Psychosocial Separation and Women's Disengagement from Prosecutions against Abusive Intimate Partners in Spain

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Abstract

In order to end and "liberate" themselves from an abusive relationship, female survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) usually face a complex process. Although women may decide to seek help through the criminal justice system, some refuse to participate in legal proceedings against their abusers. While many studies have focused in exploring variables explaining disengagement from legal proceedings, the aim of this paper is to study the impact of the process of liberation from an abusive relationship on the likelihood of disengagement from legal proceedings. Liberation was measured through the psychosocial separation overall score and the likelihood of disengagement (LoD) was predicted by a logistic regression model developed in a previous study in Spain. A sample of eighty women involved in legal proceedings for IPV against their ex-partners in Andalusia (Spain) participated in this study.

Exploratory analyses were conducted using ANOVA and Chi-square; multiple linear regression analyses were used to study the relationship between psychosocial separation and LoD. Results showed that victims who had higher psychosocial separation from their abusers were less likely to disengage from legal proceedings against the abuser. We discuss the results in terms of practical implications like detection of women's need for specific psychological support to ease a comprehensive recovery. Training programs for legal professionals and judges in the judicial arena should use the results of this study to increase professionals' understanding of IPV and survivors' decision-making processes. This would lead to decrease secondary victimization, as well as decrease the frustration of legal professionals when victims disengage from legal proceedings.

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) against women continues to pose a social and political concern for which legislation and policies have led to new challenges. One aspect that generates concern worldwide has to do with an IPV survivor's choice to not participate in the prosecution of their batterer, file for protection orders, or otherwise engage with the criminal justice system (CJS) (Sleath & Smith, 2017). Although this sometimes leads to positive outcomes for them, including decreased anxiety, decreased costs, and not having to attend or testify at court hearings, it also can result in police and other legal actors becoming frustrated (Gauthier, 2010; Goodman, Bennett, & Dutton, 1999) and prosecutors considering themselves "helpless" when IPV victims withdraw the complaint (Cretney & Davis, 1997, p. 83). In addition, victim withdrawal from prosecution often ends any legal proceedings against their abuser (Hoyle & Saunders, 2000; Messing, 2014), especially in those cases where she is the only witness and her testimony provides unique evidence (Robinson & Cook, 2006;

Sleath & Smith, 2017). The end result can be that abusers become empowered and that abusive power dynamics in the relationship are reinforced (Gauthier, 2010).

At 13%, Spain has one of the lowest rates in the EU for women's physical or sexual victimization by an intimate partner (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). This may be due to Spain's implementation of the Organic Act 1/2004 of 28 December on Integrated Protection Measures against Gender-based Violence, one of the most comprehensive and progressive pieces of IPV legislation worldwide (Goicolea et al., 2013). This act has led to an increase in the total of complaints, court sentences, and protective measures against IPV each year in Spain (Bodelón, 2014). The Act's recognition of IPV as a public offense is also partly responsible for recent increases in legal help-seeking by survivors. Approximately 1 in 4 women who experience IPV seek legal help, according to the Government Office of Gender-based Violence (GOGV, 2015).

However, female victims in Spain are withdrawing from IPV legal proceedings at a high rate. Twenty-one percent of all who file complaints in Spain withdraw from legal proceedings (GOGV, 2015). Several studies have explored the reasons why these women withdraw their participation from legal proceedings (e.g., Bennett, Goodman, & Dutton, 1999; Cala, Trigo, & Saavedra, 2016; García-Jiménez, Cala, Trigo, & de la Mata, 2019b; Robinson & Cook, 2006; Sleath & Smith, 2017). Although some research has shown the importance of emotional detachment from the partner in their decision to withdraw (e.g., Erez & Belknap, 1998; Hare, 2010), the resulting analyses and models have failed to consider the impact of the *process* of leaving, breaking free, and recovering from the violent relationship on disengagement from the CJS. This is particularly surprising given that some variables related to a lack of participation in the CJS have also been identified as obstacles when it comes to leaving an abuser (García-Jiménez, Cala, Trigo, & Barberá, 2020), such as emotional and economic dependence on the partner (e.g., Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Both

aspects are essential to achieve a final state of psychosocial liberation (Roca-Cortés et al., 2015). To get to this final stage requires a long and complex process (Anderson & Saunders, 2003), and at the same time, many of these women have to deal with an arduous, dynamic, and complex decision-making process regarding participation in legal proceedings (Barata, 2007; Boivin & Leclerc, 2016; Kingsnorth & Macintosh, 2004).

Although victims' legal help-seeking has been shown to be determined by the stage of their process of recovery (Shearson, 2017; García-Jiménez et al., 2020), there is a gap regarding survivors' recovery and their subsequent decision-making process of legal disengagement. Currently, there is no previous research that directly explores the interaction between both processes: psychosocial liberation and CJS participation. Furthermore, existing studies about the process of leaving do not show to what extent emotional attachment or detachment to the abuser predicts disengagement from the CJS. This article addresses this gap in the literature by investigating whether the process of liberation from a violent relationship impacts the likelihood of victim disengagement from the CJS.

