

As if living in a concentration camp: The experience of intimate partner violence as seen through the eyes of female victims*

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The aim of this paper was to evaluate the understanding of partner violence from the perspective of female victims. This study addresses intimate partner violence from a qualitative paradigm and a social constructivist approach. Data was collected from interviews with 15 female victims of violence, which was used as the basis for thematic analysis. In the contents of the subjects' narratives, four core themes and eight sub-themes stood out. The core themes were: incident-based violence, life in the world of the perpetrator, causes of the violent behavior and justification for it, and victims taking responsibility for the violence. The results of the analysis showed that the violence experienced by these victims could not be reduced to isolated incidents. Still, it was a process that included situations and behaviors that were not subject to punishment, which kept the victim in constant fear, controlled her behavior, and made her a subordinate perpetrator. In contrast, most explanations given (by the victims) for the violent behavior had the function of justifying the perpetrators' behavior and attributing responsibility to other agents – alcohol, mental illness, problems in the family of origin, or an external source of frustration. In certain cases, the women felt that they could be responsible for their own victimization as victims of violence. The results of the research indicate that intimate partner violence should be considered as a crime against identity and freedom, and that persons working with victims of violence should aim to deconstruct the beliefs that lead victims to find excuses for violent partner behavior, as well as to deconstruct beliefs that lead them to feel responsible for their victimization.

Keywords: Intimate partner violence, victims, battered women, qualitative research, Serbia

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Highlights:

- Victims experience intimate partner violence as a process in which the perpetrator keep the victims in constant fear.
- Explanations of causes of violence by victims tend to separate the violent behavior from the perpetrator's personality and to justify violent behavior.
- Participants stated that victims may sometimes be responsible for their own victimization.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to behaviors by an intimate partner or ex-partner, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors that cause physical, sexual and/or psychological harm (WHO, 2021). IPV is a serious public health problem and violates fundamental human rights (Devries et al., 2013). Thus, many institutions are involved in combating and preventing it. Although both sexes can commit violence, research shows that victims of partner violence are most often women and that the perpetrators of violence are most often their male partners (Alzoubi & Ali, 2021; Fulu & Miedema, 2015). Violence against women has many consequences in the domain of their physical, mental, and reproductive health (Campell, 2002; Dillon et al., 20213). Physical attacks can vary in intensity and severity and in some cases, lead to the death of the woman (Campell, 2002). In reproductive health, gynecological problems, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, intentional abortions, and infertility are common (Pallitto et al., 2013; Sarkar, 2008). The consequences for mental health are numerous, from fear, shame, guilt, and loss of self-confidence to depression, anxiety, sleep and eating disorders, disorientation, and suicide attempts (e.g., Ali et al., 2013; Dillon et al., 2013; Campell, 2002; Mamula & Pavleković, 2004; Stošić, 2012).

A study on the prevalence of IPV in the Middle East based on a meta-analysis of 55 studies conducted from 1995 to 2020 shows that psychological abuse is more prevalent than physical abuse, and economic abuse is the third most common type of abuse (Moshtagh et al., 2021). Regarding the prevalence of IPV in Serbia, one of the first surveys conducted on a sample of 700 respondents showed that every second woman had experienced some form of psychological violence, and every third has experienced physical assault. The study also shows that the perpetrators are often marital or extramarital partners (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2002). An analysis of processed domestic violence cases¹ showed that in over 92% of cases, the perpetrators of domestic violence were men. The most common form was marital violence perpetrated by the current or former partner (Konstantinović-Vilić & Petrušić, 2004).

¹ Cases that have a judicial epilogue.

The very meaning of violence is changeable because violence is a social phenomenon constructed by social groups according to selective perceptions that grow out of their particular position in society (Hörl, 2007). Burman (2010) noted that those who are in a position to write laws have great power in defining a phenomenon like violence because whether a particular form of behavior will be sanctioned or not, and who has the right to seek protection from such forms of behavior, will depend on how it is defined. In addition to legal discourse, media discourse also plays a significant role in constructing the meaning of violence and understanding whether a behavior should be condemned, sanctioned, or justified (Frewin et al., 2009). Also, the definition of violence can be defined by social scientists, medical and other professionals in institutions, persons who commit and experience violence, and persons who observe violence (Hörl, 2007; Hearn, 1998; Hearn & McKie, 2010), and their understanding of violence can vary significantly.

Concerning the meaning of domestic violence² (which also includes IPV) in legislation in the Republic of Serbia, from 2002, when it was first defined in the law, until today, it can be noticed that its meaning has changed. The changes refer to new forms of violence and their consequences (Janković, 2017). However, the individual experience of abuse varies and often falls outside the parameters established by these legal definitions (Metrohra, 1999).

