



“I’d Work Weekends Because I Just Didn’t Want to Go Home”: The Spillover Effects of Intimate Partner Violence Victimization on Men’s Personal Well-Being and Working Lives

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Abstract

Purpose In Australia, 1.5 million men have reported being victims of IPV since the age of 15, yet their experiences are sometimes dismissed or not reported due to social stigma. The outcomes for these men are not well understood. This study aimed to investigate men’s experiences of IPV and how these experiences impacted them in the workplace.

Methods Using a qualitative design, we interviewed 12 Australian men and asked them to tell their story in relation to their self-reported past or present IPV experience.

Results Overall, we found that men reported a wide range of abuse experiences, including physical, emotional, and sexual. Men’s personal and working lives were directly impacted by societal perceptions of males as victims, as well as through the negative impact of direct and indirect abuse on their health and wellbeing. Men reported disruptions to their capacity to work, finances, and career progression, as well as using the workplace to cope with abuse. Many men were also hesitant to align their experiences with ‘victimization’, despite reporting clear instances of abuse.

Conclusions There is a need for increased education and awareness surrounding male IPV victimization, to counter existing prejudices that may exacerbate negative outcomes and obstruct help-seeking. Organizational support and associated policies for IPV should be specific, well publicized, and non-gender preferential. Doing so could help to reduce spillover by helping men to access support sooner.

Keywords IPV · Family Violence · Victimization · Men · Workplace · Organisational Support

Background

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive social problem characterized by actual or threatened violence and aggression, including physical, psychological, sexual, or controlling behaviors directed towards a partner; often occurring in a domestic setting (World Health Organization, 2012). There has been a recent push to promote greater inclusivity within IPV research and intervention as abuse is found to occur irrespective of gender or sexuality (Brown, 2008; Carthy et al., 2019). A recent report in the UK found there was a critical lack of research on IPV against men and boys (Spikol

et al., 2024). Indeed, to date, research and support programs primarily focus on female IPV victim experiences of male perpetrated abuse, despite growing evidence that men are also subjected to IPV (Lysova et al., 2023; Perryman & Appleton, 2016; Randle & Graham, 2011; Taylor et al., 2022). While reported rates of male victimization are lower than that of females, they are not unsubstantial. Approximately 13.5% of the adult male population in Australia has experienced violence from a female partner (Diemer, 2015). In Australia, national statistics indicate that 1.5 million men have experienced some form of violence, emotional abuse, or economic abuse from a current or former partners since the age of 15, accounting for 35% of total IPV victims (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022). This is likely a conservative estimate with studies suggesting male IPV victims are generally reluctant to report or seek help (Archer, 2000; Choi et al., 2015; McCarrick et al., 2016), or do not recognize their experiences as IPV (Walker et al., 2020).

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IPV and Gender

Prevailing conceptualizations of IPV are typically gender-exclusive and have noteworthy limitations (Buttelt & Starr, 2012). The IPV literature has been substantially influenced by the *gender paradigm* or the *feminist paradigm*; a theoretical framework that configures violence within the context of unbalanced power relations between partners, situated within the socio-political context of broader power dynamics between men and women (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005). This framework leans into established societal assumptions around masculine identity and behaviors, such as aggression and dominance, or hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005); IPV can be conceptualized as a tool that stabilizes men's collective dominance over women (Gilbar et al., 2020; Sikweyiya et al., 2020). In such a framework, female-to-male IPV may be viewed as an anomaly, or as less serious given its context in a less stable power structure. Perpetrators of IPV are often viewed exclusively or disproportionately as men by the public, with female violence against their intimate partners often characterized as reactive or defensive (i.e., as a response to the initial male violence or to the inherent power imbalance within the relationship; Kernsmith, 2005). While women experience more frequent and severe IPV compared to that which is reported by men, recent research reveals that men can also experience frequent and severe IPV in various forms (AIHW, 2024; Fanslow et al., 2023; Scott-Storey et al., 2023). It should be noted however that domestic homicides remain higher for female victims (0.34 per 100,000) than for male victims (0.29 per 100,000) (AIHW, 2024), therefore discrepancies in severity should not be minimized.

The gender paradigm has consequences for how people perceive incidents of IPV. A number of studies exploring participants' perceptions of hypothetical violent scenarios have found male-against-female violence is perceived as more serious than female-against-male violence, even when the scenarios themselves did not differ other than the genders of the perpetrator and victim (e.g., Feather, 1996 or Gerber, 1991). In one study, scenarios in which victims were verbally provocative prior to the violence were presented. Participants rated male victims who had provoked to be more responsible for being assaulted than female victims who had provoked (Harris & Cook, 1994).

The response of institutions and individuals to justice and intervention also reflects a gender bias. Brown (2004) and Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) suggest that police took male victims less seriously and arrested female perpetrators significantly less often than male perpetrators. Other studies found that family court judges were found to more likely deny restraining orders to male victims of IPV

compared to female victims (Muller et al., 2009) and deny custody applications for male victims compared to female victims (Basile, 2005). In qualitative studies, male victims describe their female perpetrators taking advantage of these gendered perceptions of IPV by purposefully involving the police or legal system, to inflict further suffering (Gadd et al., 2003). Abuse initiated by the perpetrator but enacted by these institutions appears to be a contemporary form of IPV, known as *indirect abuse* (Machado et al., 2017). Indirect abuse may contribute to the reluctance of male victims to seek help (Archer, 2000; Choi et al., 2015; McCarrick et al., 2016; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Tsui et al., 2010). The additional experiences of indirect abuse have been found to heighten feelings of male victimization by uniquely contributing to negative mental health outcomes, over and above direct abuse (Berger et al., 2016; Douglas & Hines, 2011). However, there is also evidence that female victims of IPV also experience gender stereotypes in their dealings with police and the courts (Meyer, 2011), suggesting that experiences of IPV cannot always be defined exclusively by gender. All victims of IPV can benefit from a perspective that looks beyond the gender paradigm and toward a more complete model of the dynamic.

