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Abstract

Intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) is a health problem of epidemic proportions throughout the world, and also in Spain. This violence has consequences on health and may even result in death (e.g. intimate partner femicides). Unfortunately, many cases of IPVAW are not reported, and legal complaints of violent abuse are not made in all cases. In fact, in Europe, only about one third of the victims of partner violence (and only about 26% in Spain) had previously contacted either the police or any other organization. And the available information reveals a similar lack of previous legal complaints in the case of intimate partner femicides.

This work focuses on analysing intimate partner femicides in Spain, reflecting on the low reporting rates of legal complaints observed in these cases, and on the reasons why intimate partner femicide victims have or have not filed a previous complaint. Particularly, we present and analyse secondary data about the occurrence of this type of femicide, and about the rates of legal complaints in these cases. We also reflect on strategies to improve the knowledge about why victims of intimate partner femicide have not filed a previous complaint.

Key words: femicide; intimate partner violence; legal complaints.

Femicide, intimate partner violence and legal complaints in Spain

Introduction

As different studies have shown, between 15% and 75% of women experience physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner at some time in their lives. We can therefore assert that intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) is a health problem of epidemic proportions throughout the world (Devries et al., 2013; FRA, 2014; Garcia-Moreno, Pallito, Devries, Stöckl, Watts, & Abrams, 2013). In Europe this violence affects approximately 20-30% of women at some time in their lives (FRA, 2014; García-Moreno et al., 2013). And in Spain, while surveys show considerable variability (Ferrer, Bosch, & Riera, 2006) they demonstrate that between 11% and 25% of Spanish women have experienced IPVAW at some time in their lives, and between 3% and 15% have experienced it in the previous year (FRA, 2014; GDGV, 2014; Ministry of Health, Social Services, and Equality, 2012; Ruiz-Pérez et al., 2010). This violence has consequences for physical, mental and social health, and also fatal consequences, including homicides or femicides, suicides, maternal mortality and deaths related to HIV/AIDS (García-Moreno et al., 2013).

A specific form of IPVAW that is of great concern in national and international policy is that of intimate partner femicide. The definition introduced by Diana Russell in 1976 (Russell, 2013), and recognized by the Vienna Declaration on Femicide (UN, 2012), consider that femicide is the killing of women and girls because of their gender. Nowadays, this concept is widely used in Europe in sociological and criminology analyses and by the mass media (Marcuello, Corradi, Weil, & Boira, 2016; Spinelli, 2011, 2013). Femicide can take the form of, inter alia, the murder of women as a result of intimate partner violence, i. e. intimate partner femicides, in accordance with the terminology used by UN Special Rapporteur on VAW (Corradi, Marcuello, Boira, & Weil, 2016; Manjoo, 2012). As this UN rapport points out, femicide can also include killings of women due to accusations of sorcery/witchcraft, killings of women and girls in the name of 'honour', or in the context of armed conflict, dowry-related killings of women and girls, killings of aboriginal and indigenous women, extreme forms of violent killings of women, killings as a result of sexual orientation and gender identity, or other forms of gender-

related killings of women and girls, as sati in India or female infanticide. In this sense, femicide should be considered an intersectional feminist issue.

The most overarching paradigm used to understand this problem is that of the feminist perspective (Taylor & Jasinski, 2011). As Freysteinsdóttir (2017) or Messerschmidt (2017) point out, radical feminism advanced a structural and mono-causal explanation for gender inequality and femicide that concentrated on patriarchy, arguing that femicide is simply one of the oppressive dangers girls and women face in a male-dominated, patriarchal society. And socialist feminists sought to conceptualize the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism, of gender and class inequality, and how that structural intersection impacts social action, such as femicide. In fact, the term femicide was proposed as an alternative to the gender-neutral term of homicide, a term which overlooks the realities of inequality, oppression and systematic violence against women, and it appeared in the 1970s as part of the struggle of the feminist movement to name their own experiences and create a form of resistance to this fatal form of violence (Russell, 2013).