A review of existing research on domestic and partner violence in Serbia showed that it focuses predominantly on determining the prevalence of domestic and partner violence (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2002; Konstantinović-Vilić & Petrušić, 2004), analyzing and critiquing the existing legal framework to combat this problem (Čopić, 2019), analyzing the system for protecting victims and the criminal justice response in Serbia (Ignjatović, 2011; Jovanović, 2019), the consequences of violence on women's health (Otašević, 2005), or understanding the socio-cultural context in the occurrence and maintenance of violence against women (Jugović et al., 2016). In a review of previous research, the author did not find any empirical research conducted in Serbia to understand partner violence from the position of the victims themselves. Therefore, the aim of this study was to bridge a part of the gap in the existing research and seek out a deeper understanding of the experience of partner violence from the point of view of female victims of intimate partner violence. Specifically, the research question was: How do female victims understand intimate partner violence committed by their male partners? Given that a female victim's understanding of the meaning of intimate partner violence largely determines her reaction to her experience of it and whether or not she will do something about it (Barnett, 2001), and that understanding the cause of violence affects the explanation, apology, or justification for it from by the victim himself (Hearn, 1998), the results of the research could have significant practical implications.

2 The term 'domestic violence' is used in many countries to refer to partner violence but the term can also encompass child or elder abuse, or abuse by any member of a household (World Health Organization, 2012).

Method

Research Design

This study addresses IPV from a qualitative paradigm. Specifically, we propose a qualitative research design that uses a social constructivist approach (Gerstenmaier & Mandl, 2001; Vilig, 2013). Qualitative researchers are interested in how people give meaning to the world and how they experience what is happening to them. On the other hand, qualitative research aims to understand a phenomenon concerning the meanings given to it by the research participants themselves (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Vilig, 2013). Constructivist approaches refer to an epistemological position in which knowledge is regarded as constructed (Gerstenmaier & Mandl, 2001). The constructivist approach allows us to see IPV as a social phenomenon whose meaning is not fixed but instead is subject to change and may differ concerning the position of the one who defines it (Hörl, 2007; Hearn, 1998; Hearn & McKie, 2010). In this paper, the goal is to explore the understanding of IPV from victims of violence.

Context of the Study

In terms of its socio-cultural context, Serbian society can be described as an anomic, post-war, post-conflict, and transitional society (Jugović, 2014). Some of the contextual factors important for understanding intimate partner violence in the last 25 years in Serbia are the criminalization of society; the promotion of lifestyle values supported by “models” of “getting rich quickly” and devaluation of the importance of the value of work and education; media “idolization” of famous criminals as “war patriots”; and women as sexual objects and symbols of the success of powerful men (Jugović, 2014). These global negative factors are also reflected in the functioning of families themselves, which are moving towards the detraditionalization and depatriarchalization of family relations (Milosavljević et al., 2009).

Ethical Considerations

An informed consent form, which contained information about the aim of the study, was given to each participant. Confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time were assured. At the time when this study was performed, there were no Institutional Review Boards in Serbia. The research was conducted with the approval of a mentor and a commission appointed by the Council of the Department of Psychology at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade. The research was conducted in accordance with requirements of the Law on the Protection of Personal Data of the Republic of Serbia, respecting all relevant ethical standards in the research process.

Participant Recruitment

The study was conducted in a safe house for victims of violence, located in a city in Serbia. Since the victims were temporarily housed there, the safe house represented their natural environment and where they lived. Assuming that they would feel most comfortable and safe to talk about their experience of partner violence in their own rooms, this is where the interviews were conducted, without the presence of witnesses. The study involved 15 female victims of partner violence. The number of participants was determined based on saturation criteria (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). The researcher finished sampling the participants once saturation was reached, and the new information collected did not provide any further insight into the phenomenon being examined. Table 1 presents the sociodemographic data on the study participants.

Table 1
Summary of sociodemographic variables of the participants

Variable	N = 15	%
Age		
Between 30 and 39 years	6	40
Between 40 and 50 years	5	33
Over 50 years	4	27
Place of residence		
Countryside	6	40
City	9	60
Education		
Primary school	6	40
Secondary school	7	46
Higher education college	1	7
University	1	7
Employment		
Employed	7	47
Unemployed	8	53
Children		
Women with children	14	93
Women without children	1	7

Data Collection and Data Processing

A semi-structured interview was used to collect the data. Participants were invited to speak freely about the experience of partner violence with minimal intervention or respond to questions asked by the interviewer (Esin, 2011). Before starting the main study, a pilot study was conducted on three victims of violence to reach a clearer conception of potential questions and verify the relevance of the topics to the research question. In the main study, three interviews were conducted with each participant. The first interview aimed to establish contact with participants, inform them about the research topic, and obtain informed consent. It is also the point at which the details of the second interview were agreed. This interview lasted about 30 minutes.

The second interview explored themes that reflected the research question (understanding the meaning of partner violence; recognizing forms of violence – what they consider serious violence and what is less serious, which forms of violence they give more importance to and which forms of violence they do not recognize (e.g., financial, sexual); describing the first and most severe violence experienced; describing their daily routine; understanding the causes of violence; understanding the responsibility for the violence). Table 2 gives some examples of the questions asked. The second interview lasted about 60 minutes. With the respondents' consent, an audio recording of the second interview was made and then transcribed, which created a database for analysis. The third interview was conducted in order to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the data analysis. After the researcher had conducted a preliminary analysis of each individual interview, the participants were invited to comment on the preliminary analysis results and express their opinion regarding the credibility of the researcher's interpretations (Wilig, 2013; Ber, 2001). In addition, during the interview, the participants could tell the researcher more about the topics discussed, which ones they considered necessary, and which they had left out during the second interview. The third interview lasted about 30 minutes.

