



Guilt, shame, and myths about intimate partner violence in lesbian couples in Catalonia

(Culpa, vergüenza y mitos sobre la violencia en parejas de mujeres lesbianas en Cataluña)

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Abstract

To better understand certain social and psychological factors related to the experience of intimate partner violence among lesbian women, which can act as barriers to victims' efforts to seek help, we set up a non-experimental cross-sectional study using a self-administered questionnaire. Of the 128 women who took part, 83 said they were or had been victims, with the majority Spanish (83.1%), with higher education (66.3%), and indicating feelings of guilt and shame (76.3%). They also recognized the existence of

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violence in lesbian relationships (98.7%). The younger participants were more likely to report feelings of shame and to associate the violence with triggering factors, while women with higher levels of education tended to show greater awareness of guilt and the seriousness of the violence and to give less weight to external factors such as the consumption of substances. The results will help to improve the support resources for these women. This study has limitations and includes recommendations for future research.

Key words

Intimate partner violence (IPV); lesbian women; guilt; shame; myths

Resumen

Para conocer mejor algunos factores sociales y psicológicos relacionados con la experiencia de violencia de pareja en mujeres lesbianas, que pueden actuar como barreras en los procesos de búsqueda de ayuda por parte de las víctimas, realizamos una investigación transversal no experimental a través de un cuestionario autoadministrado. De las 128 mujeres que participaron, 83 informaron ser o haber sido víctimas, la mayoría de ellas eran españolas (83,1 %), con estudios superiores (66,3 %) e indicaron haber sentido culpa y vergüenza (76,3 %). También reconocieron la existencia de la violencia en las relaciones lésbicas (98,7 %). Las participantes más jóvenes informaron con mayor frecuencia sentimientos de vergüenza y asociaron la violencia con factores desencadenantes, mientras que las mujeres con estudios superiores mostraron una mayor conciencia sobre la culpa y la gravedad de la violencia y atribuyeron menos peso a factores externos como el consumo de sustancias. Los resultados contribuyen a mejorar los recursos de apoyo para estas mujeres. Este estudio encuentra limitaciones y señala recomendaciones para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave

Violencia en pareja; mujeres lesbianas; culpa; vergüenza; mitos

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1. Introduction

In order to reach a better understanding of the violence that takes place within intimate partner relationships, various typologies have been established, most significantly that proposed by Johnson in the 1990s, centered on the dynamics of power and control, which has been further defined over the following years (Johnson 2011). Johnson (2011) distinguishes principally between intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence. “Intimate terrorism” is the violence produced by the sex/gender system (Rubin 1986), in which representations of gender appear as opposites and hierarchized and which, within the field of sexual-affective relationships and through the perceptions of gender (with the myths of romantic love, including control, possession, or domination), have the potential to turn into situations of intimate partner violence (IPV). Johnson (2011) terms the violence used by some of the women who are the victims of intimate terrorism as “violent resistance,” which in most cases is self-defense. “Situational couple violence” refers to a type of violence that is not connected to the sex/gender system, meaning that it does not seek to dominate, abuse, and/or control, but is the product of badly managed emotions on the part of one or both members of the couple relationship. Johnson’s proposed typology (2011) is useful for understanding IPV, but has an important bias, as he conceives this typology solely in terms of heterosexual couples, treating violence in couples made up of lesbian women and other sex/gender minorities as invisible (Castro and Casique 2025).

The theoretical and methodological approach of this research is based on feminist principles, understanding that these situations are closely linked to the system of beliefs, values and guidelines established according to the sex/gender system (Rubin 1986) embedded in society: it is currently binary, heterosexual, and sexist in nature, leading to situations of inferiority, subordination, and discrimination against heterosexual women, but also against lesbian women (Hart 1986, Rich 1996, Ristock 2002, Wittig 2006). Violence in lesbian couples, as in heterosexual couples, seeks to dominate, abuse, and/or control victims through psychological, physical, sexual, or economic violence, either jointly or separately, following the cycle of violence (Brand and Kidd 1986, Hart 1986, Lobel 1986, Island and Letellier 1991, Renzetti 1992, Ristock 2005, Raghavan *et al.* 2019).

