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Abstract | Scholars highlight the importance of asking victim-survivors of intimate partner violence directly about their lived experiences. In cases where the victim is killed, however, those voices are silenced. Qualitative interviews with friends and family members (informants) of intimate partner femicide victims highlighted that, while many victims experienced physical violence at the hands of their partners, they often did not label such violence as 'abuse'. The interviews further revealed that all victims experienced coercive control, and most were in the process of regaining some level of autonomy at the time of their deaths. As might be expected, the grief and loss for the survivors was close to unbearable.

Giving voice to the silenced victims: A qualitative study of intimate partner femicide

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Women are much more likely than men to be killed by an intimate partner (Bricknell & Doherty 2021; Mouzos 1999; Stöckl et al. 2013), making this form of lethal violence an unquestionably gendered crime. Intimate partner femicide (IPF), defined as the gender-based killing of a female victim by a current or former male intimate partner (see, for example, Walklate et al. 2020), has significant adverse impacts on individuals, families and communities. A growing body of literature examines the emotional, legal and financial impacts on families affected by homicide (Armour 2002; Hardesty et al. 2008). In cases where children are involved, the loss of their mother is often coupled with the imprisonment of their father, resulting in significant disruptions to their care, schooling and socialisation (Lewandowski et al. 2004). Though the rate of IPF has steadily declined in Australia over the past 30 years, it remains high (Bricknell & Doherty 2021). Thus, research needs to identify clear prevention strategies focused on reducing this form of extreme violence against women.



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A large and growing body of research has identified key risk factors for IPF. These include offender violent criminal history (including intimate partner violence perpetration in past or current relationships), offender coercive and controlling behaviour (such as stalking, intimidation and jealousy), relationship separation, and the use of weapons and/or strangulation (Caman et al. 2017; Campbell et al. 2007; Dobash & Dobash 2015; Johnson et al. 2019; Matias et al. 2020; Monckton Smith 2020; Tyson 2020; Websdale 1999).

While informative, most IPF studies are based on either administrative data (such as police reports) or self-report data from interviews with men who have killed their intimate partner. This stands in stark contrast to studies examining non-lethal intimate partner violence, which emphasise the importance of examining the lived experiences of women who have been exposed to intimate partner violence, particularly emphasising the importance of qualitative narratives (Myhill & Kelly 2021; Tarzia, Humphreys & Hegarty 2017). Lived experience research has, for example, illustrated how men's coercive and controlling behaviour entraps women in abusive relationships through violence, subjugation and surveillance, thereby limiting their freedom and reducing their 'space for action', namely their perceived ability to make decisions and be in control of their own lives (Sharp-Jeffs, Kelly & Klein 2017; Stark 2007; Westmarland & Kelly 2013). Such research has also illustrated how fear for their own and their children's safety can act as an impetus for women's active help-seeking behaviour (Meyer 2010), or how ending a relationship does not necessarily result in an end to intimate partner violence and control (Douglas 2018; Humphreys & Thiara 2003b). Findings such as these highlight the importance of listening to the voices of victim-survivors.

For obvious reasons, however, information cannot be obtained directly from women who have been killed by their intimate partners. One alternative is to turn to those close to the victim, who may be able to paint a picture of what was going on in the relationship. Of course, those close to the victim, such as family members and friends, are often brought into the court to give testimony or provide victim impact statements. However, the information provided in such dealings with the legal system is by no means a full account of their intimate knowledge of the victim's situation. Interviewing family and friends of the victim sometimes forms part of death review processes (eg Home Office 2016) and has been used in a small number of pioneering studies into IPF victimisation, mainly based in the United States (Bailey et al. 1997; Block 2000; Campbell et al. 2003). Such research can provide invaluable information about the relationships of IPF victims, as well as the coping mechanisms and experiences of those who lose a loved one to IPF. The current study uses an Australian dataset to contribute to the body of international research by drawing attention to the experiences of Australian victims. The aim of the study is to add to the current evidence base around IPF victimisation by focusing attention on the nature of the relationship and the woman's attempts at help-seeking, as told by their loved ones.