Literature Review

When analyzing disengagement from legal proceedings against abusive partners or ex-partners, the terminology used is critically important in understanding the framing of the research. First, we use the terminology of *participating* or *engaging* with the CJS rather than *cooperating*, as the former recognizes victim agency and prevents a pathologizing and victim-blaming approach, which is more likely when using *cooperation* (even though this term is commonly used in the literature). This is in line with previous research such as Bermea, Khaw, Hardesty, Rosenbloom, & Salerno (2017) and Merrit-Gray & Wuest (1995) and is an adaptation of agency as proposed by Greeson and Campbell (2011) for women who are survivors of sexual abuse. We consider women who experience or have experienced IPV

as active agents in their own liberation and recovery process (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988) and in their choices regarding their engagement in the CJS.

According to this perspective, we will use the term *survivor* to reflect these women within their journey toward recovery and liberation or psychosocial separation from the abusive relationship. Along with *survivor*, we also use the term *victim*, even though we recognize that it is often associated with negative stereotypes about people who have experienced IPV and connotes a lack of agency (Berns, 2004; Goodmark, 2008)—neither of which we wish to convey. Nevertheless, *victim* is the more accurate term when discussing the CJS (Burk, 2004). Furthermore, Spain uses the Organic Act 4/2015, of 27th April on the standing of victims of crime, for which any person who had suffered from a crime is legally recognized as a victim and has specific rights in the legal arena. For these reasons, we use *victim(s)* specifically to refer to a criminal case, when women are involved in the legal proceedings against their abusers as the complainant or the represented at court. Additionally, we use the word *women* to reflect both previous scholarship (which has focused on women), our sample (which includes only women), and the fact that the Organic Act 1/2004 was designed to be applied in Spain only to women suffering from IPV. However, we recognize that men and non-binary individuals may also be IPV victims.

The Process Of Liberation And Recovery From A Violent Relationship

From the classic models that studied the process of leaving and recovering from IPV (e.g., Landenburger, 1989) to more recent ones (e.g., Flasch, Murray, & Crowe, 2017), several stages of leaving and recovery have been identified that do not necessarily occur linearly (Bermea et al., 2017), but are instead dynamic and fluid (Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998; Khaw & Hardesty, 2015). Additionally, there may be several attempts to leave the relationship before a definitive end occurs (Cala, Godoy, & Rebollo, 2009; Lacey, Saunders, & Zhang, 2011; Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Messing, Mohr, & Durfee, 2015).

However, the end of the relationship does not ensure survivor safety—in fact, survivors are often at higher risk once they leave, and post-separation violence can be more severe than the violence experienced in the relationship (Campbell, 2004; Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000; Shearson, 2017). Ending the relationship is a process that often involves previously emotionally detaching from the relationship (Anderson & Saunders, 2003), as well as experiencing grief at the loss of the relationship (Landenburger, 1998; Messing, et al. 2015). Grieving for the lost relationship is often harsh (Messing et al., 2015), which means that separation is one of the hardest steps in the process of leaving.

Landenburger (1989) proposes a four-stage model of leaving and recovery. In the binding phase, the woman is committed to the relationship and does not recognize herself as a victim. She tries to avoid stigmatization by blocking and covering up the abuse consciously. In the enduring phase, she also tends to blame herself for what is happening to her. As she is still committed to the relationship, she may use several strategies to improve it, though she will finally recognize the situation as unsustainable, and eventually try to end the relationship during the disengagement phase. The different changes on personal and external resources through these stages determines the advance toward the definite end of the relationship, and they also constitute the starting point of the recovery stage in Landenburger's model.

The concept of recovery was expanded to the *liberation* of the survivor from the violent relationship by Roca-Cortés et al. (2015). They provide an integrative seven-stage model which expands Landenburger's model to incorporate a gendered perspective in which the final stage of psychosocial liberation and recovery for the survivor means that they do not experience any violence from their abusive partner or other people close to the partner. According to Roca-Cortés et al., at this stage, the woman rebuilds and takes control over her life in a good state of wellbeing, with the ability to detect future situations which may be violent (Roca-Cortés et al. 2015). Thus, one of the main dimensions in this model is what

they call psychosocial separation, which includes both economic independence and taking control of her own life (Roca-Cortés et al., 2015). Although we do not use this seven-stage model, we adopt their notions of recovery and liberation throughout this work.

In their process of leaving, survivors implement many strategies—including mental and/or action plans—to keep themselves safe (Bermea et al., 2017; Cala et al., 2009; Landenburger, 1989). These can include calling the police and initiating legal proceedings against the abuser. In many occasions, women seek legal aid just after having tried to improve the relationship exhaustively by other means (Shearson, 2017). Help-seeking behaviors also frequently depend on the stage of recovery. Shearson (2017) found that during the binding and enduring stages, women most often call the police and seek legal help to stop a one-time episode of violence, while those at the disengaging and recovery stage were trying to get long-term safety and a life free of violence.

Predicting Disengagement From Legal Proceedings

The reasons why survivors of IPV decide to not participate in the legal system have been internationally studied (e.g., Bennett et al., 1999; Dawson & Dinovitzer, 2001; Erez & Belknap, 1998; Goodman et al., 1999; Robinson & Cook, 2006; Sleath & Smith, 2017; Vázquez, Rivas, Suárez, & Panadero, 2018). Literature shows that disengagement from legal proceedings might be related to the severity of the violence (Goodman et al., 1999); fear of retaliation by the aggressor, and an escalation of the violence (Buzawa, Buzawa, & Stark, 2017; Sleath & Smith, 2017); economic dependence from the partner (Goodman et al., 1999), feelings of guilt and shame (Vázquez et al., 2018); or positive feelings toward the defendant and reconciliation (Malecha et al., 2003; Sleath & Smith, 2017; Vázquez et al., 2018), among other factors. Seeking help through the police or the CJS may also be difficult for survivors, as it may lead to secondary victimization by the CJS and associated professionals (Bodelón, 2014; Laing, 2017). Mistrust (Dawson & Dinovitzer, 2001) and a lack of information about

the legal system (Bennett et al., 1999) have also been shown as relevant in victims' decisions to drop charges, as has the complexity and slowness of the legal procedures (Bell, Perez, Goodman, & Dutton, 2011). Others have identified that victims evaluate costs and benefits (Kingsnorth & Macintosh, 2004) and make rationally use of justice in order to manage their situation (Ford, 1983; Hoyle & Sanders, 2000).

