



# Transformative effect of intimate partner violence against women based on sociocultural factors trapping women in a violent relationship

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## Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is the most frequent type of violence experienced by women, with devastating consequences for their physical and mental health. Due to exposure of women to the violence, their perceptions and interpretations of the situation may be distorted, making it difficult to leave the violent relationship. Exploring the obstacles that women must confront to verbalize their situation or ask for help is critical in preventing IPV against women (IPVAW). For this purpose, two studies were implemented: Study 1 included a focus group of seven victims of IPVAW and Study 2 included 550 women ( $n = 258$  suffering IPVAW and  $n = 292$  not suffering IPVAW). In Study 1, women reported that perceptions (e.g., minimization of the situation), interpretations (e.g., justifying the aggressor), and feelings (e.g., guilt) were the main obstacles in leaving a violent relationship. Study 2 revealed that participants who suffered IPVAW obtained lower scores in perceived severity, and attribution of responsibility to the aggressor, as well as higher scores in feelings of embarrassment and guilt than those who had not suffered IPVAW. No significant differences were found in risk assessed and feelings of fear. These findings highlight the serious consequences of exposure to IPVAW, requiring the implementation of preventive programs to address the distortion of reality due to the aggressor's manipulation, as well as the influence of sociocultural factors on the construction of women's roles in relationships.

**Keywords** Intimate partner violence against women · Focus group · Victims · Attributions · Feelings

## Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) comprises any physical, psychological, or sexual abuse, as well as control behaviors by a current or former intimate partner and is the most frequent type of violence experienced by women, affecting one in three of them worldwide (World Health Organization; WHO, 2020). The prevalence of physical and/or sexual IPV in the European Union was estimated to affect 22% of women at some point in their lives (European Union Agency

for Fundamental Rights, 2014). Likewise, in Spain, 14.2% of women over 16 years of age have experienced physical and/or sexual IPV, 31.9% psychological IPV, and 32.4% all these forms of IPV (Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020).

The impact of IPV on women's physical and mental health can be devastating. Specifically, women who experienced IPV could present deterioration of physical health (e.g., injuries or headaches), sexual and reproductive health (e.g., unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases), mental health (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder or depression), or even fatal consequences (e.g., homicide or suicide; Campbell, 2002; WHO, 2022). IPV against women (IPVAW) has public health costs and consequences, signifying the general wellbeing and health of the population (Spaid et al., 2016). Despite this, most IPVAW victims suffer their violent situation in silence, sometimes taking more than 8 years to verbalize the problem and/or file a complaint (Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020).

Victims of IPVAW may find it challenging to end their relationships (Caetano et al., 2005). Particularly, a macro survey conducted in Spain (Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020)

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revealed that 78.3% of IPVAW victims never reported it, and among those who did report, the percentage of reports decreased significantly when the aggressor was the current partner (5.4 vs. 25% former partners). Also, in cases where women broke their silence, they were more likely to tell other women (54.7% to friends; 36.2% to their mothers; and 25.4% to their sisters). Any action involving the verbalization of IPVAW by victims seems to have a positive impact on escaping the relationship; thus, among women who sought formal or informal help, 81.9% ended the relationship compared to 49.6% of those who never sought help (Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020). Focusing on the obstacles IPVAW victims face in leaving violent relationships and finding safety is critical to their protection.

### Theoretical framework

The patriarchal power structure and misogynistic culture are the main causes of IPVAW according to feminist theories (Bosch & Ferrer, 2000). This theory implies gender inequality, an assumption of stereotypical social and cultural roles according to sex and/or gender, contributes to IPVAW, and favors attitudes of tolerance towards aggression (European Institute for Gender Inequality, 2020). Thus, feminist theory attempts to dismantle the different ways society legitimizes IPVAW, as well as understand social perceptions and attitudes regarding IPVAW (De Miguel, 2005).

Furthermore, the gaslighting effect is fundamentally a social phenomenon that has its roots in social inequalities, particularly related to gender and sexuality, and is carried out within intimate relationships characterized by power imbalances (Sweet, 2019). It refers to the emotional manipulation of the victim by the aggressor to convince her that she misunderstands situations, sowing doubts in her perception (Stern, 2019). Gaslighting is common in IPVAW, mentally confusing and exhausting victims, distorting reality in favor of the aggressor, and hindering decision-making that would end the violent relationship (Daw et al., 2022).

In this sense, the consequences of gaslighting could be destructive for IPVAW victims, with the aggressor trying to persuade the victim that her perceptions, judgments, memories, thoughts, and assessments of the situation are highly flawed, to the extent that she should adopt the aggressor's perspective and discredit her own (Spear, 2019; Sweet, 2019). Violence against women by men might be explained as a product of social structural conditions (Hunicutt, 2009), resulting in IPVAW victims finding it difficult to leave the violent relationship due to gaslighting by their abusive partner. Also, difficulty in understanding how their partner can intentionally hurt them could lead to inconsistency-tension in them, misinterpreting reality (Grawe, 2004; Loinaz, 2014). Hence, it will be essential to explore these aspects in order to implement IPVAW prevention programs.

### IPV elements trapping women in violent relationships

Making the decision to end a relationship can be one of the most challenging choices individuals may encounter in their lives (Garrido-Macías et al., 2017). Specifically, for women in violent relationships, this type of decision is complex. Variables such as dependency (Badenes-Sastre et al., 2023a; Le et al., 2010; Valor-Segura et al., 2014), commitment and satisfaction (Badenes-Sastre et al., 2023a; Garrido-Macías et al., 2017), and cognitive distortions (Nicholson & Lutz, 2017) influence the decision-making process with respect to these relationships. Particularly, (Badenes-Sastre et al., 2023a) highlighted that IPVAW victims present greater partner-dependency, and commitment and, in this way, use less exit strategies to leave the relationship than those who have not reported IPVAW. Additionally, women who have a high degree of dependency on their partners reported experiencing higher levels of guilt and, consequently, predicted a greater likelihood of exonerating an abusive partner (Valor-Segura et al., 2014).

Among the primary factors that prevent victims from reporting or verbalizing their situation is that they do not identify themselves as victims, downplaying the importance of the situation and presenting feelings of embarrassment, guilt, or fear (Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020). In this regard, the influence of sociocultural factors as well as the consequences of IPVAW exposure in the victim's responses should also be considered to understand the complexity for victims in making decisions to end the violent relationship (Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020; Yamawaki et al., 2009).