Methodology

Data were collected between 2017 and 2019 through funding from a Criminology Research Grant (CRG 11/16–17) and with ethics clearance from Griffith University’s Human Research Ethics Committee. The project examined the backgrounds and contexts of IPF through interviews with eight family members and friends of IPF victims, referred to as informants in this paper. Consultations by the research team with homicide victim support groups suggested self-identification to be the most sensitive means of approaching potential informants for this study. A call for informants was issued via social media and community outlets (eg newsletters/Facebook, organisations working with families of homicide victims). Informants had to be aged 18 years or over and be able to give informed consent to participate in the project.

In-depth interviews were conducted with informants whose loved one had been killed in Queensland or New South Wales. Interviews were conducted by clinical interviewers over the phone or in person, depending on the wishes of the informant and the logistics involved. The interview schedule included questions about the victim’s experiences in the relationship (eg coercive control, past intimate partner violence, jealousy), and the victim’s behaviours (eg help-seeking efforts) and psychological experiences (eg distress). The interviews were recorded. Once transcribed, the data were entered into NVivo. The data were analysed for key patterns and themes using the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). Given the small sample, the themes presented are illustrative only and caution must be exercised in interpreting or generalising the results.

Table 1 provides an overview of the victims and their informants. Given the focus on IPF, all victims were female. At the time of their deaths, the victims were aged between 22 and 45. Three of the victims had children and a further two were pregnant, and the perpetrator was the biological father in all cases except one. Four of the victims were killed by an ex-partner, with whom they previously had a dating relationship. Four of the victims were killed by a current partner (some married and some dating). The informants, all but one of whom were female, were the sisters, mothers, daughters, cousins, in-laws and close friends of the victims.

Victim	Victim gender	Victim age	Victim children (and/or pregnant)	Perpetrator	Informant	Informant gender
1	Female	20–29	Yes	Ex-partner	Cousin	Female
2	Female	20–29	Yes	Current partner	Mother	Female
3	Female	30–39	No	Ex-partner	Friend	Female
4	Female	20–29	No	Ex-partner	Mother	Female
5	Female	40–49	Yes	Current partner	Daughter	Female
6	Female	20–29	Yes	Current partner	Sister	Female
7	Female	40–49	Yes	Current partner	Brother-in-law	Male
8	Female	30–39	No	Ex-partner	Sister	Female

Findings

Physical intimate partner violence

Six of the eight informants reported that there had been past physical intimate partner violence in the victim's relationship with the man who killed her. One of these informants reported ongoing severe forms of intimate partner violence, as evidenced by the bruising and black eyes inflicted more than weekly by the partner, and even strangulation. The other informants ($n=5$) whose loved ones had been subjected to physical intimate partner violence reported violence that was somewhat less frequent (ranging from once in the relationship to approximately monthly) and resulted in less severe injuries.

What became clear in the interviews was that the informants and the victims themselves often did not conceptualise the behaviours experienced by the victim as 'violence' or 'abuse'. This may indicate that perpetrator behaviour must reach a certain threshold before it is seen as abusive. As one informant stated, '...it wasn't that traditional stuff with a black eye every day' (Brother-in-law, Victim 7). Here the woman's experiences of intimate partner violence appear to conflict with the image of a *typical* domestic violence victim as someone who experiences high levels of ongoing harm (see, for example, Loseke 2003).

Contemplating why their loved one had not left the violent relationship she was in, another informant stated: '...I don't think he was violent enough for her to call it abuse. And when I say "violent enough" I shouldn't say it like that, because violence is violence, but...'. (Friend, Victim 3). Ultimately, the difficulty of identifying the intimate partner violence for what it was made it difficult for some of the victims and those close to them to understand that they were in an abusive relationship, as one informant pointed out:

I don't for one second believe that she perceived herself to be in a domestic violence situation, I really don't. I don't for one second believe that she knew what was coming or had any inkling or indication that he would do what he did. (Sister, Victim 6)

Accounts such as these may be indicative of how abusers shift the boundaries of what is normal and acceptable in relationships, to the point where their victims are no longer able to recognise the behaviour as abusive (Lundgren et al. 2002).