While this is not an exhaustive review of all the variables that have been found to be relevant to the decision to participate in judicial proceedings, it does give a general overview of reasons to not participate. However, all of these studies were conducted outside of Spain. As a consequence, during the last few years, some projects in Southern Spain have addressed this gap (Cala et al., 2016; García-Jiménez et al., 2019a, 2019b; García-Jiménez & Trigo, 2019). Not only did this body of research reveal which variables were related to disengagement from legal proceedings (identifying similarities and differences with research from abroad), they also suggested variables that predict the decision to drop charges. These include being denied a protective order, maintaining contact with the defendant, or feeling guilty for having used the CJS. These projects used quantitative analyses similar to previous research (e.g., Dawson & Dinovitzer, 2011; Robinson & Cook, 2006), but they included psychological, emotional, and motivational variables (e.g., Cala et al., 2016; García-Jiménez, Cala, & Trigo, 2019a) in addition to variables related to the judicial process (García-Jiménez et al., 2019b).

Of the research in Spain, it is worth highlighting the findings of García-Jiménez, Cala, and Trigo (under review; see also García-Jiménez & Trigo, 2019), who developed a six-variable model to predict the likelihood of disengagement (LoD) from legal proceedings by women who were IPV victims by using logistic regression analyses similar to Robinson and Cook (2006) and Kingsnorth and Macintosh (2004). García-Jiménez et al. (under review) included psychosocial variables and legal variables simultaneously instead of in separate

models, as has been done in previous Spanish research (e.g., Cala et al., 2016; García-Jiménez et al., 2019b). In addition, García-Jiménez et al. (under review) used a sample that included women whose cases were at widely different stages rather than only women whose cases were completed (e.g., Kingsnorth & Macintosh, 2004; Robinson & Cook, 2006; Sleath & Smith, 2017).

Their model can be a valuable tool in Spain, as it allows professionals to assess accurately the LoD from prosecution among women who are victims in cases of IPV in the CJS (García-Jiménez et al., under review). However, it lacks the analysis of the impact that the process of leaving, liberation, and recovery from an abusive relationship may have on women's withdrawal. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by examining the relationship between that process and withdrawing from prosecution.

Objectives and Hypothesis

Our primary research question is: does (and if so, to what extent) the process of liberation from a violent relationship impact the likelihood of an IPV survivor to disengage from the CJS? To answer this question, we analyze the relationship between psychosocial separation from an abusive partner and the probability of deciding to no longer participate in the prosecution of the defendant for women who are victims of IPV in Andalusia (Spain). First, we explore the relationship between psychosocial separation and several variables measuring the process of liberation and legal proceedings. Second, we study the relationship between psychosocial separation and the predicted LoD. We test the following two hypotheses:

1) the lower the overall score on psychosocial separation, the greater the predicted LoD;

2) of the variables used to predict disengagement, only those that indicate progress in the liberation process (i.e. feelings of guilt, ideas of reconciliation, frequency of contact) will be significantly related to the overall score on psychosocial separation.

Methods

Participants

A total of 83 women initially participated in the larger study, but the final sample for this analysis was restricted to 80 survivors of IPV who (1) were still involved in legal proceedings for IPV after filing a complaint against their abusive (ex)partners at the time of data collection and (2) spoke Spanish fluently. All of the women lived in West Andalusia (Spain). The country of origin was mainly Spain (92.5%); some women were from Latin America (6.2%) and one woman was from a non-Spanish-speaking country (1.3%). On average, the women were 41.06 years old ($SD = 11.48$), their average monthly income ($n = 78$) in Euros was €620.82 ($SD = $€556.45), and number of children they had ($n = 78$) ranged from zero to six ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.20$). As for educational level ($n = 80$), 3.8% of women had no basic education, 50% had completed elementary studies, 25% had basic professional training, and 21.3% had completed higher education or university studies. Even though women could have pressed charges for IPV when they were still in the romantic relationship, all of them confirmed that they no longer had an intimate relationship at the time of data collection. However, four women indicated they were cohabiting with the defendant.

Procedure

We recruited participants through several Municipal Information Centers for Women (MICW) in Andalusia. Andalusia has 170 MICWs distributed in its eight regions, offering both services for women in general and specific assistance for IPV survivors by providing information, resources, social and legal advice, psychological support, and employment guidance. A total of 13 MICWs participated in the study. Data were collected by the first

author and data collection lasted two years (2017-2019). After giving their written consent, participants completed two questionnaires (described below). The first one was administered verbally by the researcher, and the second one was completed in writing by the women independently (except for those who expressed problems with reading for whom the researcher read the items). The time to complete the two questionnaires ranged from 35 to 50 minutes. The project was approved by Biomedical Ethics Committee for Research of Andalusia.

Measures

We used two questionnaires to gather the data for all the variables to be analyzed.

