Intimate partner violence in lesbian couples: A systematic review on the barriers to seeking help

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Abstract

The process of seeking help for violence in lesbian couples is complex due to the variety of factors and actors that can be involved. It is a process in which the women may or may not take action to ask for some kind of support, depending on the stage at which they find themselves. However, even though women may realise that they are in a situation of mistreatment or abuse in their relationship with their partner or ex-partner, there may be barriers that hinder them from seeking help. This paper presents a systematic review of the barriers that lesbian women encounter in seeking help or accessing support systems when they are victims of intimate partner violence. Out of 139 studies reviewed, 120 were selected for further review, and 8 studies meeting the methodological inclusion criteria were finally selected. The results of this research show that psycho-social and legal barriers exist, which, within a system of oppression – heterosexist society – do not occur in isolation, but are inter-related, making it difficult for lesbian women victims of intimate partner violence to seek help or access support services. This review finds limitations in the literature reviewed and makes recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Intimate partner violence; lesbian women; support; barriers.

Introduction

In 1986 Barbara Hart defined abuse among lesbian women as "the pattern of violent and coercive behaviors whereby a lesbian seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs, or conduct of her intimate partner or to punish the intimate for resisting the perpetrator's control over her" (1986: 173). The purpose of violence in lesbian couples is the same as in heterosexual couples: to dominate, control, and/or abuse (Hart, 1986; Renzetti, 1992; Ristock, 2005). In fact, we must keep in mind that both types of couples share the same referential framework, that is, heterosexist society, within which gender precepts related to affective-sexual bonds – such as romantic love, control, domination, and possession – are developed and reproduced in both heterosexual couples and lesbian relationships (Calton, Bennett & Gebhard, 2016; Coll-Planas et al., 2008; Laliga, 2023b; Tognasso et al., 2022).

It is difficult to determine accurately the current prevalence rate of intimate partner violence among lesbian women because of a lack of statistics on reports to the police or on access to and use of support services by lesbian women victims of such violence. Furthermore, when examining the research that has been carried out on this subject, we must take into account the different methodological procedures applied, the type of sampling, the different concepts of violence applicable, or the specific time period being measured, which also make it difficult to determine the prevalence of violence accurately (West, 2002).

However, we can approximate the average prevalence of violence in lesbian couples through meta-analysis, such as the examination conducted by Badenes-Ribera et al. (2015). Out of 1,184 studies they identified, they finally selected fourteen investigations that met their inclusion and methodological quality criteria: studies that were conducted in the United States, using non-probability sampling methods, with samples ranging from 104 to 1,075 participants. The meta-analysis reports that the average lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence victimization in lesbian women is 48%, and 15% in a woman's current relationship. The mean lifetime prevalence of victimization varies depending on the type of intimate partner violence: 14% for sexual violence, 18% for physical violence, and 43% for psychological violence (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2015).

Violence in lesbian female couples includes, in addition to the physical, psychological, and sexual violence that are also present in violence in heterosexual couples, certain forms of violence that are specific to lesbian relationships and related to

the socialization of gender precepts at a personal and social level. These include negative feelings, attitudes, or behaviours against one's gender identity or sexual orientation that lead to a greater vulnerability to certain abusive tactics and behaviours in relationships, as occurs, for example, with the practice of outing. For example, a woman who is being abused may be threatened with her sexual orientation being made public in a variety of settings (e.g., at work, in the family, or in friendships), if she asks for help or reports situations of violence, or she may be reminded that, if she asks for help, no one will believe her or help her (Calton et al., 2016; Hart, 1986; Kimmes et al., 2019; Parry & O'Neal, 2015; Renzetti, 1992; Ristock, 2005; Stiles-Shields & Carroll, 2015).

These specific socially based violent behaviours lead to further victimisation and may make it more difficult to initiate the help-seeking process or to access support resources (Calton et al., 2016; Parry & O'Neal, 2015; Laliga, 2023b). In this context, our study aims to conduct a systematic review to find out what the barriers to the help-seeking process in lesbian women victims of intimate partner violence are. The results of this research are intended to contribute to the design and development of targeted measures to make it easier for these women to access support resources.

