and puts them at a higher risk for IPV, such as being the target of emasculating and homophobic comments (Scott-Storey, et al., 2022). Additionally, men who identify as non-heterosexual and/or are in same-sex relationships may be further negatively impacted as traditional masculinity is heavily dependent on the assumption of heterosexuality (Carvalho, et al., 2011; McClellenen, et al., 2002).

These negative impacts may be related with the concept of gender role conflict (GRC) (O'Neil, 2013), which occurs when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles result in restriction, devaluation or violation of others or the self. GRC has been previously associated with over 85 non-adaptive psychological outcomes, such as depression, stress and anxiety, and worse help-seeking attitudes and intentions (O'Neil, 2015). Previous qualitative research suggests that IPV directed at men may result in dissonances with their gender roles, which is possibly linked with existing and rigid notions of masculinity and expectations to conform to them (Machado, et al., 2020; Walker, et al., 2020). Taking all of this into consideration, IPV experiences have been framed as gender-specific due to the significant influence that gender norms have on all men and women, (Larsen & Hamberger, 2015; Nybergh, et al., 2016; Scott-Storey, et al., 2022).

### IPV Drivers and Dynamics

One key factor that seems to underlie violent acts towards an intimate partner is a need to exert power and control (Carvalho, et al., 2011; Longobardi & Badenes-Ribera, 2017; Rozmann & Ariel, 2018). Among the theoretical frameworks aiming to explain IPV, we highlight the feminist theory which states that violence towards women is a way for men to exert their dominance, power, and social status in society. According to this perspective, men in different-sex and same-sex relationships can be the targets of violence primarily due to retaliation of violence they exerted in the first place (Ali, et al., 2016; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Rozmann & Ariel, 2018). Also relevant is the Gender Symmetry Theory, which postulates that women can perpetuate violence towards their male intimate partners to establish dominance and control, not only as retaliation but also without being targets of violence in the first place (Kimmel, 2002).

Research has previously supported both perspectives, although many methodological and conceptual limitations have been pointed out to establish a consensus on this topic (Rozmann & Ariel, 2018). Independently of which theory is supported, striving for power and control can drive partners to exert violence, even if for different reasons and in different contexts (Rozmann & Ariel, 2018). These power and control dynamics have also been observed in same-sex relationships (Carvalho, et al., 2011), which may point to its cross-sectional nature among intimate partner relationships.

Furthermore, alcohol and substance abuse have also been linked with IPV, not only as triggers for the perpetration of violence, but also as non-adaptive coping

strategies after being a target of violence (Larsen & Hamberger, 2015). Additionally, research suggests that some of the main reasons why men remain in their abusive relationships are emotional and financial dependence, lack of awareness about what constitutes violence, and lack of information about what help resources are available (Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Tsui, et al., 2010). For men in same-sex relationships, different minority stressors are postulated to influence remaining in an abusive relationship as well, such as not being “out of the closet” or having internalized homonegativity (Carvalho, et al., 2011; Longobardi & Badenes-Ribera, 2017).

Also relevant, the “cycle of violence” has been observed in the experiences of abused men in different-sex and same-sex relationships (Machado, et al., 2017; Rollé, et al., 2018). This cycle is usually composed of three main moments involving violence and its de-escalation: an increase in tension between intimate partners, followed by a moment of violence, and the “honeymoon phase”, in which the aggressor typically de-escalates violence by apologizing, keeping distance, among other behaviors (Walker, 2009). These dynamics may keep men who are targets of violence in their abusive relationships and may condition their willingness to seek help (Tenkorang, et al., 2021).

### **Facilitators and Barriers to Help-Seeking**

In terms of frequency, men in different-sex relationships tend to seek formal help at lower rates than women in different-sex relationships (Lysova, et al., 2020). Men in same-sex relationships seem to seek help more frequently than men in different-sex relationships (Edwards, et al., 2015). In Portugal, almost 25% of the IPV formal reports refer to men as targets of IPV (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2021). When men seek informal help, they often resort to friends and family members for support, and are more likely to seek informal sources of help than their female counterparts (Choi, et al., 2018).