Male Victims of IPV

In Australia, 16% of the male population have reported psychological abuse by a partner since the age of 15, and 6% report direct physical abuse (ABS, 2022). Male victims who do experience physical violence report attacks such as biting, scratching, punching, hitting, kicking, and the use of weapons (Cho & Wilke, 2010; Coker et al., 2005; Drijber et al., 2013; Hines et al., 2010; Nayback-Beebe & Yoder, 2012; Reid et al., 2008). Male victims of IPV also experience adverse physical and psychological health consequences of abuse, which can be far reaching and last well beyond the abusive relationship (Coker et al., 2005; Simmons et al., 2018) including an increased risk of ongoing illnesses, such as chronic pain, osteoarthritis, severe headaches, sexual problems, loss of weight, and overall poorer health (George & Yarwood, 2004; Hines & Douglas, 2016). Similarly, symptoms of PTSD, depression and suicidal ideation are shown to be higher in male IPV victims compared with non-victims (Hines & Douglas, 2011, 2016; Próspero, 2007), and cumulative negative support service experiences have also been found to be significantly associated with higher rates of PTSD symptoms in male victims (Douglas & Hines, 2011).

Together, the serious consequences of male IPV victimization, the relative invisibility of male victims, their reluctance to disclose victimization experiences (Simon & Wallace, 2018) often resulting from stigma (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013) highlight a significant gap in both understanding how

and in what ways male experiences of IPV spillover into their lives, and the kinds of responses that are needed that better meet men's needs.

Ecological and Spillover Theory in IPV

Ecological and spillover theories offer a useful framework to explore the impact of IPV on the lives of men. An ecological perspective is advocated for application in IPV research as it recognizes the complex and dynamic interrelationships between people and their environments to provide a holistic understanding of IPV risks and consequences (Duffy et al., 2004). An ecological perspective considers *microsystems* (e.g., the immediate family unit and the workplace) which may interact together to form the *mesosystem* (how these micro-systems function together or interact). These systems are influenced by broader social and cultural factors in the *macrosystem* (e.g., gendered perceptions of IPV). Spillover theory works in tandem with ecological theory as it leverages the general principles of the mesosystem to suggest that, more specifically, the stressors experienced in one domain are likely to impact experiences in other domains (such as the workplace and systems beyond; Deen et al., 2022). One potential consequence of IPV is the spillover and reciprocal impact on the individual's working life (Fettró & Nomaguchi, 2018; Katz et al., 2017), and therefore their ongoing security and personal stability. For male IPV victims, this may be particularly relevant, given the role of workplace success in contributing to masculinity and male self-esteem. Investigating spillover in the context of ecological theory also allows for an understanding of the complex levels of support that could occur in a workplace setting, which encompass both formal (specific organizational policies and responses) and informal (colleague responses) support.

IPV Spillover in the Workplace

IPV intrusion into the workplace is commonly conceptualized as *IPV perpetration* that occurs within the work environment and *IPV interference* that occurs outside of work but interferes with the victim's ability to meet their work responsibilities (i.e., within the mesosystem). Indeed, the workplace provides a unique context and potential motivations for IPV (Deen et al., 2022), including through the provision of additional resources by which IPV can be engaged in (e.g., work computer/car; Deen et al., 2022; Rothman & Perry, 2004), through additional opportunities by which the victim can be harmed (e.g., career progression; Tolentino et al., 2017), and these are likely to be similar for males and females. Regarding interference, male victims report neglected work responsibilities, loss of productivity, and absenteeism linked predominantly to their mental health

issues (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; George & Yarwood, 2004; Reeves & O'Leary-Kelly, 2007), sleep deprivation, physical illness, psychological strain, or becoming homeless (Machado et al., 2017; Tilbrook et al., 2010). Such spillover may also linger beyond immediate victimization, whereby Reeves and O'Leary-Kelly (2007) found that males who had previously been victims of IPV were absent from work more often than non-victims, yet men who were currently experiencing violence displayed no difference in absenteeism from non-victims. Male victims also report that employment may provide a refuge from the abuse at home, and that they increase their working hours as a coping mechanism (Gadd et al., 2003). These work-related impacts have economic consequences, with research finding male victims were less likely to be employed (Rhodes et al., 2009), have lower salaries (Reeves & O'Leary-Kelly, 2007), experience job loss as a result of IPV compared with non-victims (George & Yarwood, 2004).

When IPV intrudes into the workplace, there are also significant costs for employers. The cost of IPV against women on the Australian economy was estimated at \$13.6 billion in 2016 and was projected to continue rising (KPMG, 2016). The report did not calculate the economic impact of violence against men. Despite overall evidence that IPV has significant economic cost, an investigation into corporate leaders' awareness of IPV found that although 66% of executives believed that IPV spilled over into work and impacted the bottom-line, only 12% believed the organization should have strategies and processes for managing the impact of IPV (Roper, 2002). Nonetheless, legislation and policy in Australia has secured a number of workplace supports and provisions to assist victims of IPV. For example, the Fair Work Act 2009 allows employees to access 10 paid days of family violence leave per year. The Respect at Work Act 2021 also includes protections for victims of IPV against discrimination and dismissal. In Australia, employees can access flexible work arrangements and managers can access assistance to help support IPV victims in the workplace (APSC, 2022).