A brief clarification on the language we will use throughout this study is in order. As an alternative to the term 'victims', because of its stigmatising connotations, 'survivors' is often substituted because its connotations are more favourable for the women (Romero-Sánchez et al., 2021). However, we consider that the term 'survivors' can also present problems in practice, especially because of the heroic nature that is implied to be present in the various experiences and situations (Echeburúa & Cruz-Sáez, 2015; García Ibañez, 2018; Romero-Sánchez et al., 2021). This can make the complexity of the processes and dynamics involved in intimate partner violence invisible, victimising women who remain in relationships and do not seek help. It can also increase guilt and frustration in women who do not feel they have the strength they are supposed to have to escape from abusive situations. The term 'survivors' also denies and invisibilises the agency of women who ended up dying as a result of their partner's or ex-partner's aggression, women who probably also employed a range of strategies to combat these abusive situations[1]. Pilar Albertín (2017) reminds us that, although the category of victim is stigmatising and criminalising, as with other categories, in intimate partner violence it

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[1] 'Survivor' is a term which applies in other areas, such as the disease of cancer, presenting similar problems, for example, when women are at an advanced stage of the disease or in cases where they have died in the end.

can be reclaimed not only as having agency – 'to recognise, become aware and objectify how violence comes from a relationship, from a way of being in the world' – but also as having visibility and social resonance, that is, claiming help or a form of support. In this study we use the term 'victims' from a victimological perspective[2], as a temporary state which one passes through in the process of victimization and de-victimization, assuming a clearly feminist position that gives agency and visibility to the range of women's experiences and situations, as well as the problems that many women face when they consider seeking help.

Method

A systematic review of the literature (Perestelo-Pérez, 2013; Wright et al., 2007) was carried out and is reported following the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) statement (Page et al., 2021).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The criteria for the inclusion of studies in the review were as follows: 1) being original research, published in peer-reviewed journals; 2) studies written in the English or Spanish language; 3) studies of primary sources using qualitative or quantitative methods; 4) studies that report on the barriers that make it difficult to start the help-seeking process and/or accessing support in a situation of intimate partner violence; 5) studies that have a sample made up of lesbian woman that experience intimate partner violence or that, in the case of also including bisexual women, report separately for lesbian women; 6) in the case of research with diverse samples of the LGBTQI+ collective that experience intimate partner violence in same-sex couples, studies that report separately for lesbian women. No geographical or time limits were established in the search.

The criteria for exclusion were: 1) studies published in books and book chapters; 2) studies written in a language other than English or Spanish; 3) studies from secondary sources, such as previous surveys, theoretical studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses; 4) studies that do not refer to the barriers in the help-seeking process and/or access to support services in intimate partner violence; 5) studies that do not include

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[2] From this perspective we can detect and modify situations that generate victimization (Morillas; Patró & Aguilar, 2014). Victimology is the interdisciplinary science that studies the process of victimization and de-victimization (Pereda & Tamarit, 2013; Tamarit, 2006).

lesbian women or, in the case of including them together with bisexual women, do not separate information for each group; 6) studies that have diverse sample of the LGBTQI+ collective experience intimate partner violence, but that do not report separately for lesbian women.

During the search process, we found one study that, among other objectives, addresses barriers for lesbian women in a broad sense, using the term 'queer' to include bisexual women and other LGBTQI+ minorities (Harden et al., 2022). Given that there are differences between lesbian and bisexual women in relation to intimate partner violence, with specific risk factors involved (Bermea et al., 2019: Reeves et al., 2023), our research is restricted to investigating the experiences of lesbian women only. Despite sharing the same system of oppression, experiences within the LGBTQI+ community are not homogeneous (Domínguez, 2023; Monaco, 2020).

Search strategy

Several search strategies were used. Firstly, an electronic search was carried out in the Scopus and Web of Science databases up to May 2023. The following keywords were used: intimate partner violence; partner abuse; domestic violence; abuse; lesbian; lesbian relationship violence; woman-to-woman; sexual minority; victims; survivors; help-seeking; support; informal support; barriers; barriers to support; services; victim services; experiences; disclosure behaviors/behaviours. A total of 105 studies were identified across all databases.

Secondly, a manual search was carried out in specialized and interdisciplinary journals: *Journal of Family Violence; Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services; Journal of Homosexuality; Journal of Lesbian Studies; Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma.* Eighteen potential studies were found.

Finally, a manual search was carried out in the lists of references of previous systematic reviews on the subject (i.e., Calton et al., 2016; Harden et al., 2022; Laliga, 2023a; Santoniccolo et al., 2021); 16 studies were selected. In total, 139 potential studies were identified, and 19 duplicate studies were eliminated; therefore, the total number of studies to review was 120. The studies were then selected and eliminated according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Study selection procedure and data extraction

The selection procedure was carried out in two phases: preliminary selection and selection. Both phases were carried out independently by the researchers. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. When necessary, an external researcher was consulted.