Men who experience IPV seem to have specific facilitators and barriers to help-seeking (Huntley, et al., 2020; Lysova, et al., 2020; Machado, et al., 2017). As internal barriers, research suggests that men tend to minimize the severity of the violence they face, which in turn can impact their help-seeking attitudes and intentions (Scott-Storey, et al., 2022). This is inherently linked with their adherence to traditional gender norms which hinder men’s capacity to recognize themselves as targets of violence, or that may make them feel vulnerable, ashamed, and “not masculine enough” (Carvalho, et al., 2011; Lysova, et al., 2020; Machado, et al., 2017). Men may also not seek help due to emotional dependence and to safekeep their family’s well-being, especially if the couple has children (Lysova, et al., 2020). Being labeled as a “victim” may also add to existing pressure and negative health outcomes derived from experiencing violence, not only because this label has been found to be perceived as stigmatizing by both men and women who have experienced violence, but also because it may be incompatible with the traditional male gender role (Burcar & Åkerström, 2009; Eckstein, 2010), potentially hindering help-seeking (Lysova, et al., 2020).

In what concerns external barriers, men may have expectations of prejudice and discrimination based on their gender role when considering help-seeking, or even of

being ridiculed or framed as the perpetrators of violence (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Machado, et al., 2017; Walker, et al., 2020). For LGBT targets of violence, minority stressors and the “double closet” may be an additional barrier when seeking help, as they have to self-disclose both as targets of violence and as LGBT (Morgan, et al., 2016). They may expect prejudice and discrimination from service providers, fearing negative repercussions, and feeling that services are not tailored to their needs (Edwards, et al., 2015; McClennen, et al., 2002). Moreover, men may feel isolated in their experiences, which could derive from the nature of the violence perpetuated (e.g., psychological violence), but also due to the invisibility surrounding males who are targets of IPV (Lysova, et al., 2020).

### **Aims of the Present Study**

Considering the literature on IPV directed at men in different-sex and same-sex relationships, and the need to further understand their experiences of violence and help-seeking, the aim of this study is twofold: firstly, assess men’s experiences of violence in their different-sex and same-sex relationships by identifying their specific characteristics and dynamics; secondly, understand men’s help-seeking process, by identifying the specific barriers and facilitators they encountered.

This study provides a novel contribution to the fields of IPV and gender norms by investigating men in circumstances of IPV in a southern European cultural context. There is a dearth of research centered around how this region’s specific masculinity norms, and subsequent possible GRC processes, may impact men’s lives and their willingness to seek help. Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, only one quantitative peer-reviewed study has been accepted for publication on GRC in men who were targets of violence (Reis, in press). Thus, this study also expands the literature on this field by complementing such findings with a qualitative approach.

### **Method**

This study followed the Journal Article Reporting Standards for the report of primary research (JARS-Qual) (APA, 2018).

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Eligible participants had to self-identify as men, aged 18 years or older, and have experienced IPV (past or present). Same-sex and different-sex relationships were considered, provided that participants were Portuguese residents and could communicate well in either Portuguese or English. In contrast, exclusion criteria included participants that, instead of experiencing IPV, reported other types of violence (such as physical or sexual abuse as a minor) that did not take place in the context of an intimate partner relationship.

## Sample

To reach the widest possible sample, the call was distributed through governmental and non-governmental organizations. The call for participation ran throughout 2019, and after preliminary assessments showing data saturation, data collection was stopped in that same year. Interviews were conducted at several locations in Portugal. Our sample was initially composed of 15 participants; however, one participant's data was excluded from the study since he mentioned being the target of another type of violence besides IPV. As a result, 14 males, aged between 24 and 51 years old ( $M=34$ ,  $SD=8$  years), were included in the study. Most men had at least a bachelor's degree, were unmarried, and were employed at the time of participation (see Table 1 for a full description of sociodemographic characteristics). Participants differed regarding their sexual orientation, with two participants identifying as bisexual, five as gay, and six as heterosexual. One individual did not to indicate his sexual orientation.

One participant did not have Portuguese nationality or spoke Portuguese and thus his interview was conducted in English. Two men were residing in a shelter for men who were targets of IPV at the moment of participation. Different forms of violence, including psychological (e.g., insulting), physical (e.g., attempt at drowning), sexual (e.g., forcing sexual contact), and economic (e.g., non-consensual use of private funds) were perpetrated against participants. Only one participant chose to remain in his abusive relationship, and participants' abusive relationships lasted from 8 months to 19 years.

