

Article

Professional's Views on the 'Nordic Paradox' in a Low Intimate Partner Violence Prevalence Country

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Abstract

The apparently contradictory co-existence of high levels of gender equality and intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) found in Nordic countries has been termed the Nordic Paradox. The aim of this study was to examine how the Nordic Paradox is discussed and explained by Spanish professionals working in the IPVAW field. Five focus groups ($n = 19$) and interviews with key informants ($n = 10$) were conducted. Four main categories of possible explanations for the Nordic Paradox were identified: *Macro-micro disconnect* (i.e., discordance between individual beliefs and behaviors and macro-social norms of gender equality), *IPVAW as multicausal* (i.e., IPVAW defined as a multicausal phenomenon that does not necessarily have to be associated with gender equality), *cultural patterns of social relationships* (i.e., the role of social relationships and the way people relate to each other in the Nordic countries), and *backlash effect* (i.e., men's reaction to greater equality for women). Although this study does not provide a final explanation for the Nordic paradox, its results provide us with a better understanding of the phenomenon and can help to advance research in this field.

Keywords: gender equality; intimate partner violence against women; Nordic paradox; professionals; qualitative study

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Intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) is a global public health problem with serious physical, social and mental consequences, often understood to be an expression of inequality between men and women (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2014). According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2021), 26% of women worldwide who have been in an intimate relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner or ex-partner. In the European Union the FRA (2014) survey found that 22% (with prevalence ranging across countries between 13% and 32%) of women had experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime.

Differences in IPVAW prevalence rates between countries have generally been linked to their levels of gender equality (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE] et al., 2017). In many countries, among them the Nordic ones which have been rated as the most gender-equal in the world (EIGE et al., 2017), efforts to address IPVAW include the development of strategies and laws aiming to increase gender equality. For example, Sweden has enacted legislative reforms with the aim of combating IPVAW since the 1980s (Corradi & Stöckl, 2014). However, despite the high levels of gender equality, the Nordic countries show a high prevalence of IPVAW. According to the FRA survey (2014) the prevalence of physical and/or sexual IPVAW was 32% in

Denmark, 30% in Finland and 28% in Sweden. High prevalence rates have also been found in other studies in Sweden (Brottsförebyggande rådet or Brå for short [Brå], 2021), Denmark (Bertelsen et al., 2019), Finland (Lehti et al., 2019), Norway (Thoresen & Hjemdal, 2014), and Iceland (Skilbrei et al., 2019). The apparent contradiction of coexistence of high IPVAW prevalence and high levels of gender equality in Nordic countries has been referred to as the 'Nordic Paradox' (Gracia & Merlo, 2016). Although the Nordic Paradox represents a research question that remains unanswered, an increasing number of studies have investigated different explanatory hypotheses with the aim of shedding some light on this issue. (i.e., Gómez-Casillas et al., 2023; Gracia et al., 2019; Ivert et al., 2020; Karlsson et al., 2022; Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2020; Wemrell et al., 2019, 2020, 2022).

The Present Study

Spain is one of the countries with the lowest reported lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual IPVAW (13%) in the EU (Castro et al., 2022; FRA, 2014; Martín-Fernández et al., 2019, 2020). According to available national official survey data, the IPVAW prevalence in Spain has remained consistently low over the years: 12.4% in 1999, 11.1% in 2002, 9.6% in 2006, 10.9% in 2011, 12.5% in 2015 and 14.2% in 2019 (Delegación del Gobierno para la Violencia de Género, 2020). The prevalence of psychological IPVAW shows the same trend. The 33% of women had been exposed to some type of psychological violence by a partner, compared to an average of 43% in EU countries, 51% in Sweden and 53% in Finland (FRA, 2014). Likewise, the prevalence of physical and/or sexual violence against violence by non-partners

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in Spain (16%) was also lower than the EU average (22%) and the prevalence in Sweden (34%), Denmark (40%) and Finland (33%) (FRA, 2014). Data on homicides of women by their intimate partner or ex-partner in Spain also show comparatively low rates. According to the Statistical Office of the European Union (2018), the IPVAW homicide rate in Spain was 0.20 per 100,000 inhabitants, clearly lower than other European countries such as Finland (0.64), Sweden (0.44), Switzerland (0.34) or Germany (0.30).

