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The Paradox of Powerlessness: Narratives of Violence Among Israeli Women Who Were Violent Towards Their Male Partners

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Abstract

This study investigates female-perpetrated violence through in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine Israeli women who had been physically and psychologically violent towards their male partners. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, two key themes emerged: "powerless victims" and "powerless perpetrators." Participants described their behavior as erratic and out of control, rooted in a profound sense of lost self and powerlessness. Applying Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist perspective, the findings reveal that these women felt ensnared by a victim mentality, which clouded their awareness of the harm they inflicted and obstructed their path to independence and self-reliance. Breaking free from oppression reveals a new path.

Keywords

intimate partner violence, female-to-male-violence, gender stereotypes, oppression

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) constitutes a significant concern within the domains of social welfare, public health, and criminal justice. Typically characterized as the physical, sexual, financial, and/or emotional abuse perpetrated by intimate or dating partners during or following a relationship (Center for Disease Control; CDC, 2016), IPV is frequently categorized as a gender-based crime, owing to the high prevalence of men's violence towards women (Wood et al., 2019). Indeed, global evidence indicates that approximately 30% of women have experienced victimization at the hands of male partners (CDC, 2020; World Health Organization, 2013), with comparable rates reported in Israel (Israeli Knesset, 2022). Notwithstanding these statistics, there has been increasing recognition and acknowledgment over the years that women can also perpetrate violence against their male partners. Studies have examined various aspects of the phenomenon, such as its scope (e.g., Dutton & White, 2013), characteristics (e.g., Carney et al., 2007), and consequences (e.g., Birkley & Eckhardt, 2015). Nevertheless, the narratives of women who are violent towards their partners have received limited attention. To contribute to the evolving theoretical and practical understanding in this field, the present study explored the narratives of Israeli women who were violent towards their male partners.

Female-To-Male IPV

Researchers have endeavored to investigate, contextualize, and analyze the motivations for and impacts of female-to-male IPV. As the findings indicate, these outcomes are often contingent upon the researchers' ideological and theoretical perspectives and the application of various typologies (e.g., by the form of violence, gender, or motivation; see Ali et al., 2016). For example, feminist researchers contend that women may resort to violence as a form of resistance, driven by motivations such as self-defense, the protection of children, or retaliation against abuse (Campbell et al., 1998; Damant et al., 2023; Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Fanslow et al., 2015; Swan & Snow, 2006). In contrast, family researchers argue that both men and women share similar motivations for IPV, such as anger and a desire to resolve conflicts (Thornton et al., 2016), or a need for power and control (Rosen et al., 2005; Seamans et al., 2007). A further review of the empirical literature supports these perspectives and highlights additional motivations for women's violence against male partners. These motivations include frustration from failing to gain their partner's attention or expressions of other negative emotions, jealousy, and the adoption of a tough guise (Bar-Merritt et al., 2010; Caldwell et al., 2009). Some studies propose that IPV is a cross-gender phenomenon, often characterized by symmetry, indicating mutual perpetration within the couple system (Dragiewicz & DeKeseredy, 2012; Enosh et al., 2013; Straus, 2015), with women exhibiting aggression at rates comparable to or even exceeding those of men (Caldwell et al., 2012; Fiebert, 2014).

Given the conflicting viewpoints on IPV, it is noteworthy that while some evidence suggests that the overall rates of violence by men and women may be similar, at the very least, the manner in which violence is expressed differs significantly

(Miller & Meloy, 2006). For example, men are more inclined to use sexual coercion, serious physical violence, and coercive control against their female partners. Women, on the other hand, often resort to emotional violence and frequently employ moderate forms of physical aggression against their male partners, including throwing objects, pushing, and pulling (Swan et al., 2008). Additionally, they may leverage their social and legal status as mothers to pursue their objectives aggressively, leaving male partners feeling powerless in response to threats of being estranged from their children (De Puy et al., 2017).

Typically, women's violence is perceived as less threatening to men compared to the opposite situation (Swan & Snow, 2003), and is often categorized as violent resistance due to provocation rather than intimate terrorism (Scarduzio et al., 2017). It is characterized as less severe and less likely to be lethal (Johnson, 2008; Reed et al., 2010), a perspective supported by the sixfold higher number of women murdered by their male ex/partners compared to the reverse (Stöckl et al., 2013). This perception of female-perpetrated IPV leaves criminal justice and social service agencies often uncertain about how to respond when women act violently toward their partners (Hines & Douglas, 2009).