Table 2
Examples some of questions asked in the semi-structured interview

In which way did your partner hurt you? Which form of violence have you experienced? Describe it to me. What do you think caused the violence, what was the reason?
What do you think can be considered violence? What do you think is serious, severe violence? How do you think violence manifests itself? What kind of behavior do we call violent?
What does your everyday life look like? Describe it to me.
Is violence ever justified, in what situations? Have you ever tried to justify your husband's violent behavior? How did you justify him?
Have you blamed yourself for the violence in some situations? In which situations?

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; Vilig, 2013). Thematic categories were not previously defined but were developed during the process of data analysis. The thematic analysis included: selecting segments from the transcripts that were recognized as necessary with regard to the research question; writing free notes on the chosen material; coding – going through the text line by line to identify units of meaning and marking them with codes; grouping different codes into appropriate themes; checking that the themes work for the coded excerpts and the entire data from the transcript; writing a final definition and naming themes and sub-themes; interpreting data and drawing conclusions based on the analysis.

Reflexivity

One of the assumptions on which the qualitative paradigm is based is that the researcher cannot be value-neutral, and therefore his/her research cannot be value-neutral either (Given, 2008). The research process and interpretation of the results can be shaped by researchers' many and varied attitudes. Being a woman herself, enabled the researcher to resonate with female survivors of violence, and empathize with them in connection with what they had experienced. From the position of a psychologist and a scientist, the researcher was able to observe and analyse the experiences of victims of violence critically. At the same time, the researcher's previous volunteer work with female victims of partner violence enabled her to acquire knowledge that could be compared with the findings from this research. All of this provided research resources for understanding the problem of violence against women. However, a researcher's resources can also represent his or her limitations and make the researcher insensitive to different perspectives. The researcher's position as a woman, a psychologist, and a provider of assistance to victims of violence could cause her to see "what she wanted to see" in the data, i.e., what was in line with her previous understanding and attitudes about violence against women. Someone with a different position could notice different patterns in the same data, so alternative readings of the text and interpretations are certainly possible.

Results

An analysis of 15 narratives from victims of violence showed that the duration of the violence was proportional to the duration of the relationship, and most of the women had experienced violence from the beginning of their marriage or cohabitation. Eight of them stated that IPV had lasted from 1 to 10 years, four noted that IPV had lasted between 10 and 20 years, and three stated

that IPV had lasted over 20 years. Three women had been victims of violence in their primary families as well. In most cases (60%), the children had also experienced violence.

In the victims' narratives about the violence they had experienced, four themes and eight sub-themes stood out.

Table 2
Overview of the core themes and sub-themes

Incident-based violence
<i>Physical violence</i>
<i>Psychological violence</i>
<i>Sexual violence</i>
Life in the world of the perpetrator
Causes of violent behavior and justification for the violence
<i>Violence as a consequence of alcohol consumption</i>
<i>Violence as consequence of mental illness</i>
<i>Violence as a consequence of problems in the family of origin</i>
<i>Violence as a consequence of redirecting aggression caused by frustration</i>
<i>Violence as an unchanging characteristic of the perpetrator</i>
Victims taking responsibility for the violence

Incident-based violence

When asked “what is violence”, the victims first mentioned various isolated forms of violence they had experienced. Their narratives were intertwined with descriptions of situations in which they had experienced physical, psychological, and sexual violence.

Physical violence is a form of violence experienced by all of the women interviewed, with severity of injuries ranging from mild to severe, life-threatening injuries. Their descriptions of physical violence corresponded to the forms of physical violence recognized in the laws in the Republic of Serbia³. The contents of the narratives were rich in their descriptions of situations containing hitting, shooting, and throwing objects, while some narratives had reports of physical violence that testify to the particular cruelty of the perpetrators.

Interviewee 1: “And he stood up, locked the door and kept beating me until sunrise, hitting my head and my back and my legs.”

Interviewee 2: “He cut my hair to here, this part that I am holding, to the skin... he put a cooking pot on my head with food in it.”

All the women also described **psychological violence**. The most common forms of psychological violence were insults, swearing, threats, complaining,

3 Family Law of the Republic of Serbia, adopted in 2005, Article 197; Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia, adopted in 2005, Article 194; Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, passed in 2016.

and isolation. In their narratives, insults and swearing were usually connected to each other.

Interviewee 4: “‘That gossip’, he called me that later on, ‘gossip, she’s pitting you against me, idiot, her mother was also a gossip.’”

The most common threats found in the narratives were threats of murder, eviction from the house, taking away children, physical injury, and rape. The perpetrators used threats to control the victims. They achieved this by causing fear that something terrible would happen to them or their loved ones if they did not act following their wishes and rules.