**Table 1** Sociodemographic characteristics

Variable	<i>N</i>	%	Variable	<i>N</i>	%
Occupational Status			Civil Status		
Student	1	7.1	Single	11	78.6
Employed	11	78.6	Married	1	7.1
Unemployed	2	14.3	Divorced	2	14.3
Education level			Has Children		
Primary	3	21.4	No	10	71.4
Secondary	2	14.3	Yes	4	28.6
Bachelor's	6	42.9	Abusive Relationship Length		
Degree			Less than 1 year	3	21.4
Master's Degree	2	14.3	Between 1–5 years	7	50.0
Other	1	7.1	Between 6–10 years	2	14.3
Living Context			Over 10 years	2	14.3
Urban	11	78.6	Filed a Criminal Complaint		
Rural	2	14.3	Yes	8	57.1
Mixed	1	7.1	No	6	42.9
Sexual Orientation					
Heterosexual	6	42.9			
Gay	5	35.7			
Bisexual	2	14.3			
Not Disclosed	1	7.1			

## Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was developed to consider IPV research, its dynamics and processes, as well as additional stressors that males in same-sex relationships may experience. The protocol was semi-structured, and three stakeholders—a clinical psychologist, a victim support specialist, and an LGBT activist—reviewed the protocol.

To further enhance comprehension of the protocol, a pre-test was conducted with two men and one woman who volunteered to be in a hypothetical IPV circumstance. Following the completion of this procedure, the protocol was finalized in both Portuguese and English, and was used in all interviews without additional modifications. The protocol included both general inquiries (e.g., “When violence first occurred, how informed were you about violence directed at men?”) and more focused inquiries (e.g., “How would you describe your experience while filing a complaint?”). When inquiring about men’s experiences of violence, we did not inquire about identities (i.e., being a “victim” of violence). Instead, we used a descriptive approach of behaviors (e.g., “being the target of stalking”). The interview protocol is included in the Supplementary Material (Appendix A).

## Coding Taxonomy Development

The development of the coding taxonomy was both inductive and deductive. On a deductive level, we considered existing research on IPV and help-seeking. The inductive approach involved examining a subset of the interviews which were subjected to the original coding taxonomy. This allowed for the emergence of new categories that more accurately reflected the data. The definitive version of the taxonomy was the result of an iterative process of improvement.

## Taxonomy Categories

We had a total of 1368 units of analysis, and our taxonomy was composed of 26 categories and 40 subcategories. These categories cover men’s accounts of their experiences with violence (i.e., “Consequences of violence”), help-seeking (i.e., “Formal help – development of the process”), and gender roles (i.e., Masculinity, victimization and gender role conflict). All categories are described in the Supplementary Material (Appendix B).

Firstly, questions inquired about participants’ general impressions about IPV directed at men in Portuguese society. Categories emerged because of this group of questions related to masculinity, and the nature of the identity of “victim”. Secondly, participants were asked about the relationship in which they experienced violence and its characteristics. Categories in this group represent many different experiences, such as the types and nature of violence that occurred, the consequences of violence and resultant feelings, and factors that may escalated violence. The third group of questions inquired about informal and informal help-seeking, including categories that for instance represented the experiences of seeking help with friends, and how filing a complaint impacted men’s well-being.

## Coding Process

Data from the interviews was coded using content analysis. According to Bardin (2011), the purpose of this approach is to systematize data according to different objectives to achieve a better understanding of its origins and meanings. Semantic coding was used to organize the data and was performed by three raters. The main rater coded all data entirely on his own. In total, the independent raters coded 50% of all collected data, with each rater coding mutually exclusive data sections that were equivalent in length. The researcher who performed the interviews and coded all the data is trained specifically in IPV and LGBT-related issues and has a background in Social Psychology. The coding taxonomy and its descriptions were provided to the other two raters, who were unfamiliar with the study aims. Discussions were held to clarify the definitions of certain categories, but our goal was to lessen any potential bias the independent raters may have had from knowledge of the subject. The QSR Nvivo 12 software was used to code the data.

## Risk of Bias Assessment

Using IBM SPSS (v25), interrater reliability was calculated using Cohen's K. This index revealed a very good level of agreement between the main rater and the second ( $\alpha=0.94$ ) and the third ( $\alpha=0.90$ ) independent raters.

## Procedure

The Ethical Review Board of the study's host institution provided its approval (32/2018). Participants gave their written informed consent at the beginning of each session. Only the interviewer and the interviewee were present, and the audio recording equipment was perceptible to both individuals. During the interviews, participants were asked about their general perceptions about IPV directed at men in Portugal, their experiences of violence and of help-seeking. To avoid potentially negative effects of discussing sensitive topics, at the end of the interviews, participants were provided with information about help resources such as helplines. Interview duration ranged from 1h30m to 2h30m, averaging 2 h. The audio files were only accessed and transcribed to text by the main researcher, which were then anonymized for the purposes of data coding by the independent coders. In total, 28 h of interviews were transcribed, analyzed and coded.