Despite the high prevalence of IPVAW and intimate partner femicides, most incidents are seldom reported to the authorities (Gracia, García, & Lila, 2009; Spinelli, 2011). In fact, since most women do not report violence and do not feel encouraged to do so by systems that are often seen as unsupportive, official criminal justice data are only able to record those cases that are reported (FRA, 2014). And this means that policy and practical responses to address violence against women are not always informed by comprehensive evidence. Besides, under-report violence usually does not permit to access both criminal and civil remedies, and the establishment of effective protection, support and rehabilitation services for victims and survivors of violence (Manjoo, 2012). For instance, Spanish law provides for both restraining measures for abusers and protection for the victims, but these legal mechanisms can only be invoked if women report their abusers (Gonzalez & Santana, 2012). In this context, this work is specifically focused on analysing the intimate partner femicides in Spain, reflecting on the low reporting rates of legal complaints observed in these cases, as well as on the reasons why victims of intimate partner femicide have or have not previously filed a complaint. To accomplish this objective, we present and analyse secondary data about the

occurrence of this type of femicide and about the rates of legal complaints in these cases, and we reflect on the strategies to improve knowledge about why victims of intimate partner femicide do not file a previous complaint.

The prevalence of intimate partner femicides

Beyond their variability and the controversy as to the most appropriate criteria and methodology for their collection (Stöckl et al., 2013; Vives-Cases et al., 2016), the data show that intimate partner violence is a major cause of female homicides in a large number of countries. In this regard, a global systematic review, carried out by the WHO (García-Moreno et al., 2013; Stöckl et al., 2013) and including available data from 66 countries, shows that across the countries where data were compiled, 13.5% of all homicides were committed by an intimate partner and 38.6% of female homicides were perpetrated by an intimate partner (range 30.8–45.3), with the rate in high-income countries being 41.2% (range 30.8–44.5). Specifically, studies from Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa, United Kingdom or the United States show that 40-70% of female murders are linked to intimate partner violence (Cooper & Smith, 2011; Me, 2013; Norris, 2013).

In Europe, available data for lethal violence demonstrate that in 2008, half of female victims were murdered by family members (35% by spouses or ex-spouses and 17% by relatives) (Me, 2013). In this same sense, Corradi and Stöckl (2014), utilizing national statistics, explore data on intimate partner femicides in 10 European countries (Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK) and conclude that homicide is an important cause of premature mortality, with intimate partners committing approximately one in seven homicides.

In Spain, the work carried out by the State Observatory on Violence against Women (GDGV, 2013a, 2014; Women's Institute, 2008) offers reliable data dating back to 1999. This femicide data reveal that between 1999 and 2017, 1,141 women in Spain died at the hands of their intimate partners or ex-partners (about 60 women are killed annually [e.g., female homicides range from 44 in 2001 and 76 in 2008]), and the number of cases of femicides due to IPVAW represents close to 50% of the cases of homicides of women registered in Spanish official statistics (Vives-Cases & Sanz-Barbero, 2017).

Specifically, Figure 1 presents the annual distribution from 1999 to 2017 of the number of intimate partner femicides in Spain, along with the rate per million women over 15 years old that these represent. These rates were calculated according to the indications of Vives-Cases, Álvarez-Dardet, Torrubiano, & Gil (2008), as the proportion between the number of women murdered by their partner or ex-partner in one year and the number of women over 15 years old registered in the municipal register on 1 January of the same year).

Insert here FIGURE 1

As can be seen, both indicators have decreased since 2008. Clearly any decrease in the number of femicides is to be regarded positively, but, beyond these data, only around 26% of these women ever report having been victims of violence (General Council of the Judiciary, 2018), and, in addition, the effectiveness of the system is continually challenged by offenders who violate restraining orders, and it is not clear why these failures occur and how they affect the behaviour or safety of women (González & Santana, 2012). In fact, it is worrisome that filing formal policy complaints does not currently reduce the risk of femicide in Spain (Vives-Cases & Sanz-Barbero, 2017). For this reason, it is important to look more closely at the reporting of this violence, in order to understand more fully the relationship between the victims of intimate partner femicide and the legal system. Since each legal system has its own singularities, we will focus this analysis specifically on the case of our interest, i.e. Spain.

The IPVAW and intimate partner femicide victims and the Spanish legal system

To understand the Spanish context and the IPVAW and intimate partner femicide victims relation with the Spanish legal system, it is important to remember that the Spanish police began to compile data on formal complaints due to IPVAW in 1983, and these data began to be systematically analysed as of 1992 (Acale, 1999); and the Spanish Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality began to provide detailed information about women victims of intimate partner femicides and their aggressors in 2003. Initially the body in charge of systematizing all this information was the Women's Institute, but in 2006 the State Observatory on Violence against Women took over this

task and drew up new indicators for compiling information (GDGV, 2013a, 2014; Women's Institute, 2008).

