



# Female-perpetrated Intimate Partner Violence Against Men: Perceptions of Portuguese Police Officers

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## Abstract

Police officers are the first responders to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). While formal protocols exist, their responses are also influenced by extra-legal factors. The present study aimed to understand the perceptions of police officers regarding male victims of IPV in heterosexual relationships. The sample comprised 1655 Portuguese police officers. The study was conducted online, and participants answered a sociodemographic questionnaire and an inventory containing 20 statements about IPV. Most participants revealed well-adjusted perceptions about the reasons for aggression and male victims' stereotypes, and the reasons to stay in the relationship. However, perceptions about reporting and separation inhibitors were ambiguous. No differences were found in perceptions regarding participants' gender or age. Participants who intervened on a higher number of IPV cases, with or without male victims, revealed more well-adjusted perceptions, compared to other participants. The study's findings provide more insight regarding police officers' perceptions of male victims of IPV and emphasizes the need to promote specific training among these professionals, to ensure an adequate and positive intervention with these victims.

**Keywords** Intimate Partner Violence · Male Victims · Perceptions · Police Officers

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## Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a worldwide public health issue, involving harmful behaviors employed by a current or former intimate partner that may cause physical (e.g., slapping, punching), psychological (e.g., being insulted or threatened) and/or sexual (e.g., being forced to engage in sexual behaviors) harm (Centers for Disease Control, 2022; World Health Organization, 2021). Initially conceptualized as violence perpetrated by heterosexual men against their female partners (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Wiper & Lewis, 2020), other forms of violence are now recognized. Heterosexual men can also be victims of female-perpetrated violence (Hines & Douglas, 2022; Machado et al., 2018), and IPV seems to be as prevalent in same-sex couples (Capinha et al., 2022).

Data from various sources highlight a significant number of male IPV victims (Desmarais et al., 2012; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2018). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey revealed that 44.2% (or 52.1 million) of U.S. men reported any contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime (Leemis et al., 2022). In Europe, male IPV victims rates range from 48.8% (Portugal) to 71.8% (Greece) (Costa et al., 2015). In the UK, 14.1% (approximately 3.3 million) of men have experienced IPV since age 16 (Brooks, 2023). In Portugal, in 2022, 27.6% (11,167) of domestic violence victims were men (Annual Report of Internal Security [RASI], 2022). Concurrently, scientific literature seems to corroborate statistical findings, gradually demonstrating that a significant number of men can be victims of IPV, perpetrated by their female partners (e.g., Bates, 2020; Hines & Douglas, 2022; Walker et al., 2020).

Despite female-perpetrated violence toward male victims being often overlooked (Hines, 2015), it seems to share many similarities with male-perpetrated violence toward women (e.g., Roebuck et al., 2023; Zara et al., 2022). Specifically, studies have found similar types of violence, potential impact, reasons for aggression and reasons to stay in the relationship. Firstly, men and women experience comparable rates of physical and psychological victimization (Roebuck et al., 2023; Zara et al., 2022). Concurrently, male victims often endure long-term physical (e.g., bruises; weight-related issues) and psychological impairments (e.g., post-traumatic stress and depressive symptoms), substantial fear, and a loss of identity and self-worth (Hines & Douglas, 2022; Powney & Graham-Kevan, 2022), akin to female victims (Roebuck et al., 2023). In addition, women's reasons for aggression are multiple and overlapping (e.g., Conradi et al., 2012; Zara et al., 2022), sharing many with male perpetrators (Powney & Graham-Kevan, 2019). Despite the preconceived notion that women are only violent as an act of self-defense, women's reasons for aggression include anger, retaliation, communication difficulties, power and control, attention-seeking, unmet needs, stress, and jealousy (e.g., Dowd & Lambo, 2022; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012). Finally, men's reasons to stay in violent relationships are complex and varied (Machado & Farinha, 2023), and comparable to those highlighted by women: concern for their children, commitment to the relationship, emotional and/or financial dependency on their partners, and fear of retaliation (Machado & Farinha, 2023; Machado et al., 2018).

While the pervasiveness of IPV is widely acknowledged, there remains a gap in understanding police officers' perceptions of this issue (El Sayed et al., 2020). As evidenced by prevalence data and studies on the impact, IPV is a debilitating and widespread issue that police officers intervene on regularly (El Sayed et al., 2020). Consequently, how police officers handle these cases can have short- and long-term implications for both victims and

offenders (e.g., El Sayed et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2024). However, this area of research is dated and underdeveloped, creating the need for scholars to explore the current perceptions police officers have of IPV cases (El Sayed et al., 2020).

## Police Response to IPV

Police officers play a major role in IPV intervention, as they are often the first responders to IPV incidents (Nesset et al., 2020; Barrett et al., 2021). For many victims, police officers are the “gatekeepers” to formal support, being their initial point of contact when seeking help (Saxton et al., 2020). Police officers’ discourses and underlying perceptions significantly influence how they address phenomena and interact with potential victims (Fernandes et al., 2020). If these perceptions are inaccurate or discriminatory, police officers may not recognize the problem or may be unsure how to proceed, thus being more neglectful toward those affected (Lourenço et al., 2018).

Research shows that police officers’ responses to IPV victims are influenced by legal and extra-legal factors (Mele, 2018). Legal factors include immediate and future risk (Campbell et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2018), victim injury (Durfee & Fetzer, 2016), and the type of offense (Dawson & Hotton, 2014; Durfee & Fetzer, 2016). Extra-legal factors, on the other hand, include officers’ gender, experience, academic qualifications, and victims’ and perpetrators’ gender and sexual orientation (Durfee & Fetzer, 2016; Richards & Harinam, 2020; Russell, 2017; Russell et al., 2012, 2015; Russell & Sturgeon, 2018; Stalans & Finn, 2006). All these factors, individually or combined, may influence police officers’ perceptions and, consequently, their assessment and responses to IPV incidents (El Sayed et al., 2020).