## Results

### Unbalanced Power, Control, and Gender-Based Dynamics can Potentiate Violence

Processes that are in line with the victimization cycle were reported in most cases ( $n=13$ ). Some participants reported staying in the relationship mostly due to emotional dependence ( $n=6$ ), social isolation ( $n=2$ ), lack of awareness about violence and resources ( $n=2$ ), and lack of self-esteem due to the violence experienced ( $n=2$ ).



Two other participants mentioned family motives, such as feeling that remaining in the relationship would safeguard the well-being and the safety of their children and also because they feared losing legal custody ( $n=2$ ). Another participant highlighted that socially his partner was closeted and this diffculted talking to someone about the situation.

When inquired about factors that may have potentiated the perpetration of violence, participants suggested unbalanced power and control dynamics in which the perpetrator aimed to be dominant ( $n=11$ ) and substance abuse on behalf of the perpetrator (e.g., alcohol) ( $n=3$ ). Other participants mentioned masculinity threat dynamics ( $n=3$ ) such as same-sex partnership among men and the invisibility of violence in these relationships, early history of sexual abuse, erectile dysfunction, or similar sexual difficulties.

In terms of appeasing factors, participants reported that keeping distance from the aggressor after the violent events led to a reduction in tension ( $n=5$ ) and being passive by not voicing their own opinions on the matter ( $n=5$ ). Two participants highlighted that clear communication and dialogue also helped decrease the tension in the couple.

### **Participants Experienced Several Types of Violence**

Psychological violence was the most experienced type of violence ( $n=12$ ), with participants indicating a range of behaviors, such as being criticized and humiliated ( $n=10$ ), being the target of coercive control and stalking ( $n=9$ ), being socially isolated ( $n=6$ ), and being threatened with disclosure of false aggressor status (i.e., being the aggressor in the relationship, or being a child sex offender) ( $n=3$ ). These incidents were seen as serious, and one participant compared them to physical violence.

Physical violence was the second most reported type of violence ( $n=10$ ) and constituted acts such as being punched ( $n=5$ ), strangled ( $n=2$ ), being cut ( $n=2$ ) and an attempt at drowning ( $n=1$ ). For all participants who reported physical violence, psychological violence co-occurred. Economic violence ( $n=6$ ), such as attributing domestic expenses without the consent of the participant ( $n=2$ ), and sexual violence, such as being forced to have sexual intercourse ( $n=3$ ), were also reported. One participant reflected on how his experiences of sexual violence impacted him.

Lastly, specific circumstances of violence were reported by participants in same-sex relationships ( $n=2$ ), namely being criticized for being out or not “discreet” ( $n=2$ ) or threatening to out the participant to his family and workplace ( $n=1$ ).

### **Experiencing Violence Leads to Significant, Often Long-Lasting Psychological Consequences**

Most participants reported a wide array of negative psychological outcomes resulting from their experiences of violence ( $n=10$ ). Among these participants, feeling emotionally exhausted was the most described feeling, especially after filling police complaints ( $n=9$ ). Other participants reported lower self-esteem ( $n=5$ ), and that they still felt they could not move on from the experience ( $n=4$ ). Some stated that they had a better sense of what they deserved in a relationship after these experiences

( $n=4$ ), but nevertheless felt anxiety, sadness, numbness, socially isolated and the targets of stigma ( $n=3$ ). Lastly, two participants indicated that they felt like they had lost their identities, and another two participants reported feeling suicidal. Many of these consequences were still felt years after the episodes of violence occurred. These experiences of abuse also led to economic consequences, as reported by 5 participants. Two participants indicated that aggressors kept funds and documents from them after breaking up, and another two were left in a considerably worse economic conditions after the aggressor imposed non-consensual expenses.

### **Most Men did not Feel Informed about Violence Directed at Men, and Suggest that it is Stigmatized and Mostly Invisible in Society**

Most participants stated that they did not feel informed about violence directed at men at the time of their experiences of violence ( $n=11$ ) and stated that physical violence as the most recognizable type of violence ( $n=8$ ). When asked about overall perceptions about violence directed at men in society, participants felt that violence against men is not discussed as much as it should ( $n=11$ ) and that men are seen as having to perform traditional masculinity roles such as being physically strong, emotionless, and enforcing power to avoid being labeled as more feminine or non-heterosexual ( $n=9$ ).