Questionnaire for sociodemographic data and to obtain the predicted LoD.

This instrument aimed at describing the sample and calculating the predicted LoD (from 0 to 1). Additionally, this questionnaire also included different variables to be studied in an exploratory way.

The questionnaire consisted of sociodemographic questions and a short version of a questionnaire developed for previous studies (see Cala et al., 2016; García-Jiménez et al., 2019a, 2019b; under review). This short version was comprised of 21 questions: two questions about the intimate relationship (How long has it been since the relationship ended?; Was he her partner or ex-partner when the charges were pressed?) and 19 questions related to legal proceedings and the experiences of the women with the CJS (e.g., Did you file one or more complaints before the current one? Yes/No; How tired are you of the legal proceedings? Self-rated 0-10).

The six variables shown to predict LoD by García-Jiménez et al. (under review) were included among the 19 variables related to the legal proceedings. These variables from the highest to the lowest odds ratio in the predictive model were (1) the victim believing that she

was making decisions throughout the process alone (versus her thinking that only her lawyer[1] was making decisions or that they were making decisions together); (2) thoughts about going back to the defendant after filing the complaint; (3) being denied a protective order; (4) maintaining frequent or occasional contact with the defendant (versus no contact), (5) feeling guilty about having filed the complaint (self-rated 0-10); and (6) not having support from social or health services (García-Jiménez et al., under review; García-Jiménez & Trigo, 2019). The predicted LoD was calculated using a programmed software to implement the predictive model by García-Jiménez et al. (under review) by combining the values for each variable according to their weight for prediction. This model correctly predicted whether a woman would disengage from the legal system in 83.6% of the cases, with high specificity and sensitivity (García-Jiménez et al., under review).

The Psychosocial Separation Scale (SPS-VP).

This scale was designed for women in a situation of "male chauvinist intimate partner violence" (Roca-Cortés, Porrúa, Yepes, & Codina, 2015, as cited in Roca-Cortés et al., 2015, p. 100) and allowed to obtain the psychosocial separation overall score. The scale assesses the extent to which a survivor is psychologically and materially separated from her (ex)partner, which constitutes one dimension of the liberation from the violent relationship. Since all the women had ended the relationship by the time of the data collection, we used the SPS-VP Protocol B, which is designed for women who have already ended the violent relationship. The scale includes 40 Likert scale items ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *continually*. The overall score was calculated by using the weighted score for each item instead of the direct score because, as stated by the authors, the weighted score of the test presented better internal balance based on the same weight of the three-subdimensions. For

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[1] In Spain, in addition to the prosecutor, both the victim and the defendant have their own lawyers representing their interests in the courtroom.

this reason, the overall weighted score ranged from 30 to 150. Each subdimension includes items referring to the different stages of survivors' process of recovery and liberation. The first subdimension is the *reaction to violence* and assesses, based on 16 items, a woman's change from survival behaviors to confrontation, recognizing, naming and rejecting the violent behavior, seeking external help, and detecting situations of violence (e.g., "I have looked for someone to stop his bad ways (family members, friends, services, hotlines, the police, etc.)"). The second subdimension is the *evaluation of the relationship* and it assesses the commitment to the relationship and the woman's processes of grief, separation, and reestablishment of her identity (e.g., "Even if he were to stop treating me badly, I would completely abandon my relationship with him"). The subdimension *control of her own life* assesses the woman's psychological and economic independence, her recovery of social relationships, and decisions about her life and body control based on 12 items (e.g., "I am capable of moving forward on my own (and with the children that depend on me)"). The higher the overall score, the greater the psychosocial separation from the relationship. The SPS-VP is the only scale existing and validated in Spain, with no background to test the external validity. The authors of the scale developed factorial analyses that showed a consistent internal structure. Alpha scores were .77, .60, and .51 for each dimension, respectively (Roca-Cortés et al., 2015).

Dependent and independent variables.

The two main variables for this research were the predicted LoD and the Psychosocial Separation (SPS-VP) overall score, both of which were measured quantitatively. Each of them functioned as dependent or independent variables depending on the analyses to be carried out and the hypothesis to be tested. The independent variables are those listed in Table 1, where we indicate the coding and the descriptive data for each of them. These independent, derived from the 21 questions in the first instrument, +were of two types:

variables related to the intimate relationship and other variables related to the legal

proceedings and the experiences of survivors with the legal system.

For the exploratory analyses, both the SPS-VP overall score and the predicted LoD

were the dependent variables, while the independent variables were those others listed in

Table 1.

For the first hypothesis, the predicted LoD functioned as the dependent variable. The

SPS-VP overall score and other possible covariates with SPS-VP were considered the

independent variables. These possible covariates were all the variables listed in Table 1

except for the six variables to predict LoD.

In the second hypothesis, the SPS-VP overall score was the dependent variable and

the six variables that predicted LoD according to García-Jiménez et al. (under review) were

the independent variables (see Table 1).