Of the aforementioned sociodemographic variables, gender seems to be the most predominantly studied. In general, female officers tend to hold more proactive attitudes toward police intervention in IPV cases (McPhedran et al., 2017), and typically show greater empathy toward victims, in contrast to their male colleagues (El Sayed et al., 2020; Stalans & Finn, 2000). Regarding age, older officers tend to rely more often on IPV risk assessment tools (Campbell et al., 2017), and understand IPV complexities better (El Sayed et al., 2020). However, they also seem more likely to prioritize arrest when intervening (Zhao et al., 2018).

Conversely, in terms of officers’ level of education and years of experience, scientific results seem to be inconclusive. While Belknap (1995) found no relation between officers’ education and their perceptions of IPV, Gracia and colleagues (2011) found that police officers with higher levels of education were shown to be more empathetic and less sexist. Likewise, officers with more years on the force were shown to adhere to more problematic views on IPV (Robinson & Chandek, 2000). However, recent studies found that experienced officers had more supportive views toward victims and recognized the importance of police intervention (El Sayed et al., 2020; Finn & Stalans, 2002; Russell & Sturgeon, 2018; Stalans & Finn, 2006). Additionally, trained professionals intervened more effectively and were less likely to hold stereotypical beliefs about IPV (Engelman & Deardoff, 2016; Muftić & Cruze, 2014).

Researchers have also explored how victims’ and offenders’ characteristics may influence police responses to IPV incidents, although findings are typically inconclusive and outdated (El Sayed et al., 2020). Available data suggests that police officers often harbor stereotypical beliefs about IPV (Russell & Light, 2006), and may exhibit gender bias in arrest decisions,

favoring quicker arrest of men who assault women than women who assault men (Barkhuizen, 2015). This bias stems from a perception that male-perpetrated IPV is more severe and harmful (Mele, 2018; Russell, 2017), leading police officers to adopt a more punitive approach toward male perpetrators, while being more lenient toward female perpetrators (Russell & Kraus, 2016; Russell & Sturgeon, 2018). Conversely, incidents involving male victims of IPV are often minimized, with men being frequently blamed for their victimization, and their credibility being questioned (Machado et al., 2024a; Walker et al., 2020).

## Police Responses to Male Victims of IPV

Most research on police perceptions of IPV is centered around female victims, with only a few national and international studies exploring officers' perceptions on male victims (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2015; Machado et al., 2021; Russell & Light, 2006).

Of the limited research on police discourses regarding male victims of IPV, it seems that police officers often maintain stereotypical views, negatively impacting these professionals' interactions with these men (Bates, 2020; Machado et al., 2017; Russell & Light, 2006).

Because female-perpetrated violence against men is still viewed as unconventional, men who disclose their experiences of violence often face ridicule, dismissal, or wrongful accusations by law enforcement (Bates, 2020; Hine et al., 2022; Huntley et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2020). Consequently, many men experience secondary victimization when seeking help (Gueta & Shlichove, 2022; Machado et al., 2017). Scientific reviews highlight that men are in a disadvantageous position when they seek assistance from formal sources, as the criminal justice system tends to downplay the seriousness of IPV incidents, failing to intervene or arrest female perpetrators (e.g., Russell & Light, 2006).

Nationally, there appears to be a scarcity of studies examining perceptions and discourses of police officers regarding IPV in general, and male victims in particular. A recent study revealed that, while police officers acknowledged the complexities of IPV, their discourse remained gendered, focusing and being more sensitive toward women, and struggling to focus on male victims (Machado et al., 2021). Encouragingly, when questioned about male victims, these officers demonstrated relatively adjusted perceptions about the male experience of IPV, demonstrating that they were aware of the reasons women are violent toward men, the reasons why men stay in their relationships, and being conscious of some barriers these men face when seeking help (Machado et al., 2021).

Law enforcement has made strides in understanding and handling IPV cases, yet there remains a significant gap in understanding how police officers perceive male victims of IPV. Most of what is currently known about police perceptions and discourses surrounding IPV is largely outdated, with limited research specifically addressing officers' views on male victims. Therefore, there is a pressing need to delve deeper into these areas, seeking to update what is already known and learn more about what is currently unknown.

## Current Study

The present study aimed to explore police officers' perceptions of IPV in heterosexual relationships. This study proves to be relevant since there seems to be a significant gap in understanding how police officers perceive male victims of IPV. Existing research predominantly centers on female victims, thereby neglecting male victims and their specific challenges

(e.g., Barkhuizen, 2015; Machado et al., 2021; Russell & Light, 2006). Given the pivotal role of police in assisting IPV victims, it is of the utmost importance to better understand how officers perceive the various types of victims they may encounter throughout their careers. By exploring these perceptions, this study aims to provide valuable insights that can inform the development of training programs and policies to ensure an adequate and positive intervention, thereby addressing a critical gap in the literature and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of IPV.

Therefore, the present study intended to analyze police officers' perceptions of IPV when presented with a non-stereotypical version of this crime, i.e., if the victim is male and the perpetrator is female. Furthermore, this study sought to test if other sociodemographic variables, namely police officers' gender, age, experience and training influence these perceptions.

## Method

### Sample

The present study utilized a quantitative design, using a random sampling technique. The sample comprised 1655 participants, members of the National Republican Guard (*Guarda Nacional Republicana* – GNR), and of the Public Security Police (*Polícia de Segurança Pública* – PSP), two Portuguese law enforcement agencies responsible for maintaining public order, ensuring security, and enforcing the law (Europol, 2024).