In the phase of preliminary selection, a total of 120 studies were reviewed based on their titles and abstracts; 64 articles were eliminated because they did not meet the inclusion criteria and 56 full texts were examined in the selection phase. Of these, 48 studies were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria: one study was not written in Spanish or English, but in French; twelve studies did not come from primary sources, but from analysis of secondary sources (theoretical studies or systematic reviews); two studies did not report on barriers to help-seeking processes and/or access to support services; twelve studies did not include participants who self-identified as lesbian women victims of intimate partner violence or, in cases that used a broad concept to include queer, bisexual, and transgender women, did not report separately for lesbian women; and twenty-one studies had diverse samples of the LGBTQI+ collective victims of intimate partner violence but did not report separately for lesbian woman. Therefore, eight studies were selected (see Figure 1).

These eight primary studies were analyzed and coded to extract the most relevant data on barriers to the help-seeking process or access to support services for lesbian women experiencing intimate partner violence. Each investigation was analyzed in Depth. Data extraction in the study with a sample composed of gen men and lesbian women (Leun, 2016) could only be possible when the author made it explicit that the information was a lesbian woman. Therefore, we excluded information when we could not identify who was reporting.

Because the number of articles was small and because your study was not a qualitative meta-analysis or an integrative meta-analysis, we do not synthesize patterns across the study findings but reporting the findings. The studies selected the systematic review of the literature described three main barriers on the reasons why lesbian women do not ask for help. These barriers are closely related to each other: a) sociological barriers; b) psychological barriers; c) legal barriers. The multidisciplinary character that made up the research group that carried out this systematic review influenced the coding of information through these sociological, psychological, and legal barriers. After identifying the problems that appeared in relation to our discipline, we shared them to be able to relate the information obtained.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of study selection process
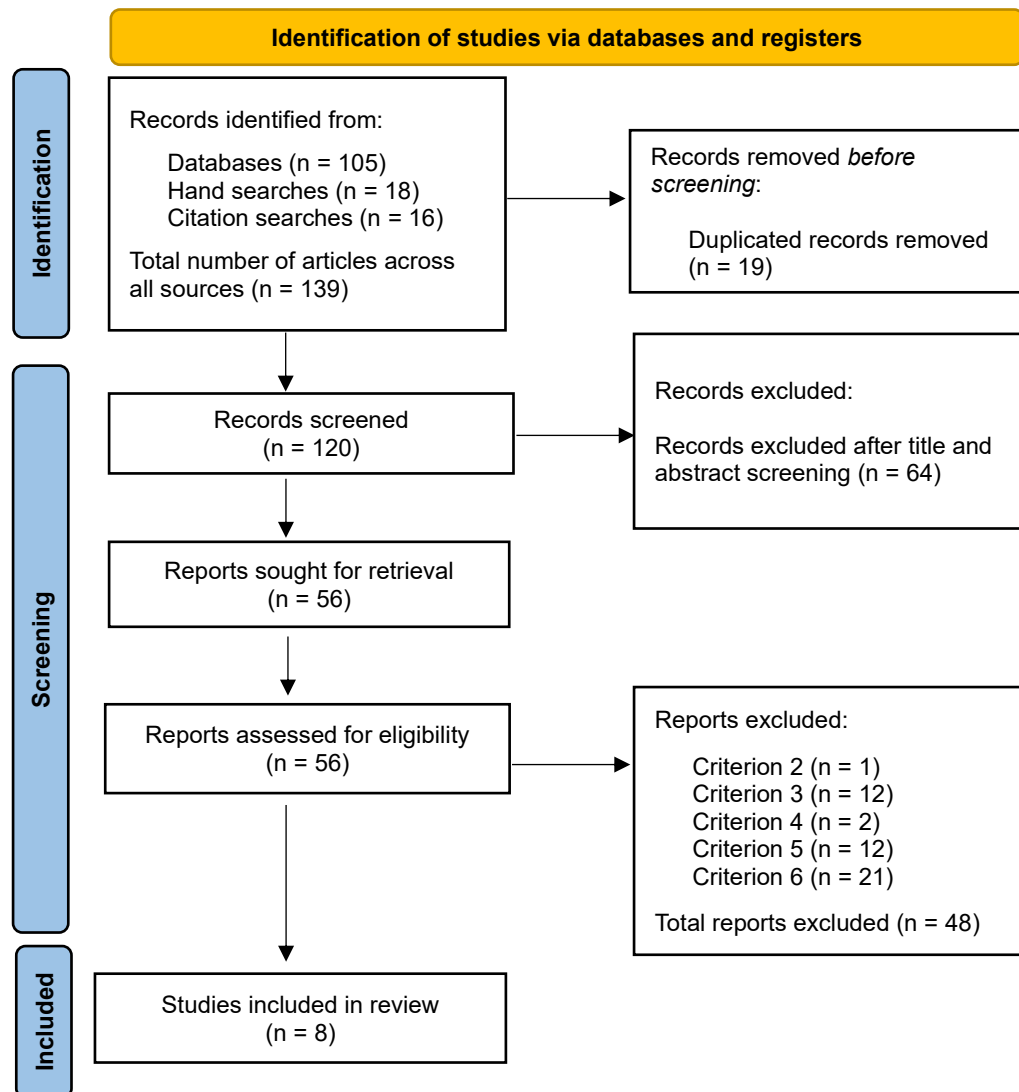
Results