On the other hand, Spain stands out for its legislative developments, policy-making, and other strategies implemented to address IPVAW, leading to an increase of intervention programs for victims and aggressors, support, and information centers for victims, IPVAW training and specialized services or financial assistance (Castro et al., 2022; Vives-Cases & la Parra Casado, 2008). Among the legislative initiatives, the Organic Law 1/2004, on Comprehensive Protection Measures against Gender Violence has been highlighted as particularly important (EIGE, 2014). This cross-cutting law promoted the development of strategic plans for gender equality and has provided a new approach to end the impunity of male aggressors, increasing the penalties for IPVAW crimes (European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice, 2011). Specific IPVAW laws are considered to be important tools for reducing this type of violence (Sanz-Barbero et al., 2018). The enforcement of the Spanish Organic Law 1/2004 leads also to the development of support programs and services for victims, and greater training and specialization of professionals working on the field of IPVAW. The importance of professional specialization to tackle IPVAW has been highlighted by international organizations such as the United Nations (2010). As research also suggests, professionals with more IPVAW-specific professional training and greater knowledge of existing protocols show higher levels of self-efficacy in relation to and are more willing to act in IPVAW cases (Murillo et al., 2018). The views, attitudes and beliefs of professionals working in the field of IPVAW play a major role in societal responses to this problem and have been widely studied in Spain. These studies have focused on areas such as health care (Briones-Vozmediano et al., 2022), social services (García-Quinto, 2022), or law enforcement (Lila et al., 2013). Against this background, this study aims to further our understanding of the Nordic Paradox by analyzing how professionals working in the field of IPVAW in Spain, one of the EU countries with the lowest IPVAW prevalence rates, explain this phenomenon.

Method

Methods and Participants

Organizations and professionals were contacted by phone and e-mail, and informed and invited to participate in the study. All participants had extensive experience and knowledge of IPVAW. The focus groups and individual interviews included participants from various areas of expertise and different sectors involved in IPVAW in Spain. The key informants had worked in positions of responsibility in victims or batterer services for at least two years. Five focus groups with 19 participants (3–5 in each group) and ten interviews with key informants were held. The sectors in which the participants worked can be seen in Table 1.

Procedure

Prior to the first contact with participants, the research proposal was submitted to Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Valencia (UV-INV_ETICA-1166769) for approval. At the beginning of the focus groups, the professionals gave informed consent for their participation and agreed to maintain confidentiality within the group. Then, they were introduced to the research on differences in IPVAW prevalence rates in EU countries (FRA, 2014; Gracia et al., 2019; Martín-Fernández et al., 2019, 2020). The data on which ‘Nordic Paradox’ (Gracia & Merlo, 2016) has been formulated were presented. After this introduction, participants were asked the question “Why do you think the ‘Nordic Paradox’ has appeared?” During the focus groups and interviews, the moderator asked follow-up questions like “What do the others think?” and “Do you all agree?” with the aim of stimulating discussion and providing space for the participants’ own reflections. All participants were asked to elaborate on their answers, and to give examples from their own experiences of situations they had encountered in their work.

The focus groups were moderated by M.L and A.C took notes and ensured that the video and audio recorders were working properly. Video recordings allowed the capture of interactions or nonverbal behaviors, such as expressions of agreement or disapproval. The focus groups were conducted in the research facilities of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Valencia. Individual interviews were conducted by M.L or A.C and lasted around 60 minutes. Given the busy schedules of the key informants, all the interviews were carried out in the key informants’ workplaces.

Table 1. Description of Focus Group participants and Key Informants by Sex and Field

Organizations	F.G.P		K.I.P		Total	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Judicial sphere	1	1	2	–	3	1
Social service	1	–	2	–	3	–
Police	2	3	2	–	4	3
Youth intervention services for victims and offenders	1	1	–	–	1	1
BIPs	3	1	1	–	4	1
Support service for victims	4	–	1	–	4	1
Victim intervention programs	1	–	–	2	1	2
Total	13	6	8	2	20	9

Note. IPVAW = Intimate Partner Violence Against Women; BIPs = Batterer Intervention Programs; F.G.P = Focus Group Participant; K.I.P = Key Informant Participant.