<<TABLE 1 AROUND HERE>>

Data Analysis

We conducted several analyses using SPSS 25 and statistical power $(1 - \beta)$ assuming

$\alpha = .05$ was calculated post hoc by using G*Power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang,

2009). First, we carried out exploratory analyses to test independent relationships between the

SPS-VP overall score and all the variables shown in Table 1. By doing so, we could identify

which variables might be relevant to be included in a multiple linear regression as

independent variables to test the first hypothesis. These included the analyses between SPS-

VP and the six variables within the predictive model by García-Jiménez et al. (under review)

that allowed us to test the second hypothesis. We also developed exploratory analyses to test

independent relationships between all variables in Table 1 and the predicted LoD, except for

the six variables that contributed to obtain the LoD. We used Snedecor's *F* tests, or Welch's

F tests when the assumption of homoscedasticity was not met, for categorical-quantitative

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variables relationships $(1 - \beta = .60)$, and Pearson's correlation coefficient was used for quantitative-quantitative variable relationships $(1 - \beta = .79)$. In accordance with Cohen (1988), we considered R^2 and r as effect size indexes, respectively, as small $(R^2 = .01; r = .10)$, medium $(R^2 = .06; r = .30)$, and large $(R^2 = .14; r = .50)$ effect sizes. Subsequently, we tested whether the six variables to predict LoD by García-Jiménez et al. (under review) showed covariation between them. We used ANOVA models, as well as Pearson's Chi-square tests to study the relationships between categorical variables $(1 - \beta = .67)$, considering φ as the index for a small $(\varphi = .10)$, medium $(\varphi = .30)$, and large $(\varphi = .50)$ effect size (Cohen, 1988).

Second, the SPS-VP and any variable with a relevant relationship from the exploratory analyses were included in a multiple linear regression model to analyze their relationship with the predicted LoD. We previously conducted ANCOVA tests to determine the interaction effects between relevant variables from the exploratory findings. We took ΔR^2 as the effect size index for each variable in the multiple linear regression $(1 - \beta = .87)$. For this analysis, the categorical variables were coded dichotomously (0/1).

Results

The average LoD predicted for the 80 women was .13 $(SD = .17)$, and the overall average SPS-VP score for the 80 women was 120.05 $(SD = 12.39)$, indicating that the women were above the cut-off point established by Roca-Cortés et al. (2015) at 90 to be considered as women with low liberation from the relationship. As is shown in Table 1, few women (13%) said that they made decisions during the legal proceedings alone, had thought about getting back together with the abuser (18%), or had occasional or frequent contact with the defendant (29%). Only a third of the women had a protection order granted, and their feelings of guilt were relatively low $(M = 3.15, SD = 3.92)$. On average, the women had been separated from their abuser for more than two years at the time of the survey, though there

was a great deal of variability in the number of months since the relationship ended ($M =$ 28.33 months, $SD = 32.24$). About half were separated when charges were filed against the defendant (53.8%).

Exploratory Analysis: Variables Related to SPS-VP

We first conducted exploratory analyses that examined whether each of the variables shown in Table 1 were related to the psychosocial separation overall score. These analyses determined which variables would be included in subsequent analyses. As Table 2 shows (SPS-VP column), only three variables achieved a statistically significant relationship with the SPS-VP overall score and reached at least a medium effect size.

First, women who had filed at least one previous complaint had higher SPS-VP overall scores ($M = 126.24$; $SD = 8.53$) than women whose current complaint was the first one they had filed ($M = 116.35$; $SD = 12.92$). Second, women who admitted they had thought about restarting the relationship after filing the complaint had lower SPS-VP overall scores ($M = 110.85$; $SD = 14.93$) than women who had not ($M = 122.02$; $SD = 10.95$). Finally, the lower the feelings of guilt about filing the complaint, the higher the SPS-VP overall score. These last two variables are also factors from the predictive model by García-Jiménez et al. (under review), so they were not included in the final multiple linear regression model. The psychosocial separation was also related to the elapsed time (in months) since the breakup of the relationship. The greater the number of months since the breakup, the greater the SPS-VP overall score. However, the effect size was small, so it was excluded from the final model.

<<TABLE 2 AROUND HERE>>

Exploratory Analysis: Variables Related to Predicted LOD

We next conducted the same analyses to explore the relationship between all the variables in Table 1 and the predicted LoD from legal proceedings, omitting the six variables that allowed us to predict LoD. Only two variables showed statistically significant

relationships (see Table 2, predicted LoD column). The more months that women had been involved in the current legal proceedings, the lower the predicted LoD. At the same time, those women who had not applied for a protective order also had a lower predicted LoD ($M =$ .04; $SD = $.06) than those women who did ($M = $.11; $SD = $.13). However, these relationships did not reach medium effect sizes, so they were not included in the final model.

We also tested the relationships between the six variables that made it possible to obtain the predicted LoD from the predictive model by García-Jiménez et al. (under review). Of all the relationships tested, only being granted the protective order showed a statistically significant relationship with the frequency of contact, with women who were not granted the protective order having more frequent contact with their (ex)partner χ^2 (2, $N = 70$) = 8.37, $p =$ .015, $\varphi = $.33. The analyses of the standardized residuals showed that within the group of women whose protective order petitions were denied ($n = 23$), the percentage of women that had occasional and frequent contact with the (ex)partner after filing the complaint was higher than expected, 53.3% and 67.7% respectively, compared to women without contact (22.4%). No other variables in the model showed a statistical relationship between them (non-relevant results are not shown here).

Linear Regression Model Predicting LoD

Finally, we conducted two multiple linear regression models analyzing how psychosocial separation is related to and predicts women's predicted LoD from legal proceedings. Apart from SPS-VP overall score, only having filed a previous complaint(s) was entered in the model, as it was the only one with a statistically significant relationship with psychosocial separation and at least a medium effect size. Prior to the regression analysis, we conducted ANCOVA analyses, which did not show an interaction between having filed a previous complaint(s) and women's SPS-VP overall score, controlling for the predicted LoD ($p > $.05).