The vast majority were male (88.9%), married (72%), whose ages ranged from 21 to 62 years old, and a mean age of 40.07 years ( $SD=8.64$ ). Most of the participants completed their high school education (67.3%). Table 1 provides further details regarding the sample's sociodemographic characteristics.

Participants' years of experience ranged from 0 to 37 years, with an average of 17.03 years of service ( $SD=8.79$ ). Most participants reported having dealt with IPV cases (91%),

**Table 1** Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

	Participants	
	<i>n</i>	%
Sex		
Masculine	1472	88.9
Feminine	183	11.1
Age Range		
<25 years old	40	2.4
25–44 years old	1093	66.1
45–65 years old	522	31.5
Marital Status		
Single	332	20.1
Married	1191	72
Widowed	4	0.2
Divorced	128	7.7
Academic Qualifications		
Elementary (or Primary) School	3	0.2
Middle School	184	11.1
High School	1114	67.3
Higher Education (College, University)	354	21.4

**Table 2** Participant's professional experience

	Participants %
IPV cases	
None	9
1 to 10	21
11 to 50	26.3
51 to 100	5
More than 100	5.6
Undetermined number	33.1
IPV cases with male victims	
None	29.3
1 to 10	41.6
11 to 50	3.5
51 to 100	0.2
More than 100	0.2
Undetermined number	25.2

and IPV cases that involved male victims (70.7%). More than 14% of participants worked on at least 50 cases. Furthermore, more than 64% reported not having received any formal training on how to intervene in such cases. Table 2 provides a more detailed analysis of the results.

## Instruments

For data collection, a self-report inventory was created, comprising 2 parts. The first collected data regarding sociodemographic variables, namely sex, age, marital status, academic qualifications, and professional experience.

For the second part, the Intimate Partner Violence Perceptions Inventory, comprising 20 statements, was designed based on up-to-date scientific literature on the topic. To the authors' knowledge, no other inventory specifically collects data regarding participants' perceptions about female-perpetrated IPV against male victims. Exploring these perceptions will grant greater comprehension of the complexity of IPV, allowing for a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. The statements were scored based on a five-point Likert scale (0 – Don't agree or disagree; 1 – Disagree completely; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Agree; 4 – Agree completely). An exploratory factor analysis (EFA), with varimax rotation, was performed, extracting three factors that explained 43.65% of the variance. The KMO=0.87 and BST  $p < .001$  assumptions were met. Survey revealed good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha=0.85).

Nine statements comprised factor 1, named *Reasons for aggression and male victims' stereotypes*. All statements were coded inversely, meaning that participants reported more adequate perceptions of IPV if they disagreed with the presented statements. All items reflect social stereotypes and misconceptions that persist about female-perpetrated violence against men. Some items relate to the reasons typically attributed to female-perpetrated IPV, such as believing that women only attack their partners "to defend their children", as an act of "legitimate defense", when they are "desperate", or due to "communication problems". As explained in the introduction, women's motivations are overlapping (Barton-Crosby & Hudson, 2021; Conradi et al., 2012) and the aforementioned reasons, while documented, do not seem to be the only reported ones (Barton-Crosby & Hudson, 2021; Langhinrichsen-

Rohling et al., 2012; Zara et al., 2022). Likewise, the idea that women are only violent because they were victims of “prolonged violence” is not correct, since studies have found that women can be the sole perpetrators (e.g., Bates, 2020; Walker et al., 2020). Furthermore, the two statements that imply IPV only occurs when there is an history of “substance abuse” or “mental health issues” are erroneous. While these variables are risk factors for IPV perpetration and victimization, their mere presence does not guarantee violence, as there are instances where IPV occurs without these conditions being present (Cafferky et al., 2018; Swanson, 2021). Two items relate to stereotypes about male victims’ experiences. First, believing that men “have enough strength to stop their female partners” is regarded as false, as it assumes IPV can only be physical, neglecting other types that are often present (e.g., Machado et al., 2018) and, even in situations where physical violence exists, women are often physically violent when men are vulnerable and incapable of defending themselves (Bates, 2020). Second, the belief that “men only press charges because they want revenge” is also considered false. On the rare occurrence that male victims press charges, they do so when violence is severe, and they seek answers to stop it (Lysova & Dim, 2022). Factor 1 presented good internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.82$ ).

Seven statements regarding the *Reasons to stay in the relationship* were included in factor 2. One item states that “women harm their partners to exert power and control over them”, as explained by research (e.g., Barton-Crosby & Hudson, 2021). Three statements reflect potential reasons why male victims remain in their abusive relationships, namely the “fear of repercussions/retaliations”, “shame of what others may think” and “emotional dependency” (Machado & Farinha, 2023). The statement referring that “men report less incidents than women” is corroborated by official statistics (e.g., RASI, 2022). The two remaining items were coded inversely: the one claiming that “only men with low self-esteem remain in the relationship” is false, because, although a valid reason, there are a plethora of other factors that may prevent men from leaving (Machado & Farinha, 2023); the item “It is easier for men to leave their abusive relationships than it is for women” is incorrect, because, as illustrated previously, men and women may experience a variety of reasons that make it difficult for them to leave (Machado & Farinha, 2023). Factor 2 revealed an acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.65$ ).

Lastly, four statements were included in factor 3, titled *Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors*, all scored normally. All items reflect potential help-seeking barriers, such as the “fear of not seeing their children again”, the belief that institutions “lack quality support”, “fear that they are not going to be believed”, and “shame of being perceived as victims” (Machado & Farinha, 2023). Factor 3 revealed an acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=.63$ ). Table 3 provides information about the items’ factor loadings and further details about eigenvalues and internal consistencies.