The Current Study

In summary, there is some evidence that the male IPV experience and associated consequences can be similar to those experienced by females; however, the experience for men remains unclear due to a lack of targeted research on their experience of IPV. Men's experiences of IPV as victims and the impact this has on their work are particularly under-researched (Deen et al., 2022; MacGregor et al., 2021) and existing studies are also predominantly quantitative. Qualitative contributions, on the other hand, can shed light on how, rather than just if, IPV impacts work performance (Reeves & O'Leary-Kelly, 2007). To address these gaps a qualitative study was undertaken with a sample of Australian males

who self-identified as having past or present experience of IPV. This study had two interconnected aims: (1) to better understand men's experiences of IPV (such as the types and severity of experiences), and (2) to understand the impact of these experiences (with a specific focus on the workplace and working life).

Method

Participants

Participants were 12 heterosexual males who identified as victims of IPV, aged between 26 and 65 years old. All but one participant ($n = 11$) were no longer in their abusive relationship, having separated during the past 15 years. Participants were recruited as part of a larger ongoing study investigating the impact of IPV on both men and women.

Design and Data Collection

This study was designed around a narrative approach, which involves a process of storytelling (Mishler, 1986). Participants recall experiences that impacted their lives and narrate them in chronological order (Sandelowski, 1991). This approach was chosen to minimize collusion (i.e., participant behavior being influenced by researcher expectations) between participant and researcher to ensure that the participant voice was clear and distinct from that of the researcher (Miller, 2017). In this study, participant interviews were conducted either face-to-face (25%), internet video communications (17%) or phone (58%). Participants were asked to tell their story in relation to their IPV experience. The following prompts were used to elicit further information if required: impact of IPV on working life (e.g., "how did [experience] impact you at work?"); nature of the abuse (e.g., "can you tell me what you mean by [experience]"); help seeking behavior (e.g., "did you talk to anyone about [experience]?"); disclosure (e.g., "did anyone know about this [experience]?"); perceptions of self (e.g., "How did [experience] effect how you see yourself?").

Several methodological precautions were in place to enable ethical discussion of sensitive topics with this vulnerable population. Foremost, the relatively unstructured interview process preserved the autonomy of participants; men were in control of which experiences they brought up and discussed, and which they did not. The researchers conducting the interviews approached probing opportunities with curiosity and avoided language or reactions which could be perceived as judgmental or reinforcing of social stigma. When participants showed signs of distress they were validated, given time and space, and where appropriate, consent to continue was re-confirmed. Participants were also made

aware that they could cease the interview at any time. Both researchers conducting interviews were female.¹

Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from a university ethics committee. A highly targeted recruitment approach was employed to access the hard-to-reach population. Participants were recruited using posters placed in Violence Assistance Programs, or online via IPV support platforms and a male e-health newsletter.

Analysis

There was substantial overlap between participant narratives (i.e., participants were not reporting overly heterogeneous experiences) and as such, a thematic analysis using the coding reliability approach (Braun & Clarke, 2020) was conducted. This inductive approach involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (i.e., themes) within data using illustrative quotes. Two researchers were involved in the data coding and thematic analysis process; with an initial 10 broad themes refined through a systematic process into a final list of four themes. A third researcher familiar with the objectives of the study coded a random sample of 20% of the data (Boyatzis, 1998). The percentage level of inter-rater agreement was greater than 80%, indicating reliable coding (Boyatzis, 1998). In cases of disagreement, the matter was discussed between the researchers until consensus was reached.

Results

Four themes with relevant sub-themes are summarized in Table 1, along with illustrative quotes. The sub-themes are described in greater detail below using individual quotes as an indication of participants' voice. We use square brackets to indicate altered wording to enable readers' understanding of quotes out of context, and '...' indicates words deleted from quotes to focus on the key meaning.

Societal Perceptions

Gender Bias

All participants described biased societal responses to their victim status that appeared to be driven by a pervasive

¹ Ideally, we would have given participants the choice of a male or female interviewer, however this was not possible within the research team at the time.

Table 1 Overview of results—Themes, Sub-themes, and Quotes

Theme	Sub-theme	Definition	Illustrative quote
Societal Perceptions	Gender bias	Participant experiences of, or reflections on, societal conceptualization of intimate partner violence based in gendered frameworks	<i>"There is a belief in the larger population a man cannot be a victim of domestic violence, and you are always the abuser."</i>
	Help-seeking	Participant experiences with help seeking for abuse or attempts to do so	<i>"People are dismissive or disregard your perspective when you do reach out for help... sometimes I think, is there any point in trying to reach out for help again?"</i> <i>"I've got this stupid idiot guy mentality—men can't be victims of abuse."</i>
	Self-perceptions of being a victim	Descriptions of the how societal perceptions impacted identity as a victim of abuse	<i>"She punched me in the head between 10 and 12 times. I was just lying there and I almost lost consciousness."</i>
Experience of Abuse	Direct abuse	Experiences of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse	<i>"A lot of the violence is indirect. It's either vicarious through the children or it actually comes from the state, on the basis of [believing female perpetrator] complaints."</i>
	Indirect abuse	Experiences of relational or systems-based abuse	<i>"I was just totally depressed, I couldn't figure a way out of it, was very withdrawn, very overweight, you get stuck."</i> <i>"I was quite depressed; I started smoking a lot more marijuana for a while."</i>
Impact on Mental Health and Wellbeing	Mental health issues	Descriptions of how the abuse impacted psychological health	<i>"I was living out of my car. I had to borrow some money to keep everything going."</i>
	Coping	Strategies used by participants to cope with the mental health impact of abuse	<i>"My boss called me into his office one day and said, 'Is there something wrong, because you don't seem to be yourself?' and I broke down in his office and explained everything."</i> <i>"It made me go to work more... I didn't want to go home."</i>
	Quality of life	Descriptions of effects on personal wellbeing not directly related to psychological health	<i>"I was at work but I wasn't present at work. I was distracted. I was not focused. My productivity went out the window."</i>
Impact on Working Life	Support experiences	Positive and negative elements of experiences with workplace support (formal and informal)	<i>The time that goes into it [dealing with abuse] is massive. I could be far more effective in my business if I didn't have to [deal with] that sort of stuff</i>
	Work as a coping mechanism	Utilizing work or the workplace to cope avoid abuse or cope with the mental health impact of abuse	<i>"I've been a little bit stressed... and relapsed into not focusing on work; my supervisor has basically forced me onto working shorter hours, which means I get paid less."</i>
	Capacity to work	Direct or indirect impact of abuse on participants ability to engage with work	
	Career	The negative or positive impact of abuse on career progression or quality	
	Finances	Direct or indirect impact of abuse on participants financial wellbeing	