In addition to physical, psychological, economic, and sexual violence, which is common in heterosexual couples, it is worth highlighting other specific forms of violence that only occur in same-sex relationships and are related to the socialization of gender norms at a personal and social level, through homophobic behaviors that are, in turn, related to what has been termed minority stress (Mason *et al.* 2014, Kimmes *et al.* 2019, Trombetta and Rollé 2022, 2024, Laliga-Mollá 2023b, 2024, Trombetta *et al.* 2023, Castro and Casique 2025). Minority stress originates in prejudices, negative feelings, attitudes, or behaviors directed against a person’s gender or sexual orientation (Meyer 2003, Longobardi and Badenes-Ribera 2017), which are expressed, for example, in LGBT-phobic practices or outing and can have a significant impact in the presence of same-sex IPV (Ristock 2005; Barnes 2011; Badenes-Ribera, Frías-Navarro *et al.* 2015; Calton *et al.* 2016; Longobardi and Badenes-Ribera 2017; Badenes-Ribera, Sánchez-Meca *et al.* 2019; Donovan and Barnes 2019; Kimmes *et al.* 2019; Longares *et al.* 2019).

Furthermore, the fact that there are barriers involved in the processes of finding help makes it difficult for many victims to escape their situation and to be able to rebuild a

new life, free of violence. With regards to partner abuse in lesbian couples, it is worth drawing attention to the existence of legal, psychological, and social barriers that are distinct and interconnected, and make it difficult for many women who are or have been victims to be able to seek help or access support resources (Laliga-Molla *et al.* 2024b). The legal barriers relate to the uncertainty created by the laws, the way the phenomenon is treated as invisible, victims' lack of trust in those working in the legal system, or lack of awareness of the resources available in these situations (Irwin 2006, Hardesty *et al.* 2011, Walters 2011, Leung 2016). The psychological barriers refer to the emotions of shame, guilt, or fear of possible reprisals by their partners or ex-partners (Irwin 2008, Hardesty *et al.* 2008, 2011, Walters 2011, Di Battista *et al.* 2021). The social barriers refer to the myths and beliefs about violence within lesbian couples (Irwin 2008, Walters 2011, Register 2018). The myths about IPV can be defined as stereotyped beliefs that are used or serve to justify, deny, or minimize this type of violence, as well as to excuse the person who is abusing (Bosch-Fiol and Ferrer-Pérez 2012). One of the most widespread myths about lesbian couples is that violence does not exist, or rather that it is a spat or scrap between equals, and if violence is used, it is less common than in heterosexual couples, meaning that it is a one-off or goes both ways, as a form of mutual violence (Hart 1986, Island and Letellier 1991, Ristock 1991, West 2002). Other myths about IPV between lesbian women relate to heterosexist roles, meaning that women who abuse other women in their relationships appear physically stronger, with more masculine behavior (Hart 1986, Ristock 1991, West 2002). There is also a myth about the consumption of alcohol and drugs leading to IPV between lesbian women, which is used to justify these situations (Island and Letellier 1991, Ristock 1991).