Analytic Approach

The focus groups and interviews were analyzed thematically. The analysis followed a series of steps, aided by the software program NVivo 12. First, the focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim (A.C.). Second, the transcripts were read for the development of initial codes by two authors (M.L. and A.C.) independently. The codes were then sorted into subcategories, categories and themes, which were reviewed and revised. Finally, disagreements were discussed with a third author (E.G.) until a consensus was reached with the fourth author (M.W.). This thematic analysis resulted in a descriptive analysis of the contents of the discussions. These contents are articulations by professionals assumed to be influenced by IPVAW policy, the media, as well as by their own encounters with victims and perpetrators. The focus groups and interviews were held in Spanish. Quotes from focus group participants (FGP) and key informants (KI) were translated into English by the authors, who made minor changes to phrasing to facilitate the reading. The number of coding references belonging to each of the identified categories was recorded and considered as proxy of the importance of the theme, using the matrix coding queries function of NVivo 12. The consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research were applied in this study.

Results

In response to the research question “Why do you think the ‘Nordic Paradox’ has appeared?”, the thematic analysis of the focus groups and interviews yielded four categories: Macro-micro disconnect; Multicausal phenomenon; Cultural patterns of social relationships and Backlash effects (Figure 1, Table 2).

The Nordic Paradox as Expressing a Macro-micro Disconnect

The category found to include the highest number of coding references was that of macro-micro disconnect, as participants in most of the focus groups and interviews suggested that the Nordic Paradox may reflect discordance between individual beliefs and behaviors and macro-social norms of gender equality. In other words, it was suggested that gender equality at the macrosocial level in the Nordic countries does not correspond with equality at the individual and/or relationship level. As one participant said “In the public sphere [they are equal], but... To what extent are they equal? Are they equal in their relationships?” (FGP.2.4). Along the same lines, participants proposed that the image of the Nordic countries as equalitarian is not entirely congruent with relationship dynamics at the micro-level.

Maybe they have a society that apparently has a very equal external image, but if you go deeper, I guess, I don’t know, you make a social survey in homes, in families, and maybe there is less equality than we think, in the micro-level. Maybe it is less than what we are shown. (KI.4)

This sense of discord between equality norms and how they are reflected in individual beliefs and behaviors were related to perspectives gathered under two subcategories. The first one, *Failure in the socialization process of gender equality*, encompasses statements or discussions about gender equality norms not necessarily permeating the individual and interpersonal levels in the Nordic countries, as persons here may be aware of the laws and social norms that “force” them to be equal in the public sphere, while individual beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are not as equalitarian. One participant stated, for example: “As a society we have changed and we have very clear things, but internally these changes are much more difficult to achieve and arise in conflict situations” (KI.2). Also, this participant emphasized the importance of differentiating between