Specifically, because of experiencing IPVAW, women may be susceptible to the gaslighting effect, altering their perceptions and interpretations of violent situations in the relationship (Spear, 2019; Sweet, 2019), potentially thwarting exiting the violent relationship. In fact, although women sometimes recognize IPVAW's objective indicators, they may normalize violence without perceiving its severity, which is one of the main reasons victims continue with or return to the aggressor (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020). Furthermore, many women who experience violence from their current partner do not anticipate that the violence will occur again in the future (Badenes-Sastre et al., 2023a), implying it an obstacle for their self-protection. Particularly, Campbell et al. (2003) showed that half of the victims killed by their partners did not believe they were at risk of being murdered. In this regard, the perception of IPVAW can vary in difficulty depending on the type of violence experienced, with physical violence being more easily recognized and perceived as serious than other subtler forms of violence, such as psychological or sexual violence (Badenes-Sastre & Expósito, 2021; Novo et al., 2016; Yamawaki et al., 2009).

Otherwise, feelings of embarrassment, guilt, or fear could be obstacles for women in verbalizing or reporting their situations (Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020). According to Puente-Martínez et al. (2016), the risk of staying in violent relationships increases with higher levels of embarrassment and guilt. Particularly, embarrassment generates discomfort and confusion in the victim and impedes action, while guilt repairs the aggressor's negative behaviors and keeps the woman in the abusive relationship. In this line, feelings of embarrassment or guilt in victims of IPVAW could make them underestimate the severity of the violent situations in their relationships as well as justifying the aggressor's behavior to rationalize situations of IPVAW that are difficult to understand (Herrera & Expósito, 2009; Valor-Segura et al., 2014). Likewise, although feelings of fear could drive women away from the violent relationship, when violence is chronic, fear makes women stay in the relationship, encouraging new violent behaviors toward them (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Puente-Martínez et al., 2016). Fear of IPV is powerful in both women who have suffered violence by their partner or former partner and women who have not. To release themselves from these negative emotions, women who have not suffered IPV could blame victims for the situation (Yamawaki et al., 2009), whereas victims of IPVAW may use strategies such as denial, normalizing the situation, or forgiving the aggressor (Puente-Martínez et al., 2016). Further research is necessary to understand comprehensively the psychological and emotional processes that IPVAW victims experience and develop tailored, specific measures that can effectively support them. Through the present study, this gap is addressed by utilizing a mixed-methods approach and, gathering firsthand accounts from women who have experienced IPV, thereby adding unique and novel data to the previous literature.

Hence, this research aimed to explore the obstacles that IPVAW victims face in leaving a violent relationship. Two studies were performed using an explanatory sequential mixed methodology. In Study 1, the IPVAW victims' experiences about their violent relationships were collected through a focus group in order to explore the obstacles they encountered in leaving the violent relationship. Then, based on the main obstacles mentioned by victims related to perceptions, interpretations, and feelings about IPVAW, a second study was carried out to analyze the consequences of the IPVAW exposure, evaluating these obstacles quantitatively through a survey of women who informed (and those who did not) IPVAW, establishing differences in them according to the sample.

## Study 1

### Method

#### Participants

A total of seven women who experienced physical, sexual, and/or psychological IPV participated in the focus group. Participants were recruited through their previous participation in the University of Granada psychosocial intervention program for children and mothers who are victims of IPVAW. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 60 years ( $M = 42.14$ ;  $SD = 13.15$ ). The educational level indicated by the participants was low ( $n = 3$ ), medium ( $n = 1$ ), and high ( $n = 3$ ). All were Spanish and their marital status was separate. Five of them reported having children.

#### Design and procedure

A qualitative phenomenological study to explore perceptions, interpretations, and feelings of the IPV relationship, as well as triggers to leave was performed. This method provides information about human experiences through descriptions provided by the people involved (Neubauer et al., 2019). In this regard, a focus group is an appropriate method to collect information about attitudes, knowledge, and experiences (Myers, 1998). Following Myers' (1998) recommendations, a semi-structured interview was conducted through a focus group of IPVAW victims ( $n = 7$ ) in 2017. The group was selected by convenience sampling based on a psychosocial care program carried out at the University of Granada for children and their mothers who were victims of IPVAW.

The categories to be explored were determined before conducting the group interview. Researchers engaged in a reflective dialogue based on previous literature, establishing the objectives of the study and the research questions for the interview (see Table 1).

The duration of the interview was 2 hours and 13 minutes. Women were provided with information about the study's purpose and gave their voluntary consent by signing an informed consent form, adhering to the principles of the Helsinki Declaration. The study was approved by the ethics committee at the University of Granada, and women did not receive any compensation for their participation. Lastly, the interview was audio-recorded to transcribe into text. Two professional psychologists facilitated the discussions in the group using a semi-structured guide and analyzed data.

**Table 1** Interview questions for focus group

1. Perceptions about the abusive relationship	<p>1.1. How did you perceive that the relationship was not normal?</p> <p>1.2. Did you perceive that you were in a risky situation? What helped you perceive risk? What situations did you perceive as maximum risk?</p> <p>1.3. Could you perceive IPVAV in other people's relationships but not in your own? Why do you think that happens?</p>
2. Interpretations about the abusive relationship	<p>2.1. How did you react to signs that the relationship was not normal?</p> <p>2.2. Did you have any doubts about the IPVAV situation?</p> <p>2.3. Did you end up believing what the aggressor argued?</p> <p>2.4. When you justified the situation, you normalized it and minimized its severity; why do you think you did that?</p>
3. Feelings during the abusive relationship	<p>3.1. Have you felt embarrassed?</p> <p>3.2. Have you felt guilty?</p> <p>3.3. Have you felt fear?</p> <p>3.4. How did you manage these feelings? What situations provoked these feelings in you?</p>
4. Triggers for leaving the abusive relationship	<p>4.1. What would you identify as triggers to leave the violent relationship?</p>

Note. IPVAV = Intimate partner violence against women. Translated from Spanish into English

### Analysis strategy

The data gathered from the focus group was subjected to a content analysis. The analysis was organized using the four main topics addressed in the script as a reference. Based on a predefined procedure, two independent coders (M.B. and A.B.) categorized the citations of participants regarding their obstacles to leaving the violent relationship in perceptions, interpretations, feelings, and triggers to leave, ensuring accuracy and reliability of the coding results. First, the researchers independently read the transcribed interview and included the participants' citations in the previously established categories. After that, they shared their results and discussed any discrepancies with a third researcher. The agreement index was calculated for the inclusion of citations in each category: perceptions ( $\kappa = 0.87$ ), interpretations ( $\kappa = 0.82$ ), feelings ( $\kappa = 0.94$ ), and triggers to leave ( $\kappa = 1$ ). At the end of the process, total agreement was obtained from the three researchers for the inclusion of citations in each category.