Our previous studies (Laliga-Mollá, San Martín-Martínez *et al.* 2025) have observed that more than half of the participants (65%) in the study carried out in Catalonia at the end of 2023 had experienced or were still experiencing situations of violence with a partner or ex-partner, and that the violence was psychological in the vast majority of cases, compared to other less frequent forms of violence, such as physical, sexual, or economic violence. Psychological violence was not only the main form reported in this study but was also the one that, for the victims, was repeated most often, with these situations lasting more than a year in most cases, especially for women aged between 45 and 55. Among other findings, we observed that women without children reported physical aggression more often than those with children, while the variable of nationality also showed a significant association with physical and economic violence, both being more prevalent in the reports of foreign women, compared to Spanish women. The data obtained in this study are in line with research conducted in English-speaking countries, where psychological violence has been found to be the most common form of intimate partner violence in lesbian couples, compared to other forms of violence such as physical, sexual, or economic abuse (Turell and Cornell-Swanson 2005, St. Pierre and Senn 2010, Walters 2011, Badenes-Ribera *et al.* 2015). In the context of Spain, the Asociación Aldarte (2012) also found similar results at a national level in research that included both gay men and lesbian women: violence between partners in same-sex relationships was present in half of the cases, with a greater incidence of psychological violence.

Another study, based on the same sample and published in 2024 (Laliga-Mollá *et al.* 2024a), examined the sources of support and their relative usefulness. In contrast to

earlier research in different Spanish contexts. In contrast to previous research conducted in contexts different from Spain's (Sylaska and Edwards 2015, Di Battista *et al.* 2021) the results indicated that most of the women had told someone about their experiences of violence, although not all of them asked for help in the end. In this study, the sources of support that participants most often used were psychological services and friends, with a combination of these two sources in most cases, a finding that coincided with previous studies (Turell 1999, Merrill y Wolfe 2000, McClennen *et al.* 2002, Sylaska and Edwards 2015, Di Battista *et al.* 2021).

The aim of this study is to examine some factors related to the experience of intimate partner violence among lesbian couples, which may act as barriers preventing victims from seeking help; specifically, it analyzes two potential types of barriers faced by lesbian women in Catalonia who are victims of violence from their partner or ex-partner: one psychological (related to feelings of guilt and shame) and one social (related to myths about violence in same-sex female couples); the study also analyzes the role that certain variables play in these experiences and beliefs, from an intersectional perspective, to draw attention to the difficulties victims face in initiate the process of seeking help or accessing the range of available support resources.

2. Methodology

2.1. Technique

In this study, we designed and implemented a questionnaire in Catalonia using the application *Microsoft Forms*, with a total of 42 closed, open, and mixed questions in separate sections; it also had a preamble and introduction. After being evaluated according to the protocols of the Ethics Committee of the University of Vic-University of Central Catalonia and approved, the questionnaire was made available for three months from early December 2023 to early March 2024.

The questionnaire's preamble gave the names of the researchers, along with their institutional affiliations, with the aims and the final form of the study. The study's altruistic nature was also highlighted, explaining the benefits associated with the research and the possible undesirable effects for the participants (discomfort or unease), emphasizing that they could abandon the questionnaire at any point without explanation. They were also given an email address for any questions they might have.

The introductory material requested the participants' sociodemographic data to analyze the role these variables play in experiences of intimate partner violence from an intersectional perspective. Following the introduction, the questions were organized into three sections: 1) Typology, frequency, and duration of violence; 2) Processes of seeking help; 3) Barriers or obstacles encountered in seeking support. In this paper, we are focusing on the results of this last section, in particular on the psychological and social barriers that may make it more difficult or impossible to start the processes of seeking help.

The variables analyzed in this study were selected due to their relevance in previous research identifying psychological and social barriers in help-seeking processes among survivors of intimate partner violence in female same-sex relationships. Specifically, for the analysis in this study, we examine five questions that involve various factors that can

act as barriers preventing victims from seeking help, such as guilt, shame, and myths about intimate partner violence among lesbian women.

- If you have experienced the situations described above [physical, psychological, sexual, or economic violence within your partner relationship], have you ever felt guilty? (guilt).
- If you have experienced the situations described above, have you felt shame? (shame).
- Do you think that situations of abuse or mistreatment can occur in lesbian couple relationships? (violence).
- Do you think that abuse in lesbian couple relationships is less serious than that perpetrated by men against women? (comparative severity).
- Do you think that drugs, alcohol, or jealousy in lesbian couple relationships are factors that directly trigger the situations described above? (triggering factors).