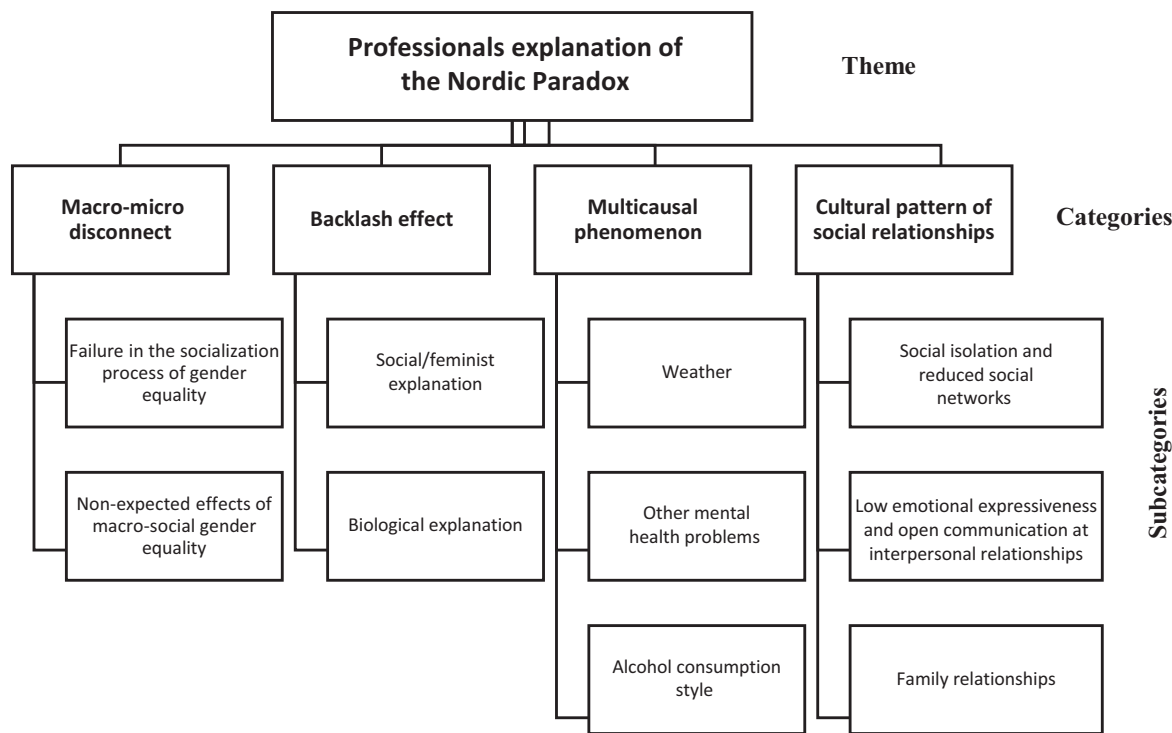


Figure 1. Topic of Discussion, Categories and Subcategories.

Table 2. Categories and Subcategories as Measured by Number of Participants and Coding References

Categories and subcategories	N° of participants who mention ($n^1=29$)						N° coding references ($n^2=166$)	
	N			%			N	%
	W	M	T	W	M	T		
Macro–micro disconnect								
Failure in the socialization process of gender equality	12	3	15	57.1	37.5	51.7	34	19.76
Non–expected effects of macro–social gender equality	7	3	10	33.3	37.5	34.5	22	12.79
Total							56	32.55
Multicausal phenomenon								
Weather	9	5	14	42.9	62.5	48.3	23	13.37
Alcohol consumption	7	0	7	33.3	0.0	24.1	11	6.39
Other mental health problems	4	4	8	19.0	50.0	27.6	11	6.39
Total							45	26.16
Cultural pattern of social relationships								
Social isolation and reduced social networks	7	4	11	33.3	50.0	37.9	21	12.20
Low emotional expressiveness and open communication at interpersonal relationships	6	2	8	28.6	25.0	27.6	11	6.39
Family relationships	5	2	7	23.8	25.0	24.1	9	5.23
Total							41	23.83
Backlash effect								
Social/feminist explanation	6	2	8	28.6	25.0	27.6	25	14.53
Biological explanation	3	1	4	14.3	12.5	13.8	5	2.90
Total							30	17.44

Note. N^1 = Total participants; N^2 = Total of coding references; W = Women; M = Men. T = Total.

the public and private spheres, “What you think does not equate to a change in your behaviors or a change in your behavior in your most personal context. The public sphere and the private sphere are not the same thing” (KI.2). It was thus suggested that while Nordic people are more equal in the public sphere, in the private sphere traditional gender norms continue to be reproduced.