Ultimately, considering the various perspectives in the existing literature, these patterns of female-to-male violence can also be explained through a theoretical lens that adopts a gendered perspective on female-perpetrated IPV, which serves as the foundation for the current study.

Theoretical Background: A Gendered Perspective of Female-To-Male IPV

Social discourses that construct femininity as innocent, vulnerable, and subordinated may portray women's violence either as a victim-driven, fear-based, anti-repressive act against male oppression (Hearn, 2013; Sjoberg, 2010) or as a manifestation of mental illness used to rationalize this non-normative behavior (Carlyle et al., 2014), especially in cases of severe physical assault (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). Conversely, men victims of IPV perpetrated by women are most often viewed as lacking masculinity, honor, and strength (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and may consequently experience feelings of embarrassment and face challenges to their masculine identity (Ben Simon et al., 2024). These gender constructs perpetuate gender inequality, adversely affecting both men and women (Sjoberg, 2010), and contribute to underreporting of IPV perpetrated by their female partners (Dutton & White, 2013).

The majority of literature on IPV focuses primarily on studies involving women as victims and men as perpetrators, with little attention given to men victims of IPV (Ben Simon et al., 2024). While some studies have attempted to explain why women engage in violence against their male partners (see, for example, Bar-Merritt et al., 2010; Caldwell et al., 2009; Damant et al., 2023; Fanslow et al., 2015; Seamans et al., 2007; Thornton et al., 2016), there is a notable lack of research exploring how these women describe their violent actions and how these narratives shape their self-perceptions. Recognizing the cultural similarities in perceptions of gender-based violence between

Israel and other Western countries (Herrero et al., 2017), this study aims to investigate women's narratives regarding the violence they perpetrate against their male partners. By examining these issues from a gendered perspective of IPV, we can enhance theoretical understanding and provide valuable insights for researchers and practitioners dedicated to preventing IPV.

Method

Considering that understanding human experiences is subjective, continually evolving, and deeply intertwined with culture and context (Gergen, 1973), we chose to embrace a qualitative research paradigm. This approach facilitated a form of collaborative knowledge-building with the study's participants rather than merely gathering information about them (Gergen et al., 2015). Specifically, we structured this research according to the principles and guidelines of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). IPA emphasizes an inductive approach, focusing on participants' interpretations of significant life events and experiences (Smith et al., 2009), which is especially useful when the phenomenon under study is characterized by complex aspects of gender, violence, and aggression (Eatough & Smith, 2006), as is the case in our current investigation. Adherence to IPA principles ensured meticulous data collection, analysis, and reporting, and matched the appropriate sample size for IPA studies (see Nizza et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2009).

Sample

The inclusion criteria for participation in the research study were as follows: 1) women aged 20 and above who were physically violent, 2) consistently for a minimum of one year, and 3) directed towards their male partners with whom they shared a cohabiting relationship. The sample comprised nine women, consistent with the relatively sample size recommendations for IPA studies (see Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Data collection was concluded after nine interviews due to data saturation (Chitac, 2022), as the research team agreed that the richness and detail of the obtained data were adequate to fulfill the requirements of the IPA. One-time individual in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine women, aged 26–61, who met these criteria. Six were native Israelis and two immigrated to Israel as children. Eight of the women were mothers. Seven were from families of low socio-economic status; the other two were from middle-class families. Most worked in blue-collar jobs, one was a teacher, and one was a secretary. Eight of the women had been in several violent couple relationships and were in couple relationships during the time of the interview. One woman was in a long-term couple relationship for many years, and one lived alone at the time of the interview.

The violence described by the women against their male partners included physical acts in addition to verbal and emotional abuse. All have experienced violence in either their current or past relationships. The women reported slapping and hitting their

partners, throwing objects at them, and breaking objects in the home during angry outbursts towards their partners. Some of the women were charged with violent behavior by the police, fined, given restraining orders, and/or required to be under the supervision of probation officers.