The questions contained in the different sections of the questionnaire were created and designed with reference to other research on the processes involved in finding help, drawing on previous studies carried out in other contexts that have been brought together in recent systematic reviews (Calton *et al.* 2016, Di Battista *et al.* 2021, Harden *et al.* 2022, Laliga Mollá 2023a, Santoniccolo *et al.* 2023, Laliga-Mollá *et al.* 2024a). We were able to import some of the questions contained in these studies directly, while others were reformulated and/or placed in a Spanish context, with some further questions relating specifically to the Catalan context. At the same time, in order to incorporate an intersectional perspective, we also included the questions referring to participants' sociodemographic data, taking account of the various guidelines and studies that deal with this approach as part of research (Coll-Planas *et al.* 2021, Biglia *et al.* 2022). Given that the questionnaire for this study was developed based on previous studies and the tools used in similar research, it should be emphasized that it was not tested through a formal psychometric validation process, nor was there analysis of the reliability indices. The results must therefore be considered exploratory and preliminary, giving a first approach to the phenomenon under investigation.

2.2. Sample

The questionnaire was presented exclusively to adult lesbian women habitually residing in one of the provinces of Catalonia (Girona, Lleida, Tarragona, and Barcelona). Because members of the LGBTI+ community can be difficult to contact, and because the number of lesbian women living in Catalonia is unknown, as is the number who have been victims of IPV, we used a nonprobability sample and used snowball technique (Babbie 2004, Creswell 2013). This exploratory study helps to provide a general understanding of the issue and to guide and/or facilitate its further investigation in future research.

2.3. Dissemination strategy

We obtained a link and QR code via *Microsoft Forms* for the participants to access the questionnaire, enabling us to implement an online and in-person outreach strategy to contact potential participants. Online outreach involved sending a message introducing

the research by email or through social media to selected contacts, including a link to access the questionnaire. One month after the questionnaire was launched, and in response to the low participation rate, particularly in the province of Tarragona, we carried out in-person outreach in the city of Tarragona and in Reus. Since the subject of this study, IPV, is complex and delicate, often requiring intimacy to be able to answer the questions posed, in-person outreach involved giving selected bookshops specially prepared material, such as cards and bookmarks, setting out the research, with a QR code to access the questionnaire. In this way, the participants could access the questionnaire at a time and in a place of their own choosing.

2.4. Data selection

After the questionnaire was made available, we obtained 135 responses from lesbian women, 7 of whom did not consent to taking part in the research (5%), so that the number completing the questionnaire was 128. More than half of the participants, 83 of the 128 (65%), said that they had experienced or were experiencing situations of violence with their partner or ex-partner. In this study, we are focusing on the data given by these women who were or are “victims” of IPV between lesbian women in Catalonia. The relevant data were obtained from the answers to the questions in the section on the typology, frequency, and duration of IPV, and participants who reported that they had not experienced violence were excluded. In line with the aim of this study, we selected data from individuals who answered “no” to the question of whether they had begun the process of seeking help. In total, 76 cases were selected for analysis in this research.

Therefore, the final analytical sample included all participants who reported having experienced intimate partner violence, and analyses were conducted using complete responses to the items related to the process of seeking help and barriers. Participants with missing responses in the variables of interest were excluded from the corresponding analyses.

2.5. Data analysis

In order to describe the sociodemographic and personal profiles of the participants, we carried out a frequency analysis to determine the distribution of the sample. Afterwards, we analyzed the relations between the variables in the study (guilt, shame, violence, comparative seriousness, and triggering factors), both with each other and with sociodemographic variables. Given the categorical and ordinal nature of the variables, as well as the sample size, non-parametric tests were selected. When both variables were qualitative, the chi-squared (χ^2) test was used, and effect sizes were estimated using Cramér's V; in cases where the sociodemographic variables were ordinal, the Mann-Whitney U test was applied, and effect sizes were calculated using the r statistic. All the statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS software, version 28 for Windows. The statistical tests were interpreted with a level of significance of 5% ($\alpha = 0.050$). It should also be noted that the number of valid cases varies across analyses due to missing responses in specific items.