Study characteristics

Table 1 shows the main characteristics of the eight studies included. All the lesbian women who participated in these reviewed studies are or have been victims of intimate partner violence. The geographical location of these studies covers Italy (Di Battista et al., 2021), Australia (Irwin 2006; Irwin, 2008), Hong Kong (Leung, 2016), and the United States (Hardesty et al., 2008; Hardesty et al., 2011; Register, 2018; Walters, 2011).

Only one of the eight studies used quantitative methodology, in the form of surveys (Di Battista et al., 2021); the rest used qualitative research through interviews (Hardesty et al., 2008; Hardesty et al., 2011; Irwin 2006; Irwin 2008; Leung, 2016; Register, 2018; Walters, 2011). The samples in the qualitative investigations range from eight to twenty-four lesbian woman, whereas the quantitative investigations had a total participation of 165 lesbian women.

Most of the selected papers had a sample composed solely of lesbian women, except for one in which, out of nine participants, five were lesbian women, and four are gay men, but they reported separately the main barriers in the help-seeking process (Leung, 2016). Ages range approximately from 18 to 55 years old.

The ethnic and racial characteristics of the samples in these studies were diverse and were reported by most of the studies, except for one (Di Battista et al., 2021). They included people from different countries in Europe, America, Africa, and Asia. The research by Hardesty et al. (2008 & 2011) and by Irwin (2006 & 2008) included both native-born and foreign-born women. The lesbian women participated in these research studies represented a range of ethnicity and race, being mainly African American, White, and Latina women (Hardesty et al., 2008 & 2011; Irwin, 2006 & 2008; Register, 2018; Walters, 2011).

Regarding education level, most participants had attained a post-secondary level of education, in two investigations half or more than half of participants were university students (Di Battista et al., 2021; Walter, 2011). Two studies did not report on the educational level of the participants (Leung, 2016; Register, 2018).

In relation to the occupation of the lesbian women, five of the eight studies reported on this characteristic of the participants; half or almost all were employed. Only two of the eight studies reported on income level (Irwin, 2006 & 2008); lesbian women victims had similar or lower incomes than their partners did. Finally, another analysis variable in the intersectionality of the barriers in the help-seeking process is whether a woman is a mother, and only two of eight studies reported on this (Hardesty et al, 2008; Hardesty et al., 2011).

Table 1
Study characteristics (N = 8)