Another important point to understand the Spanish context is the legal situation. In this sense, in 2004 Spain adopted a holistic approach to legislation to tackle gender based violence against women and girls. The Organic Law 1/2004 on Comprehensive Protective Measures against Gender-Based Violence introduced a range of obligations for the State under the due diligence principle (prevention, protection, punishment, compensation). Specifically, this law provided both prosecution measures, including the creation of special courts, and preventive and supportive measures (welfare, child support, housing and employment) to fight against IPVAW. In this legal context, reporting IPVAW is often the first step towards intervention, because this allows a victim access to additional support mechanisms, such as social services and counselling (Sulak, Saxon, & Fearon, 2014). In fact, in many cases, this violence and its consequences are preventable occurrences, when family members, friends, co-workers, neighbours, or agencies are aware of or suspect serious problems with the victim–batterer relationship (Spinelli, 2011). But, to effectively implement many of these measures and legally protect women victims of IPVAW, there must be a previous formal complaint (which can be filed not only by the woman herself, but also by the police, medical services or her family).

The changes in the legal framework have resulted in an increase in the number of formal complaints made due to IPVAW in Spain. Reported incidences have increased from 11,516 reports in 1983 to 166,260 in 2017 (General Council of the Judiciary, 2018; GDGV, 2013a, 2014; Women's Institute, 2008). Aside from the legal framework and a possible rise in cases, the reasons for this variability have a lot to do with the diversity of filing criteria (initially only reports within wedlock were considered, which was gradually expanded to include other scenarios of IPVAW) and procedures (more and more precise and complete) for compiling information (Ferrer et al., 2006), in addition to changes in attitude towards IPVAW (Ferrer & Bosch, 2014) or changes in the demographic profile of the Spanish population (Vives-Cases et al., 2009).

Despite the changes in the legal and policy framework, and despite evidence that reporting of IPVAW is increasing, there remains work to be done in Spain and many

cases of IPVAW or intimate partner femicides are not reported, and legal complaints are not made in all cases (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; US Justice Department, 2013). A survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2014) focused in Europe shows that only about one third of the victims of partner violence had previously contacted either the police or any other organization (e.g., health care services, social services, legal services, police, or victim support organisation). Also, it shows that in general women are more likely to contact some service following and incident of sexual violence than physical violence. Specifically, the Spanish victims interviewed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2014) reported the most serious incident of partner violence to the police in 20% of cases, and, on average, only 24% of Spanish women indicate that the most serious incident of IPVAW was brought to the attention of the police (e.g., incidents reported by the victims, incidents where somebody else reported it to the police, and incidents where the police came to know about the incident on their own). In this same sense, the IPVAW enquiry, conducted in 2011 by the Spanish Ministry of Health, revealed that the percentage of women who reported suffering IPVAW at some time in their life was nearly 10.7%, but only 25.9% of these women filed a lawsuit against their husband / partner or ex-husband (Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, 2012; Vicandi, 2013).

Related specifically to the victims of intimate partner femicides, the available information for Spain (GDGV, 2013a, 2014) reveals a situation similar to that previously described with regard to legal complaints. It could be noted that full and consistent data in this sense are only available from January 2006 and, as an average, only 26.3% of the women murdered in Spain between 2006 and 2017 had reported the violence they experienced (of whom 3.6% had given up going ahead with the legal proceedings); only 20.1% had requested protection measures; and 12.9% had protective measures in force at the time of their murder. That is, most of the Spanish victims of intimate partner femicides had not resorted to the legal system. The annual evolution of these data for the period 2006 - 2017 can be seen in Figures 2 and 3.

Insert here FIGURE 2 and FIGURE 3

Reasons why Spanish victims of IPVAW file or do not file a legal complaint

As we have pointed out previously, this work is focused on intimate partner femicide victims in Spain; it analyses the occurrence and incidence of femicides; and reflects on the low report rates of legal complaints in these cases. But we can look for clues about these victims and their behaviour in the IPVAV general data. Particularly, we can start understand why intimate partner femicide victims file or do not file a legal complaint analysing why the IPVAV victims made or not this type of complaints.