3. Results

3.1. Sociodemographic data of the participants

The sample, comprising 83 participants, came primarily from the province of Barcelona (69.9%), followed by Lleida and Girona (10.8% each), and Tarragona (8.4%). Most participants were Spanish (83.1%). In terms of marital status, more than half of the women were single (57.8%), followed by divorced (18.1%), married (14.5%), and separated (9.6%). The age distribution showed that the largest group comprised women between 31 and 35 years old (20.5%), followed by those between 51 and 55 (18.1%). Notably, nearly half of the participants reported having experienced discrimination based on their skin color or appearance. Detailed sociodemographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Age	n	%
18–25 years old	2	2.41
26–30 years old	11	13.25
31–35 years old	17	20.48
36–40 years old	13	15.66
41–45 years old	10	12.05
45–50 years old	11	13.25
51–55 years old	15	18.07
56–60 years old	2	2.41
61–65 years old	2	2.41
Education	n	%
Primary education	6	7.23
Secondary/high school education	22	26.51
Tertiary/higher education	55	66.27
Socioeconomic situation	n	%
Low	5	6.02
Lower-middle	16	19.28
Middle	51	61.45
Upper-middle	9	10.84
High	2	2.41
Are you in paid work?	n	%
No	10	12.05
Yes	73	87.95
Do you have children?	n	%
No	65	78.31
Yes	18	21.69
Do you have any condition that limits you physically or psychologically in your daily life?	n	%
No	75	90.36
Yes	8	9.64

Have you been discriminated against because of your skin color or appearance?	n	%
No	46	55.42
Yes	12	14.46
Sometimes	23	27.71
Often	2	2.41
Religion	n	%
Non-practicing	68	81.93
Practicing	15	18.07

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.
(Source: Prepared from research data.)

3.2. Guilt, shame, and myths: relational analysis

With respect to the perceptions and experiences reported about the violence in their intimate relationship, 76.3% of the 76 participants selected for this study indicated that they had felt guilt and/or shame. Meanwhile, 98.7% stated that violence exists in lesbian women's couple relationships. With regard to the seriousness of the abuse in lesbian women couples in comparison with men's abuse of women, only 15.8% thought that it was less serious. At the same time, 81.6% acknowledged the presence of triggering factors (drugs, alcohol, jealousy) associated with episodes of violence (Table 2).

TABLE 2

Variables in the study		No	Yes
Guilt	n	18	58
	%	23.7	76.3
Shame	n	18	58
	%	23.7	76.3
Violence	n	1	75
	%	1.3	98.7
Comparative seriousness	n	64	12
	%	84.2	15.8
Triggering factors	n	14	62
	%	18.4	81.6

Table 2. Frequency distribution of the study variables.
(Source: Prepared from research data.)

In terms of the relation between the comparative seriousness of the violence (lesbian couples as compared to heterosexual couples) and attribution to triggering factors (Table 3), we found a statistically significant association ($\chi^2 = 9.46$; $p = 0.002$). Given that 25% of the cells had expected counts below 5, Fisher's exact test was also conducted, confirming the significance of the association ($p = .007$). The effect size, measured using Cramér's V ($V = .35$), indicated a moderate association between the variables. Corrected residuals ($cr = \pm 3.1$) revealed that participants who perceived violence in lesbian couples as less serious were significantly overrepresented among those who identified triggering factors such as alcohol, drugs, or jealousy, whereas those who did not perceive such violence as less serious were underrepresented in this group.