Procedure

Following approval from Ariel University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Israeli Ministry of Social Welfare, the authors commenced the recruitment process, which proved to be quite challenging. Two women who had completed a treatment group were recruited through the adult probation service. After no other women in this setting agreed to be interviewed, the third author contacted acquaintances and colleagues, directors of Centers for the Treatment of Domestic Violence. The few women referred to the researchers after initially agreeing to participate did not follow through with the interviews. A notice about the research on social media, including Facebook groups and forums dealing with domestic violence, yielded three more interviews. The third author then joined a general women's group on Facebook and presented an invitation to participate in the study, which yielded four more participants. We can only speculate about the difficulty in recruiting women for this study. One possible explanation is the women's difficulty in confronting the label of violent women because of the shame surrounding the use of violence by women, especially towards their partners. Another is avoidance stemming from the difficulty in relating a traumatic life story related or unrelated to women's violence.

The interviews were conducted with flexibility, adhering to the principles of good research practice outlined in IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Questions were formulated based on the natural flow of conversation and participants' responses. Initially, participants were encouraged to share their stories with minimal interruption from the interviewer. Following this, participants were asked questions pertaining to the research topic, including their relationships with significant others, experiences of violence in other contexts, perceived influences of violent behavior, expectations for future relationships, parenthood, family life, advice for other women who engage in violence towards intimate partners, and suggestions for professionals working with them. The interviews took place in settings chosen by participants, such as their homes, quiet corners of coffee shops, or public parks. One interview was conducted via telephone. Each interview lasted approximately 2 hours and was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants received both oral and written explanations of the research topic and purpose before providing written informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary and without compensation. Additionally, all data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality, and names were changed to pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The analysis adhered to the guidelines for IPA (Smith et al., 2009) as well as recommendations for achieving excellence in IPA research (Nizza et al., 2021). IPA is distinguished by its adherence to the idiographic approach, wherein each case is meticulously examined before seeking patterns across cases. The analysis encompassed both aspects of convergence and divergence. Transcripts underwent thorough reading line by line, carefully considering descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual nuances. This initial phase necessitated maintaining an open and exploratory mindset to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data. Initial observations were synthesized into emerging experiential themes, succinctly and meaningfully encapsulating the core elements of each participant's experience. These themes were then organized into clusters, and overarching themes were discerned through abstraction and subsumption techniques applied within and across cases (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2009).

The primary responsibility for the initial analytical steps lay with the first author, while the other three authors provided oversight throughout to ensure the analysis's integrity. Minor adjustments were implemented after this audit process. The subsequent analysis and writing stages were conducted collaboratively, with the authors sharing, questioning, and refining final ideas. This collaborative approach adheres to established standards in IPA methodology and bolsters the study's rigor.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to bolster the trustworthiness of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), beginning at the study's conceptualization and extending through to its conclusions (Creswell, 2015). Firstly, long, in-depth interviews were conducted to allow for a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences. Secondly, no attempts were made to direct or influence participants' thinking, and ample opportunities were provided for clarification and accuracy checks during the interviews. Thirdly, four researchers with diverse academic backgrounds and professional experiences participated in the analysis. This team included a social work academic specializing in domestic violence and qualitative methodologies, a clinical social worker in the field of domestic violence, an academic criminologist specializing in violence, and an expert in couple therapy and qualitative research methodology.

This collaborative approach aligns with Benner and colleagues' assertion that employing multiple readers often yields diverse insights (Benner et al., 2009). Additionally, a detailed description of the analysis and direct, thick quotes were provided to allow readers to assess the research process, critically evaluate the researchers' interpretation of participants' voices, and enhance the transferability of the findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). Lastly, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process by all researchers involved (Alase, 2017).

Findings

To fully grasp the context in which the women's narratives of violence against their male partners were constructed, it is crucial to recognize the profound sense of cyclical powerlessness and helplessness that resonated throughout their accounts. This echo has inspired the two themes that will be further presented in the findings: "*powerless victims*" and "*powerless perpetrators*." Stretching from their early childhood, all participant shared early formative experiences of interpersonal pain and betrayal, which constituted a psychological foundation for their patterns of out-of-control behavior.