In this sense, the FRA enquiry (2014) respondents who did not personally contact the police were asked which reasons led them not to do so. In the case of Spanish women, the two main reasons for not presenting formal complaints about the maltreatment were: consider it as a family matter (about 43%), or not consider it a serious enough episode (about 25%). Furthermore, for about a quarter of victims, feelings of shame or embarrassment about what had happened was the reason for not reporting the most serious incident of sexual violence by a partner to the police or any other organisation.

The Spanish enquiry mentioned above (Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, 2012) offers some other information about the reasons for not presenting a legal complaint. An extensive analysis of these results is made by Sanz-Barbero, Otero-Garcia and Vives-Cases (2016). They identify and analyze the prevalence of and the principal factors associated with reporting a situation of IPVAV and the main reasons women cite for not filing such reports, or for subsequently deciding to withdraw their complaint. Overall, 72.8% of women exposed to IPV did not report their aggressor. The main reasons women claimed for not filing a report were that they did not think it was necessary, they were not conscious of their situation, or because it was psychological abuse (33.9%); that it was due to fear, threats, or lack of trust in the reporting process (21.3%), or because the relationship ended (17.8%). About 25% of the women who filed a report subsequently withdrew the complaint. The main reasons that women gave to explain this withdraw were that they thought the aggressor would change (21.8%), that the relationship ended or the aggressor behaviour changed (20%), or due to fear and threats (18.2%). The probability of reporting increased among women with young children who were abused, and those whose mother was abused. It is worth noting the high levels of coincidence between these reasons given by women in Spain and those

described in other studies in Europe, both quantitative (FRA, 2014), and qualitative (Prosman, Lo Fo, & Lagro-Janssen, 2013).

In accordance with these results, economic type reasons would be the least important in Spain when making the decision not to report IPVAW (about 4% of respondents, according Sanz-Barbero et al. (2016) results). Nevertheless, it is important to take into account the fact that the described data from the survey by the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality (2012), analysed by Sanz-Barbero et al. (2016), were collected between December 2010 and February 2011. In this regard, and as different analysts have pointed out (Beteta, 2013; Briones-Vozmediano, Agudelo, Goicolea, & Vives-Cases, 2014; Ferrer & Bosch, 2014), it can be hypothesised that economic type reasons for not filing a complaint may have gained weight due to the effects of the strong economic crisis that has been experienced in Spain. In fact, the data concerning complaints corresponding to the period of crisis would point in this direction, given that between 2008 (the year when most women filed complaints for IPVAW in Spain) and 2013 the number of complaints filed due to gender-based violence dropped in Spain by 12.12% (from 142,125 to 124,893) (General Council of the Judiciary, 2018), while as of 2014, the number of legal complaints has increased again (with 126,742 in 2014, 129,193 in 2015, 142,893 in 2016, and 166,260 in 2017). Indeed, this crisis has involved, amongst other things, a decrease in earnings and a significant rise in unemployment rates, leading to an increase in situations of economic dependence of the victim upon the abuser. Furthermore, among the many austerity measures that have been applied with the supposed aim of tackling the economic crisis, cutbacks in financial and material aid to battered women have also been included, decreasing the means to attend to them and even further hindering, if that were possible their chances of becoming independent. Likewise, the survey of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) pointed towards a connection in this regard by establishing that there are twice as many women who file complaints when they do not depend economically on their abusers, and indicated that the proper functioning of victim support systems and widespread knowledge of the existence of such services could be some of the explanatory indications of the high rates of complaints filed in Nordic countries.

Continuing with the analysis of reasons for not filing a complaint, it is striking that, despite the recurring reference to fear or to an emotional dependence on the abuser, both of which affect the victims' decision making (Bornstein, 2006; Felson & Paré, 2005), only 1 in 5 of the women who have experienced a situation of abuse explain the lack of a complaint on the basis of these reasons (Sanz-Barbero et al. (2016). This result highlights the need to move away from a priori explanations and to give voice to the victims so as to gain a true understanding of their situation and of the reasons that lead them to continue in an abusive situation.