For these reasons, when participants experienced violence, they often felt shame, ridiculous, and invisible ( $n=8$ ), and that violence directed at men is considered less serious than violence directed at women ( $n=6$ ). Some participants voiced concerns about the effectiveness of justice and police forces to help men and women in these circumstances ( $n=5$ ), and partly due to this, some felt afraid of the consequences of being mislabeled as the aggressors in their experiences of abuse ( $n=4$ ). Lastly, 2 participants suggested that violence experienced in same-sex couples may be harder to detect, also due to the lack of tailored efforts to do so.

### **Being a “victim” is Seen as not Consonant with Being Masculine**

When discoursing about the topics under study, the concept of “victim” was often mentioned and elaborated upon by participants. Some participants voiced that the identity of “victim” is not compatible with notions of traditional masculinity, given that being a “victim” was inherently thought of as being passive, weak, and something pejorative ( $n=4$ ). For these reasons, some participants stated that it was hard for men to recognize themselves as “victims” of violence ( $n=3$ ), and that seeking help may be hindered ( $n=2$ ).

Two participants in same-sex relationships voiced that violence between a couple of men was seen as normalized or ridiculed, in part due to traditional masculine socialization for violence among men ( $n=2$ ). Lastly, one participant suggested that being a “victim” is often not associated with empowerment, and another indicated that perhaps this identity may not fit anyone, man or woman, due to its socialized negative connotation in Portuguese society.

### **Emotional Dependence Hinders Men's Recognition as Targets of Violence, and Access to Information and Emotional Support Facilitates it**

Independently of the participants' self-identification with the term "victim", they were inquired about the factors that played a role in their own recognition as targets of violent behaviors. Among the factors that hindering the capacity of men to recognize themselves as targets of violence, seven men indicated that emotional dependence to the aggressor was the most relevant factor. Additionally, men mentioned shame ( $n=3$ ), lack of information and awareness ( $n=2$ ), and one reported being in a same-sex relationship due to the added invisibility of violence in these types of relationships. Conversely, having access to information (e.g., websites, testimonies) ( $n=8$ ), having emotional support adjusted to their circumstances and non—judgmental ( $n=6$ ), or facing higher severity of violence ( $n=2$ ) were seen as potential facilitators of their recognition as targets of violence.

### **Friends and Family were Sought for Support, but Formal help Sources were Scarcely Resorted to**

Most participants sought help from their friends ( $n=10$ ) and family ( $n=5$ ) amidst their experiences of violence. Three participants remained silent about their situation fearing negative reactions from friends and family. This type of informal support was sought mostly after incidents of violence occurred ( $n=5$ ), but also when participants were left without a place to stay ( $n=2$ ). Most participants found the support of friends and family to be helpful ( $n=10$ ), but two participants stated that it was unhelpful.

Participants provided several reasons not to contact formal help sources (e.g., health centers, therapists) or file a criminal complaint. They indicated emotional dependence and not wanting consequences for their ex-partners ( $n=5$ ), lack of awareness about who to contact and how the process would be ( $n=4$ ) and not being aware about what constituted violence ( $n=4$ ). Additionally, some men felt like they could/had to manage the situation ( $n=3$ ), that being a man (and in some cases being LGBT) meant there was no guarantee that police forces would provide adequate treatment ( $n=3$ ) and felt ashamed ( $n=2$ ).

When specifically asked about domestic violence/intimate partner violence helplines, most participants did not know about them ( $n=9$ ), and those who knew never thought to call ( $n=4$ ) or had intentions but never actually called ( $n=1$ ). Three participants stated that they associated these types of services and organizations to support women who were targets of violence, and that to foster a call to this type of service men had to process their own shame and fear of prejudice from helpline providers ( $n=5$ ) as well as more information that is specific to all realities, including LGBT issues ( $n=3$ ).

### **Reporting Violence to Police Forces is a Complex Process that Further Stigmatized some Men**

A total of 8 participants reported the violence they experienced to police forces. The motives behind these reports were varied, ranging from having their situation pub-

lily exposed ( $n=2$ ), to threats made to their loved ones by the aggressor ( $n=1$ ), and acting before the aggressor falsely filed a complaint to the police ( $n=1$ ). To 4 of these 8 men, their own sense of fear, shame and stigma were a key aspect to overcome when doing this process.