> My story begins with a lack of control… It started during a three-year social boycott I endured in fourth grade, where nobody talked or listened to me. When I tried to tell the adults, they didn't believe me at all… I wanted to stop it all, so I pushed the leader of the boycott against the wall and strangled her. Nobody understood that it came from deep hurt within me. Later, when I was raped at 14, I couldn't talk or share my feelings. When people spoke to me, I started screaming and acting erratically… When I tried to tell others about it, nobody believed me… When they hurt you so badly, you lose control and the will to be yourself. (Nurit)

The participants' narratives reveal erratic, irrational, and uncontrollable behavior stemming from a loss of self. This behavior reflects their feelings of powerlessness, both as victims of violence and as perpetrators. Below, we present narratives that align with these two themes: powerless victims and powerless perpetrators. Additionally, a final theme that emerged from the data highlights how some women managed to break free from this cycle of victimization and perpetration, a cycle rooted in deep feelings of powerlessness.

Powerless Victims

The path to powerless victimhood was triggered by an underlying sense of existential threat and vulnerability. This is exemplified in the following quote, as the participant describes herself as a victim of her own psychological constraints and consequently dependent on another, thus supporting the establishment of a clear hierarchy within the participants' romantic relationship, where the man is superior and the woman is inferior.

> I wanted to end the relationship many times, but I didn't because I was afraid to be alone... I am very needy and fearful—phobic, really. I'm afraid of roaches, dogs, strangers, of being home alone, and it made me very needy... Our dynamic was very hierarchical—I was the weak one, and he was the smart one, the knower, the one who was always right. (Julia)

From this weak, subordinated position, all of the participants described themselves as becoming victims of hurtful behavior in their relationship with their former or current

male partners and other familial connections. These accounts were depicted with profound helplessness, portraying the women themselves as powerless objects devoid of free will and choice, entirely subjected to the force exerted upon them by others.

> It was clear that [partner] wanted me… and that I have no choice other than to be with him and to sleep with him, and to pretend also that everything is OK and great in front of him, and in front of my parents, and mainly in front of me. And truthfully, it was too much for me… that I disappeared in the situation. (Avia)

The necessity of yielding to the wills of others compelled the participants to relinquish significant aspects of their selves. As depicted in the quote above, this vanishing of the self reached such depths in certain instances, that seven of the participants went as far as to omit the personal pronoun 'I' when discussing their victim selves, opting instead to narrate their choices and actions in the third person. The following quote is from a participant who, despite reconstructing her life during her partner's incarceration for violence, ultimately returned to the relationship upon his release: "*Then he was released from prison… Naïve Gabriela believed the good lies… and Gabriela left everything: the friends, the people, and moved far away. Soon, the beatings resumed, and he took away my money as well…*" (Gabriela). The participants' powerless, subordinate, almost irrational 'I' was described by all in a constant search for an 'other' who held the necessary power to provide protection in a dangerous world. Nonetheless, in their attempt to surround themselves and rely on a powerful 'other' for physical or emotional survival, five of the participants found themselves increasingly powerless as they spiraled further out of control into a cycle of victimization. As Gabriela explained:

> I always said I would date a criminal… I wanted to find someone who would protect me so that I wouldn't be afraid of anyone, so that no one could touch me or my body. But then there was a lot of beating, nearly every day. I wanted to leave, but I had no strength. I couldn't admit my mistakes. I couldn't tell anyone that I had ruined my life or scream for help. (Gabriela)

The other participants adopted similar strategies that further relinquished their selves, nearly reaching a state of complete internalization of powerlessness. For example, referring to oneself as a child, as illustrated in the following quote, expresses the women's perception of themselves as immature and incapable of making informed decisions in their lives. In most instances, this perception was adopted by their formal and family environments, rendering the participants even more powerless.

> I always wanted a man older than me, because I'm childish. I never meant to marry him; I just wanted to pass the time, but basically, they said, 'You have to marry him.' One day he said, 'We are getting married.' I said, 'Really? We are?'... Then the beatings started and only got worse... I screamed for help from the neighbors, the police came many times, and

> he said that he didn't do anything to me. My husband told them I was mentally ill. They sent me to a psychiatrist to get pills... Social services wanted to take my children away... I was always the screaming 'crazy mother.' (Shir)

Losing further aspects of their selves, while feeling utterly dependent on a failing powerful 'other', led the participants, from their perspectives, to lose control in another way through inflicting violence on their male partners, in a kind of impulsive rebellion. Nonetheless, this action soon yielded an opposite yet similarly disempowering outcome, as they became powerless perpetrators.