### Results

As per the research objectives, participants provided information about their experiences with IPVAV. In the following section, we present results from the study.

#### Perceptions about the violent relationship

In general, women showed a low perception of severity of IPVAV during their relationships, tending to normalize it even if other people alerted them:

Woman 1, "My relationship was completely normal" (Comment 1).

Woman 2, "I thought everything that happened was normal. They know how to do it so well that you don't notice the IPVAV" (Comment 2).

Woman 3, "In my case, many people told me so, but I didn't believe it. If he is your first partner and he does these things to you, you think it's normal. Lack of information" (Comment 3).

Woman 4, "Maybe the situation is not as serious as I think" (Comment 4).

Specifically, women provided information about different abuse and control situations, which were not perceived as alarm signals:

Woman 5, "He would take my cell phone and I would say that I have nothing to hide, I don't care. I didn't perceive the situation as: It's mine! Why are you touching it?" (Comment 5). "For example, I had no money and when I had to buy shoes for the child or something else, I had to pay for it somehow. He told me: If you don't comply as a woman, then... I had to do what he asked me to do. And the next day, I was having lunch with him in the neighborhood on the weekend, laughing at the table as a happy family" (Comment 6). "He was watching over his daughters, he told them: Don't go out because it's very cold. Don't go out because it's too hot. Let's go home because I want to watch TV. And I thought: He is a good father; he takes care of us! And I felt it was normal" (Comment 7). "I didn't work because he told me that he didn't want to hire someone to take

care of the daughters”. It seemed normal to me but then I couldn’t do anything without his permission. I didn’t even know how to withdraw money from the bank” (Comment 8). “He wouldn’t let me give my opinion, I said one thing and he said the opposite” (Comment 9).

Woman 3, “Even though I worked and kept the house, I could not buy a television, I could not buy anything...” (Comment 10). “I didn’t realize he was isolating me” (Comment 11).

Woman 6, “I used to say: Wow, how he cares about me! He would go everywhere with me, because wouldn’t let me see my friends or anything, but I saw it as normal” (Comment 13). “The first three months after I met him, everything went very well, without any fights, a very wonderful summer. When he started coming to sleep with me on the weekends, that’s when it started to go bad, but I saw it as normal” (Comment 14). “The first slap I did not see it as normal, but he apologized and justified himself by telling me that he thought I had been unfaithful, and I normalized his behavior” (Comment 15).

Woman 4, “The money was all and absolutely for him even though I worked for it” (Comment 16). “The beatings came and went, and I tried not to cry so that my parents wouldn’t wake up and notice” (Comment 17). “I learned how to apply makeup to remove the bruises on my face and no one in my family knew about it” (Comment 18). “At the beginning I thought my relationship was normal, I also had nothing to compare it to” (Comment 19).

However, when IPV occurred in other women, some participants did not normalize the situation and were able to perceive the severity in which other women found themselves. At other times, they can perceive IPV when they are already out of the violent relationship.

Woman 2, “I did not see her relationship as normal. He was there, there... until he took her away from her friends, from us” (Comment 20).

Woman 7, “I said to her, what he is doing to you is not normal. The girl was so manipulated and absorbed by him that there was nothing we could do” (Comment 21).

Woman 4, “I realize it now; I didn’t realize it before. I didn’t realize it until I got out of the relationship” (Comment 22). “If I thought it would happen to me again, I wouldn’t let anyone near me” (Comment 23).

Woman 5, “Now I have learned a lot, I am a person, I know what I am worth” (Comment 24). “Before, I didn’t know it was abuse, I thought it was the novelty of being married, that maybe my mother had also lived through it and put up with it, but then she calmed down because I have never seen my parents fight” (Comment 25).

Woman 3, “Now, this monster comes along, and I say hey, I could detect it” (Comment 26).

Also, women had difficulty perceiving the risk they were facing. Consequences of IPVAW for victims, children’s response to the situation, lack of autonomy, threats or attempted murder were some of the elements or situations that helped victims of IPVAW perceive that they might be at risk of death:

Woman 6, “When I went to prison for what happened” (Comment 27).

Woman 5, “When he held up a knife to me. The frightened faces of my daughters saying “Shut up, mom, he’ll kill us right here! And I thought, what movie am I living?” (Comment 28).

Woman 3, “In my case, he sent me to work; if I didn’t work, I didn’t eat. I was unemployed for 3 days and he kept me in a locked room for 3 days and kept telling me you don’t work, you don’t eat” (Comment 29).

Woman 4, “First, when my daughter was born, all hell broke loose” (Comment 30). “When I decided to leave the relationship. Then, he put a tombstone in the WhatsApp status with the date of our wedding” (Comment 31).

### Interpretations about the violent relationship

IPVAW victims’ interpretations of the aggressor’s behaviors could be distorted as a result of exposure to violence as well as previous sociocultural factors, which is reflected in the women’s narratives regarding different types of abusive situations such as physical, psychological, sexual, or control abuse:

Woman 4, “He had alcohol problems and I justified it with that. He was telling his sorrows around. There came a time when I even wondered if I was making a mistake” (Comment 32). “I worked miles away from home, I left work at two in the morning and walked home whether it rained or snowed... It seemed normal to me. Because if he had to get up in the morning to work, he wasn’t going to come at two o’clock in the

morning to pick me up. It didn't seem strange to me that he would make it difficult for me to get my driver's license" (Comment 33). "When you have only had one partner and you start with him when you are 15 years old, that's what you got, you don't know if he is more or less aggressive sexually..." (Comment 34). "My life-long friends were more his friends than mine, I couldn't tell them anything, he was right" (Comment 35).