While factor loadings are important, theoretical coherence and practical implications should also guide item placement (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The item relating to communication problems, despite loading higher in factor 2, is conceptually aligned with the constructs measured by factor 1. Thus, retaining said item in factor 1 will ensure that it remains conceptually coherent and theoretically meaningful (Clark & Watson, 1995). Likewise, the item that claims men do not press charges because they are afraid of being perceived as victims has a higher loading in factor 2, but contributes significantly to the internal consistency of factor 3. Recognizing that internal consistency is a key aspect of scale reliability (Field, 2024), that item will be kept in factor 3 to preserve its reliability and theoretical integrity.

**Table 3** Intimate Partner violence (IPV) Perceptions Inventory's factor loadings

Items	Factor Loadings		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
<b>Factor 1: Reasons for aggression and male victim's stereotypes</b>			
Women only attack their partners/ex-partners to defend their children*	0.66	-0.13	0.09
Women only attack their partners/ex-partners when they are victims of prolonged violence (that is, over the years)*.	0.62	-0.07	0.13
Women only attack their partners/ex-partners when there is a history of substance abuse (e.g., alcohol, drugs) by one of the members of the couple*.	0.77	0.05	0.09
Men are only victims of IPV when their female partners/ex-partners have mental health issues*.	0.72	0.003	0.07
Women are only violent when they are desperate or when they "lose their mind"***.	0.67	0.14	-0.07
It's the communication problems that cause women to become violent with their partners*.	0.36	0.38	-0.01
In IPV cases, women only harm their partners/ex-partners in legitimate defense*.	0.72	0.003	0.02
In IPV cases, men are only harmed if they want to. Otherwise, they have enough strength to stop their female partners/ex-partners*.	0.61	0.10	0.002
Men only press charges because they want to get revenge on their female partners/ex-partners*.	0.49	0.33	-0.10
Eigenvalue	4.40		
% Variance	19.63		
$\alpha$	0.82		
<b>Factor 2: Reasons to stay in the relationship</b>			
Women harm their partners mainly to exert power and control over them.	-0.04	0.56	0.23
Only men with low self-esteem stay in an abusive relationship*.	0.27	0.60	-0.15
The fear of repercussions and/or retaliations lead male victims to stay in abusive relationships.	0.16	0.50	0.36
Men stay in abusive relationships because they are ashamed of what others may think of them.	-0.04	0.66	0.24
Emotional dependency is one of the reasons why men stay in abusive relationships.	0.03	0.57	0.17
Men tend to report less incidents of domestic violence than women.	-0.25	0.43	0.12
It is easier for men to leave their abusive relationships than it is for women*.	0.33	0.48	-0.19
Eigenvalue	3.21		
% Variance	14.61		
$\alpha$	0.65		
<b>Factor 3: Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors</b>			
The fear of not seeing their children again prevents male victims of IPV from separating.	0.10	0.11	0.67



**Table 3** (continued)

Items	Factor Loadings		
Male victims of IPV do not press charges because they believe that institutions lack quality support.	0.03	0.15	0.71
Male victims of IPV do not press charges against their female partners because they fear no one is going to believe them.	0.06	0.46	0.58
Male victims of IPV do not press charges against their female partners because they are ashamed of being perceived as victims.	-0.09	0.58	0.38
Eigenvalue		1.22	
% Variance		5.53	
$\alpha$		0.63	

\*Item's responses are scored inversely

## Procedures

Upon receiving approval from the Ethics Committee of [blinded for review purposes], formal requests were sent to Portuguese law enforcement agencies. Among those contacted, the PSP and the GNR agreed to participate in the study. Simultaneously, the inventory was developed based on existing literature, and recommendations given by professionals, experienced in working with IPV victims. To ensure a diverse sample from various regions of the country, the study was conducted online over a two-month period. Invitations were emailed to multiple police stations, encouraging internal dissemination among their members. Upon accessing the study page, participants were presented with an informed consent form, outlining its objectives, confidentiality measures, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation. Completion of the inventory was expected to take approximately 15 to 20 min. Data collected was solely used for statistical analysis and is accessible only to the research team. No financial compensation, support, or other incentives were provided to the participants.

## Data Analysis

IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28.0 was used to process and analyze collected data. Initially, a descriptive analysis was conducted, based on the sociodemographic characteristics described previously. Subsequently, normality tests were performed to assess whether parametric tests were appropriate. Given that normal distribution assumptions were not met, non-parametric tests were utilized. Specifically, Spearman correlation coefficients were performed to evaluate associations between IPV perceptions and participants' age range, the number of IPV cases handled, and the number involving male victims. Mann-Whitney tests were used to determine whether there were differences based on participants' gender. Kruskal-Wallis were conducted to determine if there were differences in IPV perceptions based on participants' age range, the number of IPV cases handled (with and without male victims), and the type of IPV training received (or lack thereof).

## Results

### Total Inventory and Factors' Scores

The total score of the Intimate Partner Violence Perceptions Inventory was calculated based on the sum of all 20 items. Thus, the higher participants scored in the inventory, the more adjusted their perceptions of male victims of IPV were. The overall score ranged from 0 to 78, with an average score of 43.55 ( $SD=13.28$ ).

For the *Reasons for aggression and male victims' stereotypes*, the overall score ranged from 0 to 36, with an average score of 22.55 ( $SD=7.61$ ). Participants disagreed mostly with the item "Men are only victims of IPV when their female partners/ex-partners have mental health issues", followed by "In IPV cases, men are only harmed if they want to. Otherwise, they have enough strength to stop their female partners/ex-partners". Conversely, participants seemed to have more difficulty with the item "It's the communication problems that

cause women to become violent with their partners”, with 40.8% of the sample having no opinion.