Powerless Perpetrators

The violence described by the participants in the study toward their male partners was characterized as another manifestation of powerlessness, albeit in the role of perpetrators. The transition from being a powerless victim to becoming a powerless perpetrator was delineated by all as a process of moving from internalizing their sense of helplessness to externalizing it.

> Being so helplessly dependent on him… I would rage if he couldn't or didn't want to provide me with what I wanted at that moment. It was demanding and very, very angry, with a feeling of 'you owe it to me'. Like losing control, screaming, and crying hysterically... There was a lot of anger. I found myself in situations where I expressed my helplessness and distress as aggression. You see, I'm small, so it cannot really hurt... (Julia)

Disowned of a solid sense of self and seeking false stability through the power of the other, all of the study's participants reached a turning point that led them to act violently toward their partners. However, as demonstrated in the above quote, eight of the participants did not perceive their actions as 'truly' violent; instead, they described them as uncontrollable bursts of helplessness that reached a breaking point, often without recognizing the psychological or physical harm inflicted upon their partners. Some have even described their violent acts as distant from their true, lost selves: "*I felt so helpless… really… that all I could say was that I'm not like that, that this life situation has brought me to this point. I'm not that person; it disgusts me*" (Miriam). Further distancing themselves from their true selves through shame and disgust, these uncontrollable bursts of anger and violence were often recounted as irrational, leaving the impression that the women were oblivious to their underlying causes—rendered powerless to both initiate and halt their destructive impulses.

> Things came up, and I was angry. So much anger came out of me at that time... We were fighting, and I made his life miserable. At some point, he asked me if I was doing it on purpose, punishing him. I think that I, myself, didn't understand that I am [punishing him] ... I don't even know what I was punishing him for… It was a really dark time. Anyway, things got worse, and my aggression turned physical. (Mia)

These 'dark,' unwitting episodes of aggression often came abruptly and burst out uncontrollably, with the perpetrator seemingly demanding validation through violence. Interestingly, in none of the cases did the pivotal moment of transition from powerless victim to powerless perpetrator inspire an effort to reclaim the disowned self. Instead, the women sought to recover the illusory protective power of the other. For example, the following quote describes a participant who reacted violently when her partner ignored her, thereby reflecting her disowned self. In responding to this unfortunate reflection, she reacted with violence—not to hurt him back, but to prompt him to validate her, to affirm her sense of self by granting her the power of acknowledgment. Ultimately, this attempt failed and led to further self-loathing.

> Our fights were long, silent treatments in which he wouldn't say a word to me. The longest one was half a year. At first, I tried talking to him, asking for his forgiveness, being better, cleaner, and quieter. Tried everything to fix it. I cried, and I begged for days, but nothing helped. After a few years, I stopped and just waited for it to pass on its own. It would eat me from the inside… sometimes I just had to talk to him, and he wouldn't react, and so, frustrated, I would throw something at him. A glass, an ashtray. Then, I hated myself even more. (Debbie)

A Way Out

As demonstrated by the exemplar quotes, being a victim-perpetrator only leads to more feelings of powerlessness, as the women remain victims not only of their dismissive, aggressive, and/or abusive partners but also of their own uncontrollable, irrational cycle of helplessness. When speaking of rehabilitation, six of the study participants described breaking free from this vicious cycle by recovering and re-owning their lost selves. As Shir explained: "*A woman needs to trust herself. Do not wait for someone to do this and that. Rise up, do it yourself. You know what you need, so do it. Rise up and do it*". However, as exemplified in the introduction of the findings, trusting oneself, or even knowing oneself, let alone rising above past experiences, can be a daunting task due to complicated and painful interpersonal histories. Accordingly, all six participants emphasized the transformative and life-changing role of therapy in addressing these challenges.