We conducted a two-step hierarchical linear regression to introduce both independent variables separately. The first included the SPS-VP overall score while having filed a previous complaint(s) was entered in the second step. Although results showed that the second model was statistically significant, the $\Delta R^2 < .02$ was not ($p = .870$; see Table 3). For this reason, and based on the parsimony principle, we took the first model, which allowed to predict the LoD from the SPS-VP overall score. Thus, women with higher levels of psychosocial separation (more liberated) from the abusive partner are less likely to withdraw their participation in prosecution.

<<TABLE 3 AROUND HERE>>

Discussion

This research sheds light on the impact that the process of liberation for women who are IPV survivors has on their decision to withdraw from the criminal prosecution of their abusers. Our analysis indicates that the LoD decreased as the survivor's degree of psychosocial separation from the defendant increased. These results complement the findings in previous scholarship that attachment to a partner or ex-partner—as measured by indicators of emotional attachment including the presence of positive feelings for the partner or ex-partner, desire for reconciliation, and feelings of guilt (e.g., Erez & Belknap, 1998; Cala et al., 2016; Hare, 2010; Malecha et al., 2003; Vázquez et al., 2018), as well as indicators of economic dependence (e.g., Hare, 2010; Goodman et al., 1999)—lead some victims to discontinue participating with the CJS in prosecuting their abusive partners or ex-partners.

As expected, we found a significant relationship between the SPS-VP overall score and two of the variables from the model by García-Jiménez et al. (under review) to predict LoD: feelings of guilt and the idea of returning to the defendant after filing the complaint. Both are psychological and emotional responses to leaving and could be interpreted as indicators of progress in the journey to liberation. The desire for and the commitment to the

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relationship are expressed in the initial stages in the process of leaving, and this might denote that women are still engaging in efforts to maintain the relationship as in the binding and enduring stages as described by Landenburger (1989). Some survivors may seek social service and/or legal help, and even file a complaint, expecting that this serves as a warning to the partner to change his violent behavior (Hoyle & Saunders, 2000). It may not be surprising that when a survivor believes there has been a slight improvement in her abuser's behavior, she stops using social and legal services and withdraws her complaint(s) (Cala et al., 2016). It may be that for those women who want to continue the relationship, the CJS can function as a tool to gain some control in the relationship, but not to put an end to it (Ford, 1983). Additionally, guilt is more commonly present in IPV victims than in other types of victims involved in the CJS (Buzawa et al., 2017). Guilt tends to only be overcome in advanced stages of the process of leaving and recovery after the survivor has grieved the lost relationship (Landenburger, 1998; Messing et al., 2015).

The frameworks we used here defined several stages in the process of leaving and recovery. These stages include a phase prior to complete liberation in which survivors strive to detach from the relationship and make several attempts to break up and live independently (e.g., Cala et al., 2009; Campbell et al., 1998; Lacey et al., 2011; Landenburger, 1989; Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Roca-Cortés et al., 2015). Therefore, it is understandable that participants in our sample with high SPS-VP scores had previously filed at least one complaint against their partner. Previous complaints could be interpreted as indicators of the transition to a complete detachment from the relationship (Campbell et al., 1998). In addition, during the disengagement phase, women's interest in using the CJS is often motivated by seeking formal protection, long-term safety, and ending the relationship (Shearson, 2017).

The frequency of contact with the ex-partner was also expected to be related to SPS-VP overall score, which is an indicator of commitment to the relationship and/or a way to

ease the abuser's attempts to maintain control over her through his constant requests for forgiveness (Landenburger, 1989). However, there was not a statistically significant relationship between the frequency of contact and the SVS-VP overall score. This relationship may have been mediated by receiving a protective order, as compliance with the order would decrease contact and communication between the victim and the defendant.

In any case, the fact that the predictive model developed by García-Jiménez et al. (under review) included these variables led us to think more about the importance of the *process* of liberation. Yet their analysis did not include psychosocial separation as a whole, a dimension within the process of liberation that covers a broader set of aspects regarding the emotional separation and the economic independence from the aggressor (Roca-Cortés et al., 2015). Acknowledging this dimension is important given the complexity of the decision-making process regarding participation in the CJS (Kingsnorth & Macintosh, 2004; Boivin & Leclerc, 2016). This participation is based on multiple internal and external factors (Barata, 2007). While some survivors need external support to file a complaint, others may not be ready to separate, and seek help from police or other forms of legal assistance to manage the violence in their intimate relationships (Boivin & Leclerc, 2016).

The main contribution of this work lies not so much in being able to *prevent* women's withdrawals from legal proceedings but in the possibility of an adequate assessment of survivors by specialized services available through the CJS system. Whether to participate in prosecution should be a survivor's decision, and their autonomy and agency need to be respected (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000). However, they could be referred when necessary to psychological support services when there are clear signs of an incipient process of liberation that still require hard work and external support in terms of ending the relationship (Messing et al., 2015). Likewise, other research has shown that institutional support is a key factor in

ending a violent relationship (Anderson & Saunders, 2003), which means that the CJS can be helpful if a survivor desires separation and prosecution (García-Jiménez et al., 2020).