TABLE 3

			Triggering Factors		Total
			No	Yes	
Comparative seriousness	No	N	8	56	64
		%	12.5%	87.5%	100.0%
		Cr	-3.1	3.1	
	Yes	N	6	6	12
		%	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
		Cr	3.1	-3.1	
Total		N	14	62	76
		%	18.4%	81.6%	100.0%

Chi-squared= 9.46; p=.002; Fisher's exact test p = .007; Cramér's V = .35

Table 3. Relation between the variables "comparative seriousness" and "triggering factors".
(Note: One cell (25%) had an expected count below 5. Source: Prepared from research data.)

Nationality was associated with attribution of abuse to triggering factors ($\chi^2(1) = 4.26$, $p = .039$), although Fisher's exact test was not significant ($p = .055$), suggesting that this result should be interpreted with caution. The effect size, measured using Cramér's V ($V = .25$), indicated a small-to-moderate association. Corrected standardized residuals (± 2.1) indicated an overrepresentation of Spanish participants in the "no triggering factors" category, while foreign participants were overrepresented in attributing violence to triggering factors (Table 4).

TABLE 4

			Nationality		Total
			Spanish	Foreign	
Triggering factors	No	n	14	0	14
		%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
		cr	2.1	-2.1	
	Yes	n	40	13	53
		%	75.5%	24.5%	100.0%
		cr	-2.1	2.1	
Total		n	54	13	67
		%	80.6%	19.4%	100.0%

Chi-squared (χ^2) = 4.26; $p = .039$; Fisher's exact test $p = .055$; Cramér's V = .25

Table 4. Relation between the variables of "nationality" and "triggering factors".
(Note: One cell had an expected count below 5. Source: prepared from research data.)

Regarding age (Table 5), significant differences were found for shame ($Z = -2.609$, $p = .009$, $r = .30$) and triggering factors ($Z = -2.515$, $p = .012$, $r = .29$). Participants reporting shame had significantly lower mean ranks of age, indicating that they tended to be younger than those not reporting shame. In contrast, participants who attributed the abuse to triggering factors had significantly higher mean ranks than those who did not, suggesting that this group tended to be older. No statistically significant differences were found for the remaining variables.

TABLE 5

	No (n)	Mean rank	Yes (n)	Mean rank	Z	p	r
Shame	18	50.22	58	24.86	-2,609	.009	.30
Triggering factors	14	25.25	62	41.49	-2.515	.012	.29

Table 5. Relation between age and variables in the study.
(Source: Prepared from research data.)

The variable level of education (Table 6) showed significant associations with guilt ($Z = -1.956$, $p = .050$, $r = .22$), comparative seriousness ($Z = -2.065$, $p = .039$, $r = .24$), and triggering factors ($Z = -2.096$, $p = .036$, $r = .24$), based on the Mann–Whitney U test. Women with higher levels of education showed higher mean ranks for guilt and comparative seriousness, indicating greater awareness of the severity of abuse, while they showed lower mean ranks for triggering factors, suggesting they attributed less importance to external factors such as substance use. No statistically significant differences were found for the remaining variables.

TABLE 6

	No (n)	Mean rank	Yes (n)	Mean rank	Z	p	r
Guilt	18	31.83	58	40.57	-1.956	.050	.22
Comparative seriousness	64	36.61	12	48.58	-2.065	.039	.24
Triggering factors	14	41.79	53	31.94	-2.096	.036	.24

Table 6. Relation between level of education and variables in the study.
(Source: Prepared from research data.)

The association between guilt and having children (Table 7) did not reach statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 3.71$, $p = .058$), although a small-to-moderate effect size was observed (Cramér's $V = .22$). A higher proportion of women without children reported feelings of guilt (82.8%) compared to those with children (17.2%). However, corrected standardized residuals ($cr = \pm 1.9$) did not reach significance, and these findings should therefore be interpreted with caution.