Equality in the professional sphere and in the field of opportunities is there [in the Nordic countries], so it implies equality, but to move from that to gender equality in terms of being a woman in the family context, that is where I think they are at their worst. (KI.9)

Participants thus suggested that changes in the public sphere (i.e., laws and regulations) have been more advanced than changes in mindsets in Nordic countries. This was seen to lead to some incongruence between the laws of equality and the internalization of these norms at the individual level in their intimate relationships, as a key informant noted: “They achieve legal levels of equality, but.... Does society advance at the same level as legality? Has Swedish society advanced at the same pace as its equality laws?” (KI.4). Other participant also added:

So, I understand that I have to respect my partner or that we have to do the same things... but then, if my relationship with the other is not healthy or I am frustrated by things or I understand love in a way that I hurt my partner or I hurt myself... I think that in the end this tends to lead to violent behaviors or to relationship behaviors that are not healthy, so equality is not real. It is just that we all have the same options, but there is no equality in my relationships. (FGP.2.2)

The second perspective was clustered under the subcategory *Un-expected effects of macro-social gender equality*. According to the participants, the discord between the macro and micro levels could be influenced by additional factors, including, on a macro-social level, denial of IPVAV in Nordic societies and neglect of the IPVAV issue by governmental authorities. For example, one participant stated: “In the Nordic countries the problem [IPVAV] is not recognized, there is no awareness of the problem” (KI.7). It was thus suggested that the governments of the Nordic countries would not recognize the existence of the problem or the need to act, due to an assumption that IPVAV only occurs in less gender equal countries. One of the participants expressed this point: “They take the equality for granted; you know? Maybe they take the equality for granted and in reality, there are some opposite attitudes of possessiveness and sexist values that generate this violence and they are not realizing it...” (KI.10). Denial of the problem would result in neglect of IPVAV policies, laws and specific prevention. This could relate, some participants suggested, to a lack of specific laws on IPVAV: “[They] do not have a specific law as we do [in Spain] the comprehensive law on gender violence, so these problems that may exist between couples remain within the scope of family law, family conflicts” (KI.9). Along the same lines, it was noted that for some victims and offenders, the current IPVAV intervention programs may not be effective: “These women don’t get [into] an intervention program so that they can recognize the indicators [of violence], but I also believe

that they [men] are not part of the intervention [IPVAW programs in the Nordic countries]" (FGP.5.3).

Meanwhile, on the individual level, some participants pointed to the issue of shame among victims. According to the participants, these feelings would likely be stronger among Nordic women due to expectations of gender equality.

It is so frowned upon or unbelievable in a society as advanced as a Nordic one that there are men who hurt their partners... I believe that these women are unable to disclose this situation in their homes, considering that they have good levels of equality in other areas. (KI.3)

Another participant added: "I imagine that in these countries where there is so much formal equality, maybe for women it is also very shameful to acknowledge [that they are victims of violence]" (KI.7). Shame was related to the desire to maintain a facade of equality in their relationship. This reaction was seen to be reflective of a conflict between the Nordic ideal of strong and independent women and the possibility of being exposed to IPVAW. The difficulty for women to recognize themselves as victims in such an equalitarian country where "these things don't happen" was also discussed.

Of course, understanding that this happens to me [being a victim of IPVAW] is very hard, so of course, I don't want to see myself like this... and besides, I am from the most developed countries, so... This happens to others, but not to me, no. (FGP.2.3)

The Nordic Paradox is a Multicausal Phenomenon

Under the category *Multicausal phenomenon*, factors related to IPVAW but not direct to gender equality were discussed in all the focus groups and interviews. Along these lines, IPV was defined as a multicausal phenomenon that does not necessarily have to be associated with gender equality. Therefore, more equality would not necessarily lead to a reduction in IPV. Some participants pointed to this conclusion, expressed for example as "Obviously there are other factors, not only equality" (KI.7), and "No, I think there's something else... more things, more factors..." (KI.2). Specific factors potentially related to the Nordic Paradox were brought up and, through the analysis, grouped under subcategories. These were defined as: *Climate*, *Alcohol consumption style* and *Other mental health problems*.

Climate was the most discussed subcategory, as it was mentioned by almost half of the participants in the focus groups and interviews. Adverse weather conditions in the Nordic countries (i.e., more rain, snow, lower temperatures) were here mentioned as a factor affecting the amount of social support received. In other words, bad weather conditions would decrease people's possibilities of "going outside" and bonding with others. Therefore, there would be an increase in the feeling of loneliness and isolation. One participant highlighted "climate and the loneliness" (FGP.4.1), and another added:

I think that one of the main reasons for the existence of IPVAW is the weather, in other words, Nordic people spend many hours in the dark, so there are few outings outside the home. Meetings are held at home and this also has an effect on the IPVAW. (KI.9).