Interviewee 6: “Because, he kept telling me that he would cause some sort of tragedy, that he would kill me, that I must never leave him, that I’ll only be able to leave the house when I die, and at the end when I told him that the kids are what matters most to me, that only they matter in my life, he said: ‘I’ll throw baking soda in your face, you won’t even see your kids.’”

The victims often described their complaints at the beginning of a description of a violent situation. This form of violence consisted of constantly monitoring and correcting the victim’s behavior. Remarks were directed at them for some of the most banal things, and no matter how the victim acted, it was never good or correct enough. Complaints often concerned the victim’s behavior toward other people, most commonly her relationship with other men. “Why is this, why is that?” is an essential feature of this form of abuse.

Interviewee 7: “If I leave early for work... why am I going to work, if I say hello to someone, ‘Why did you say that, why did you talk to them.’ If someone comes, if anyone visits, never mind who, my mother or anyone else, ‘But why did they come, to talk you into something?’, that kind of nonsense, or: ‘Why is this spoon here, why is this plate here, why is the child sick’ ... why this, why that... everything is ‘why’, and there is always something.”

Isolation of the victim from relatives and friends also increased control over the victim, which was achieved by restricting or prohibiting their interactions with others.

Interviewee 8: “So, it bothered me, because still... I had no friends because of him, I didn’t have my relatives, it was all ...”

I: “Did he forbid you?”

Interviewee 8: “Yes, of course. Because for God’s sake, I got married, I’m a married woman and I can’t go and see my friends and I can’t go and see my uncles.”

Talking about *sexual violence* was not spontaneous. The women would only talk about sexual violence if they were explicitly asked about it. This does not mean that they did not recognize sexual violence because after talking about such an experience, they stated that it was also violence. For some of them, it was the worst and most severe form of violence they had experienced.

I: “Were you forced?”

Interviewee 2: “One million and five hundred thousand times. He would wake up at two or four in the morning, and when I told him that I didn’t want to, he would go crazy from two ’till three in the morning, completely crazy, then I would give in, and the pig would unload, and yeah...”

I: “Do you consider that to be violence?”

Interviewee 2: “Violence, without a doubt, the most disgusting violence possible, the worst... humiliating, absolutely humiliating”.

Sexual violence was the most challenging form of violence for the women, as evidenced by the long pauses between sentences and choosing appropriate words to describe certain violent sexual scenes adequately.

Interviewee 9: “After the violence he would, well... act all nice, as if nothing had happened... and then at night... well... he... when night came... you had to sleep with him, whether you liked it or not... so, first he would beat me, then I would have to sleep with him... so... that hurt me the most... it hurt me the most that it had to be like that... not like a normal man, like, I couldn’t sleep with him normally...”

Life in the World of the Perpetrator

All previous descriptions of forms of violence have been recognized as forms of partner violence in the laws that define the meaning of domestic violence⁴. However, conversations with the women revealed descriptions of events that they associated with violence, but as isolated events did not require punishment because they could not be subsumed under any form of violence defined in the law. By analyzing these narratives, *Life in the world of the perpetrator* was selected as a theme. Speaking about their lives, the women described experiences that indicated the dynamics of the violent relationships in their daily lives.

Interviewee 2: “When our kids, for example, were in the garden, if they played in the sand and got some of the sand on the concrete, I

4 Family Law of the Republic of Serbia, adopted in 2005, Article 197; Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia, adopted in 2005, Article 194; Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, passed in 2016.

would quickly go and clear it up, you know, as if I were living in a concentration camp and... like I was Jewish and the Germans were coming to look for any sort of spec, anything they could find ... so I would clear things away quickly, like cooking pots or anything that could annoy him, I would move it all quickly, I had to... move it out of his sight, so he wouldn't see it, if the kids wanted something, I would turn it around, if I saw a conflict between him and the kids, I would turn on the kids, then turn around and wink at them, then keep shouting..."

In this narrative, there is no specific violent act, but rather a description of one segment of the victim's life, in which her behavior and feelings were shaped by the anticipated reaction of the perpetrator and the fear that the perpetrator would get annoyed. Her behaviour was managed in relation to the response of the abuser and not to the usefulness of the action performed. The situation did not constitute a crime and did not contain behaviors that could be punished. However, this status kept the victim in continuous fear, shaped her behavior, and made her subordinate to the abuser. The metaphor "as if I were in a concentration camp" in the above excerpt does not indicate one violent act, but a whole way of life. It is the life of a victim of partner violence.

Causes of Violent Behavior and Justification for the Violence

In addition to the forms of violence, the victims also spoke about the causes of violence, which most often had to justify the violent behavior. For example, the victims described the violence as a consequence of alcohol consumption or mental illness, a consequence of problems in the family of origin, a consequence of redirection of aggression caused by frustration, or an unchanging characteristic of the perpetrator.

Violence as a Consequence of Alcohol Consumption

In the narratives, violent behavior was very often associated with the use of alcohol, more precisely, violence was presented as a consequence of alcohol consumption.

Interviewee 11: "Well there's no violence if he doesn't drink, but, unfortunately, it turned into him just refilling his glass in the morning."