Woman 6, "When he hit me, he tried to justify it" (Comment 36).

Woman 3, "He told me: Your family doesn't love you, there's only me, the day you leave me, or something happens you'll be under a bridge with the girls because you're not capable of anything. Finally, I really thought my family didn't love me" (Comment 37).

Woman 5, "I depended on him. He made me think that what I had lived, was not what I had lived. It was what he told me that I had lived" (Comment 38). "Many times, I would serve him last so that his food would not get cold, and he would say to me: Why do I bring the money home, so that you eat first and I can be the shit and eat last? Then I would justify myself and not do it again. Also, he would make me stand at the other end of the table" (Comment 39).

Woman 1, "I attributed it to my strong character. If you hurry, I can justify his behavior years later" (Comment 40). "Sometimes, I still wonder why. I don't understand a lot of things" (Comment 41). "Normally I would think this can't be happening to me! I want to die!" (Comment 42).

Woman 2, "I justified it to my family and hid other things" (Comment 43).

When women were asked why they justified the aggressor's behaviors, women provided information about the inexperience, lack of information, embarrassment, or sexist beliefs as factors favoring the interpretations mentioned above.

Woman 3, "Due to lack of information, especially if he is your first partner" (Comment 44).

Woman 1, "Lack of support. Nobody believed me" (Comment 45).

Woman 2, "In my case it was because of the role I had in my family. What my family inculcated in me about relationships" (Comment 46).

Woman 4, "Because women have to be more submissive" (Comment 47). "Also, because I felt embarrassment or guilt. If you didn't guilt yourself, he blamed you" (Comment 48).

### Feelings during the violent relationship

During the violent relationship, women informed feeling embarrassment, guilt, and fear because of exposure to the abuser's violent behaviors.

#### Embarrassment

Woman 5, "You don't say the first slap, you keep quiet out of embarrassment" (Comment 49).

Woman 3, "I didn't say about the bed. How are you going to tell the police that your husband makes you get into bed? The most of them do it!" (Comment 50).

Woman 4, "I have felt embarrassment in situations of violence and have justified it" (Comment 51).

#### Guilt

Woman 4, "I blamed myself, and if I didn't, he did it" (Comment 52). "I avoided going to bars and it suited him fine. Then the relationship deteriorated" (Comment 53).

Woman 5, "I was told at a women's aid service that I was mistreating my daughters because I was aware of what was happening" (Comment 54).

Woman 1, "It made me feel that I was responsible for having been a victim of violence" (Comment 55).

#### Fear

Woman 1, "I went through a lot of fear, and I have struggled a lot to overcome that fear and have a normal life. Nothing could be worse than being on the lookout for when I was going to kill myself. Uncertainty, a lot of fear" (Comment 56).

Woman 5, "I'm still scared, I'm terrified for my daughters, because we had a restraining order that is now over" (Comment 57). "Just knowing that it was time for him to come home from work made me afraid" (Comment 58). "Listening to his motorcycle or his car already scared me" (Comment 59).

Women 3 and 4, "I was afraid when I heard the door open" (Comment 60).

Women 3 and 5, "I was very afraid that he might hurt my daughters" (Comment 61).



In response to guilt, embarrassment, and guilt feelings, women used different coping strategies:

Woman 1, “What could I say if they made me feel responsible for not having acted otherwise? I didn’t tell anything” (Comment 62). “I felt he was going to kill me, and I was so distressed, without any family support... Alcohol gave me strength, took away my fear” (Comment 63).

Woman 5, “For fear that he would do something to my daughters, I would tell them to go give daddy a kiss, I know you love me, don’t give it to me” (Comment 64). “He would come in drunk at night and wake the children to scold them. Then I learned that if I gave him money he would keep drinking and disappear for a few days. It was the only way to keep him away” (Comment 65). “I have felt a lot of fear even after the relationship ended. The first thing I did when I arrived home with the car was to check that he had not jumped over the balcony to enter my house. I knew he was capable of anything” (Comment 66). “In the end, I went to a social security psychologist to tell her that I was afraid to leave the house and I didn’t know why” (Comment 67).

### Triggers for leaving the violent relationship

Although the women were exposed to different situations of violence, only some of them were decisive in their decision to leave the violent relationship:

Woman 5, “I was told I didn’t have cancer and I thought I had to fight. To think that my daughters have had to take care of me. They don’t have to take care of a mother (she bursts into tears). That gave me strength and I went to file a complaint” (Comment 68). “Also, I reported it because he was going to kill me. The frightened faces of my daughters will never be forgotten” (Comment 69).

Woman 1, “He left home and me, then, a few months later, I filed for divorce” (Comment 70). “Three friends who supported me and told me to report my situation” (Comment 71).

Woman 3, “When, one day, he came to my daughters’ school and in front of everyone he started to insult me and wanted to hit me. So, I said, I’m filing a complaint” (Comment 72).

Woman 4, “When he really believed that I was going to separate from him, then he threatened me, and I decided to report it” (Comment 73).

Woman 2, “I went to the doctor with two anxiety attacks and the doctor, without telling me anything, filed a report” (Comment 74).

## Study 2

### Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: IPVAW victims will score lower in perceived severity (Hypothesis 1a), risk assessed (Hypothesis 1b), and attribution of responsibility of the aggressor (Hypothesis 1c), as well as higher in feelings of embarrassment (Hypothesis 1d), guilt (Hypothesis 1e), and fear (Hypothesis 1d) than those who did not report IPVAW.

### Method

#### Participants

<sup>1</sup>The necessary sample size of 102 participants was determined using the G\*Power program (Faul et al., 2009) based on a medium effect size of  $d = 0.50$ , a significance level of  $\alpha = .05$ , and a power of .80, for the purpose of conducting a mean difference test. The final sample comprised 550 women, 258 of whom reported physical, psychological, and/or sexual IPV. The participants’ age ranged from 18 to 60 years old, with a mean age of 24.43 years ( $SD = 8.57$ ). Most women had university education (84.2%), and the rest vocational training (4.2%) or bachelor’s studies (11.6%). Regarding employment status, 59.8% of women were students, 35.1% employees, and 5.1% unemployed. Finally, of the 550 participants, 12.4% had children, and 72.2% reported maintaining a relationship (vs. 27.8% without a partner).