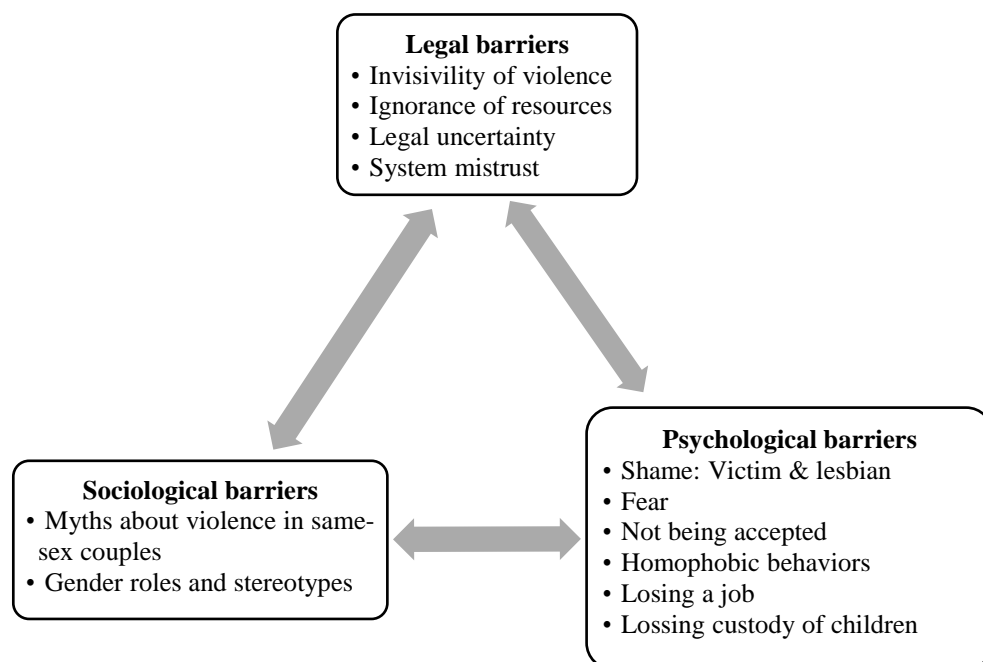| Study	Location	Method/ Technique	Sample	Age	Race & Ethnicity	Education	Occupation	Income level	Children
Di Battista et al., 2021	Italy	Quantitative: Surveys	165 lesbian women	From 18 to 54 years old	Not reported	Master's degree (61.2%), secondary school education (33.9%), middle school (1.8%), post-graduate (1.8%)	Employed (68.9%), retired (18.8%), unemployed (9.1%), student (1.2%)	Not reported	Not reported
Hardesty et al., 2011 / Hardesty et al., 2008	Chicago, Illinois (USA)	Qualitative: Interviews	24 lesbian women (19 self-identified as lesbian, and 5 were at least somewhat closeted)	Average age of 32 years old	12 of the women were African American, 9 White, and 3 Latina	Education ranged from junior high school to a BA	Half of were employed	Not reported	Yes
Irwin, 2008 / Irwin, 2006	Sydney (Australia)	Qualitative: Interviews	21 lesbian women	From 25 to 53 years old	Most women were White Australians, with a minority being Indigenous Australians or born in overseas countries	Some women had tertiary educational qualifications; others had not completed high school	Almost all were employed	Similar or lower incomes than their partners	Not reported
Leung, 2016	Hong Kong	Qualitative: Interviews	5 lesbian women and 4 gay men	From 20 to 55 years old	All the lesbian women were local-born Chinese	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Register, 2018	USA	Qualitative: Interviews	8 lesbian women	From 20 to 52 years old	non-Hispanic White	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Walters, 2011	USA	Quantitative: Interviews	4 lesbian women	From 30 to 50 years old	3 of the women were White, and 1 African American	2 PhD students; the others held a BA or BSc degree	Not reported	Middle-class	Not reported

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Barriers in the help-seeking process

The search for help by the victims of any crime is part of the process of de-victimization. This process aims to repair the damage caused to de victims and the restoration of their lifestyle prior to the criminal act (Morillas, Patró & Aguilar, 2014; Pereda & Tamarit, 2013). It is a complex process which, in addition to the involvement of a range of factors and actors, consists of different stages (Pereda & Tamarit, 2013; Tamarit, 2006). Depending on the stage at which the victims find themselves in this process – in a state of shock, in denial, or assimilating facts – the moment of seeking help may vary. But it may also be the case that, despite awareness of what is happening, there are one or more barriers that hinder and prevent the help-seeking process.

The studies selected the systematic review of the literature described three main barriers that hinder and prevent lesbian women victims of intimate partner violence from seeking help or accessing support resources. These barriers are psychological, sociological, and legal in nature; they are inter-related; they do not occur in isolation; and they affect both women who are at a stage of denial of the facts (of the abuse of their partners or ex-partners), and also women who are at a stage of accepting and assimilating what has happened.