> If I had gone into therapy [before], none of this would have happened... I wouldn't even be with him. It's about understanding, becoming aware... I wouldn't have acted with violence; I am not violent... I understand that it's either someone chooses me or I choose him. (Nina)

By gaining the freedom to choose, rather than being chosen, these women found the possibilities and strength to break free from the vicious cycle of helplessness. This shift empowered them to reconnect with their true selves, taking control of their own lives and destinies in the process.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the narratives of women who acted violently toward their male partners. A comprehensive review of the findings indicates that, when recounting their experiences of violence, the women depicted themselves as powerless victims and/or powerless perpetrators of violence.

The primary emphasis in the women's narratives of violence was their portrayal of themselves as victim-perpetrators. The literature has documented the interconnectedness between experiencing past or current victimization and subsequently engaging in perpetration, both for men and women (Nabors et al., 2009; Thornton et al., 2016), with women exhibiting higher rates of this pattern (Burke et al., 2022). Specifically, research indicates that a history of sexual and/or physical abuse and neglect among women may predict violent behaviors towards others, including intimate partners (Bair-Merritt et al., 2010; Damant et al., 2023; Swan et al., 2008). In this regard, the study participants' narratives detailing direct or indirect exposure to various forms of aggressive and violent behavior align closely with empirical findings in the literature. However, it is the sense of powerlessness that is woven throughout the findings that raises an intriguing point: the women's depiction of both their experienced and inflicted violence in terms of irrationality and lack of control. Whether as victims or perpetrators, the study participants depicted themselves as lacking power in controlling their choices or actions, frequently subjected to the will or influence of another, typically their male ex/partner. In doing so, they find themselves imprisoned by the victim mentality, blind to the suffering they cause their male partners, and oblivious to the pathways leading toward independence and self-reliance.

The narrative of powerless subjection to the will of the other resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist account of women's psychological oppression (de Beauvoir, 1974). According to de Beauvoir, it is women who are perceived by men as 'the Other', in a way that positions them as belonging to an oppressed group, a view that leaves women marginalized and viewed through the lens of male dominance and objectification (de Beauvoir, 1974). De Beauvoir uses the term 'feminine inferiority complex' to elucidate how women become 'the Other' in relation to men, referring to the cumulative effect of women's internalization of patriarchal meanings on their psyches. In her work, *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir (1974) explores how the innate human desire for recognition drives individuals to internalize societal values, especially during childhood when critical reflection is still in its formative stages. She explores how these values shape women's choices and influence women's identities. De Beauvoir argues that patriarchy imposes constraints on women during their transition from girlhood to womanhood, promoting the display of 'feminine' traits while simultaneously disparaging and ridiculing them as human flaws. Accordingly, in contrast to men, who are socially constructed as strong, rational, and potent, women, positioned as the inferior 'Other,' are frequently labeled as irrational, emotionally volatile, unpredictable, and weak (Carlyle et al., 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Consistent with this claim, many of the study's participants recounted early experiences of being treated as inferior or objectified by others, enduring actions such as name-calling, social boycotts, parental neglect, interpersonal traumas and other forms of degrading or aggressive behavior directed towards them. De Beauvoir contends that individuals who identify as women not only face external labeling but also inevitably internalize suggestions of their own inferiority due to their existence within a patriarchal society, where the prevailing belief is that women are inferior (de Beauvoir, 1974). This implies that, through the concept of the 'feminine inferiority complex,' women may internalize and adopt oppressive labels imposed by male dominance such as irrational, weak and out of control, which contrast with portrayals of male superiority. Accordingly, participants in this study described the violence in their lives, whether experienced or inflicted, in feminine terms. They described it as resulting from uncontrollable bursts of frustration and helplessness, feeling powerless to leave violent relationships or to stop violent behavior towards their partners. They either minimize the significance of their violent behavior or describe it as non-normative, labeling it as 'crazy' and often viewing it as a deviation from their true selves. As the oppressive labels of women as inferior and men as superior became more deeply entrenched and firmly held, the violence became wrongfully, yet increasingly 'justified'. According to these limiting social constructs, men in their superiority, cannot be victims. Therefore, any violence inflicted upon them by inferior women is perceived as harmless, if it is acknowledged as violence at all. As they became increasingly entangled in the oppressive social discourse, the participants lost more and more freedom in their lives, drifting farther from their true selves. Some even reached the point of total estrangement, bordering on dissociation.