### Instruments

**WHO Violence Against Women Instrument (WHO, 2005)** This instrument assesses experiences of violence against women by a partner or former partner through 13 items with dichotomous response (Yes/No). Specifically, six items measured physical violence (e.g., “Has your partner pushed you?”), four items psychological violence (e.g., “Has your partner humiliated you in front other people?”), and three items sexual violence with or without the use of physical force (e.g., “Did you ever have sexual intercourse you did not want because you were afraid of what he might do?”). The worldwide use of this instrument is supported by previous

<sup>1</sup> Part of the sample was extracted from a broader project [blinded for reviewers].

studies (Badenes-Sastre et al., 2023b; Nybergh et al., 2013; Schraiber et al., 2010; WHO, 2005). A translation and back-translation process (English–Spanish/Spanish–English) was conducted for the instrument used in this study. Participants were asked whether they had experienced any type of physical, psychological, or sexual violence from their current or former partner(s) and were asked to respond with either “yes” or “no.” The items were grouped into three blocks, one for each type of IPVAW (physical, psychological, and sexual). Information was obtained on the type of IPVAW experienced by repeating one item three times for each type of IPV: “Have you experienced any of the behaviors listed above [psychological, physical, or sexual violence items] by your partner and/or ex-partner at any point in your life?” In this way, information was obtained on whether the women had suffered physical, psychological, and/or sexual IPV.

**Perceived severity of IPVAW** Based on previous studies (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2020), participants had to imagine that their partner performed some violent behavior (items on WHO instrument) toward them. Then, they were asked: “To what extent do you perceive these behaviors [psychological, physical, or sexual violence items] as severe?” Responses ranged from 1 = *nothing severe* to 7 = *very severe*. This question was asked three times, once for each type of IPVAW. Lastly, the three items were averaged to obtain the total score.

**Risk assessment of IPVAW** Based on previous studies (Badenes-Sastre et al., 2023a; Garrido-Macías et al., 2017), participants had to imagine that their partner performed some violent behavior (items on WHO instrument) towards them. Then, they were asked: “To what extent do you consider that these behaviors [psychological, physical, or sexual violence items] would be a risk to your life?” Responses ranged from 1 = *the experiences of violence would not pose any risk to my life* to 7 = *the experiences of violence would totally pose a risk to my life*. This question was asked three times, once for each type of IPVAW. Lastly, the three items were averaged to obtain the total score.

**Attribution of responsibility (McCullough et al., 2003)** Participants had to imagine that their partner performed some violent behavior (items from WHO instrument) toward them. Then, they were asked: (1) “How intentional do you think his behavior would be? (responses ranged from 0 = *not at all intentional* to 6 = *totally intentional*); (2) “How much is the offender to blame for what he did to you?” (responses ranged from 0 = *not guilty* to 6 = *totally guilty*); and (3) “Could your offender have known you would be hurt?” (responses ranged from 0 = *no knowledge at all* to 6 = *complete knowledge*). These questions were asked three times, once for each type of IPVAW. To apply this

instrument in our study, we conducted a translation and back-translation process (English–Spanish/Spanish–English). The three total items were averaged to obtain the total score. Cronbach’s alphas for physical, psychological, and sexual violence were .64, .66, and .67, respectively.

**The positive and negative effect schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988; Spanish version by Sandín et al., 1999)** The questionnaire included 20 items, ten of which measured positive effect (e.g., interest), and ten evaluated negative effect (e.g., guilt). Cronbach’s alphas in the Spanish version (Sandín et al., 1999) were .87 for positive effect and .89 for negative. Based on the results obtained in Study 1, we only evaluated three items of negative effect: embarrassment, guilt, and fear. Participants had to imagine that their partner performed some violent behavior (items of the WHO instrument) towards them. Then, they were asked: “To what extent would you feel [embarrassment, guilt, or fear] if your partner performed any of the above behaviors [physical, psychological, or sexual violence] toward you?” Responses ranged from 0 = *not at all* to 4 = *very much*. The question was asked for each type of IPVAW, as well as for each emotion (embarrassment, guilt, and fear). To obtain the embarrassment score, the participants’ responses on all three types of IPVAW were averaged. The same procedure was followed to obtain the guilt and fear scores.

**Demographic information** Participants were asked at the end of the survey about age, education level, employment situation, relationship status, and having children.

## Design and procedure

A non-experimental comparative study was performed. First, the Lime Survey research platform was utilized to create an online survey. After obtaining approval from the ethics committee of the University of Granada, the survey was disseminated in Spain through social networks and participants were selected through incidental sampling. The inclusion criterion for participation was being an adult woman (age  $\geq 18$ ). Participants were provided information about the objective of the study, signing informed consent according to the Helsinki Declaration and ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of their data. After that, participants were classified into two groups (IPVAW victims vs. non-IPVAW victims) based on their responses to the Violence Against Women Instrument (WHO, 2005). If the participants had suffered any type of violence mentioned in the WHO items, they were included in the group of IPVAW victims. Otherwise, they were included in the group of non-IPVAW victims. No monetary incentives were provided for participation.



**Table 2** Characteristics of the participants according to whether or not they suffered IPVAW

	Total ( <i>n</i> = 550) <i>N</i> (%)	IPVAW victims ( <i>n</i> = 258) <i>N</i> (%)	Non-IPVAW victims ( <i>n</i> = 292) <i>N</i> (%)
<b>Age</b>			
18–29	402 (73.1%)	177 (68.6%)	225 (77.1%)
30–39	99 (18%)	57 (22.1%)	42 (14.3%)
40–49	34 (6.2%)	17 (6.6%)	17 (5.9%)
50–60	15 (2.7%)	7 (2.7%)	8 (2.7%)
<b>Educational level</b>			
Less than college degree	87 (15.8%)	39 (15.1%)	48 (16.4%)
College degree	463 (84.2%)	219 (84.9%)	244 (83.6%)
<b>Employment status</b>			
Student	329 (59.8%)	154 (59.7%)	175 (59.9%)
Employed	193 (35.1%)	89 (34.5%)	104 (35.6%)
Unemployed	28 (5.1%)	15 (5.8%)	13 (4.5%)
<b>Civil status</b>			
Single	153 (27.8%)	66 (25.5%)	87 (29.8%)
Dating relationship	224 (40.8%)	107 (41.5%)	117 (40.1%)
Living with partner	113 (20.5%)	58 (22.5%)	55 (18.8%)
Married	60 (10.9%)	27 (10.5%)	33 (11.3%)
<b>Children</b>			
Have children	68 (12.4%)	37 (14.3%)	31 (10.6%)
Have no children	482 (87.6%)	221 (85.7%)	261 (89.4%)

IPVAW = Intimate Partner Violence Against Women; *N* = number of participants.