Fewer social interactions with family and friends would make it more difficult for people to identify situations or behaviors of violence in their social environment, reducing the control that society may exert over IPVAW. They also mentioned how the reduction in going out of the home as a result of adverse weather conditions could be a problem for victims when leaving the violent

situation. Despite the availability of resources for the protection of victims in the Nordic countries, it was argued that women could not easily access without being controlled by their offender.

My first impression is the weather. I think that the cold, the rain... It may be that this hinders them from having escape opportunities and perhaps in countries with a better climate or with a more open character may be easier. [In countries with a better climate] I have a bigger group of friends, I have the possibility of going out, but [in the Nordic countries] with such shorts days... I don't know. (FGP.5.2)

Finally, the weather was also related to an increase in conflict in couple relationships. Bad weather conditions would reduce the number of exits out of the home, which would lead to more hours of cohabitation and a possible increase of stressful situations. Lack of social support to buffer the stress of conflict situations would, according to the participants, increase the risk of aggression. For example, one participant argued that "Being at home all day together, you can't go out when it snows or the weather is bad..." (FGP.3.2), and other added:

Maybe the society here [in Spain] is much more open, more outward looking, and there [in the Nordic countries] everything is lived much more indoors because of the climate, the temperature... It gets dark sooner, they don't have social life [like in other countries], then it's not easy to share things with others. Experiences that's, most of them are done in private, so... it is easier to reproduce a situation of violence when the cohabitation between the couple is more continuous than when your day is exhausting. [In Spain] you are at work all day, so meet your partner from time to time, or on vacations, something we don't see each other until the holidays. (FGP.5.4)

The second subcategory *Alcohol consumption style* was commonly discussed and caused disagreement among the participants. While some participants brought up the importance of alcohol consumption as a triggering risk factor for IPVAW that could explain the Nordic Paradox, other participants, despite considering alcohol consumption as a risk factor for IPVAW, denied that the different pattern of alcohol consumption explained the Nordic Paradox. It is also important to note that only the female participants considered alcohol consumption pattern to be a variable that may affect the higher prevalence rates of IPVAW in the Nordic countries, as some of them indicated: "A high rate of alcoholism, which is also an important issue in partner relationships and discussions. Can result in much more serious consequences..." (KI.9). Emphasis was also placed on different types of alcohol, as alcohol consumed in the Nordic countries was classified as hard alcohol, as opposed to alcohol consumed in other countries such as Spain (i.e., usually beer or wine). Consumption in the Nordic countries was also related to solitary consumption, and to a characterization of "lone drinkers". One participant explained this idea: "Alcohol is hard, and, above all, they drink a lot of alcohol in solitude, a lot..." (KI.9).

The third subcategory was *Other mental health problems*. Here the suicide rate in Nordic countries, which was noted too higher compared to other European countries, was mentioned by several participants: "Suicide rates are also very high compared to the rest of Europe." (FGP.2.4), and: "I think there was a statistic that the highest suicide rates were up there too, wasn't there?" (KI.10). It was suggested that these higher suicide rates could mirror a greater dissatisfaction with life and a lack of meaning, which could be reflected in aggressive behaviors towards oneself as well as towards others:

The fact that the state is in charge of the happiness of individuals makes it control them more, no? which is good, but it also restricts their freedom more, and that would explain, perhaps, the lack of sense and suicides. (KI.1)

Regarding aggressive behaviors, one of the participants mentioned the possibility that men in the Nordic countries have more difficulty controlling their aggressive impulses in a stressful situation: “Perhaps Nordic men have less training or difficulty with impulse control” (FGP.1.3), and the possibility that there is a higher number of people with psychopathological characteristics in the Nordic countries compared to other countries: “Even people may suffer from certain abnormal personalities without being pathological.” (KI.7).