Nevertheless, to some men, this experience was still positive overall, clearly surprising them in how they felt assured and not judged by the police forces ( $n=3$ ). However, other participants had mixed ( $n=1$ ) to negative experiences ( $n=4$ ). For instance, three participants felt that police forces did not believe or disregarded their account of the experiences they had gone through and were not trained to provide a gender-responsive service.

Moreover, one participant tried to report the abuse he was going through several times, and in two of those circumstances he was the one who was considered the aggressor. Additionally, two participants implemented safety measures because of the reporting, namely wearing electronic GPS with trackable bracelets and remote assistance devices. These participants voiced that these types of systems had severe limitations, such as being inconvenient for the performance of their jobs and daily lives, and due to their lack of effectiveness, these systems could potentially threaten the well-being of those they aim to protect.

## Discussion

This study aimed to understand the violence that men in different-sex and same-sex relationships experienced, and their insights about formal and informal help-seeking processes and dynamics. Our results show that violence negatively impacted men's health and willingness to seek help and this was rooted in different factors.

The main drivers of violence were related to power and control dynamics, and substance abuse, which are in line with the literature on IPV (Carvalho, et al., 2011; Coker, et al., 2021; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, et al., 2012; Rollè, et al., 2018). These findings add to the literature on possible violence typologies and their potential application to men in different-sex and same-sex relationships. For instance, Johnson's typology (Johnson, 1995) argues that due to over-arching patriarchal norms, coercive control is most likely perpetrated by men towards women as the basis of Coercive Controlling Violence (i.e. aiming to gain general control of the partner, resorting to physical or sexual violence). Our findings, along with more recent research (Hines & Douglas, 2010; Machado, et al., 2017) inform of circumstances in which men were also the targets of this type of violence in different-sex relationships, and expand it by considering same-sex relationships. Nonetheless, more research is needed to assess how gender may play a role in different violence forms that have underlying power and control dynamics. Directed efforts should be made to understand scarcely researched populations such as men and women in same-sex relationships.

It is important to highlight other factors that emerged which we interpreted as gender-based dynamics, such as masculinity threats and the aggressor not recognizing violence among same-sex couples as valid, significant, and consequential. Our findings contribute to the scarcely researched field of IPV directed at men in same-sex relationships (Edwards, et al., 2015), and highlight the invisibility of same-sex

IPV and its subsequent disregard in terms of validity and severity, as stated in previous research (Rollè, et al., 2014). Nevertheless, more research is needed on the possible intersection between norms about violence, masculinity and sexual orientation/gender identity, and how this intersection may impact the identification of what constitutes violence in an intimate relationship (Scott-Storey, et al., 2022). This may also inform clinical practice and future research on this field, by highlighting a possible lack of recognition of the specificities of same-sex IPV in those involved in the process.

Participants experienced several forms of violence such as psychological, physical, economic, and sexual, with significant and long-lasting consequences in their lives. Aggressors also threatened to falsely disclose some of our participants as the perpetrators of violence (i.e., IPV or child abuse). This type of coercive control may be specific to men due to the normative perceptions about who the target of IPV commonly is and the invisibility surrounding men who experience violence. This pattern of behaviors has been observed previously in this population (Avieli, 2021; Hines, et al., 2015) and may point to the need to consider normative perceptions about violence and masculinity when dealing with men who experience violence. It may also point to gendered forms of Intimate Terrorism, potentially expanding Johnson's typology and contributing to a critical reflection on its tenets and applicability (Ali, et al., 2016; Johnson, 1995).

All the reported episodes of violence were extremely serious to the point that two participants felt suicidal in their abusive relationships. Psychological violence was thus compared to physical violence in terms of its consequences, as pointed out in previous research (Longobardi & Badenes-Ribera, 2017). Feeling exhausted, anxious, sad, numb, and being the target of stigma were key experiences during this process. Our results corroborate previous literature on this topic (Coker, et al., 2021; Eckstein, 2016; Scott-Storey, et al., 2022) and highlight that men go through very complex situations in which different types of violence can accumulate, leading to great strain.