Often, the goal of associating violence with alcohol was to separate violent behavior from the perpetrator's personality. Unfortunately, such separation had the function of justifying violent behavior.

Interviewee 12: "He pushed me, pushed me hard, I hit myself on the door, on the doorknob... it was his birthday, we threw a little party. It happened in front of my aunt and uncle, my brother and mother

... but y'know, I justified it... that's the first time I officially, in my head... come on, it doesn't matter, he's drunk..."

In addition, understanding violence as a consequence of alcohol consumption allowed them to distinguish between the perpetrator's good and the bad side.

Interviewee 13: "But, when he's not drinking and when that doesn't happen to him, he's a great guy, but when he does, he turns into a murderer."

The great guy/murderer dichotomy testifies to Interviewee 13's view of the perpetrator as a split personality. When he did not drink, the perpetrator was a good man, when he drank alcohol, he became an evil murderer. By holding this kind of understanding of violence, the victims released the perpetrator from responsibility for the violence they committed, and the culprit became alcohol.

Interviewee 5: "Our marriage wouldn't have had any problems if he hadn't started drinking. So, if he hadn't started drinking, it would have been phenomenal. He's a really good person, regardless of everything that happened, his character is good... so, my child has a granddaughter, who he loves and lives for, simply, as though they're his own, the relationship is great, alcohol is the problem... he's great when he doesn't drink, the alcohol makes him do it, just the alcohol, nothing else... but when he's not drinking, you can talk freely with him, he functions normally."

In Interviewee 5's narrative, on the one hand, the perpetrator was a man of good character, who loved her daughter from her first marriage and her granddaughter, and on the other hand, there was alcohol. This separation is so pronounced that alcohol "had come to life" and gained the ability to force someone to do something he would not otherwise do.

Violence as a consequence of mental illness

Understanding violence as a consequence of mental illness also functions to justify violent behavior and separate the perpetrator's personality into a good and a wrong side.

Interviewee 13: "So, in that moment, when it's happening, he becomes unpredictable. He doesn't know how to control himself. It's some sort of state... maybe he's ill, and nobody has diagnosed him, I've started thinking like that. Maybe it's some sort of illness, maybe he has some kind of problem in his head. Outside of that he's normal."

In her narrative, Interviewee 13 speaks of the perpetrator as an insane and mentally ill person. Such a person needed to be diagnosed and treated. In

this example, the dichotomy was between average and ill, which separated the perpetrator's good (healthy) and bad (ill) sides.

Violence as a Consequence of Problems in the Family of Origin

Linking violent behavior with problems in childhood was another framework for understanding violent behavior. In some narratives, the victims explained their partner's violent behavior as a result of issues in their families of origin, that is, their exposure to parental violence. This deterministic view of the cause of violent behavior also had the function of justifying and diminishing the perpetrator's responsibility.

Interviewee 13: "Everything that happened to us is not my husband's fault, I can't blame him, it's all a consequence of his childhood and his parents. His father is a math teacher and is very strict, that whole part of town complains about him, he mistreats everyone, students, even his own kids."

In some narratives, the victims associated violent behavior with something from childhood, with problems in the family of origin, but without a clear understanding of the nature of that connection.

Interviewee 14: "Maybe some things came about because of his family, I don't know, I believe that everything came from his family, he spends some time with his grandparents, then with his mother, then his father, back and forth, going around, and the kids use that."

Violence as a Consequence of Redirecting Aggression caused by Frustration

Here, the violence is understood as a discharge of accumulated dissatisfaction and attack on a person weaker than the perpetrator.

Interviewee 5: "But, actually, I think it all started when he got fired, I think that totally ruined him, because, first, he started working in 2001, he was born in '65, he started working quite late... and then came [company name], and three years ago, he was in the first 300 they laid off ... from that moment he became unbearable, not only for me, but for everyone, except he doesn't mistreat anyone else, he can't, they come and go, but then there's no one left but me."

In this case, Interviewee 5 understood violence to be a consequence of dissatisfaction due to the loss of a job, which the perpetrator expressed through violence.

Violence as an Unchanging Characteristic of the Perpetrator

In some narratives, the victims felt that the perpetrator's propensity for violence was a natural and immutable characteristic. They felt that violence

was in the genes of the perpetrator and was not connected with any external conditions that frustrated the perpetrator, nor with problems in the family of origin, nor with alcohol, nor with any mental illness. This understanding of violence did not provide any hope that something could be changed or improved.

Interviewee 2: “He doesn’t need a reason to become violent... I don’t know, I think something within him makes him do it, I think it’s part of his character to react violently”.

Interviewee 7: “He was born a bully, his father was the same and there’s nothing else to say. He’s just like his father, I think that’s it. It’s in his genes.”

Victims Taking Responsibility for the Violence

In trying to understand the violent behavior, the victims inevitably questioned their behavior and their responsibility for it. Some of the women spoke of their guilt for causing violence.

Interviewee 15: “It was, it was a small thing, maybe it was my fault, I blamed myself, I told myself that my first marriage fell apart so I shouldn’t behave like that, I kept blaming myself, so I told myself to keep quiet. I was supposed to turn him around, not put up with it.”