For the *Reasons to stay in the relationship*, the overall score ranged from 0 to 26, and the average score was 13.77 ( $SD=5.19$ ). Participants scored highest in “Men tend to report less incidents of IPV than women” (87.9%), followed by “Men stay in an abusive relationship because they are ashamed of what others may think of them” (58.7%). The most ambiguous responses were related to “The fear of repercussions and/or retaliations lead male victims to stay in abusive relationships”, where 37.9% of participants had no opinion.

Lastly, for the *Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors*, the overall score ranged from 0 to 16, with an average score of 7.24 ( $SD=3.57$ ). 40.6% of participants agreed with “Male victims of IPV do not press charges against their female partners because they are ashamed of being perceived as victims”. However, 36.7% disagreed with “Male victims of IPV do not press charges because they believe that institutions lack quality support”. Table 4 presents more detailed information about participants’ responses to all items of the Intimate Partner Violence Perceptions Inventory.

## Correlation Tests

No correlation was found between participants’ age range in *Reasons for aggression and male victims’ stereotypes*,  $r_s=-0.02$ ,  $p=0.37$ ; in *Reasons to stay in the relationship*,  $r_s=0.001$ ,  $p=0.96$ ; in *Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors*,  $r_s=0.03$ ,  $p=0.25$ ; or overall IPV perceptions,  $r_s=-0.005$ ,  $p=0.85$ .

On the other hand, statistically significant correlations were found between the number of IPV cases in which police officers intervened and some of the inventory’s factors. Exposure to a higher number of IPV cases was correlated with less adjusted perceptions about *Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors* ( $r_s=-0.06$ ;  $p=0.02$ ).

Finally, statistically significant correlations were found between the number of IPV cases involving male victims and some factors. Exposure to a higher number of IPV cases with male victims was correlated with more well-adjusted perceptions of the *Reasons for aggression and male victims’ stereotypes* ( $r_s=0.07$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), and with less adjusted perceptions of the *Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors* ( $r_s=-0.06$ ;  $p=0.02$ ).

## Difference Tests

No differences were found between participants’ gender in the *Reasons for aggression and male victims’ stereotypes*,  $U=126,402$ ,  $Z=-1.33$ ,  $p=0.18$ ; in the *Reasons to stay in the relationship*,  $U=127,620$ ,  $Z=-1.161$ ,  $p=0.25$ ; in the *Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors*,  $U=127,190$ ,  $Z=-1.235$ ,  $p=0.22$ ; or in the total score,  $U=132,721$ ,  $Z=-0.293$ ,  $p=0.77$ .

Concurrently, no statistically significant differences were found in age range in the *Reasons for aggression and male victims’ stereotypes*,  $\chi^2(2)=1.220$ ,  $p=0.54$ ; in the *Reasons to stay in the relationship*,  $\chi^2(2)=5.501$ ,  $p=0.06$ ; in the *Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors*,  $\chi^2(2)=1.822$ ,  $p=0.40$ ; or in the overall score,  $\chi^2(2)=2.796$ ,  $p=0.25$ .

Likewise, no statistically significant differences were found in participants’ training in IPV intervention regarding the *Reasons for aggression and male victims’ stereotypes*,  $\chi^2(4)=1.629$ ,  $p=0.80$ ; the *Reasons to stay in the relationship*,  $\chi^2(4)=9.336$ ,  $p=0.053$ ; the

**Table 4** Participant's responses to the intimate Partner violence (IPV) perceptions Inventory

	Disagree		No opinion		Agree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Factor 1: Reasons for aggression and male victim's stereotypes</b>						
Women only attack their partners/ex-partners to defend their children*	1408	85.1	213	12.9	34	2
Women only attack their partners/ex-partners when they are victims of prolonged violence (that is, over the years)*.	1044	63.1	416	25.1	195	11.8
Women only attack their partners/ex-partners when there is a history of substance abuse (e.g., alcohol, drugs) by one of the members of the couple*.	1329	80.3	272	16.4	54	3.3
Men are only victims of IPV when their female partners/ex-partners have mental health issues*.	1435	86.8	185	11.2	34	2
Women are only violent when they are desperate or when they "lose their mind"*	1122	67.8	358	21.6	175	10.6
It's the communication problems that cause women to become violent with their partners*.	631	38.1	675	40.8	349	21.1
In IPV cases, women only harm their partners/ex-partners in legitimate defense*.	1328	80.2	261	15.8	66	4
In IPV cases, men are only harmed if they want to. Otherwise, they have enough strength to stop their female partners/ex-partners*.	1419	85.7	188	11.4	48	2.9
Men only press charges because they want to get revenge on their female partners/ex-partners*.	949	57.4	549	33.2	156	9.4
<b>Factor 2: Reasons to stay in the relationship</b>						
Women harm their partners mainly to exert power and control over them.	398	24	559	33.8	698	42.2
Only men with low self-esteem stay in an abusive relationship*.	659	39.8	486	29.4	510	30.8
The fear of repercussions and/or retaliations lead male victims to stay in abusive relationships.	595	35.9	627	37.9	433	26.2
Men stay in an abusive relationship because they are ashamed of what others may think of them.	254	15.3	430	26	971	58.7
Emotional dependency is one of the reasons why men stay in abusive relationships.	361	21.8	622	37.6	672	40.6
Men tend to report less incidents of domestic violence than women.	113	6.8	88	5.3	1454	87.9
It is easier for men to leave their abusive relationships than it is for women*.	698	42.2	515	31.1	442	26.7
<b>Factor 3: Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors</b>						
The fear of not seeing their children again prevents male victims of domestic violence from separating.	536	32.3	691	41.8	428	25.9
Male victims of IPV do not press charges because they believe that institutions lack quality support.	608	36.7	478	28.9	569	34.4
Male victims of IPV do not press charges against their female partners because they fear no one is going to believe them.	509	30.7	491	29.7	655	39.6
Male victims of IPV do not press charges against their female partners because they are ashamed of being perceived as victims.	232	14	346	20.9	672	40.6