Finally, an analysis of these answers draws particular attention to two key issues: the type of solution the victims of IPVAW consider optimal; and a lack of awareness of a problem (Sanz-Barbero et al. (2016). As far as the solution is concerned, it would follow, from the results obtained, that there is a certain degree of distrust among women towards penal solutions and, additionally, that what they basically desire is for the abuse to end (and not so much for the abuser to be punished for the crime committed). As shown by Blay (2013), the question of distrust towards the penal and legal system and its efficacy has been repeatedly mentioned in the literature on the issue. In fact, in Spain different qualitative studies have been conducted in order to determine the barriers or resistance women have towards this type of solution (Blay, 2013; GDGV, 2013b), so as to understand possible reasons for withdrawing complaints already filed (Cala, 2012), and also to analyse possible failures of the judicial system and protection mechanisms implemented that may be standing in the way, or even impeding the access, of women to justice, which could also increase their distrust in said system (Amnesty International, 2014; Spinelli, 2011). On the other hand, if the desired solution aims to put an end to the violence, filing a complaint may not be perceived by them as the best solution, as it does not always achieve this aim and might even bring about undesired consequences (confrontation with the abuser, breakup, increase in violence, undesired penal processes, etc.) (Artz, 2011; Blay, 2013).

As regards to awareness of the problem, the answers obtained indicate that victims of IPVAW in Spain do not always have an adequate understanding of what abuse is (especially as far as psychological violence is concerned), nor are they aware of the risk they are running. In fact, it has been suggested that the results obtained in the FRA

survey, mentioned above, determined – as another of the causes for the high rates of filing complaints for IPVAW in Nordic countries – the high levels of training and education in the issue, which would give women a greater awareness of the problem and a greater ability to identify and, therefore, report this type of behaviour.

In this sense, although there is evidence that an accurate risk assessment is crucial to women's ability to make decisions about how to protect themselves and their children, very little is known about how women assess their risk for re-assault (Bowen, 2011; Connor-Smith, Henning, Moore, & Holdford, 2011) and only a small number of empirical studies have examined the accuracy of victim risk appraisal or how perceived risk for battered women may affect their help-seeking and safety-related behaviours (Bell, Bennett Cattaneo, Goodman, & Dutton, 2008; Bennett Cattaneo, Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007; Heckett & Gondolf, 2004; Snider, Webster, O'Sullivan, & Campbell, 2009). The overall evidence indicates that approximately two thirds of victims accurately assessed their level of risk and approximately one third of women were found to be incorrect in their estimates of risk (Bell et al., 2008; Bennett Cattaneo et al., 2007).

As Bowen (2011) remarks, it has been suggested by some that as these women live their daily lives through minute-by-minute risk assessment, and could be regarded as experts in risk assessment within their interpersonal context. Conversely, it also has been argued that due to the continued exposure to abuse and resulting psychological trauma, female victims are less likely to be able to accurately perceive their own risk (Campbell, 1995). In this sense, as González and Santana (2014) pointed out, women may not take measures for protecting themselves, even after reporting abuse. Professionals working in protection services provide different explanations for this, ranging from lack of awareness of the seriousness of the problem to feelings of helplessness. For example, some women believe that divorce will end their problems, making subsequent protection unnecessary; other women distrust protective measures, and do not consider them truly helpful in preventing their abusers from trying to do them harm. Similar to what Campbell (1995) pointed out, it is necessary to consider women's risk perception in risk assessments, and to design interventions to make women aware of the importance of their perception.

Sulak et al. (2014) provide another point of view, remarking that the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) may be applied successfully to predict behaviour in violent social situations and may also offer a model for understanding reporting behaviour in IPVAW victims.

Although it could be thought that a greater severity in the violence experienced would serve to offset the different reasons analysed, so that the greater the seriousness of violence – in terms of its frequency and intensity – the more likely the victims would be to make the decision to stop living with their abuser and/or report the violence they are suffering, the data reveal that this is not so and that, in contrast, and as mentioned above, only around 27% of femicide victims in Spain had actually gone so far as to lodge a complaint. In fact, diverse theoretical perspectives (Amor & Echeburúa, 2010; Bosch, Ferrer, & Alzamora, 2006) remind us that the helplessness and hopelessness produced by intense, prolonged abuse, together with the subsequent deterioration in self-esteem, occasionally generate a paradoxical difficulty in making firm decisions, and can even condition the maintenance of the relationship, whereby the victim would return to the abuser and, of course, fail to file a complaint before the courts.