TABLE 7

			Do you have children?		Total
			No	Yes	
Guilt	No	n	11	7	18
		%	61.1%	38.9%	100.0%
		cr	-1.9	1.9	
	Yes	n	48	10	58
		%	82.8%	17.2%	100.0%
		cr	1.9	-1.9	
Total		n	59	17	76
		%	77.6%	22.4%	100.0%

Chi-squared = 3.707; $p = .058$; Cramér's $V = .22$

Table 7. Relation between guilt and having children.
(Source: Prepared from research data.)

4. Discussion

The aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of the social and psychological barriers faced by lesbian women who are or have been victims of IPV, the obstacles that make it difficult to seek help or to access support services. To this end, we carried out a non-experimental cross-sectional study using a self-administered questionnaire with 42 items, using a convenience sample and snowball technique, in which the majority of participants indicated that they had experienced or were experiencing situations of IPV (83 out of 128 participants, 65%).

The findings of this study are consistent with the literature about the obstacles faced in the processes of seeking help (Irwin 2006, 2008, Hardesty *et al.* 2008, 2011, Walters 2011, Leung 2016, Register 2018, Di Battista *et al.* 2021). First, it is important to note that the stereotyped image that tends to be prevalent in society about women victims as passive and irrational beings – especially when they do not follow the guidelines set out by the judicial system (Larrauri 2007, San Martín and González 2011, Laliga and Bonilla 2015) – gives rise to an associated stigma that increases the guilt and shame felt, and that is even more complex for lesbian women who are already dealing with a stigmatized identity (Overstreet and Quinn 2013). We were able to infer the existence of barriers in the psychological aspect of the processes involved in seeking help or obtaining access to support resources, as the majority of the participants felt guilt and shame because of the situations of intimate partner violence that they were experiencing or had experienced (73%), which is at the same level as found in research carried out in contexts that were distinct from those in Spain (Irwin 2008, Walters 2011, Di Battista *et al.* 2021).

Closely connected to the stereotyped image of this phenomenon of partner violence just mentioned are certain myths that grow up and serve to justify or minimize the violence in lesbian women couples, which coincide with some of the results of other studies (Irwin 2008, Walters 2011, Register 2018, Di Battista *et al.* 2021). Specifically, our research allowed us to observe that most of the participants recognize and identify the existence of intimate partner violence in lesbian couples' relationships (98.7%), and it is only a minority that considers these situations to be less serious than those that occur in heterosexual relationships (15.8%). This means that the participants in this study do not discount the possibility that such situations of abuse are present in lesbian relationships and, therefore, do not subscribe to the myth that denies the phenomenon and makes it invisible (Island and Letellier 1991, Ristock 1991, Renzetti 1992), which claims, for example, that these cases do not show intimate partner violence, but simply quarrels and fights between equals, because abuse only takes place in heterosexual couples (Irwin 2008, Walters 2011, Register 2018). In this regard, it is important to bear in mind the difficulty faced by some lesbian women in acknowledging the presence of such abuse in lesbian relationships, especially given the heterosexist framing of intimate partner violence (Irwin 2008, Register 2018). We should also point out, however, that this study did find evidence of a myth that justifies intimate partner violence, as a majority of participants (81.6%) considered the presence of substances to be triggers for episodes of violence.

By analysing the relations among a range of variables, we were able to observe statistically significant associations that need to be taken into account in providing support resources for these victims. The participants who considered that the abuse

found in women couples was less serious than that taking place in heterosexual couples tended to give greater importance to the origin of violence in factors such as drugs, alcohol, or jealousy. At the same time, also important was the finding that younger participants tended to report feelings of shame more often, while women in older age ranges associated the violence with triggering factors. Women with higher levels of education tended to show. Women with a higher level of education tended to show greater sense of guilt, greater awareness of the seriousness of the violence, and to give less weight to external factors such as the consumption of substances.