Nevertheless, some women did express being fearful of their partners and the extent to which they might display their violent tendencies. One informant recalled an incident where their loved one had expressed directly that she was afraid her partner was going to 'do something' to her. This informant noted that, at the time, they were not able to fully perceive and understand the danger in which this woman found herself: 'That's a very clear reference to violence, and I still kind of thought that it seemed so remote. That stuff happens in movies...' (Daughter, Victim 5). Research highlights the challenges bystanders face in balancing the need to take action with the need to provide emotional support and simply 'be there' in response to disclosures of abuse (McKenzie et al. 2020).

Two of the women actively sought help to escape from the intimate partner violence by turning to the police. Nevertheless, as the informants noted, the police were unable to protect them. Their informants noted that often this was because of a lack of evidence. As one informant stated:

She...went to the police to get a restraining order against him, only a week or so before her death, and it was denied. There wasn't enough evidence of violence to get a restraining order.
(Cousin, Victim 1)

When asked about the criminal justice system and the evidence needed for interventions such as restraining orders, one informant noted that their loved one's partner had been violent in past relationships, but none of those prior victims reported his violent behaviour to the police, for fear of retaliatory violence. This highlights the importance of thinking of intimate partner violence as a pattern of behaviour, as opposed to a series of separate incidents (see, for example, Stark 2007).

Patterns of coercive control

While not all homicides were preceded by physical intimate partner violence, coercive control was a common theme in all of the informants' narratives ($n=8$). Much of this coercive control was in the form of verbal and emotional abuse, seeking to belittle the victim and diminish her self-confidence and independence, such as by calling her fat, making her feel ashamed of her clothing choices, and acting in a menacing or dominant way. Such expressions of abuse challenge women's self-perceptions and destabilise their idea of what is normal and acceptable in romantic relationships (Lempert 1996; Lundgren et al. 2002; Stark 2009). Indeed, two informants noted that this abusive behaviour affected the victims' ability to make their own choices and led them to constantly second-guess themselves and whether their choices were 'good enough' for their partners. As such, their space for action was reduced. For example, one of the informants reported that after years of exposure to controlling behaviour, the victim started to question every decision she made, including whether or not he would approve of the make-up she wore.

Six of the eight informants reported signs of romantic jealousy, a common precursor to IPF (Dobash & Dobash 2015; Johnson et al. 2019; Monckton Smith 2020). For example, one informant stated: 'He always thought she was having affairs. From day dot, he assumed she was having affairs with every second man that walked past' (Sister, Victim 8). Another informant stated that the perpetrator would say to the victim: 'who you looking at; what are you doing; you want to go be with someone else?' (Friend, Victim 3). But, as one informant poignantly pointed out, such suspicions of infidelity were not grounded in reality. In fact, the limited opportunities the victim had to leave the house or spend time with others outside of the relationship made it virtually impossible for her to have an affair: 'he couldn't possibly truly suspect she was having an affair because he knew where she was every minute of the day' (Sister, Victim 6).

The partners' jealousy was not, however, limited to romantic relationships but extended to the victim's activities and friendships outside of the relationship. For example, as one informant stated: 'He'd even get jealous if she was here spending time with us...because that was taking time away from him' (Sister, Victim 8). The partners' behaviour included stalking their victims and/or the victims' families and paying the victims 'surprise visits' on the rare occasion that they were out at a social gathering without him. Some informants reported that the partner restricted the victim's movements such that she was not able to leave the house without him. For example, one informant stated: 'he didn't let her do anything, he would drop her off to work and be there to pick her up 10 minutes before knock-off time. Even at lunch, he would just show up' (Sister, Victim 6). Another informant reported that the victim was not allowed to leave the house without leaving one of the children at home with him. As such, the children became a pawn in the partner's manipulation of the victim (see Child and Youth Protection Services 2020).

Such restrictions on the victim's activities and associations with friends and family caused the social sphere around her to decrease. One informant reported that the victim used to be surrounded by friends, but 'that number was being whittled down' (Brother-in-law, Victim 7). While friends and family members tried to stay connected, many found themselves shut out by the partner. One informant stated that the partner would answer the victim's phone and tell whoever was calling that the victim did not want to speak to them. Such strategies of social isolation are common and serve to limit the woman's point of reference and, ultimately, render the abuse invisible to the outside world (Lempert 1996).