\*Item's responses are scored inversely

**Table 5** Differences tests between the number of IPV cases (with and without male victims) and intimate Partner violence perceptions Inventory's factors

Factors	IPV Cases		IPV Cases featuring male victims	
	$\chi^2$ (df)	<i>p</i>	$\chi^2$ (df)	<i>p</i>
Reasons for aggression and male victims' stereotypes	18.664 (5)	0.002	19.091 (5)	0.002
Reasons to stay in the relationship	36.451 (5)	0.001	25.652 (5)	0.000
Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors	20.809 (5)	0.001	14.926 (5)	0.011
Total	25.796 (5)	0.000	19.144 (5)	0.002

*Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors*,  $\chi^2$  (4)=3.284, *p*=0.51; or in the overall score,  $\chi^2$  (4)=4.327, *p*=0.36.

As for the variables related to the number of IPV cases, with and without male victims involved, statistically significant differences were found in all the inventory's factors and the overall score. Table 5 provides further details regarding the results obtained in all Kruskal-Wallis tests performed.

Statistically significant differences were found between the number of IPV cases, in relation to the *Reasons for aggression and male victims' stereotypes*,  $\chi^2$  (5)=18.664, *p*=0.002; the *Reasons to stay in the relationship*,  $\chi^2$  (5)=36.451, *p*<0.001; the *Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors*,  $\chi^2$  (5)=20.809, *p*=0.001; and the total score,  $\chi^2$  (5)=25.796, *p*<0.001. Participants who worked on more than 100 cases and who worked on 51 to 100 cases reported more well-adjusted perceptions regarding the *reasons for aggression and male victims' stereotypes* than participants who did not work on a single IPV case, who worked on one to ten, who worked on 11 to 50 and those who were unable to provide an accurate number. Moreover, participants who worked on one to ten, 11 to 50, 51 to 100, and more than 100 IPV cases reported more well-adjusted perceptions regarding the *reasons why men stay in abusive relationships*, compared to participants who reported not having worked on a single case, and those who could not provide an accurate number. Lastly, participants who worked on one to ten, 11 to 50, and 51 to 100 IPV cases reported more well-adjusted perceptions regarding inhibiting factors for criminal complaint and separation than participants who reported not having worked on a single case, and those who could not provide an accurate number. Participants who worked on more than 100 cases revealed more well-adjusted perceptions in comparison to those who did not provide a specific number.

As for the overall score, participants who worked on 51 to 100 cases and more than 100 cases revealed more well-adjusted perceptions, compared to those who did not work on IPV cases, who worked on 11 to 50 cases, and who did not provide a number. Finally, participants who worked on one to ten cases, and 11 to 50 cases revealed more well-adjusted perceptions, compared to participants who did not work on these cases, and those who did not provide a number. Table 6 provides further details regarding the differences in IPV perceptions between groups.

Regarding the number of IPV cases involving male victims, statistically significant differences were found between groups in the *Reasons for aggression and male victims' stereotypes*,  $\chi^2$  (5)=19.091, *p*=0.002; the *Reasons to stay in the relationship*,  $\chi^2$  (5)=25.652, *p*<0.001; the *Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors*,  $\chi^2$  (5)=14.926, *p*=0.011; and the overall score,  $\chi^2$  (5)=19.144, *p*=0.002.

**Table 6** Differences between the number of IPV cases regarding perceptions of male victims of IPV

Intimate Partner Violence Perceptions Inventory	Number of IPV cases	<i>N</i>	Mean Rank	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
Reasons for aggression and male victims' stereotypes	None	149	106.23	4653.50	0.003
	51 to 100	82	133.75		
	None	149	109.17	5091.00	0.001
	More than 100	92	140.16		
	One to ten	346	228.98	11528.50	0.008
	51 to 100	82	268.68		
	One to ten	346	209.50	12456.50	0.001
	More than 100	92	257.10		
	11 to 50	435	249.58	15136.00	0.029
	51 to 100	82	286.21		
	11 to 50	435	229.53	16358.00	0.006
	More than 100	92	275.96		
	51 to 100	82	373.47	19074.50	0.032
	Unknown	545	331.21		
More than 100	92	367.43	20606.50	0.006	
Unknown	545	310.82			
Reasons to stay in the relationship	None	149	219.72	21563.50	0.003
	One to ten	347	260.86		
	None	149	254.15	26693.50	0.001
	11 to 50	435	305.64		
	None	149	104.39	4379.00	0.000
	51 to 100	82	137.10		
	None	149	109.09	5079.50	0.001
	More than 100	92	140.29		
	One to ten	347	483.16	82182.50	0.001
	Unknown	546	424.02		
	11 to 50	435	529.33	102082.00	0.000
	Unknown	546	460.46		
	51 to 100	82	384.23	16668.50	0.000
	Unknown	546	304.03		
More than 100	92	381.29	19431.50	0.000	
Unknown	546	309.09			
Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors	None	149	227.88	22779.50	0.035
	One to ten	346	257.35		
	None	149	268.59	28845.00	0.044
	11 to 50	435	300.69		
	None	149	109.16	5090.00	0.035
	51 to 100	82	128.43		
	One to ten	347	482.42	82440.00	0.001
	Unknown	546	424.49		
	11 to 50	435	523.89	104450.00	0.001
	Unknown	546	464.80		
	51 to 100	82	363.41	18375.00	0.009
	Unknown	546	307.15		
	More than 100	92	357.71	21601.00	0.031
	Unknown	546	313.06		