The existence of various legal, social, and psychological barriers clearly have an impact on the processes of seeking help, such that many lesbian women who are victims of intimate partner violence choose to deal with the situations themselves by means of managing their own emotions (Hardesty *et al.* 2008, Di Battista *et al.* 2011); in other cases, these obstacles that create barriers to accessing the sources of help may lead to situations of isolation and significantly worsen the abuse and mistreatment within the couple, leading in turn to consequences for the women's physical and mental health (Irwin 2008, Walters 2011). It is necessary, therefore, to implement public policies that contribute to raising awareness about these problems by providing information, not only about how these situations come about, their origins and their consequences, but also about what resources are available (Laliga-Mollá *et al.* 2024a; Laliga-Mollá, Badenes-Ribera *et al.* 2025).

5. Limitations and recommendations

This study focuses on examining some factors related to the experience of intimate partner violence among lesbian couples, which may act as barriers preventing victims from seeking help, but its usefulness lies not only in making this phenomenon more visible and highlighting the problems faced by women as they seek to move beyond the condition of victimhood to rebuild the life they had before the violence and take control of it again, but also in its consequences for policy. Even so, there are limitations that will need to be examined in future research on this specific area. First, there is the possibility of geographical bias deriving from the contacting strategy we used in Catalonia, where dissemination was carried out predominantly online with very little in-person recruitment, which only took place in the province of Tarragona and in urban areas (Tarragona and Reus). In this respect, it would be advisable for future research to consider ways to complement online and in-person recruitment strategies in order to reach the broadest possible group of people from different geographical areas and provinces.

If we also bear in mind that the sample is not probabilistic, that the questionnaire was drawn up on the basis of pre-existing empirical and conceptual references, and that it had, therefore, not passed through psychometric validation processes or been analysed with reliability indices, the results obtained in this study cannot be generalized and must be interpreted with caution, taken as being of an exploratory and preliminary nature, and constituting a first approach to the study of violence in women couple in Catalonia. In this context, future research should include validation of the analysis for the internal consistency of the tool, to reinforce the quality of the methodology and the comparability of the results.

Lastly, it would be appropriate to look at the different types of violence that this study includes and that were referred to in the self-administered questionnaire. This only addressed the classification of physical, mental, economic, and sexual violence in the area of emotional-sexual relationships, leaving other forms of violence out of the study, such as the cyber-bullying or cyber-violence within couples made possible by information and communication technology (Igareda 2024). Nor were there any questions about the specific violence that occurs in same-sex couples relating to concepts of gender at a personal and social level, such as interiorized lesbophobia or the threat of outing (Ristock 2005, Parry and O'Neal 2015, Longobardi and Badenes-Ribera 2017).

6. Conclusions

By carrying out this study, we were able to approach a phenomenon that remains little explored in Catalonia, partly because of homophobic attitudes, including sexism and discrimination against the LGBTIQ+ community, which has contributed to the silencing of the victims and their unwillingness to ask for help or seek access to the various support resources that may be available (López and Ayala 2011, Donovan and Barnes 2020). The framing of intimate partner violence in our system as heterosexual and sexist makes it even more difficult for lesbian women who are victims of intimate partner violence to start the processes involved in seeking help. It is, therefore, important to bear in mind that, in order to make it possible to improve the approach to and intervention in such cases – violence in lesbian couple and other sexual/gender minorities – it will be necessary to address the professional perspective at the same time, as it is not free of the stereotypes and myths surrounding this problem, with possible negative repercussions for the help offered to these victims. This means that we must not put the focus solely on the women themselves, their experiences and life stories, but that we must also investigate the obstacles that come up in professional practice impeding the provision of help. Currently, there is virtually no research in Spanish context that examines the obstacles and changes professionals face in providing support to victims (Simpson and Helfrich 2005, Merlis and Linville 2008, Ford *et al.* 2013, Hancock *et al.* 2014, Furman *et al.* 2017, Alston *et al.* 2021). We invite consideration of such research as we propose for the future to continue making progress in this area.

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