Unlocking and understanding why intimate partner femicide victims do not file a previous complaint about

Our analysis has shown that many victims of intimate partner femicide in Spain did not file a complaint about IPVAW before the fatal incident. We have extended this by analysing the reasons that surviving female victims of IPVAW have given for not filing complaints, suggesting that this may offer some insight into the reasons femicide victims do not come forward for help and support before the femicide occurred. Obviously, this is only indirect information because these women can no longer provide direct testimony; therefore, it is necessary to continue to look further into this issue and to follow a procedure to gain understanding on this question (McPhedran, Eriksson, Mazerolle, & Johnson, 2018). In this sense, qualitative research, which supplements the data collected by interviews with other complementary sources, can provide insights into femicide not available by other methods (Weil, 2017).

One possible source of complementary information in this regard could be the available reports concerning the characteristics of intimate partner femicide victims. Thus, for

instance, the Spanish General Council of the Judiciary (2017, December 20) has been producing periodic reports since 2001 on the issue, which have focused on different aspects. Between 2001 and 2005, cases of both IPVAW and family violence were included; and, as of 2007, summaries of the cases in which the murdered women had filed a complaint, detailed analyses of the cases in which the abuser committed suicide, etc. have been compiled. Meanwhile, the State Observatory on Violence against Women (2017, December 20) has, since 2007, drawn up Annual Reports which contain extensive and detailed information regarding the number of intimate partner femicides and their main characteristics including, for instance, the age and nationality of the victim and abuser, the state of the relationship at the time of the partner's murder (whether or not the intimate relationship was maintained and whether they were living together), and the victim's legal situation (whether she had lodged a complaint, requested protection measures, etc.).

From the detailed analysis presented in some of these reports, it can be deduced that those intimate partner femicide victims who had filed a complaint were somewhat younger and had put an end to their relationship to a greater extent than those who had not, with no observable differences according to nationality. However, and as pointed out in these reports, these are merely tendencies about some characteristics of the victims who had filed or not filed a previous complaint, but these reports do not contain information about the reasons to report or not the violence suffered. So, additional in-depth analyses are necessary in order to indicate whether the tendencies about characteristics are consolidated, and also to study specifically the reasons for reporting. In this sense, we consider that a triangulation procedure may be used to assess the reasons for low reporting rates and formal complaints among women victims of intimate partner femicides. In fact, according to Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007), a mixed – method research approach is useful for triangulation, complemented by development, initiation and expansion, and may also be useful for the development of instruments, data collection and interpretation of results. Goicolea, Vives-Cases, Minvielle, Briones-Vozmediano, & Ohman (2014) summarize data collected through individual interviews, which serve to triangulate and complement the information gathered through the documentary review. However, other qualitative studies (e.g.,

Sheehan Murphy, Moynihan Dudley-Fennessey, & Stapleton, 2015) suggest supplementing the collected data by conducting interviews or gathering information from other sources, such as media releases or affidavits by police officials.

Taking all these suggestions into account, we believe it is possible to improve our knowledge about the relation between victims of intimate partner femicide and the Spanish legal system, and about why these victims did not file a previous complaint, by carrying out qualitative research that collect data from different complementary sources, and following these steps:

- The first stage would include the identification of the cases corresponding to intimate partner femicides in the time period and territory being studied. For this it is essential to begin by having a clear, operational definition of the concept and to clarify whether only proven cases would be included, or also others that might be under investigation at the time of preparing the study. The latter point is especially important since it refers to the most recent cases.

In order to perform this identification we suggest using the formal and informal sources available. For instance, in the case of Spain, formal sources would include the Annual Reports of the State Observatory on Violence against Women and the General Council of the Judiciary, mentioned above. Among the informal sources, there are different websites of NGO's that, based on journalistic information, keep an updated list on intimate partner femicides in Spain.

- The second phase would consist of analysing the information published in the press concerning the women identified, drawing up a file of data available for each one of them. Even though journalistic information is not always properly corroborated, this source could be useful in identifying significant people who may have come into contact with the victims.
- The third phase would consist of analysing the judicial information available. In this regard, court rulings (which are public in Spain) are particularly useful, as are the summaries of court proceedings supplied in the reports by the General Council of the Judiciary.

A review of this evidence will enable the information obtained in the previous phase to be completed and corroborated, until the most reliable and complete file

possible is compiled for each of the cases analysed. Additionally, it will be possible to identify experts who may have come into contact with the victims and might contribute valuable information about them.