The practical implications of our results go beyond including psychosocial separation as a predictive factor of dropping charges in the model by García-Jiménez et al. (under review). One application of this analysis is developing training programs targeting police, legal actors, and other professionals that demystifies IPV; explains the processes of entrapment and recovery; teaches professionals how to listen to and respect women's agency and decision-making, linking women's decision-making explicitly to their own priorities, contexts, and available resources; and gives information about the emotional and cognitive processes often associated with women's recovery. This training should be oriented to significantly lessen stereotypes and the acceptance of myths about IPV and survivors. These tend to be associated with negative attitudes and victim-blaming and usually lead to negative practices, secondary victimization of IPV survivors that is still frequent in the CJS (e.g., Bodelón, 2014; Laing, 2017). These can decrease women's credibility if they return to the CJS (Bodelón, 2014).

These trainings would also help police and legal actors better understand why survivors of IPV are reluctant to participate in the CJS and increase their awareness of the complexities of leaving a violent relationship. Trainings should include that women often use strategies other than participating in the CJS to become safe (Khaw & Hardesty, 2015). Survivors' decisions about abusive relationships should not be classified as "right" or "wrong", especially without considering their social contexts, knowledge, and perspectives (Mannell, Jackson, & Umutoni, 2016). Instead, they should respect survivors' agency and decision-making (Greeson & Campbell, 2011). This is fundamentally important in the legal arena, especially as the CJS itself has an impact on survivors' recovery from IPV (Bell et al., 2011). When survivors' needs are considered by the CJS, they are less likely to experience

secondary victimization and more likely to participate in prosecution (Boivin & Leclerc, 2016). Similarly, professionals becoming aware that leaving is a process, that survivors have agency, and gaining respect for their decisions would improve relationships between professionals and clients and decrease feelings of frustration when victims disengage (e.g., Gauthier, 2010; Goodman et al., 1999). This awareness would even decrease professionals' reluctance to serve survivors who are not yet totally detached from their partner (Shearson, 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

This research has several limitations that must be taken into consideration when interpreting the results presented here. First, we could not use probability sampling given the realities of conducting IPV research, so our results may not be generalizable to the population of IPV survivors in Spain. Second, most women in the sample were in the investigation stage of their criminal case (66.3%), so we cannot know accurately how SPS-VP is related to LoD for women at other phases of prosecution. Additionally, the sample was obtained by contacting professionals at public aid services (MICWs) which involuntarily excluded women with fewer opportunities to access these resources in Spain, such as migrant women (Briones-Vozmediano, La Parra, & Vives-Cases, 2015). Finally, the SPS-VP instrument used here was not validated in different languages other than Spanish and Catalan. Hence, the participants of this work had specific situations that must be considered when interpreting the results.

Moreover, all the participants in this study were women, so we cannot know whether the process of liberation is associated with disengagement for male victims. However, worldwide most IPV is experienced by women and 38% of femicides are committed by male intimate partners (García-Moreno et al., 2013). In Spain, more than 1,000 women have been murdered by their partners or ex-partners since 2003, with 60 women murdered on average

per year (GOGV, 2018). The Organic Act 1/2004—considered an example for many international laws on violence against women— (Goicolea et al., 2013) was designed to be applied in Spain only for women who are victims of IPV. Thus, the restriction of the law to women reflects the seriousness of violence against women and gendered nature of IPV.

Another methodological limitation has to do with the use of the predicted LoD instead of a final decision to withdraw that remained unknown at the time of data collection. This means that there are likely some false negatives and false positives. Future research should analyze how the predicted risk ultimately corresponded to the final decision of dropping the charges. Even so, we must point out that the logistic model used to calculate LoD classifies correctly more than 80% of the cases (García-Jiménez et al., under review; García-Jiménez & Trigo, 2019), and this model was developed with a sample with similar characteristics to the participants of this work –the same cultural and legislative context of southern Spain. Future research should clarify whether the variables found to be significant here with regard to predicting victim disengagement are replicable in other cultural and legislative contexts.

An intersectionality perspective is needed when dealing with female survivors of IPV and diversity must be addressed before generalizing our results. Replication studies including diverse samples must be carried out. We must acknowledge that survivors' strategies and rhythms of recovery, response to victimization, and help-seeking behaviors vary across cultures and ethnic groups and are shaped by cultural values, religion, acculturation processes, and economic stratification (García-Moreno et al., 2013; Kasturirangan, Krishnan, & Riger, 2004; Satyen, Rogic, & Supol, 2019). The acceptance of patriarchal norms constitutes one of the bases of the gendered nature of IPV against women, which is predominant in Spain. However, the complexity of social relationships does not place gender as the only category to bear in mind but also others intersecting with it, such as ethnicity (McCall, 2005). For instance, in the case of Spain, Roma women may face greater obstacles

to ending the abusive relationship. This is sometimes explained by the normalization of violence and stronger gender norms within Roma communities, which may hinder women's empowerment and freedom (Vives-Cases, Espinar-Ruiz, Castellanos-Torres, & Coe, 2017). Furthermore, culture also affects women's engagement with prosecution (Epstein & Goodman, 2013). In this regard, migrant women may experience additional barriers to seek help. Evidence has shown that not being fluent in Spanish, not having enough information about available resources, and fearing consequences in their legal status or deportation are common obstacles both in Spain (Briones-Vozmediano, et al. 2015; GOGV, 2015) and internationally (Satyen et al., 2019).