**Table 6** (continued)

Intimate Partner Violence Perceptions Inventory	Number of IPV cases	<i>N</i>	Mean Rank	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
Total Score	None	149	227.15	22670.50	0.033
	One to ten	346	256.98		
	None	149	264.62	28253.50	0.019
	11 to 50	435	302.05		
	None	149	104.91	4456.00	0.001
	51 to 100	82	136.16		
	None	149	108.84	5042.00	0.001
	More than 100	92	140.70		
	One to ten	346	468.03	86663.50	0.042
	Unknown	545	432.02		
	11 to 50	435	513.37	108587.50	0.024
	Unknown	545	472.24		
	11 to 50	435	253.11	15273.00	0.039
	51 to 100	82	290.24		
	11 to 50	435	257.39	17136.50	0.030
	More than 100	92	295.23		
	51 to 100	82	376.34	17233.00	0.001
	Unknown	545	304.62		
	More than 100	92	380.88	19377.00	0.000
	Unknown	545	308.55		

Participants who worked on one to ten, 11 to 50, and an unknown number of IPV cases featuring male victims revealed more well-adjusted perceptions about the *reasons for aggression* than participants who did not work on any IPV cases with male victims. Furthermore, participants who worked on 11 to 50 cases revealed more well-adjusted perceptions, compared to those who worked on one to ten cases and those who could not provide a specific number.

Regarding the *Reasons to stay in the relationship*, participants who worked on one to ten and 11 to 50 IPV cases with male victims reported more well-adjusted perceptions compared to participants who did not work on a single case, and those who could not provide an accurate number.

For the *Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors*, participants who did not work on a single IPV case and participants who worked on one to ten cases with male victims revealed more well-adjusted perceptions than participants who could not provide an accurate number.

Finally, for the total score, participants who worked on one to ten, and 11 to 50 IPV cases involving male victims revealed more well-adjusted perceptions than participants who did not work on a single case and those who could not provide an accurate number. Table 7 provide further details regarding the differences in IPV perceptions between groups, based on the number of cases featuring male victims.

**Table 7** Differences between the number of IPV cases featuring male victims regarding perceptions of male victims of IPV

Intimate Partner Violence Perceptions Inventory	Number of IPV cases	<i>N</i>	Mean Rank	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
Reasons for aggression and male victims' stereotypes	None	484	548.10	147908.50	0.001
	One to ten	686	611.89		
	None	484	264.15	10480.50	0.002
	11 to 50	58	332.80		
	None	484	431.80	91620.00	0.020
	Unknown	416	472.26		
	One to ten	686	367.96	16780.00	0.047
	11 to 50	58	426.19		
	11 to 50	58	270.55	10147.00	0.049
Unknown	416	232.89			
Reasons to stay in the relationship	None	485	556.54	152068.00	0.011
	One to ten	687	607.65		
	None	485	265.80	11057.00	0.008
	11 to 50	58	323.86		
	One to ten	687	583.47	121277.00	0.000
	Unknown	416	500.03		
	11 to 50	58	296.22	8658.00	0.000
Unknown	416	229.31			
Criminal complaint and separation inhibitors	None	485	470.90	91227.50	0.013
	Unknown	416	427.80		
	One to ten	687	579.78	123812.50	0.000
	Unknown	416	506.13		
Total Score	None	484	549.29	148485.50	0.002
	One to ten	686	611.05		
	None	484	265.06	10918.00	0.006
	11 to 50	58	325.26		
	One to ten	686	573.03	127916.00	0.004
	Unknown	416	515.99		
	11 to 50	58	282.11	9476.50	0.008
	Unknown	416	231.28		

## Discussion

Police officers generally revealed well-adjusted perceptions regarding male victims of IPV, albeit at varying degrees. Notably, police officers seem to recognize most of the reasons associated with female perpetrators' aggressive behaviors and appear to be aware that male victims face unique social stereotypes. The only exception was the item related to communication problems, where most had no opinion. This statement implied that communication problems are the sole cause of aggression in relationships, which may explain why participants were expected to disagree. While research acknowledges communication problems as a common motivation for violence (Dugal et al., 2019), it also suggests that other reasons may exist (Elmquist et al., 2014; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012). The absence of a clear stance on the matter suggests that either police officers might not perceive communication problems as a reason for aggression, or that participants struggled to grasp the statement's intent, thus hindering their ability to position themselves. If the inventory is to be used in future research, it is advised that the item be revised to prevent confusion.



Similarly, police officers generally indicated an understanding of the reasons why male victims remain in their abusive relationships, although their responses were more dispersed. The sole exception was the statement concerning the fear of repercussions or retaliations, with a majority of the sample expressing no opinion. This finding could suggest that police officers may not perceive it as a significant reason, despite scientific literature indicating its relevance (Machado et al., 2018, 2021). On the other hand, police officers recognized that male victims are less likely to report IPV than women, and that shame is a commonly reported reason for remaining with their abusive partners, as indicated by a clearer response tendency in these two items.

The perceptions that appear to be the most ambiguous are those relating to criminal complaint and separation inhibitors. While officers recognized the fear of not being believed and the shame associated with victimhood as significant barriers for male victims seeking help, there seems to be a lack of recognition regarding the impact of children on underreporting. Research indicates that concerns about losing custody or the welfare of their children are major deterrents for male victims (Hine et al., 2022; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado & Farinha, 2023), yet this did not seem to be acknowledged by most officers in the study. This lack of awareness may stem from traditional gender stereotypes, where caring and being concerned for children's well-being is typically associated with a more feminine role (Parke & Cookston, 2019). Consequently, this result highlights the need to focus on the influence of children when educating officers about this phenomenon. Lastly, many officers disagreed with the notion that men refrain from reporting violence due to a perceived lack of support from institutions. However, studies have consistently found that male victims do not find formal support systems effective or supportive (e.g., Douglas & Hines, 2011; Machado et al., 2016, 2017; Machado & Matos, 2022; Walker et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2019). Male victims often report feeling rejected, dismissed, or even blamed when seeking help (Machado et al., 2024a). Considering this overall negative reception, it is understandable why men perceive such services as lacking quality since they don't feel protected or cared for. This lack of awareness highlights the urgent need to reformulate how police officers interact with these men, bestowing them the necessary tools to adequately support these victims. This need may be even more urgent with this specific group of professionals, considering that men unanimously consider the police as the least useful source of support (Machado et al., 2024a).