Figure 2
Barriers in help-seeking process

Legal barriers
• Invisivility of violence
• Ignorance of resources
• Legal uncertainty
• System mistrust

Sociological barriers
• Myths about violence in same-sex couples
• Gender roles and stereotypes

Psychological barriers
• Shame: Victim & lesbian
• Fear
• Not being accepted
• Homophobic behaviors
• Losing a job
• Lossing custody of children

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Legal barriers

Four of the eight selected studies report legal barriers that make it difficult for lesbian women victims of intimate partner violence to initiate the help-seeking process or access support services (Hardesty et al., 2011; Irwin, 2006; Leung, 2016; Walters, 2011). Qualitative research by Hardesty et al. (2011) conducted in the United States through interviews with twenty-four African American, White, and Latina lesbian women with an average age of 32, born both in the USA and abroad, reports that the main legal barrier is the context of legal vulnerability experienced by lesbian women due to the heterosexist frame of reference. Specifically, their fear for their parental and property rights affects their ability to initiate the help-seeking process. Thus, when rights were secure it was easier for women to ask for help or access support services, but when these were insecure they became barriers or obstacles in seeking help in these situations of intimate partner violence.

For example, participants who are clear about their property rights will access police services to help them get the abuser out of the home; however, they may not report the abuse if they are insecure about parental rights and fear for the loss of custody of their children: "My children are everything to me. Everything. And if I even have a notion that, you know, it was possible to lose them [then], I hid everything from him. Because he does make considerably more money than I do, and he's remarried, and I couldn't ask for a better stepmother for my kids. So it's like a perfect home life, perfect situation. . . I just could not fathom if I lost them, let alone if I lost them because of [the abuse]. So, I hid a lot [from him]" (Hardesty et al., 2011: 39). Other women, who are clear about their parental rights and do not fear losing custody of the children, may be insecure about their tenancy rights because the home belongs to the abuser and she pays the rent, so that even though they can initiate the process of seeking help, this insecurity over tenancy rights prevents them from following the advice of police officers to leave the abusive situation: "Claudia, another overt help seeker, had no custody concerns as she no longer had any contact with the father of her children. Despite secure parental rights, she was dependent on her abuser for housing as her abuser was the primary leaseholder and payer of rent. When she called the police for help, her abuser laughed and said, 'They can't do nothing to me… I'm on the lease.' Thus, although Claudia's insecure tenancy rights did not prevent her from seeking help, it did prevent her from acting on the police officers' advice and her own desire to leave the abusive relationship" (Hardesty et al., 2011: 39-40).

Qualitative research by Leung (2016), conducted in Hong Kong, involving five women born in Hong Kong ranging in age from 20 to 55, highlights that lack of awareness of available support resources for intimate partner violence situations is another barrier that creates obstacles for many lesbian women victims of intimate partner violence, hindering them from initiating the help-seeking process or accessing support services. For example, participant Beatrice, referring to social services, stated the following: "For me, social workers only work for new immigrants or street kids. I really don't know how social workers can help [LGBT people], I really don't know about this . . . I had seen an advertisement on TV but thought that it was only for an 'ordinary' family, not for Tongzhi [refers to LGBT people in the Chinese community in Hong Kong]" (Leung, 2016: 2399).

Both Leung's study (2016) and quantitative research by Walters (2011) — the latter conducted in the United States through surveys involving four lesbian women (three of them White and one African American), from 30 to 50 years old — report that the heterosexual nature of support resources and/or possible lesbophobic behaviours on the part of main professionals engaged in care, accompaniment, and support provision also constitute barriers in the help-seeking process. Furthermore, as a consequence of the heterosexual frame of reference, lesbophobic behaviorist and the consequent invisibilization of violence in lesbian women, Irwin's qualitative research (2006) – conducted in Sydney involving twenty-one lesbian women, most of whom were White Australians, with a minority being Indigenous Australians or born overseas, and ranging from 25 to 53 years old – reports that several women chose not to access formal support services because they felt they would not be believed, their abusive situations would not be taken seriously, and/or the seriousness of these situations might be minimized. As an example, one of the participants stated the following in relation to police support: "I would never feel like I could go to the police. 'What do I care? They're women.' I mean, number one, I don't think - the police might now - but then I don't think, they wouldn't really see our relationship as a real relationship anyway. And they'd probably say something like 'Just work it out yourselves' or 'Get out of the situation'" (Irwin, 2006: 33). All these legal barriers generate distrust towards the system itself and make it difficult for lesbian women victims of intimate partner violence to access formal support resources.

Social barriers

Social barriers relate to myths about violence in lesbian and other gender minority couples, which deny and invisibilize this phenomenon (Island & Letellier, 1991; Ristock, 1991; Renzetti, 1992). The main myths that we have been able to identify in the review of the selected studies relate to the idea that among lesbian women there are only fights between equals and that intimate partner violence only takes place in heterosexual couples (Irwin, 2008; Register, 2018; Walters, 2011).