Same-sex specific expressions of violence were also registered and are in line with research on the specificities of same-sex IPV and how different minority stressors in the aggressor and the target of violence may play a role in its processes (Edwards, et al., 2015; Longobardi & Badenes-Ribera, 2017; Meyer, 2003). This highlights the importance of mapping out all types of violence and recognizing that same-sex couples may go through specific circumstances that health service providers, police forces and the justice system should be aware of to provide adjusted responses (Rollè, et al., 2018). As previously stated, the literature in this field is still emerging (Edwards, et al., 2015; Rollè, et al., 2018) and our results help shed light on the specific processes men in same-sex relationships go through in the Portuguese context.

In line with research on these topics, participants reported remaining in their abusive relationships mainly due to emotional dependence or to lack of awareness about violence (Carvalho, et al., 2011; Mallory, et al., 2016). The cycle of violence was also observed in most cases (Machado, et al., 2017; Rollè, et al., 2018) and may be inherently linked with why men stayed in their relationships. Men also reported that they did not feel that violence directed at men was discussed in the Portuguese society, and that physical violence was most recognized, which is partly in line with

research on this field in Portugal (Machado, et al., 2016). Despite our findings that help understand this awareness (or lack thereof), more research on awareness about IPV is needed to allow for the extrapolation of comparisons between different cultural settings.

Countering the lack of awareness may be achieved by providing quality information about what constitutes violence, what are a person's rights in these circumstances, and what mechanisms and resources exist to help someone in these abusive situations (Tsui, et al., 2010). Public awareness campaigns have been used previously and can still be improved considering the insights and suggestions of men who went through experiences of violence (Reis, et al., 2022). Access to adequate information may, in turn, aid men in recognizing themselves as targets of violence and potentially lead to help-seeking.

Importantly, despite recognizing the violent circumstances they had been through, one key takeaway message from men's accounts of their experiences lies in their interpretations of the identity of "victim", and how this may lead to cognitive dissonance. This may be partly due to the involuntary designation of people who experienced violence as "victims" without considering their self-determination as such (Hollander & Rogers, 2014), which has also been observed among women who were targets of violence (Leisenring, 2006). The same could be said for men who experienced abuse in their relationships, but there are social and historical specificities to be considered. The lack of fit with the term "victim" of violence may stem from the historical construction of who a "victim" is commonly perceived to be (i.e., mainly women) and how traditional masculinity is inherently incompatible with weakness, emotional instability, and lack of dominance (Burcar & Åkerström, 2009; Eckstein, 2010). This may be dependent on cultural settings and their general perceptions about masculinities, femininities, "victims" and intimate partner violence, and our findings are among the first contributions on this topic in the Portuguese context (Machado, et al., 2020).

Moreover, for men who are not heterosexual and cisgender there may be some added factors to consider, as their own sexual orientation and/or gender identity may not be aligned with the traditional perceptions of what "being a man" and a "victim" means (Eisikovits & Bailey, 2016). In turn, this dissonance, or lack of fit, stemming from their involuntary designation as "victims" of violence can result in negative psychological outcomes for men (Eckstein, 2010), and possibly hinder help-seeking. Thus, future research should consider the possible negative effect of being imposed a stigmatized identity, since evidence points to its negative influence on health and help-seeking in IPV (McCleary-Sills, et al., 2015). A better approach to conceptualize who is a "victim" is also needed, and if other terms should be preferred. For instance, prioritizing a descriptive approach of events (i.e., highlighting who perpetrated and who was the target of behaviors) may be a way to avoid using terms such as "victims" that may lead to unwanted negative effects. Another possibility could be the use of the term "survivor" of violence or abuse, which has been suggested in previous literature on IPV (Eckstein, 2016), but more research is needed to properly understand what terms may be most adequate, and if they are constant over time.

The negative feelings voiced by men about the masculine gender role may also be related with the concept of Gender Role Conflict (GRC) (O'Neil, 2008, 2013). Quali-

tative research conducted with males who were targets of IPV has shed light on how they may question or feel distress regarding their own gender roles, which could be because of expectations and violations about what “being a man” means (Machado, et al., 2020; Walker, et al., 2020). To the best of our knowledge, very few studies have specifically used the GRC framework to understand men’s experience of violence (Reis, et al., in press). Decades of quantitative research on other samples of men have shown that GRC is associated with many psychological non-adaptive outcomes, including worse attitudes and lower intentions to seek help (O’Neil, 2015). Thus, our interpretations are novel as they provide an important complement to existing quantitative approaches, especially in the Portuguese context. Future research could assess if and how GRC may relate to the experiences of violence and subsequent help-seeking, and how it may exacerbate the negative impact that violence has on men.