belief that men could not be victims of IPV, particularly at the hands of a female perpetrator. Participants described experiences where their victim status was not recognized or ignored. This experience occurred, even in situations where male victims' experiences of IPV were observed or heard first-hand, either by friends or institutions:

She threw me on the bed and just punched into me repeatedly. My friend actually came up to the room and was standing there thinking it was funny, yelling 'ha, ha, ha, look at this, de-fence, de-fence, de-fence' like that. I was just shocked. [P1]

She once abused me in a public place. My solicitors got CCTV footage. Nobody cared. [P5]

I've copped people saying 'you're a male, you've obviously wanted it' and that's something that's hurt just as much as the actual incident. [P6]

Most tied this back to gendered conceptualizations of partner violence:

I wouldn't be confident that anyone I spoke to about it would take it seriously. They'd assume that I'd do something about it. The gender thing is definitely true because growing up I never conceived that domestic violence is something that a woman does to a man, it's always framed in the opposite way. [P11]

Help-seeking Experiences

Many participants expressed apprehension and reluctance to ask for help:

I had friends, but the last thing a man does is talk about it and admits it. I was very isolated. [P8]

I would go to my Dad's occasionally and he'd see me with a black eye or bruising and he'd be like, how did you get that? I'd be like, oh, I walked into something, or I was just in the dark. [P1]

Probably only one of my mates ever really knew. I'm a very private person when it comes to things like that, and I just try and clean the mess up and move on. [P12]

For those that did attempt to find help, they were disappointed and disheartened by the lack of support for male IPV victims:

There's no shelter for men, only park benches... You can google some of the women's domestic violence shelters and there's probably about 30 in [large Australian city] alone, but from what I've seen a lot of men are copping it though, and nowhere to go. [P8]

There's got to be an easier way how men can be contacted. I think the White Ribbon have lost it. I think the cops have lost it. I think the politicians have lost it.

It's just not working. I'm very disappointed in society because of it, actually. [P12]

When participants sought help from support services, many recounted being met with derision or accusations of being the perpetrator, rather than the victim:

I spoke to one [psychologist] and she stood up in front of me... and shouted at me "Men can't be victims of abuse, only women are." She'd basically made assumptions about it and she's saying, "men like you try and manipulate the situation... You're the abusers". [P7]

I tried to contact [a men's helpline]. I was told I should just leave because I was the one who was causing violence. [P4]

They were also commonly met with ridicule, which compounded the psychological effect of the abuse:

The police laugh at me when I try and put in statements of what's actually going on in the relationship, how I'm being treated and how I was being punched. You know they'd turn around and laugh at me and that's soul destroying. [P2]

However, a few participants recalled some positive experiences from seeking help, mostly where professionals helped to validate or name their experiences:

I went to see my family doctor about a referral for my broken tooth... She said, "Did [your wife] do that to you?" I actually broke down. She said, "She's abusive towards you." [P7]

What first led me to the realization [that I was a victim] was my lawyer. She said it is domestic violence and you should have reported it. I didn't even think about it until then actually. I was shocked for ages. You mean I can talk about this? [P9]

Self-perceptions of Being a Victim

Participants acknowledged that they struggled or simply refused to identify themselves as victims of IPV despite their lived experiences:

I've got this stupid idiot guy mentality - men can't be victims of abuse. [P7]

Even now I have question marks about it [being an IPV victim], because of the disrespect I got from authorities and what's out there about it for males. [P9]

If you'd asked me a year ago if I'd been the victim of domestic violence, I would've said "absolutely no". But if you'd asked me if my partner had ever hit [me], well yes... and if you'd asked about all the emotional side of things... I'd have said "definitely". It's not

something I grew up believing men could be the victims of domestic violence, it doesn't sit right with me. [P11]

For some, this struggle to identify as a victim was inter-related with the abuse they experienced:

I thought I was the problem, she convinced me because I'd had an unhappy childhood that I'd deserved to be hit and all of that. [P8]

Experience of Abuse

The experience of abuse reported by the participants involved both direct (e.g., physical, sexual, and psychological) and indirect abuse (e.g., relational, systems-based).

Direct abuse

Almost all participants provided descriptions of substantial physical abuse:

We had an argument where she actually grabbed me and bent me over the kitchen bench backwards and was over the top of me with a knife to my chest... Telling me, "It's just going to take one little push and I'm going to have this in your chest". [P1]

You'd be driving somewhere down the freeway and she'd be punching you, she'd grab a hold of the steering wheel and try and run the car off the road. [P4]

I said do not call me names in front of the kids. So she started punching and slapping ... when I would turn my head to go and check in and look on the kids, she managed to get a punch on my face and broke one of my teeth. [P7]

Instances of physical abuse were often a part of broader attempts at control:

When I spoke to her about [the physical abuse] afterwards she admitted that it was deliberately manipulative to get me to do what she wanted. [P10]

Some participants acknowledged that despite being physically stronger than their abuser, they chose to take a beating to avoid inflicting any injuries on them:

With my strength I could easily turn around and knock her out or something, but I'm not violent at all. I'm a gentle giant, I don't like hitting people... that's why the police are supposed to be there you know to stop this sort of thing. [P2]

I'm actually a karate guy. But I took a lot of beatings, pretty good ones actually, she tried to kill me with knives. You can block them, [but] everything I was trained to do, you can't do it. You've just got to take it. [P8]

I was trying to walk away ... she says ... "You always walk away don't you? you coward"... I turned to her and I said "look, I just don't want this to get any worse than it is. Please stop it". She goes "what are you going to do, hit me? Come on, hit me"... I've never laid a hand on - I grew up in a world where we were taught no one ever hit a woman [P7]

There were also situations of sexual abuse described:

We were joking around one day you know that men wake up with an erection, I sort of said yeah, I said jump on and then she told me she had been and that's a real sickening feeling to know that I'd been violated like that without any knowledge. [P2]

The criticism went on to the way that I had sex with her... If she didn't get her way, she used to get really angry and aggressive and so I'd just lay there and just let her do whatever she wanted [P3]

Others noted that the size differential worked against them, meaning that they were physically unable to resist the attacks:

People say men are stronger than women, but that's not always the case, I'm a fairly small person, she was taller than me, she was bigger than or bulkier than me. [P6]

Participants also provided many examples of psychological abuse experienced. This was most often manipulation and/or persistent criticism.

She wasn't a hitter, but she was extremely manipulative with words. She put me down to the point of making me feel worthless. [P2]

Things she said of me were distorted and I said "that's not how things happened". It was put on me that my memory was poor, her memory was excellent, she always remembered correctly, I always remembered incorrectly. And I got into this pattern of really doubting myself, what was right what was wrong. [P5]

She was becoming a lot more critical about everything to do with me, to do with appearance... about not spending enough time with her, not spending enough money on her, spending too much time at work... I'd bend over backwards to try and show her that I was not the person who she was saying I was, but nothing really worked, she'd just go on to something else [P11]

For some victims this appeared to have a greater impact than physical abuse as they felt they had no defenses against or proof of this type of abuse:

So the physical violence wasn't great. The emotional and psychological [abuse]... it was torture, it was hor-

rible... the point of not being recognised by anyone as being a victim or being affected in any way. [P2]

I think she'd worked out early in the piece that I was never going to hit her back. So if anyone tells you of domestic violence being bad in a physical sense it's not that, it's emotional abuse, it's way worse. It's about that control. [P8]

So I think the psychological part of that is that if you're not prepared for it you're not equipped to deal with it, you're kind of paralysed, you don't know how to respond. [P11]

Indirect Abuse

Participants reported experiences of indirect abuse, in which their female perpetrators elicited the support of institutions to inflict further damage:

She actually went to the police... I had bruising all over my face, [but] I was the one that actually ended up getting served with the AVO (apprehended violence order). [P1]

I dropped the kids off one day and parked in her driveway, she emerged with a glass of wine and started swearing at me, she said don't ever park in my driveway, I'm f* this and f* that. I thought "oh well it's not a big deal. I was parked in her driveway". A couple of weeks later I got an IVO (intervention order) against me saying I turned up in her driveway and abused the shit out of her. [P5]

I got arrested and interrogated for an assault that supposedly took place half an hour after I was in hospital with a tube in my arm and quite literally too sick to move. But I can't get them to investigate anything at all. It feels like the state has become an instrument of her violence. [P10]

There were also accounts of the perpetrator purposefully trying to damage the victim's character and reputation:

My former partner contacted senior people at the company that I worked at, told them that I was gay, had abandoned the family and that I had mental health issues. [P5]

She accused me of having an affair with a colleague at work which was really ironic. there was no truth at all, but she wouldn't accept that. [P11]

Participant descriptions of indirect abuse seemed particularly acute when children were involved and female perpetrators manipulated state-systems to threaten or block access to children:

If I don't do what she says, she will withhold access to [the children]. I have been threatened with her saying

things like, "I'll just accuse you of domestic violence. Who do you think they're going to believe?" [P3]

Or used the children themselves to enact abuse:

As soon as she got pregnant... here was another weapon... a little [baby]. She wouldn't let me come to the scans, medical checkups. She wouldn't let me at the birth... I begged... fast forward to the birth, I got a call from the hospital... that's how I found out I was a dad. [P8]

Similar to how participants spoke about the disproportionate impact of psychological abuse, indirect abuse was regularly described as being worse than the physical abuse they endured, particularly when children were leveraged:

What hurt most wasn't being knocked on my back, wasn't being frightened that I was going to hit her. What hurts most is not seeing my baby girl, is being frightened for my baby girl. [P10]

Impact on Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental Health Issues

All participants reported a significant decline in their mental health and wellbeing because of experiencing IPV:

It really hurt me for a long time and it took me a long time to actually trust anyone... The thing is I felt inside, I felt really lonely and sad. [P1]

I used to be a happy person. Not anymore... If people say to me or if my mum says "I want my son back" I say to her "your son's dead" it's just affected everything. [P6]

For many, the impact was severe, and they reported clinically diagnosed mental illness and/or suicidal thoughts or actions:

I had a tree picked out to drive into in the 100 kilometer an hour zone. I'd drive to work every evening thinking all I've got to do is just go straight ahead here and I'll hit this tree and the only thing that kept me alive was knowing that my children wouldn't survive and have a decent life if I wasn't there. [P2]

It got to the point that I attempted to hang myself with my bootlaces, in custody. [P10]

Behavioral Coping Mechanisms

Some participants used substances to cope with their experiences of IPV:

I was given sleeping tablets, I had adverse reactions to those and [it was] affecting my ability to work, I felt

terrible. There was one medication that made me so agitated ... that I started drinking excessively, simply so I could sleep and have some sort of sense of calm. [P5]