Similar to de Beauvoir's assertion that internalizing one's inferiority may hinder the ability to perceive possibilities for transcendence and to take associated risks due to low self-esteem (de Beauvoir, 1974), participants in this study described themselves, as demonstrated in the first two themes (powerless victims and powerless perpetrators), as lacking alternative routes beyond the cycle of victimhood and perpetration. It was only in the concluding theme of the findings, 'a way out,' often recited only in the last few minutes of the interview by the few participants who managed to break free from the victim-perpetrator cycle of violence, that the narratives changed to include more 'masculine' labels such as independence, power, and self-confidence. This liberation from gender-biased labels reinforced the women's accountability for their violent behavior and empowered them to take responsibility for their own security, happiness, and future.

Practical Implications

The study highlighted the interactions between social and psychological factors, as well as cultural constructions of gender. This interaction contributes to the constellation of patterns of victimhood and perpetration, indicating the importance of empowering women, as well as men, to break free from the oppressive gender-biased discourse. This

can be achieved by encouraging women to take ownership of their lives, establish a connection with themselves, and cultivate self-confidence. It also involves rejecting any reference to an oppressive social discourse that dictates what is considered typically feminine or masculine.

Policy-makers, social workers, psychologists, and educators play a critical role in fostering such changes in the lives of women and young girls, particularly during their formative years when critical developmental processes of self-identity are shaped. Therapy for victim-perpetrator women should guide them in acknowledging and taking accountability for their violent behavior, while also focusing on restoring an authentic and coherent sense of self. This involves fostering awareness, acceptance, and integration of both the 'good' and 'bad' aspects of the self, enabling them to identify their needs, as well as those of their partner, and freely choose their future life course. Such an approach may be instrumental in halting current involvement in violent relationships as victims and/or perpetrators and preventing such future development. These changes must also apply to men and boys, as limiting discourses not only perpetuate oppressive situations for women but also stifle men in their own restrictive, false 'superior' state. This prevents men from seeking help or deviating from what is labeled as masculine (Machado et al., 2017), thus inhibiting them from connecting with, embracing, and presenting their true selves.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Notwithstanding the study's contribution, several limitations should be noted. The first pertains to our sample; it is possible that the difficulty in recruiting participants may have biased the sample, resulting in a particular, and perhaps limited, perspective on the narratives of women who were violent in intimate partner relationships. While the narratives provided rich and informative insights, future studies should aim to include larger and more diverse samples. This includes considering variations in religion (such as Christians, Muslims, or Druze), levels of religiosity (ranging from secular to highly traditional), and severity (including different levels and types of violence). Another limitation is that our sample included heterosexual women only, whereas IPV also occurs in same-sex relationships as well (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2015). Therefore, it is essential for future research to explore IPV in same-sex relationships to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this issue, and its gender-related aspects.

Conclusion

This study goes beyond qualitatively addressing the motivations for violence among women who have been violent; it also examines the nature of these narratives and how they shape the participants' self-perceptions, drawing on de Beauvoir's framework. Applying Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist account of women's psychological oppression (de Beauvoir, 1974), the findings revealed that these women were deeply

entrenched in a gender-biased, oppressive narrative of womanhood as irrational, weak, and subordinate to men.

These internalized perceptions, according to de Beauvoir (1974), are rooted in gender stereotypes and contribute to the systemic oppression and marginalization of women in society, denying women the opportunity to become themselves while also causing harm to men. Breaking free of the oppressive discourse of women as inferior and men as superior, as briefly demonstrated in the concluding theme 'a way out,' revealed a different path for self-realization and transcendence. Concluding on this note, and inspired by the participants' attempts 'to find a way out,' we adopt de Beauvoir's (1974) claim that as long as women internalize and suffer from the 'feminine inferiority complex,' their situation within the patriarchy will prevent them from realizing their full human potential. It is our responsibility as researchers and as a society as a whole, men just as much as women, to find our own 'way out' of the 'feminine inferiority' and 'male superiority' concepts, which are oppressive to all genders.

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