Regarding the sociodemographic variables analyzed, no correlation was observed between participants' age range and their perceptions of male IPV victims. Similarly, no significant differences were found in perceptions based on age range. This suggests age may not influence IPV perceptions, contrary to some literature (Campbell et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2018). Studies that establish a connection between age and IPV perceptions often attribute it to years of experience, suggesting that older police officers may have more nuanced perceptions due to longer exposure to such cases. Therefore, this study's results could suggest that experience may have a greater influence than age itself, as older age does not necessarily equate to extensive experience. Moreover, over 60% of the sample were aged 25 to 44 years old, potentially limiting age-related differences. Future studies should explore the potential influence of experience on IPV perceptions and strive to incorporate a more diverse age range to capture potential variations.

Notwithstanding, the results indicate that exposure to a higher number of IPV cases, including those involving male victims, correlated with less well-adjusted perceptions of

potential inhibitors to criminal complaint and separation. Since police officers only intervene when victims report the crime, they may not be as aware of potential factors that may inhibit disclosure. Likewise, regarding the differences between groups, as expected, police officers who worked on a higher number of IPV cases, with or without male victims, revealed more well-adjusted perceptions of male IPV victims. In contrast, those who did not work on any IPV case revealed the least adjusted perceptions. These findings highlight the importance of first-hand experience: direct exposure to victims and perpetrators of IPV may facilitate the development of more accurate and comprehensive perceptions of this phenomenon.

Finally, no correlations or differences were found in IPV perceptions regarding officers' training. While previous literature (e.g., Engelman & Dearthoff, 2016) suggest that training could positively influence perceptions, this was not observed here. This result may be due to most participants not receiving training, or being unable to specify the source of their training (i.e., whether the training was provided by the institution or outside it). Future studies should seek to more accurately assess the type of training received by participants.

While the current study's findings offer valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, when using a self-report instrument, while advantageous since it is easy to complete and gather information about participants' experiences, there may be a risk of social desirability bias. Secondly, the closed-response format of the inventory may restrict the depth of information gathered. Thirdly, the present sample is rather homogeneous in terms of gender, age range, and training, which may make it difficult to identify any potential differences between participants regarding these variables. Although this population is predominantly male, future studies may benefit from including a larger number of female officers, in hopes of uncovering new information that was unobtainable in the present study. Similarly, future studies may seek to gather a larger number of older and trained officers, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

## Conclusion and Practical Implications

Portuguese police officers presented relatively well-adjusted perceptions about male victims of IPV, though some ambiguity was noted regarding criminal complaint and separation inhibitors.

This study enhances understanding of police officers' perceptions of male victims of IPV and its influencing variables, offering a quantitative complement to existing qualitative data (Machado et al., 2021). The present results further support previous qualitative findings, indicating that police officers generally hold adequate perceptions, albeit with some limitations. Concurrently, future research could benefit from exploring victims' perceptions of police officers' intervention, to achieve a more holistic and detailed understanding of this phenomenon.

A key implication is the need for specific IPV training. Officers had more difficulty recognizing potential criminal complaint and separation inhibitors. Thus, it seems pertinent to develop programs catered to professionals, emphasizing the complexity of IPV and intentionally highlighting the characteristics of male victims, providing useful information about the types of violence, impact, reasons for female aggression, why men stay, and their reluctance to seek help. This need for proper training is even more evident for this particu-

lar sample, considering that the majority of participants had not undertaken any training. Therefore, by seeking to provide these officers with useful information and tools on how to properly interact with male victims of IPV, it hopefully would result in a more adequate and positively impactful interaction, motivating more men to seek answers to stop the violence they endure.

In conclusion, this study contributes to research on male victims of IPV, helping to add to what is already known about the phenomenon and shedding light to a group of individuals that is often overlooked (e.g., Hines, 2015). This study supports the belief that IPV is a complex phenomenon that can manifest in various relationships, with anyone potentially being a victim or perpetrator (Machado et al., 2024b). Furthermore, since men report numerous consequences to their health and well-being (e.g., Powney & Graham-Kevan, 2022), it is fundamental that more studies seek to better understand this phenomenon, and aid in the development of useful strategies and responses that mitigate such impact. Likewise, since police officers are often first responders, guided by their experience and perceptions, scholars must understand and promote well-adjusted, scientifically sound perceptions of IPV and male victims, to ensure positive and impactful interactions.

Finally, multidisciplinary approaches are crucial for addressing IPV and ensuring comprehensive victim support. Collaboration among different disciplines (e.g., law enforcement, psychology), each bringing a unique perspective and expertise, may contribute to a more holistic understanding of IPV and effective interventions. Victim support goes beyond legal recognition: raising social awareness about the prevalence and impact of IPV, challenging stigma and victim-blaming attitudes, and promoting empathy toward victims, in particular men, who have often been disrespected. Likewise, institutions should be gender-neutral and sensitive toward the various identities and circumstances victims may present. Rather than assuming a binary understanding of victimhood based solely on victims' and perpetrators' gender, interventions should be inclusive and address the unique needs of all IPV victims. Every victim deserves understanding and compassion, and everyone should be given the same opportunities to overcome violence.

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## Declarations

**conflicts of Interest** We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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