Victims were sometimes acutely aware of the controlling nature of the partner, according to the informants. One informant stated that their loved one had expressed that she was in a 'controlling relationship' and that her partner was 'gaslighting' her (Daughter, Victim 5). Nevertheless, few of the victims equated the controlling behaviour with domestic violence or risk of serious harm. For example, one informant noted, 'I don't think she would have said she was in a domestically violent relationship' (Friend, Victim 3), despite the victim enduring years of jealousy, stalking and manipulative behaviour at the hands of her partner.

(Re-)establishing autonomy as a trigger

A common theme across all cases was that the victims were trying their best to maintain or regain their autonomy, despite months or years of physical and/or emotional abuse. The most concrete example of this was considering or actually separating from their partner. Such withdrawal of commitment has been linked to increased use of violence in an attempt to re-establish control (Johnson & Hotton 2003; Wilson & Daly 1993) and, if the loss is perceived as irretrievable, motivation or decision to kill (Monckton Smith 2020).

Four of the victims had formally separated from their partners at the time of their deaths. A further two victims had previously separated from their partners, but had since reunited and were in a relationship with them at the time of their deaths. The informant of one of these victims reported that once they were back together after the first separation, the partner had whispered in the victim's ear: 'if you ever try to leave me like that again I'll fucking kill you' (Brother-in-law, Victim 7). Despite such threats, this victim had reached a 'point of desperation', as the informant put it, and was about to leave the house (as well as the relationship) when her partner killed her.

The last two victims were also in the process of separating from their partners. One of these women had been considering, and even talking about, separation for over a decade, and had reached the point where she had asked her partner to pack his things and leave. As the informant in this case stated, however, 'I don't think he would have ever agreed, properly, to separate' (Daughter, Victim 5).

But (re)gaining autonomy was not only about separating from their partners. Instead, it appeared to be the final step in a long process of rediscovering their self-worth and placing boundaries around what was acceptable and not acceptable in the relationship. One of the informants talked about how the victim resisted her partner's control: 'as he tried to tighten, she'd try to pull away' (Friend, Victim 3). Another said that her loved one noticed the adverse effect the dysfunctional relationship was having on their children, and that this realisation made her enter a 'protective mummy mode' where she was 'getting a bit brave and maybe speaking up a bit' (Sister, Victim 6). These examples challenge the common assumption that abused women lack autonomy by illustrating their persistent efforts at maintaining self-worth and agency even within the structural conditions of men's violence (see also Lempert 1996; Meyer 2012).

Many discussed how this strength and resilience had always been present within these women, but that it had been temporarily silenced by their partners. Others noted that external validation, from people outside of the relationship, made the victims feel stronger and more confident. As one informant stated, such validation made their loved one come to the realisation that 'she wasn't as worthless as she thought she was' (Mother, Victim 4). Another informant noted how the friends and colleagues the victim gained through her education and work made her feel valued to a much greater extent than she was used to:

She used the word 'valued' all the time. I think throughout all her different jobs, she felt there was a very big difference in that value—the way that people value each other—almost to the point that she thought it was fascinating how kind or what positive feedback you would get outside of the house, compared to what she was used to. (Daughter, Victim 5)

Discussion

Scholars highlight the importance of asking victim-survivors of intimate partner violence directly about their lived experiences (Myhill & Kelly 2021; Tarzia, Humphreys & Hegarty 2017). In cases where the victim is killed, however, those voices are silenced. This study used qualitative interview data from eight friends and family members (referred to as informants) of IPF victims. The qualitative nature of the study supplements the existing and growing evidence base generated using survey methodologies with larger samples (Myhill & Kelly 2021). Nevertheless, given the small sample size, caution must be exercised in interpreting and generalising the results.