- The fourth phase would consist of carrying out semi-structured interviews of the significant others (such as neighbours, relatives or close kin, friends, etc.) and experts (e.g., police, doctors, psychologists, social workers, etc.) identified in the previous phases, who could provide direct information about the victims. This information would enable possible gaps to be filled in, and provide complementary information of interest.

What is more, we propose interviewing women survivors who have been the object of serious violence and who can contribute their experiences in relation to the issue and their motivations for reporting or not reporting it.

- The fifth and final phase would consist of reviewing the information compiled and performing a comparative analysis between the characteristics of the murdered women who had previously filed a complaint and those who had not, in relation to all the potentially relevant variables (socio-demographic characteristics of victim and abuser, background of the intimate relationship, request for prior help, family and institutional support networks available, etc.).

A first approximation to the utility of these suggestions was tested by taking as an example the 23 cases of intimate partner femicides that occurred between 2004 and 2014 in our Autonomous Community (Bosch, Ferrer, Urbano, Vicens, & Herrezuelo, 2015). The results obtained from interviewing people close to the victims (professionals and significant others) point out that one of the main reasons why victims of intimate partner femicide had not filed a formal complaint was their inadequate perception of the risk they were in, added to the limitations of community and legal resources. One of the limitations of this study had to do with the small number of participants and the fact that only one Spanish community was surveyed. However, it was encouraging to find the results were similar to some previous studies with IPVAW victims.

Conclusions

The review of the literature on victims of intimate partner femicide in Spain permit us to confirm the low reporting rates of legal complaints observed in these cases and to

suggest that the reasons why these victims did not file a previous complaint about the violence could be that in Spain victims of IPVAW do not always have an adequate understanding of what abuse is, nor are they aware of the risk they are running. In this sense it could be noted that, in general, much work in IPVAW has been carried out in order to obtain instruments so that professionals (psychologists, police, etc.) can assess the risk that women victims of IPVAW are in (a review of these measures can be obtained in: Bowen (2011), Connor-Smith et al. (2011), Nicholls, Pritchard, Reeves, and Hilterman (2013) or Spinelli (2011)), and the focal point has been surviving women (Weil, 2017). However, there are far fewer studies focused on murdered women and their experiences or risk perceptions.

Obviously, it is difficult to directly access the experiences of intimate partner femicide victims or to conduct qualitative studies of them, because they are dead (Weil, 2017). Reflecting on the strategies to improve our understanding about them and why they did not file a previous complaint, and taking previous work into account (Goicolea et al., 2014; Johnson, et al., 2007; Sheehan et al., 2015; Weil, 2017), we consider that qualitative research, collecting data from different complementary sources, may constitute indirect procedures to analyse these reasons and the role of risk perception in the case of these victims.

In any case, more research is required to determine how women's perception of risk is formulated, how the factors that lead to inaccurate perception of risk works, how such perception affect their behaviour with regards to seeking help and safety, and how practitioners can help IPVAW victims to appreciate the level of risk that they face (Bowen, 2011; Heckett & Gondolf, 2004). In the case of murdered women, the qualitative research may enable relevant information to be attained in this regard, which can complement the information obtained in prior studies (Artz, 2011; Blay, 2013; Cala, 2012; Goodman & Epstein, 2011; Prosman et al., 2013).

One question to consider is whether, as pointed out above, not filing a complaint in Spain prevents women victims of IPVAW from accessing some of the protection systems allowed by law (protection orders, police surveillance, restraining orders for the abuser, etc.). However, filing a complaint does not necessarily avoid their re-victimisation or guarantee their protection. Actually, the fact that there are murdered

women who had filed a complaint shows that the degree of protection available to them is not always sufficient (Sulak et al., 2014). And also in a research on this topic it is always important to remember that attributing a sense of urgency to victims with regard to reporting violence would imply that they always have the option to report; however, this is an oversimplification of the issue as these women may not have access to available support mechanisms (Amnesty International, 2014; Sulak et al., 2014).

In this regard, it is necessary to continue to work in order to find out which protection mechanisms are implemented when a woman files a complaint and whether they are sufficient, and to improve them until they manage to ensure women's safety. But, it must be emphasized that the study presented was developed in a Spanish context, but it could be a referent to understanding causes for the low complaint rates in other settings and to detect different relations between women and the legal system in other contexts.

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