I: “What do you mean by turning him around?”

Interviewee 15: “Well, my mother’s teaching was: ‘If you want to keep your husband, you have to be a good wife,’ so something must be wrong with me.”

Interviewee 15’s guilt came from assessing her inadequacy as a woman. In her opinion, she was not doing well; she was not a good wife, which is why she was responsible for the violence. Being a good wife means changing a man, as Interviewee 15 said, to turn a man around. In her opinion, every good woman had this “skill”, and it was her fault that she did not have it.

Most of the women did not consider themselves responsible for the violence, but in reviewing their behavior, they also talked about when violence against women could be justified:

– When a woman is unfaithful:

Interviewee 7: “So, first he beat me, broke my arm, with no reason, I’m not a slut, and I didn’t do anything bad.”

– When a woman does not fulfil the traditional gender role

Interviewee 2: “I never had understanding for him; why would I have understanding for the beatings. What did I do to deserve them? I don’t leave the house, I look after the kids, I sit quietly and clean,

and he beats me. What have I done to deserve him beating me? Do I go out and leave him with the kids, so that he should beat me? I've done nothing to deserve any beatings."

– When asking “superfluous” questions

Interviewee 9: “He normally talks to you for five minutes and then suddenly starts beating you, and you don't know why, there's no reason for it, no reason at all. So, I kept quiet about it all, always quiet, I never said a word to him, never stood in his way, if he went out, I never asked him where he was going or what he was doing.”

In the above excerpts, the victims used descriptions of their behavior to contrast with behaviours related to a woman's responsibility for the violence they experienced. According to the participants, women would be responsible for their victimization: if they were unfaithful to their partner, if they did not perform tasks related to the traditional female role, or if they interfered too much in their partner's life by questioning him or asking “superfluous” questions.

Discussion

For female survivors of partner violence, naming, understanding, and defining the experience of partner violence is not always easy. Partner violence is ambiguous, it is connected with a history of violent episodes. It leads to painful and traumatic experience expressed by sadness, anger, shame, or despair, rather than being simply one episode of injury or threat of harm (Mitra, 2013). The women's narratives of partner violence in this study included stories about the forms of violence experienced and its causes and a re-examination of the responsibility for the violence on the part of the perpetrator or the women themselves. When asked what violence meant to them, the victims would first cite various isolated forms of violence. Almost all women began their story of violence by citing examples of physical violence, which is confirmed in other studies (Gill, 2004). The reason for this probably lies in the fact that physical violence is the easiest to recognize and prove because it provides material evidence (in the form of visible injuries). When we use terms for violence, such as hitting, pushing, slapping, or beating, we construct violence as being concrete and measurable. In this way, we can quickly determine the punishment for the one who commits it (Mitra, 2013).

Unlike physical forms of violence, which are specific in terms of their duration, manifestation, and magnitude of the injury, psychological violence has permeated entire narratives and the whole of their lives. Psychological violence is consciously, intentionally and purposefully carried out to inflict psychological pain (Ignjatović, 2011). Through the threats they use, the perpetrators keep the victim in constant fear that something terrible might happen, thus ensuring her obedience. A particularly harmful form of psychological violence is isolation because it leads to creating an atmosphere of dependence and control of the

victim. By restricting socializing with friends or relatives, the perpetrator distances the victim from possible sources of help and support. Separating the victim from a friend or family, either physically or emotionally, prevents a “call for help”, reinforces feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and intensifies further abuse because it remains hidden (Anderson et al., 2003). With their objections to the most banal things, perpetrators do not give the victim a moment of peace, and they indicate that the victim’s behavior is constantly monitored. All forms of psychological violence tend to undermine the victim’s identity, diminish their ability to think or act independently (Anderson et al., 2003), cause a loss of self-confidence, and impair mental health (Babović et al., 2010). As Grigsby and Hartman (1997) point out, perpetrators would not even use it if psychological violence did not have as many effects.

Sexual violence includes any sexual contact that a woman does not want and disagrees with, including coercion into sexual intercourse, sexual harassment and blackmail, and sexual humiliation in front of other people (Bukvić, 2008). The women avoided talking about this form of violence, which can be explained by their feelings of shame and embarrassment, and their patriarchal upbringing (Jugović et al., 2016). The conversation about this topic was difficult for the women. In some narratives, they would recognize it as the most severe form of violence, accompanied by a feeling of great humiliation. Also, the literature indicates that negative emotions such as a sense of powerlessness, helplessness or shame, and ongoing fear of men, as well as anger, disgust, sadness, are related to the experience of sexual violence by a partner (Crown & Roberts, 2007; Livingston et al., 2004; Zweig et al., 1997; Zweig et al., 1999).