The interviews revealed that although six out of the eight women had experienced some form of physical intimate partner violence, it appears some were hesitant to label that violence as 'abuse'. This seems to suggest, in the current sample at least, that perceptions of what does and does not constitute abuse vary considerably, and that for some individuals the *traditional* idea of abuse as serious physical intimate partner violence shaped their conceptualisations of what was occurring (see Loseke 2003). This is an injury threshold that not all women experiencing intimate partner violence reach. It also seems to suggest that the victims (and the informants) may have internalised the 'calculus of harm' approach often observed in the legal system, whereby the seriousness of violence is assessed by the level of harm afflicted (Bishop 2016; Stark 2009; Tyson 2020).

It is frequently argued that 'naming' such behaviours will not only make victims more able to identify what is happening to them but provide impetus and empowerment to seek help, whether that is informal, such as from friends or family, or formal, such as through the justice system (Douglas & Godden 2003; Humphreys & Thiara 2003a). As Lempert (1996: 275) poignantly states: 'Naming is how the unknown becomes known'. We agree with McKenzie et al. (2020) about the need for interventions specifically educating family members and friends about how to offer support and guidance to women experiencing intimate partner violence, including education about the normalisation of violence. Of course, it is important to stress that there is no way of knowing whether, for the victims whose loved ones participated in this study, overtly identifying and labelling the behaviours they were experiencing as abusive would have led to any change in the outcome, or would have altered victims' perceptions about the level of danger that the perpetrator posed to them.

The interviews further revealed that all of the women had experienced some form of coercive control, and in two cases this occurred in the absence of physical intimate partner violence. Scholars continue to argue for the importance of examining 'non-violent coercive control' (Crossman, Hardesty, & Raffaelli 2016; Kirkwood 1993; Stark 2007). It is important that due recognition is given to such forms of abusive behaviour, which may not otherwise fit within existing social and legislative definitions (Lempert 1996; Williamson 2010). One of the informants expressed clear discontent with how the legal proceedings emphasised the absence of physical intimate partner violence and downplayed the years of controlling and belittling behaviour to which her loved one had been exposed. Constructing intimate partner violence as 'abusive' only when it involves physical violence serves to advance a 'crime of passion' framework whereby violence is viewed as spontaneous incidents preceded by victim precipitation (Monckton Smith 2020).

While calls have been made in Australia for the criminalisation of coercive control, similar to the legislation introduced in England and Wales, scholars have called for a carefully considered approach before the introduction of such laws (Tolmie 2018; Tyson 2020; Walklate & Fitz-Gibbon 2019). While coercive control is receiving increasing attention from scholars and policymakers, translating better knowledge about coercive control into practical and genuinely effective means of identifying and responding to those behaviours remains a significant challenge.

Coercive control entraps women in relationships by reducing their space for action and, as such, is often referred to as a 'liberty crime' (Bishop 2016; Sharp-Jeffs, Kelly & Klein 2017; Stark 2007; Tyson 2020). The interviews with informants revealed that the women were all in the process of regaining some level of autonomy and self-worth. These efforts can be seen as ways of 'stretching' their space for action (Westmarland & Kelly 2013) and exercising agency despite significant constraints on their autonomy (Bruton & Tyson 2017; Lempert 1996; Stark 2007). Relationship separation might be the most concrete example of such stretching of space and exercising of agency. As Sharp-Jeffs, Kelly and Klein (2017: 165) point out, however, 'the cost of such assertions of autonomy is often high'. Abusive men perceive separation as a threat to their authority and power within relationships, and post-separation violence has been seen as an effort by abusive men to regain control over what they believe to be rightfully theirs (Johnson & Hotton 2003; Monckton Smith 2020; Sev'er 1997; Wilson & Daly 1993). However, not all of the women had left their partners. Some were considering leaving to attempt to extricate themselves from the violence, and some had previously separated but had since gotten back together. Given much research highlights the precariousness of the separation process for victims of intimate partner violence, it is clear why actual, intended or perceived separation is one of the most well known risk factors for IPF (Johnson & Hotton 2003; Wilson & Daly 1993). The results from the current study, albeit from a small sample, highlight the importance of further understanding the relationship between physical intimate partner violence, coercive control and relationship separation.

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