For those who sought help, friends and family were the most common sources of informal help, with formal help sources being resorted to only when violence became unavoidable or very severe. These findings corroborate previous research in men who were the targets of IPV (Machado, et al., 2017; Rollè, et al., 2018) and may signal how violent episodes that are commonly interpreted as less severe by these men are not seen as worthy of being disclosed to formal help sources. Another motive may be due to the perception that help sources may not be adequate or even further stigmatizing, such as understanding that existing IPV helplines are exclusively for female targets of IPV, and may be discriminatory (Hines, et al., 2007; Tsui, 2014). We highlight that one participant ended up being considered the aggressor when attempting to file a formal complaint, which is in line not only with some expectations about the ineffectiveness of existing help systems and resources (Machado, et al., 2017; Tsui, 2014), but that has also been experienced by men in similar circumstances previously (Walker, et al., 2020). Thus, training and adequate awareness raising about existing resources is key to potentiate help-seeking.

Still, several men did not disclose their situation, not even to their friends and family, because they were afraid of the repercussions. This may point to the need to raise awareness in bystanders of violence, and in the population in general, so that any given person is adequately informed to advise on the topics of violence and existing help resources. Additionally, men in same-sex relationships faced specific expectations of stigma and discrimination (i.e. “the double closet”) (Morgan, et al., 2016). Being aware of each populations’ specificity is key to not only detect violence that is widely recognizable, but also to provide a tailored approach to each case. This may be achieved by education on these topics early in people’s lives, specific training programs for service providers and public awareness campaigns (Reis, et al., 2020, 2022; Tsui, et al., 2010).

In sum, the experiences of IPV that men in different-sex and same-sex relationships go through are multi-faceted, complex, and deeply rooted in pre-existing social norms about gender roles, sexual orientation, and violence. Many factors were identified that could play a role in facilitating and hindering help-seeking, which should be the target of future research to build knowledge on this phenomenon and assist the development of tailored and more effective interventions for these populations. It is important to consider that these processes and dynamics can be impacted by cultural variables, and our novel findings shed light on IPV in the Portuguese setting.

## Limitations

Future research could aim to overcome different limitations present in this study. Firstly, our sample was obtained mostly via formal help sources such as governmental and non-governmental agencies, given that some of our participants had sought help with these sources. This is in part why essentially half of our sample had filed a formal complaint. Thus, the generalization of our findings may be limited for people with these types of experiences, and future research may aim to collect the impressions of other men via other sources such as social media platforms, that one hand may expand the reach of communication but on the other hand may limit the depth of analysis as provided in this study (Lyons, et al., 2022). Secondly, our data was based on self-report of events that in some cases had happened years before, in very distressful circumstances of different degrees of severity. Violent experiences can impact memory recall, and this should be considered in future efforts in this field. Thirdly, our research could have been complemented by quantitative methods to provide a more standardized view over the topics under study, namely IPV and GRC, but measures that specifically apply to men's gendered processes of IPV are still non-existent (Costa & Barros, 2016).

## Conclusion

Our study provides novel insights about how men experience IPV, highlighting the potential role of GRC. Consistent with previous research, men in different-sex and same-sex relationships experience different types of violence, that lead to significant consequences for their lives, and are often based on power and control dynamics. These findings add to existing typologies of violence such as Johnson's (Johnson, 1995), and highlight the complexities of IPV processes and dynamics. It is important to consider the specific barriers and facilitators to help-seeking in these populations, such as how specific stressors may impact the experiences of men in same-sex relationships. IPV can be considered a highly gendered experience, and GRC may play a role in men's experiences of violence and help-seeking. Future studies should resort to mixed-methods approaches to assess if GRC is linked with male experiences of violence and help-seeking, potentially paving the way for more effective interventions and awareness-raising.

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**Authors' contributions** ER, CM and PA contributed to the conception and design of the present study, with ER specifically conducting the literature review. All authors idealized and revised the methodological approach. ER carried out data collection, but all authors contributed to its analysis and later the development and revision of the discussion of the findings. The supplementary materials were developed by ER, PA and CM. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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## Declarations

**Ethics approval** The Ethical Review Board of ISCTE-IUL provided its approval for this study (32/2018).

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that the submitted work was carried out without any personal, professional, or financial relationships that could potentially be construed as a conflict of interest.

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