**Table 3** Correlation analysis among perceived severity, risk assessed, attribution of responsibility to the aggressor, and feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and fear

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Perceived severity	–					
2. Risk assessed	.685**	–				
3. Attribution of responsibility to the aggressor	.553**	.484**	–			
4. Embarrassment	–.055	–.008	–.032	–		
5. Guilty	–.133**	–.032	–.221**	.481**	–	
6. Fear	.268**	.450**	.285**	.176**	.176**	–

*N* = 550. \**p* < 0.05, \*\**p* < 0.01, \*\*\**p* < 0.001

### Analysis strategy

The statistics program IBM SPSS Statistics 23 was used to perform the statistical analyses. Initially, descriptive analyses were performed to explore the frequency of IPVAW in our sample recruited in Spain. Then, scores and correlations among perceived severity, assessed risk, responsibility of the aggressor, and feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and fear were assessed, differentiating by groups (IPVAW victims vs. non-IPVAW victims). Finally, the differences according to victims who suffered IPVAW (*n* = 258) and not (*n* = 292) were calculated by a Student's *t* test for independent samples to determine the existence of any differences in perceived severity,

assessed risk, attribution of responsibility of the aggressor, and feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and fear.

### Results

#### Elements related to IPVAW trapping women in violent relationships

Of the total of participants, 53.1% (*n* = 292) had never suffered violence from their partner or former partner, and 46.6% (*n* = 258) provided information about suffering physical, psychological, and/or sexual IPV. Table 2 shows the characteristics of the participants according to whether they suffered IPVAW by their partner or former partner.

**Table 4** Mean differences in perceived severity, risk assessed, attribution of responsibility of the aggressor, and feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and fear according to whether participants suffered IPVAW or not

	IPVAW victims ( <i>n</i> = 258) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Non-IPVAW victims ( <i>n</i> = 292) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% ( <i>CI</i> )	<i>d</i>
Perceived severity	6.79 (.48)	6.88 (.28)	− 2.65	.006	[− 0.15, − 0.03]	− .09
Risk assessed	6.43 (.72)	6.51 (.59)	− 1.56	.119	[− 0.20, 0.02]	− .09
Attribution of responsibility of the aggressor	5.18 (.82)	5.33(.65)	− 2.40	.017	[− 0.27, − 0.03]	− .15
Embarrassment	2.59 (1.13)	2.23 (1.30)	3.50	.001	[0.16, 0.57]	.36
Guilt	1.48 (1.12)	1.07 (1.07)	4.37	.000	[0.23, 0.59]	.41
Fear	3.30 (.71)	3.31 (.71)	− 0.13	.895	[− 0.13, 0.11]	− .01

*M*, mean; *SD*, standard deviation; *n*, number of participants

Likewise, the Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant correlations among the main variables evaluated (see Table 3).

### Obstacles in leaving violent relationships

Table 4 displays the results from the Student's *t* test for independent samples, showing significant differences between the groups of IPVAW victims (vs. non-IPVAW victims). Particularly, IPVAW victims, obtained significantly lower scores in perceived severity ( $t(401) = -2.65, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.16, -0.02], d = -0.09$ ), attribution of responsibility to the aggressor ( $t(548) = -2.40, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.27, -0.03], d = -0.15$ ), and higher scores in embarrassment ( $t(547) = 3.50, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.16, 0.57], d = 0.36$ ) and guilt ( $t(548) = 4.37, p = 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.23, 0.59], d = 0.41$ ), confirming Hypotheses 1a, 1c, 1d, and 1e. However, no differences were obtained between the two samples in the variables risk assessed ( $t(494) = -1.56, p > 0.05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.20, 0.02], d = -0.09$ ) and fear ( $t(548) = -0.13, p > 0.05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.13, 0.11], d = -0.01$ ), rejecting Hypotheses 1b and 1f.

### Auxiliary analysis

Finally, a frequency analysis was conducted to investigate the frequency of each type of IPVAW in the sample.<sup>2</sup> The results showed that of the 46.6% of women who reported IPVAW, 23.3% of them had suffered physical violence, 83.3% psychological violence, and 54.3% sexual violence. Also, differences in perceived severity, risk assessed, attribution of responsibility to the aggressor, and feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and fear according to the type of IPVAW were explored through a linear repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA).

The results indicated that the type of IPVAW influenced the perceived severity ( $F(1, 257) = 11.53, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.043$ ), risk assessed ( $F(1, 257) = 65.33, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.203$ ), feelings of guilt ( $F(1, 257) = 17.98, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.065$ ), feelings of embarrassment ( $F(1, 257) = 7.86, p = 0.005, \eta_p^2 = 0.030$ ), and feelings of fear ( $F(1, 257) = 5.49, p = 0.020, \eta_p^2 = 0.021$ ). No significant results were obtained in the attribution of responsibility based on the type of IPVAW ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Specifically, physical violence was perceived as more severe ( $M = 6.94, SD = 0.38$ ) than psychological ( $M = 6.81, SD = 0.65$ ) and sexual violence ( $M = 6.62, SD = 0.83$ ); just as it was also assessed as more risky for survival ( $M = 6.83, SD = 0.55$ ) than psychological ( $M = 5.82, SD = 1.41$ ) and sexual violence ( $M = 4.96, SD = 1.71$ ). Furthermore, physical violence generated less feelings of guilt ( $M = 1.17, SD = 1.41$ ) than psychological ( $M = 1.45, SD = 1.20$ ) and sexual violence ( $M = 1.82, SD = 1.52$ ), less feelings of embarrassment ( $M = 2.35, SD = 1.51$ ) than psychological ( $M = 2.59, SD = 1.31$ ) and sexual violence ( $M = 2.83, SD = 1.30$ ), and more feelings of fear ( $M = 3.82, SD = 0.50$ ) than psychological ( $M = 3.14, SD = 1.01$ ) and sexual violence ( $M = 2.95, SD = 1.26$ ).