Despite these limitations, this analysis is a pioneering work in exploring the liberation of the relationship from IPV as a process affecting female survivors' decision to participate in the CJS. In addition, it addresses gaps in the literature such as Shearson's (2017) call for using quantitative methodologies to complement qualitative findings. This helps to better understand the relationship between the stages of the leaving and recovery process from abusive relationships and women seeking legal help behaviors. In this regard, our results confirm the complexity involving the decision-making process whether to participate in prosecution and are shown to be essential content in professionals' training. Specific training is aimed at giving adjusted responses to survivors' needs based on the comprehension of the psychological processes involved in recovery from violence that may explain women's disengagement from prosecution. On this basis, there is a call for the CJS to give responses that take into consideration survivors' agency and facilitate women to take control over their own lives in the aftermath of IPV.

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Table 1.

Coding and descriptives for dependent and independent variables.

Variables related to the intimate relationship	M (SD)/ %
Time (months) since the breakup	28.33 (32.24)
Relationship when pressing charges (partner/ ex-partner)	
Partner	46.30
Variables to predict the likelihood of disengagement	
Who made the decisions (she alone/ the lawyer(s)/ she together with her lawyer)	
She alone	13.80
She together with her lawyer	61.30
Thought of going back with the abuser (yes/ no)	
Yes	17.50
Protective Order granted (yes/ no)	
Yes	32.90
Frequency of contact with the defendant (none/ occasional/ frequent)	
Occasional	18.80
Frequent	10.00
Received Psychological support (none/ from social services/ from health services)	
None	15.00
From Social Services	81.30
Feelings of guilt (0 – 10)	3.15 (3.92)
Other variables related to the legal proceedings	
Complaint filed (victim's independent and considered decision/ By her, in response to traumatic event/ by another person)	
Victim's independent and considered decision	30.00
By her in response to traumatic event	58.80
Expected protection when filed the complaint (yes/ no)	
Yes	74.00
Applied for a protection order (yes/ no)	
Yes	82.60
Moment of the procedure (First hearing/ Investigation phase/ Oral Trial)	
First hearing	17.50
Investigation phase	66.30
Previous complaint(s) (yes/ no)	
Yes	37.50
Time in the legal system (months)	25.47 (34.64)
Time in the current legal procedure (months)	13.59 (15.70)
Withdrew from previous complaint (yes/ no)	
Yes	56.50
Protection she felt after filing the complaint (0 – 10)	4.85 (4.10)
Perception of life in danger (self-rated 0 – 10)	4.77 (4.09)
Overall satisfaction with the CJS (0 – 10)	5.43 (3.61)
Lawyer (public/private)	
Public	74.20
How tired she was of the legal procedure (0 – 10)	6.60 (3.67)

Note: Means and standard deviations for quantitative variables and percentages for the categorical;
Missing values not imputed, and sample characteristics are for *N* = 80.

Table 2.

Results for the exploratory analyses for the Psychosocial Separation overall score (SPS-VP) and for the predicted likelihood of disengagement (LoD).

Variables	SPS-VP				Predicted LoD			
	F/ Welch's F	df	p	R²	F/ Welch's F	df	p	R²
Partner or ex-partner when pressing charges	1.36	1,78	.246	.02	2.63	1,52.81	.111	.04
Who made the decisions (she/lawyer/together)	0.87	2,77	.422	.02				
Thought of going back with the abuser (yes/no)	10.51**	1,78	.002	.12				
PO granted (yes/no)	0.11	1,68	.743	.00				
Contact with him (none/occasional/frequent)	2.94	2,13.86	.086	.13				
Psychological support (none/social/health services)	2.52	2,77	.087	.06				
Decision to file the complaint (victim's independent and considered decision/traumatic event/by another person)	0.38	2,77	.686	.01	1.14	2,77	.326	.03
Expect protection (yes/no)	0.29	1,25.11	.593	.01	0.09	1,75	.765	.00
Applied for a PO (yes/no)	0.02	1,67	.887	.00	8.79**	1,34.45	.005	.05
Moment of the procedure (First hearing/investigation/oral trial)	0.76	2,77	.472	.02	1.39	2,77	.256	.03
Previous complaint (yes/no)	13.89***	1,78	< .001	.15	3.01	1,78	.087	.04
Withdrew from previous complaint (yes/no)	0.14	1,21	.710	.01	1.10	1,21	.306	.05
Lawyer (public/private)	0.27	1,64	.605	.04	0.82	1,64	.368	.01
		N	p	r		N	p	r
Time (months) since the breakup		77	.034	.24*		77	.057	-.22
Feelings of guilt (0 – 10)		80	< .001	-.42***				
Time in the CJS (months)		64	.380	.11		64	.466	-.09
Months in the current legal procedure		72	.053	.23		72	.040	-.24*
Protection felt after complaining (0 – 10)		33	.976	-.05		33	.815	.04
Perception of life in danger (0 – 10)		77	.121	.18		77	.059	-.22
Satisfaction with the CJS (0 – 10)		54	.713	.05		54	.980	.00
Tiredness of the legal procedure (0 – 10)		65	.153	.18		65	.121	-.19

Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 3.
Results for the models from the Multiple Linear Regression analysis using a two-step hierarchical method to introduce the variables to predict the likelihood of disengagement.

	b	Type Error	β	df	t	p	R²/ ΔR²
Model 1							.21
SPS-VP	-.006	.00	-.46	78	-4.53*	< .001	.46
Model 2							.21
SPS-VP	-.006	.00	-.45	78	-4.09*	< .001	.42
Previous complaint	-.006	.04	-.02	77	-0.16	.870	.02

Note: * $p < .001$

R^2 for the complete model and ΔR^2 for each predictive variable within the model.