Qualitative research by Register (2018) — conducted in the United States through interviews with eight lesbian women between the ages of 20 and 52 — reports the difficulty that some women have in recognising intimate partner violence in their relationships as they consider it to be a phenomenon exclusive to heterosexual couples: "this isn't a problem gay people have... domestic violence is a guy thing, we're two girls" (Register, 2018: 16). Five of the eight participants in this research said that they did not realize they were victims of intimate partner violence until their friends labeled their partners' behaviour as creating abusive situations.

In Walters' quantitative survey research (2011) in the United States, one of the participants (Lynn) reports that the myth that there is no violence among lesbian women is present not only in the heterosexual community, but also in the lesbian community: "I have heard, unfortunately, lots of stories of women that have gone through domestic violence situations and the attitude that I've always heard is that it's not domestic violence; it's two women arguing. It's a catfight. It's, you know, you're both women, so you should be able to figure it out. It's almost like there's this belief that domestic violence can only happen if there is physical power; there's a physical power difference. It has to be that someone is more physically able to control the other one, which isn't the case" (Walters, 2011: 258).

Other women, such as Isabella, a participant in Irwin's qualitative research (2008) in Sydney conducted through interviews, states that she could not believe that a woman could be violent: "I never really framed my situation as being anything but just a lesbian relationship that was struggling. I knew it was struggling. She never admitted that. I knew I was starting to feel really unhappy. I didn't frame it as domestic violence. And I just thought, being a lesbian, it's really difficult. People aren't going to believe me" (Irwin, 2008: 206). At the same time, some women who recognize that they have experienced situations of abuse in their relationships still report that these situations are not severe, minimize the seriousness of the problem, and consider that they can solve these situations

themselves, as shown by qualitative research conducted in Italy through interviews with 165 lesbian women aged between 18 and 54 participating (Di Battista et al., 2021).

The existence of these social barriers in the form of myths that deny and make violence in lesbian couples invisible leads, in turn, to some lesbian women not identifying themselves with the term 'victims' and/or not conceiving intimate partner violence as a social problem but a personal problem specific to the person who assaults, as reported in the quantitative research by Leung (2016) conducted in Hong Kong with five lesbian women between 20 and 55: "Denise had never approached social workers simply because she did not connect herself with a victim identity. She explained in the interview that she was not the one with problems — her partner was. Denise thought that her ex-partner had emotional problems that caused her to use violence, saying 'our relationship problem would be solved if she learned how to handle [her emotions]'" (Leung, 2016: 2400).

These myths especially influence women who are starting their first lesbian relationships and who, later on, realize how this sociological barrier has afectes their identification as victims, making it difficult to seek any kind of help (Irwin, 2008; Register, 2018; Walters, 2011).

Psychological barriers

The psychological barriers that prevent or hinder some lesbian women victims of intimate partner violence from initiating the process of seeking help are related to a variety of emotions that contribute to silencing this phenomenon. Among these feelings, it is worth noting that some women chose not to talk about their experience of mistreatment or abuse in their intimate partner relationship or do not access any kind of source of support because they felt ashamed of being victims of this violence and/or, in the case where they were not completely open about their sexual orientation, ashamed of being a lesbian woman (Di Battista et al., 2021; Irwin, 2008; Walters, 2011). This feeling of shame is closely related to another emotion, also present in some lesbian victims of intimate partner violence, such as the fear of rejection, of not being accepted, or the fear of homophobic behaviour if they had told friends or family about their experiences of violence (Hardesty et al., 2011; Walters, 2011). In the case of lesbian victims of intimate partner violence who were mothers, there was also the fear of losing custody of their children and the fear of losing their job as their family's main source of income (Hardesty et al., 2008; Hardesty et al., 2011).

As a consequence of these psycho-social and legal barriers which make it difficult to initiate the process of seeking help, some women decided to solve the problem on their own, without any kind of support (Di Battista et al., 2011; Hardesty et al., 2008); in other cases, it can lead to isolation and significantly aggravate situations of abuse or mistreatment in partner relationships, affecting the victims' physical and psychological health (Irwin, 2008; Walters, 2011).

Discussion

The aim of this systematic review is to synthesise the material and analyse the various barriers to the help-seeking process in lesbian women victims of intimate partner violence. To this end, eight studies that met the methodological inclusion criteria were examined. From the analysis we were able to identify three types of social and legal barriers which, within the system of oppression of heterosexist society, do not occur in isolation, but are interrelated, making it difficult for lesbian women who are victims of intimate partner violence to seek help or access support services.