I was dealing with a lot of stress and the way to deal with stress was smoking, so I had started smoking a bit again. [P3]

I was quite depressed; I started smoking a lot more marijuana for a while. [P1]

Reduced Quality of Life

For most participants, the IPV experience was linked to an overall reduction in quality of life with reports of temporary homelessness and social isolation:

I was very isolated, I'd sleep in my car, I even slept in the flower bed sometimes... you're just humiliated... there's just nowhere to go. Unless you're rich and you can book yourself into a hotel and have a bit of a sanctuary for the night, but I wasn't. [P8]

I basically gave all of that up. I didn't do anything, I didn't talk to anyone, really. I didn't have a social life. The only social life I had was with her and people she knew, which was problematic when the relationship ended. [P9]

Other men spoke about the lasting impact of the abuse on the quality of their future relationships:

I can't trust anybody [after the abuse]. If I meet someone and they try and get close to me, I find myself deliberately doing things to make them not want to like me more. So I have no work life, I have no social life. [P2]

Sometimes if [my new partner] starts getting upset about something my voice can change. She would say "now you're scared of me, you think I'm going to be violent don't you... I'm not your ex-wife". [P9]

I find it hard with my [new partner]... She'll just do something that I have a response to, that I just lose my erection, and she gets all upset... it's like flashbacks, particularly when she is on top, because that's the way my relationship with my ex-partner was. [P3]

Difficult financial positions often left participants more vulnerable, whether that be to their IPV situation or negative consequences associated with it:

They [friends] start to react adversely, saying, "You should just leave" and I say, "What would happen to the kids? I can't financially do it." [P4]

I do need to do more counselling. I know that. I can't afford to do it right now though. The kids need more

counselling and that's where my financial focus is - it's being able to pay for them to go to counselling [P7]

Impact on Working Life

Formal and Informal Organizational Support Experiences

Participants recalled varied experiences about the level of awareness and support they received in the workplace, either from their colleagues or their organization.

Only one person gave a rat's arse. He sort of figured it out fairly quickly and said, "Just get the kids and come and stay with us." [P4]

We've got a brand-new domestic violence policy that deals with women and members of the LGBTIQ community. There's no policy resources for men.... There was a mention of men in the previous policy and now it's gone. [P3]

While there were positive elements to some accounts, these were ultimately not adequate:

The local team has been supportive, but he's pushed it aside to the point where in later years he would say to me "oh what happened to you and the person?" and I'd have to re-explain. He absorbed it but then forgot about it and focused on how I was working I suppose. [P6]

Mostly, colleagues either turned a blind eye and ignored the signs or tried to make light of the situation:

I tried to talk to a guy at work about what had happened, and he basically just made jokes about it like, "come on man, if you can't handle a woman - you're the bitch in the relationship if you're the one getting beaten around and shit." [P1]

Formally disclosing their IPV situation at work was often not encouraged and proved unhelpful when they did:

I did [disclose], but there was the expectation that I was just to deal with it and be productive. [P3]

You bring up your personal issues, to your own peril. I really think it's what led to my redundancy. [P5]

Using Work As a Coping Mechanism

Several participants reported working extra-long hours as a means of avoiding going home to the abuse, or to manage their situation at home:

I'd work longer hours; I'd work weekends because I just didn't want to go home. Just even on the bus or in the car on the way home, just the anxiety about what's going to happen when I get there? One way to deal

*with that was working 60 hours a week, sometimes, or longer, which is not good in the long run [P3]
It made me go to work more. I wanted to work a lot more. I wanted to just stay at work. I didn't want to go home. [P9]*

Capacity to Work

Most participants described a reduced capacity to work effectively because of their IPV experience:

I was at work, but I wasn't present at work. I was distracted. I was not focused. My productivity went out the window. [P3]

I was good at what I did, when I'm not thinking of jumping off bridges... I'll never forget, we had a conference call one day and it was a couple of directors, and one guy said, "I don't understand a word you just said". I couldn't say [it], but I haven't slept... You're not functioning, you've got all this abuse going home. [P8]

The [anti-depressant] was giving me horrendous side effects, the problem with that was a dull brain, which made it very difficult to work. [P5]

For some, the impact was so severe it led to work being taken off them:

Someone else had to take over and fix [the project] up, because I got into a bit of a mental thing, I just couldn't finish it. The project was taken off me... I take pride in my work... so having had something taken off me was a bit demoralizing and definitely contributed to a general sense of failure. [P11]

Career

Some participants acknowledged that using work as a coping mechanism led to short-term success, with quick career progression and increased finances:

I've been forced up the corporate ladder and I've done crazy things... before this situation [the IPV experience] I probably wouldn't have got to where I am today. [P4]

However, more participants described the negative impact that the IPV experience had on their career including stifling their upward trajectory:

She also knew that the damage to my career had been done when I left the job before to go to [overseas] for her. So this would be job number two that would be damaged as part of that. [P7]

The time that goes into it [dealing with abuse] is massive. I could be far more effective in my business if I didn't have to [deal with] that sort of stuff. [P5]

Some tied this back to deliberate acts of sabotage from the female abuser:

Every single time I had a major interview, or I had an interview coming up, she would start an argument the night before... We would be up until 2 or 3 in the morning, shouting at each other. [P7]

She had to try and break down this [relationship with] a partner of mine in this business, and that made that business relationship very shaky after that. [P12]

Others noted that their experience of abuse led to a complete loss of ability to continue their career:

I'm pretty sure that the effects of my relationship have affected my medical health and my work life because like I don't work. I'm classified as on disability now. [P2]

If I were to try and return to work, I couldn't discharge my duties properly. I would be committing fraud upon the people that I would be working for... I don't believe in the integrity of the field anymore.² [P10]