Ultimately, the application of the Bonferroni test for pairwise comparisons indicated significant differences between physical and psychological violence in perceived severity ( $p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.039, 0.217]$ ), risk assessed ( $p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.816, 1.1207]$ ), feelings of guilt ( $p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.465, -0.100]$ ), feelings of embarrassment ( $p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.414, -0.066]$ ), and feelings of fear ( $p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.546, 0.826]$ ). That is, physical violence was perceived as more severe and risky for survival, as well as arousing fewer feelings of guilt and embarrassment and more feelings of fear, compared to psychological violence. Also, significant differences were found between physical and sexual violence in perceived severity ( $p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.204, 0.424]$ ), risk assessed ( $p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.622, 2.130]$ ), feelings of guilt ( $p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.887, -0.416]$ ), feelings of embarrassment ( $p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.711, -0.251]$ ), and feelings of fear ( $p < 0.001, 95\%$

<sup>2</sup> Most of the women reported more than one type of IPVAW. For this reason, the sum is different from 100%.

CI [0.676, 1.061]). Likewise, significant differences were obtained between psychological and sexual violence in perceived severity ( $p < 0.01$ , 95% CI [- 0.318, - 0.054]) and risk assessed ( $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [- 1.122, - 0.607]). Lastly, although the attribution of responsibility was not significant based on the type of violence, differences were observed in pairs between the types of violence. Specifically, significant differences were observed between physical and psychological violence ( $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [0.303, 0.606]) as well as physical and sexual violence ( $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [0.198, 0.482]).

## General discussion

The current study investigated the psychological and emotional process in which IPVAW victims are involved and its impact on their decision-making. In this regard, prior studies have noted the importance of variables such as dependency, commitment to the relationship, cognitive distortions, or feelings of embarrassment, guilt, or fear (Badenes-Sastre et al., 2023a; Garrido-Macías et al., 2017; Le et al., 2010; Nicholson & Lutz, 2017; Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020; Valor-Segura et al., 2014) in victims' decision-making in their relationships. However, as far as we know, this is the first study to analyze the IPVAW effect on victims, comparing their experiences with those of women who have not experienced IPV, facilitating greater understanding of this problem.

These novel findings offer insight into this gap, taking into account the IPVAW victims' perspective as well as the devastating effects of gaslighting to which IPVAW victims are subjected. The experiences informed by the participants in the focus group offered relevant information. Particularly, women provided information about their difficulty in perceiving the reality of the situation they experienced. The main obstacles that women encountered in becoming aware of their situation and ending the relationship were (a) minimizing the situation, (b) not assessing the risk of IPVAW adequately, (c) justifying the aggressor, (d) blaming themselves, (e) being embarrassed and not telling anyone about it, and (f) fearing for their life or their children's lives. According to previous literature (Heim et al., 2018), this dysfunctional information processing may play a crucial role for women when deciding whether to end or continue a relationship. Hence, to help IPVAW victims, the first step will be to comprehend the effects of IPVAW on their mental and emotional state and to establish prevention programs.

According to the WHO (2020), IPVAW can be prevented by mitigating risk factors. Specifically, the most important sociocultural risk factors that explain the occurrence of IPVAW are the prevailing attitudes and beliefs toward IPVAW, which create an environment of acceptance and

tolerance (Ferrer-Pérez et al., 2020). The acceptability of IPVAW, and namely victim-blaming attitudes, is still widespread, condoning IPVAW (Herrero et al., 2017). In Spain, the majority of the population still tends to think that women exaggerate the problem of male violence, and they even consider that most women file false complaints for financial gain and to the detriment of men (Sociological Research Center, 2017). These permissive and tolerant public attitudes toward IPVAW could also influence the individual responses of women involved in violent relationships (Gracia et al., 2020). Therefore, it will be a major task to make the severity and consequences of IPVAW visible at the social level as well as to train professionals who could attend to women for different services, especially healthcare centers where victims frequently go with symptoms difficult to filter to diagnose IPVAW and where health professionals are uniquely positioned to detect and prevent IPVAW (Coll-Vinent et al., 2008; WHO, 2022).

In relation to Study 2, the results confirmed the Hypothesis: "IPVAW women will obtain lower scores in perceived severity (1a) and attribution of responsibility of the aggressor (1c), as well as higher scores in feelings of embarrassment (1d) and guilt (1e)." Based on the gaslighting effect (Spear, 2019; Sweet, 2019), it seems that IPVAW victims (vs. non-IPVAW participants) perceive the severity of IPVAW less, attribute less responsibility to the aggressor, and feel more embarrassment and guilt, as a possible consequence of the exposure to the aggressor's manipulation. These differences between both women who suffered IPV and those who did not should be highlighted because the victims' confusion about the situations they are in or have experienced could put them at risk (Badenes-Sastre & Expósito, 2021) by staying in the violent relationship. Just as IPVAW, the gaslighting effect is rooted in gender inequality that fosters unequal intimate power relations. The aggressor uses gender stereotypes, structural and institutional inequalities to manipulate the victim easily by basing their arguments on the social reality of inequality (Sweet, 2019). This can be reflected in some of the quotes from the participants in Study 1: "I had no money and when I had to buy shoes for the child or something else, I had to pay for it somehow. He told me: If you don't comply as a woman, then... I had to do what he asked me to do" (Comment 6); "I couldn't do anything without his permission. I didn't even know how to withdraw money from the bank" (Comment 8).

In this regard, because of the gaslighting effect, victims of IPVAW may begin to doubt their experiences and feel powerless to leave violent relationships. To address this problem, it is essential to provide support to victims that recognizes the impact of gaslighting. This can include providing education about the gaslighting effect, validating victims' experiences, and helping them develop adequate coping strategies. It is also crucial to address the impact of

gaslighting on victims of IPVAW, helping them understand what is happening and empowering them to seek help and leave violent relationships.