In addition to these forms of violence, which can be recognized in legal documents, the victims also reported violence which cannot be classified as any of the legally sanctioned forms of violence. This type of violence did not constitute a crime to which punitive measures could be tied because it cannot be observed as isolated violent incidents. Still, it referred to the entire way of life of a female victim of partner violence, presented in this paper as *Life in the world of the perpetrator*. These actions do not have to be violent, but instead they control the victim’s behavior and shape her inner experience. When the victim says that she feels like she is living in a concentration camp, it refers to the experience of her entire life. Living with a violent partner means living with violence even when the partner is not present. His supervision and control are present all the time, and her behavior and actions are aimed at preventing potential future violence. This understanding of violence corresponds to what is referred to as coercive control (Stark, 2007), and it implies the association of violence with control and coercion. When violence is linked to control and coercion, abuse can no longer be causally linked to a specific violent incident, but to the victim’s experience of being caught and trapped by something other than a violent act. Therefore, to contain the entire experience of a victim of violence, violence should be defined as a crime against identity and freedom (Stark, 2007).

Related to the understanding of the forms of violence, the victims also spoke about the causes of violence that led to the justification of the perpetrators. The victims presented violence as a consequence of alcohol consumption, as a consequence of mental illness, as a consequence of problems in the family of origin, as a consequence of redirected aggression caused by frustration, and as an unchanging characteristic of the perpetrator. Most explanations for violence had the function of justifying violent behavior. This is also true of reasons given concerning violence as a consequence of alcohol consumption. When violence is explained as a symptom of alcohol consumption, violence should be “treated” with treatments for alcoholism, which shifts the focus from the individual responsibility and conscious choice to behave violently. Personal and social beliefs about the connection between alcohol and violence lead to the perpetrators using alcohol as a justification for violence (WHO, 2006). This understanding of violent behavior is widespread and very powerful, as evidenced by the fact that the victims also explained violent behavior in this way. By rationalizing, victims blame other agents for the violence, not the perpetrators (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983). Also, mental illness is seen as an external cause that cannot be controlled and leads to violence. By focusing on factors beyond the perpetrator’s control, the victims deny their partner’s intention to hurt them and rationalize the violent episode (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983).

To understand the violent behavior of their partners and justify it, the victims separated the violent behavior from the personality of the partner. This dichotomy of great guy/murderer, ill/normal provided a basis for the victims to blame other factors or agents, and not their partners for the violence. As Wood (2001) states, splitting violent behavior from the perpetrator’s own personality allows victims to describe the perpetrator under the influence of alcohol or illness as being “out of control”, and thus remain attached to his “true” nature (Wood, 2001). This cognitive dissonance is always accompanied by emotional dissonance that allows the victim to stay attached to the good side of the perpetrator despite the violence and thus justify staying with him (Enander, 2011).

Understanding violence as a consequence of redirecting aggression caused by frustration also functioned to justify the perpetrator when external, situational reasons led to the perpetrator losing control. Pressure at work, job loss, and problems with the law are examples of situations that the victims assumed cause partner violence (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Mehrotra, 1999). Understanding violence as a consequence of problems in the family of origin also allowed victims to justify their partner’s behavior. This type of justification was used by the victims when they knew that their partners were also victims of domestic violence. Then they considered a violent model of behavior to be the cause of violence. Research confirms that violence behavioural patterns may be transmitted transgenerationally and that children who have witnessed parental violence or have been victims themselves, when they grow up, are more likely to be violent towards partners or their children (Ajduković & Pečnik, 2004; Widom,

1989). Only the understanding of violence as an unchanging characteristic of the perpetrators led to the violence being attributed to the perpetrator himself. In that case, the victims blamed the perpetrators for the violence, stating that the violence was in their genes and a part of their nature.

In questioning the perpetrator's responsibility for the violence, the victims also questioned their own responsibility. Most women did not consider themselves responsible for the violence they experienced. However, some of them blamed themselves. In those cases, they would see their guilt as being due to their inability to prevent their partner's violent behavior, which is something that is expected from a good woman. According to O'Grady (2005), women take responsibility for maintaining a romantic relationship, and often hold themselves accountable in violence cases. In this case, the victim may think that the partner's violence reflects her inability to maintain the relationship, not a flaw in the partner's behavior (Towns & Adams, 2000).

The victims justified their own "innocence" by contrasting their own behavior with behavior that in their opinion could provoke violence in their partners. The participants in this study implicitly stated that a woman can be held responsible for violence if she does not behave morally, if she is unfaithful to her partner, or if she does not act in a way that proscribed by her gender role – for example when she does not do the housework or take care of children at home, or when she asks "superfluous" questions. All these "justified" reasons are the opposite of what characterizes a traditional woman – a woman who is obedient, faithful, and attached to her home and children. Such beliefs confirm the understanding that violence against women in the family is conditioned by structural and cultural factors that shape gender relations in society (Babović et al., 2010). A woman's exposure to domestic violence is deeply rooted in the patriarchal structure of society and the traditional gender roles based on it (Nikolić-Ristanović & Milivojević, 2000; Miletić-Stepanović, 2002). Violence against women in conventional ideology does not have the character of a dysfunction and of a disruption of family relations; on the contrary, a man is given the power and right to discipline a woman's behavior (Miletić-Stepanović, 2002). Such beliefs are deeply rooted, as evidenced by the fact that the victims themselves saw the legitimacy of violent behavior when gender norms are not respected.