Finances

Many of the participants were financially impacted because of their IPV experiences. For some this was related to their decline in productivity at work. For others, finances were impacted by their need for flexible working arrangements to accommodate their children. At times this meant a change in job or employment status with a subsequent negative impact on finances:

Oh yeah, I'm scarred from [the abuse]. There's no doubt about that. And because of that, I was scarred financially, pretty bad. [P12]

*I've been through a lot of jobs. I've been unemployed. Part of the problem was trying to get access to the kids. I've left two jobs because there was no flexibility from that perspective... It was hell. That impacts on the finances. You're not earning a lot of money, you're running around, and buying things for the kids. [P8]
Because I've been a little bit stressed at the moment and a relapse into not focusing on work, my supervisor has basically forced me onto working shorter hours, which means I get paid less. It's about \$400 a fortnight less, which that's a reasonable chunk. [P3]*

² Speaking to a career in the legal industry.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was twofold; first, to understand men's experiences of IPV victimization, and second, to examine the impact of these experiences, with a particular focus on men's work and working lives. Regarding the first aim, we found that men reported both physical and non-physical abuse, as well as control, and that these experiences were colored by societal (and gendered) perceptions of victimhood. Regarding the second aim, we found that men's working lives were directly impacted by these experiences, as well as indirectly through the negative impact of abuse on their health and wellbeing.

We found further evidence for the pervasive societal belief that men are unlikely victims of IPV (Machado et al., 2017; Tilbrook et al., 2010), especially of violence perpetrated by a female. This bias seemed to impact, and at times exacerbate, male victims' IPV experiences, and provides evidence for macrosystem influence on men's individual experiences of IPV. Most participants struggled at some point with identifying themselves as a victim, despite their lived experience; they instead reported feeling denial and shame. Nonetheless, in line with Berger et al. (2016) and Walker et al. (2020), the men in our sample often reported experiencing both direct and indirect abuse. The direct abuse was physical, sexual, and psychological in nature and the descriptions were severe; similar in some ways to the experiences reported by women (Fanslow et al., 2023). More unique to men were the reports of their female partners leveraging gender-biased prejudices within the police and legal system to inflict harm. Men also reported that children were used as a mechanism of control post-separation, with women using institutions to block male victims' access to their children.

We found that there was a reported absence, or lack of awareness, of targeted support services for male victims. When they did seek help from services, such as the police, domestic violence help-lines, or psychologists, men still faced barriers based on their gender. They were often dismissed, ridiculed, or accused of being a perpetrator themselves. In many cases, these unhelpful experiences were revictimizing, and intensified male victims' feelings of distress, isolation, and shame as the rejection reinforced self-doubts about their situation or left them feeling hopeless with no avenues of support. In a few instances, male victims experienced positive help-seeking experiences, although predominantly in the form of validating the victim's circumstance but not providing tangible help to lessen the impact of IPV. It may be beneficial for future research to explore the formal and informal supports available to victims in order to develop a help-seeking experience that is supportive of those who feel threatened or unsupported by current processes.

In the workplace, there was some evidence to suggest the gender paradigm remains a dominant perspective on IPV in some workplaces, reflected by participants in the current study through the lack of policies, resources, awareness, or understanding around the issue of IPV against men. The lack of overt signs of support within businesses meant that male victims generally did not seek help at work. In cases where male victims did disclose, it resulted in absent or inadequate action and was even perceived to damage career progression for some, which is consistent with fears expressed by men in other studies (Taylor et al., 2022). Support in the workplace appeared to only come from individual colleagues who noticed or were disclosed to. However, these interactions were still mixed; some colleagues offered support in the form of empathetic listening, but others dismissed or joked about their situation. These experiences are likely to reinforce male's stigma internalization (i.e., the extent to which they believe the negative stereotypes about IPV are true of themselves; (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013), and further discourage help-seeking behaviour. This finding is of consequence, considering recent meta-analytical evidence that higher workplace support is associated with lower family-to-work issues and can help at comparable levels to family support (French et al., 2018). Further, there is some evidence that male victims of IPV use the workplace to proactively seek support (Hogan et al., 2021). While our findings do not fully align with this, we add that male victims may not view the workplace as an avenue for support, but another area of life to keep their suffering silent, primarily due to a lack of visible support.

The lack of perceived support is striking when 95% of corporations listed on the Australian Stock Exchange offer support to employees experiencing IPV. Commonly available support covers confidential disclosure, flexible working arrangements, and leave access. While these supports are 'available', it is not clear how, or if, they are being pitched to male employees; the implementation of many IPV assistance programs is established within broader gender equality initiatives. Thus, it may be that some male employees perceive these supports as specific to females. Alternatively, or additionally, the traditional business perspective that work and home lives should be separate could be negatively impacting male victims' help-seeking (Gadd et al., 2003; Reeves & O'Leary-Kelly, 2007).

We found substantial evidence for spill-over between home and work microsystems. The main pathway by which IPV appeared to spill over to men's workplace experiences was through the impact on mental health, wellbeing, and subsequent coping strategies. Some participants increased their work hours in order to protect themselves by avoiding or allaying the abuse at home, as is reported elsewhere (Gadd et al., 2003) and is a similar experience to women victims, who sometimes describe the workplace as a

sanctuary from abuse (Kumar & Casey, 2020). This may provide some protective effects; Wathen et al. (2018) found that the wellbeing of working IPV victims was like that of unemployed non-victims, and that IPV victims who were unemployed reported the poorest quality of life. Some men in our study even reported that this helped them to excel at work. In these situations, it may be that the shame associated with victimization is being offset by success at work, and that this is motivating an increased pursuit of work success. Such a phenomenon is shared by women victims, who sometimes report a need to excel at work, alongside shame and low self-worth (Kumar & Casey, 2020). Overall, this partially ‘positive’ impact is novel in research on male experiences of IPV, where predominantly the impact is reported as negative (Garro et al., 2024).