Severity minimization and low attribution of responsibility to the aggressor are cognitive distortions, an erroneous way of interpreting reality (Loinaz, 2014). Grawe's consistency theory (Grawe, 2004) posits that IPVAW conflicts with women's motivational goals, leading to a state of inconsistency-tension. To alleviate this inconsistency-tension, women may choose to leave their abusive partner or alter their thoughts (e.g., attributions) in a manner that is congruent with their experience of IPV. In this regard, women who have not suffered IPV would not be exposed to this inconsistency and would therefore more accurately interpret the reality. These findings show the transformative effect of IPVAW on the individual response of the victim. Although most people consider IPVAW unacceptable (92% vs. 14% who justify it; Government Delegation for Gender-based Violence, 2014), in contrast to others forms of violence, IPVAW is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon heavily shaped by social and cultural norms surrounding the acceptability of using violence in intimate relationships (Gracia et al., 2020). It seems that sociocultural factors would reinforce the idea that there are reasons to justify IPVAW, the same reasons that make 14% of the population consider IPVAW somewhat acceptable. Thus, it is crucial to address these common reasons that contribute to rationalizing the devastating impacts of IPVAW. This will help evoke individual responses from victims, ultimately enhancing their protection.

Likewise, in relation to feelings of embarrassment and guilt, previous studies point out that these feelings are generated by exposure to IPVAW, influencing the maintenance of the relationship (Escudero et al., 2005), possibly not because of the violence itself but rather by the meaning given to the situation based on the previously internalized sociocultural construction. Embarrassment is linked to public exposure and negative self-evaluation, and guilt tends to promote in women the thought that they have done something wrong (Smith et al., 2002). Both embarrassment and guilt may make it difficult for victims to tell their situation to others as well as causing them to adopt a different interpretation of reality than women who have not experienced IPV. Taking these differences between groups of women into account will be important to understand and approach the transformative effects of IPVAW in their interpretations and responses to this issue.

The hypotheses, "IPVAW women will obtain lower scores in risk assessment (1b), as well as higher scores in feelings of fear (1f)," were rejected. No differences were found between the groups of IPVAW victims and non-IPVAW participants. Thus, according to Gondolf and Beeman (2003), at times, women may recognize the risk of IPVAW, but they may not take steps to terminate the violent relationship. In this

case, the victims' assessment of risk would not be affected by IPVAW and, other factors such as the above mentioned, should be the focus of future interventions. Lastly, IPVAW victims (vs. non-IPVAW participants) showed no differences in feelings of fear, possibly because, irrespective of whether they suffered IPVAW, women have personal awareness and fear of the personal costs of violence by men, being fundamental in creating a society in which women can live without fear of men's violence (Brownhalls et al., 2020). Therefore, both individual and collective commitment is required from public institutions to generate a culture of equality as an alternative to misogyny (Bosch & Ferrer, 2000). Furthermore, fear within the context of a relationship could have an ambivalent effect, driving women away from IPVAW or habituating them to the threatening situation (Puentes-Martínez et al., 2016). In the latter case, the habituation of victims to fear could explain why no differences were found between the groups. In this sense, although in Spain 32.4% of women reported having suffered IPVAW, only 13.9% of the total sample reported feeling fear of their partner and/or former partner. Particularly, among women who experienced violence from their current partner, a high percentage did not feel afraid, with 84.6% experiencing psychological violence, 44.1% experiencing physical violence, and 61.8% experiencing sexual violence. These percentages decreased for former partners (50.4, 19.8, and 24.9%, respectively; Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020). For a better understanding of the role of fear in relationships, more research is needed.

In sum, this work presents important implications; exposure to IPVAW has serious consequences for women, even affecting their interpretation of reality and generating negative emotions such as feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and fear. In this respect, when women are involved in IPV, social perceptions about the causes of IPVAW could play an important role. In this way, educating in gender equality to minimize the normalization of IPVAW will be a first-order necessity. Preventive programs are required to raise social awareness and make the consequences of IPVAW visible for victims. This is an essential point because it will allow victims to identify what is happening to them, and it will also help professionals who care for them (e.g., health professionals) to identify these obstacles and offer victims help. Also, institutions should consider these findings as elements to assess the risk in which the victims find themselves, giving a practical application to this empirical evidence.

### Limitations and future directions

It is unfortunate that the study did not ask women whether the violence was perpetrated by their current or former partner. According to the women in the focus group, when women have left the violent relationship, they can begin to



perceive the severity and risk they were in, changing their interpretation of reality. Also, it would be important to consider if women have received psychological help and/or treatment as a result of IPVAW because that could influence access to information and understanding the problem could minimize these obstacles. It would be advisable for future studies to explore this gap.

Although IPV affects women globally (WHO, 2020), the response to this problem depends to some extent on the cultural context, including beliefs, attitudes, and laws (Spencer et al., 2020). In this regard, the interpretation of the results of this study should be limited to the Spanish context from which the sample was recruited. Similarly, it would be interesting to balance the sample according to sociodemographic variables because despite the use of snowball sampling, most of the women who participated in the survey had a high level of education.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study suggests that perceptions and interpretations about the violent behaviors of the aggressor partner could be distorted in IPVAW victims and, along with feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and fear resulting from this version of reality, leaving the violent relationship would not be the first option. Future studies should continue research along this line to understand and adequately address the obstacles IPVAW victims face to become aware of the reality they are experiencing. Likewise, the development of effective prevention and intervention programs is necessary. On the one hand, prevention programs should address gender and power inequality in relationships, offering information on how this inequality favors the establishment of violent relationships. On the other hand, intervention programs should focus on helping IPVAW victims recognize the reality and impact of gaslighting on their perceptions, interpretations, and emotions, as well as the consequences that IPVAW implies for their lives.

## Conclusions

Exposure to IPVAW has a transformative effect on victims, affecting their perception and interpretation of reality and generating emotions such as embarrassment, guilt, or fear that would make it difficult to leave the violent relationship. Also, unlike women who have not experienced IPV, victims of IPVAW show lower perceived severity and attribution of responsibility to the aggressor, as well as higher feelings of embarrassment and guilt. Addressing these obstacles to exit the violent relationships, while taking into account the influence of sociocultural factors, will be critical to understanding individual victims' responses and to implementing appropriate prevention programs to end IPVAW.

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**Data availability** The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Ethics approval** This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of University of Granada (n°: 1522/CEIH/2020).

**Consent to participate** The authors affirm that human research participants provided informed consent for publication. All the women voluntarily agreed to participate in the research by completing the survey.

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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