Limitations and Recommendations for the Future

Although the study makes an essential contribution to understanding IPV from the victim's perspective, this study has some of the limitations commonly reported in qualitative designs. Since the sample consisted of women accommodated in a single safe house in Serbia, global inferences are very limited. Women are accommodated in safe houses immediately after leaving their abusive partner, and if they have nowhere else to go, and this also contributes to the limited possibilities for inference. It would be helpful to expand the research to include in the sample women who have better social support, and who can

talk about the violence experienced from a more significant time distance away. Another limitation of this study may stem from potential researcher bias. The researcher had a constructivist approach to the data analysis, accepting the possibility that her positions would shape the reading and interpretation of the material. It would be beneficial to access the data from a different, for example, phenomenological, approach and compare the findings with the results of this research. Finally, the results of this research would be significantly supplemented by an analysis of the understanding of violence by the perpetrators of violence themselves. In this way, the perspective of both parties involved –the victims and perpetrators – would be more clearly understood, which could provide important data on the similarities and differences related to defining the meaning of violence and attributing responsibility and guilt for violence in a relationship. Such insights would be necessary for designing prevention programs to combat this form of violence.

Conclusion

Victims' experience IPV not as isolated violent incidents but as a process. The analysis shows that partner violence cannot be observed only in terms of clearly defined violent actions, which have a beginning and end, but rather that the overall dynamics of the relationship, in which power and control dominate, must also be considered. Otherwise, the full meaning of intimate partner violence will not be covered as perceived by the victims. This means that in determining the meaning of IPV one should find a balance between definitions that are, on the one hand, useful for scientific and practical purposes, and on the other hand, reflect the social reality and the feelings of the people involved. This is a necessary task, but at the same time, it is a very demanding and complicated one (Hörl, 2007) for those who are in a position to define the meaning of intimate partner violence. In such situations are legislators, scientific researchers and professionals who support victims of violence.

The victims presented violence as a consequence of alcohol consumption, as a consequence of mental illness, as a consequence of problems in the family of origin, as a consequence of redirected aggression caused by frustration, and as an unchanging characteristic of the perpetrator. Most of explanations of causes of violence by victims tend to separate the violent behavior from the perpetrator's personality and to justify violent behavior. Also, participants stated that victims may sometimes be responsible for their own victimization. These findings on how the victims understand partner violence are important for those who provide them with help and protection. Providers should consider IPV as a crime against identity and freedom. They should help the victims understand the dynamics of violent partnerships and the control mechanisms used by perpetrators. Finally, they should work with victims of violence to deconstruct beliefs that lead victims to find excuses for violent partner behavior and deconstruct ideas that lead them to feel responsible for their victimization.

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Kao da živim u koncentracionom logoru: Iskustva nasilja od strane romantičnog partnera viđena iz ugla žena žrtava

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Cilj ovog rada je bio da se proceni razumevanje nasilja u bliskim partnerskim vezama iz ugla žrtava ženskog pola. U istraživanju je pristupljeno temi partnerskog nasilja iz ugla kvalitativne paradigme i socio-konstruktivističkog pristupa. Podaci su prikupljeni kroz 15 intervjuja sa ženama žrtvama nasilja, a potom su ovi podaci korišćeni kao osnova za tematsku analizu. Iz sadržaja priča ispitanica izdvojene su četiri glavne teme i osam podtema. Glavne teme su bile: nasilje bazirano na događajima (eng. incident-based violence), život u svetu počinioca (nasilja, prim. prev.), uzroci i opravdanja za nasilno ponašanje i preuzimanje odgovornosti za nasilje od strane žrtava. Rezultati analize pokazuju da se nasilje koje doživljavaju žrtve ne može svesti na izolovane događaje. Takođe, nasilje koje su žrtve opisale je proces koji je uključivao i situacije i ponašanja koja nisu kažnjiva po zakonu, koja drže žrtvu u stanju konstantnog straha, kontrolišu njeno ponašanje i koje su je činile potčinjenom počiniocu. Nasuprot tome, najveći deo objašnjenja nasilnog ponašanja (koja su dale žrtve) imao je funkciju opravdavanja počiničevog ponašanja i pripisivanja odgovornosti za to ponašanje drugim stvarima – alkoholu, mentalnoj bolesti, porodici porekla ili spoljašnjem izvoru frustracije. U pojedinim slučajevima su žene osećale da one mogu biti odgovorne za svoju sopstvenu viktimizaciju, kao žrtve nasilja. Rezultati ovog istraživanja ukazuju na to da se nasilje u bliskim partnerskim vezama može smatrati zločinom protiv identiteta i slobode, i da osobe koje rade sa žrtvama nasilja treba da pažnju posvete i tome da se dekonstruišu uverenja koja su dovela do toga da žrtva nasilja nalazi opravdanje za nasilno ponašanje svog partnera, kao i da se radi na dekonstrukciji uverenja koja ih vode ka tome da se osećaju odgovornima za svoju viktimizaciju.

Ključne reči: nasilje u bliskim partnerskim vezama, žrtve, pretučene (eng. Battered) žene, kvalitativno istraživanje, Srbija

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