Despite some short-term benefits from increased work hours, our participants ultimately described adverse impacts on their working lives through worsening IPV-related mental health issues. These also persisted following their abusive relationship ending. Participants expressed reduced productivity owing to stress, symptoms of depression, suicidal intentions, or inappropriate coping mechanisms such as substance use. As is also reported by women (Logan et al., 2007), this subsequently jeopardized their employment, leading to stalled careers and loss of finances, as organizations were either unaware or unsupportive of the male victims’ personal circumstances and instead would focus on performance issues.

Although physical abuse was an aspect of the male IPV victim experience, it did not appear to have as prominent an impact on their working lives as psychological abuse in the current group who shared their experiences. Further, none of our participants spoke about being directly victimized in the workplace (though we also did not specifically ask about this). It may be that this was perceived as weakness and not freely disclosed during the narrative, or alternatively, it may be that this experience is rarer for male victims in heterosexual relationships. Men often experience psychological, systems-based, or coercive abuse from women (Spikol et al., 2024), which can be enacted remotely. Nonetheless, the potential absence of observable victimisation in the workplace could mean that the abuse they experience is less visible to others (i.e., colleagues and managers). This may compound the perceived unlikelihood of the situation to others and make the process of disclosure more laborious for victims. Indeed, this trend runs contrary to the experiences of women in the workplace who report substantial harassment or abuse at their workplace (Logan et al., 2007), which may be why some research finds that women are more likely than not to disclose abuse (Swanberg et al., 2006; for an exception, see MacGregor et al., 2016).

Limitations

Male victims of IPV are a challenging population to access; men often hesitate to identify themselves as victims, and many don’t connect with the usual terms like ‘domestic violence’ when describing intimate partner conflicts (Walker et al., 2020). This resulted in a small sample size; the generalizability of our findings is unknown. The findings in the current study are limited to men who acknowledged their IPV experience and were willing to share their story, meaning they may view their experiences differently to those who do not recognize that they have been victimized. These findings are also limited to heterosexual men who reported on relationship experiences with women; we had no participants in gay relationships where forms of indirect abuse may be less favoured (see Mayshak et al. [2024] for a recent investigation with gay men). We also did not have any participants who identified themselves as transgender. Finally, we did not have any participants who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, who hold their own distinct narratives and theories on family violence (Tulich et al., 2020). These could manifest in culturally unique experiences for male victims of IPV who also identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Given this study was part of a larger study focused on IPV experiences more broadly, data on occupation was not collected and therefore unable to be analyzed. This is important as different occupational roles could interact differently with men’s experiences of IPV and the impact on their working life. For example, it is reasonable that there may be more stigma associated with victimhood in more traditionally ‘masculine’ roles, such as trades. Further, our narrative approach to interviewing has strength in not restricting the participants’ voice, but also means that our findings are based predominantly in what participants chose to talk about; there are likely unrecognized experiences and impacts that were not brought up.

Future Research and Implications

This study has several important implications. Foremost, targeted research is needed to further investigate this study’s proposed relationships into how IPV spills over to impact male victims’ working experience. Within our broad themes, there was also an emergent nuance worthy of targeted consideration. For example, there was the tendency for institutions and services to revictimize men who were seeking help, via unhelpful responses (e.g., ridicule, minimization). While we did not have the sample size to fully consider these preliminary ‘sub-themes’ in the current study, they may be important directions for future studies. In the case of the workplace, such revictimization may create a bi-directional spillover, whereby the experience of abuse impacts capacity

for work and the need for workplace support which then, via their inadequacy, compound the impact of abuse on men's wellbeing and hence their work capacity. Future research could test such a model.

Within organizations, research could investigate the magnitude of how these various factors impact male victims' working lives and identify where efforts are needed to alleviate these impacts. Indeed, there is currently a lack of research into men's experiences of IPV victimization in general, which creates space for gendered assumptions grounded in 'prototypical' male IPV experience (i.e., males as perpetrators). While it is certainly true that males are over-represented in IPV perpetration statistics, this should not discount men who are victimized by IPV from adequate consideration and support. There is a need for increased education and awareness surrounding male IPV victimization, to counter existing biases that may exacerbate negative outcomes and obstruct help-seeking.

Our results suggest that many men victimized by IPV may use the workplace to cope with their experiences. Thus, organizations are particularly well-positioned to provide support; many organizations will already have IPV support in place. These supports and associated policies should be specific and non-gender preferential so that male victims of IPV feel comfortable disclosing their situation, and that this disclosure is effective in translating to appropriate support. For example, if made aware and included, it is clear that almost all of our participants would have benefited from accessing family violence leave which is now available to employees in Australia. In lieu of this, or as an alternative, incorporating more confidential avenues for disclosure via the workplace might be worthwhile. For instance, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) offer a confidential avenue for men to disclose their experiences, without fear of stigma or backlash within the workplace environment, and have demonstrated positive impact on functioning (Joseph et al., 2017). Promoting confidential avenues such as EAP may contribute to the reduction in spillover by helping men to access support sooner (Adhia et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Broadly, this study demonstrates the interconnectedness between men's home and work microsystems in the context of IPV. Specifically, we found that men experience significant physical, psychological, social and economic implications resulting from victimization. Mental health issues were the primary means that IPV interfered with men's ability to work, at times jeopardizing or damaging their employment and financial security. These consequences were exacerbated through gender-biased perceptions of IPV, manifested in a lack of supports, as well as harmful responses from

individuals, institutions, or workplaces when men did seek help. It is imperative that men's experiences of IPV victimization are visible within society and organizations, to ensure adequate awareness and support is available for all victims of IPV, regardless of their gender.

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Declarations

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