The legal system creates mistrust in lesbian women who are victims of such violence, as it does not give greater visibility to the rights these women have and the resources are available to those in these situations, and this is in addition to the women's fear of institutional violence through possible homophobic behaviour when they ask for help (Calton et al., 2016; Parry & O´Neal, 2015, Santoniccolo et al., 2021). This situation encourages the persistence of myths that deny this violence and its seriousness for lesbian women, reinforces gender stereotypes within the binomial of male batterers and female victims and therefore makes it difficult for many to identify themselves as victims, thus contributing to their silence and the perpetuation of the gender roles of emotional-sexual bonds that are also reproduced and play out between lesbian women (Barnes & Donovan, 2018; Cannon & Buttell, 2015; Coll-Planas & San Martín, 2022; Ristock, 2005). This has psychological consequences, leading some women to feel emotions of fear or shame for being a victim, as well as, in some cases, for being a lesbian woman, preventing them from seeking help and, therefore, leading to isolation and exacerbating the intimate partner violence.

This systematic review allows us to give visibility to some of the problems faced by lesbian women who are victims of intimate partner violence in the process of seeking help, and to bring together and harmonise information that is significant and relevant for the creation and development of resources or specific measures. However, this research also has limitations to be considered in future work: 1) the selection of the studies examined has been small because most of the research on this subject does not report separately for each group within the LGBTQI+ community, and, therefore, the results of this systematic review cannot be generalised for all lesbian women; 2) there may be other scientific articles indexed in other databases not used in this systematic review; 3) the selected studies are geographically located in different countries, and, therefore, the results cannot be extrapolated without taking into account possible particularities in the legislation that applies in each of these countries.

Another limitation we would like to highlight is that most of the selected studies incorporate some analytical variables in the description of the sample – such as class or age – without actually analysing these variables in detail in relation to barriers in the help-seeking process of lesbian women, except for a few, such as being a mother (Hardesty et al., 2008; Hardesty et al., 2011). In this context, we would invite future researchers to incorporate an intersectional perspective in the analysis of intimate partner violence in order to identify and give visibility to situations in which there is a higher risk of suffering violence and those who face more difficulties in seeking help and/or accessing resources or support; such visibility could have a favourable impact on the provision of comprehensive and effective support from the professional sphere (Cardenas, 2023; Coll-Planas & San Martín, 2022; Lombardo & Verloo, 2009; Parry & O'Neal, 2015; Subirana-Malaret, Gahagan, & Parker, 2019).

Another suggestion for future research is related to the methodology. The studies selected in this systematic review have been quantitative and qualitative: two of the eight studies used quantitative methodology, in the form of surveys; the rest used qualitative research through interviews. We consider that combining both methodologies can enrich the results. As a suggestion for future research in this matter, we propose that research through surveys reflect on the possibility of also conducting a subsequent interview with victims who wish to tell their experience. For example, indicating at the end of the surveys the possibility of carrying out a subsequent interview to expand information, indicating a mean of contact the main researcher (e.g., email), so that, if the victims were interested, they could be who contact with the main researcher. We choose not to ask the victims to

indicate information that could identify with the survey (e.g., email or phone). They are the ones who contact the main researcher through the email that we have indicated at the end of the survey.

Finally, it should be noted that the study of the processes of de-victimising lesbian women and other sex-gender minorities of intimate partner violence needs to incorporate the professional perspective for a better understanding of the problem, especially in seeking help or accessing support services (Leung, 2016). Through systematic reviews we can integrate and synthesise information about the experiences of professionals who provide support to these victims, as well as the kind of barriers they face in providing support, which helps greatly in the creation and development of specific measures to combat this violence. Systematic reviews at the professional level are practically non-existent at the moment, which shows a knowledge gap that we suggest for the consideration of future research on this issue.

The results of this research and other future studies in intimate partner violence in lesbian couples should inform public policies of the presence this phenomenon, the obstacles, and barriers that victims must request help or access support resources. In this sense, it would be advisable to promote awareness campaigns about this problem, design and develop specific measures or resources that address the needs of victims. These public policies must not only be focused on the victims, but also on the professionals who are dedicated to accompaniment or providing some type of support to the victims of this violence, providing them instruments to be able to carry out their professional's work with effectiveness and comprehensive nature, e.g., through specialized training in violence same-sex couples.

Availability of Data. The datasets generated during and/or analysed in the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Code Availability. Not applicable.

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