The Cultural Pattern of Social Relationships in the Nordic Countries

The category *Cultural pattern of social relationships* comprised the subcategories *Social isolation and reduced social networks*, *Family relationships* and *Low emotional expressiveness and open communication in interpersonal relationships*. The role of social relations and the way people bond with others in the Nordic countries was discussed. Participants suggested that social and family relationships in the Nordic countries may have specific characteristics that may be important to understanding the higher prevalence rates of IPVAW. These characteristics include greater social isolation and fewer social networks. Not having a large social network would make it more difficult for people to find “outlets” to share their problems. Several participants noted this as a possible problem, for example one of them said:

[The Nordic countries] are places where it is colder, a different situation, what it does is that you establish fewer relationships with friends, leave your home, that makes you maybe... that makes you more isolated and at the same time, you share more time with all your problems with your partner at home. (FGP.1.2).

Friendships as social support factors that would help reduce stress were also emphasized: “Friend relationships often help you to have other coping strategies to deal with problems with your partner, ¿No? It happens to me, it’s often better to stop discussing with your partner and talk to a friend.” (FGP.2.1). Difficulty in developing relationships with others was also related to an increased concern about the loss of significant relationships, specifically, the loss of a partner and the establishment of dependent relationships, as noted in a focus group: “The way of relating to each other in these cultures... it may be that they lose a support network, so it is very easy to generate dependency relationships.” (FGP.1.4). Along this line, they suggested that it would be the Nordic men in particular who would have the greatest difficulties in socializing. These men were described as more solitary and less able to establish social relationships, as one participant indicated: “There may be more men’s loneliness as well [...] some types of men become more isolated and are less able to establish social relations...” (KI.5)

Finally, a weaker involvement in social networks was associated with a lower likelihood of detecting IPVAW through social control. While in southern European countries, friends and family members were noted to play an active role in detecting and reporting IPVAW, participants indicated that in the Nordic countries this would perhaps not happen. Correspondingly, it was argued that this lack of social networks could reduce the victim’s possibilities of asking for help to get out of the abusive situation:

I was thinking about social support, in Spain it is very much associated with protecting victims or getting out of the IPVAW situation. Maybe in the Nordic countries they don’t have as much social support or they don’t have as many family or social support networks. Here [in Spain], even if you

don’t say that you are a victim, someone around you can see it. If I have few social networks, it may be nobody will see it. (FGP.2.2)

Furthermore, the subcategory *Low emotional expressiveness and open communication at interpersonal relationships* include comments referring to a lower emotional expressiveness or limited ability to verbalize feelings and to share them with others. One participant brought up this topic: “They [the Nordic people] have a hard time verbalizing their emotions.” (FGP.1.4), and other one added: “I believe that it is related to something very cultural of them, few expressions of the most affective part” (FGP.2.3). It was suggested that this difficulty may also be present in the most intimate social relationships: “Friendships are perhaps not so close that you can share [your feelings]” (KI.10). A lack of emotional education as the cause of the reduced ability to express feelings was also discussed. This limited ability to handle emotions was related to a stricter and more traditional education. Several participants thus spoke about a difference between successful traditional academic education in the Nordic countries and a supposed neglect of emotional education. For example, one of them suggested “Maybe the Nordic people receive a stricter education... and it results in less empathy, less affection.” (FGP.2.4), and other one added:

They do have higher study rates, but maybe they focus more on the academic level than on the emotional level... Maybe people there have a higher academic level than here, it has always been said, hasn’t it? That they have a higher academic level than the rest of Europe, but maybe they are failing in the emotional area? (FGP.4.3)

A neglect of emotional education in childhood was suggested be reflected in a weaker ability to express emotion in adulthood. Along the same lines, several participants indicated that in the Nordic countries the display of emotions is not generally encouraged, unlike in other countries that they defined as more “open” to sharing. One participant exemplified these differences: “In Latin cultures when someone feels grief or anger they say, so... Maybe there they are much more reserved, so, maybe when there is a conflict it is easier to act impulsively or aggressively.” (FGP.1.4).

The last subcategory, *Family relationships* referred to differences between family relationships in Mediterranean and Nordic countries. As one participant noted: “The Nordic people do not have the same conception of family as we do.” While the Mediterranean countries were characterized as countries in which close and frequent family contacts were maintained with the extended family, the Nordic countries were described as distant and characterized by the early rupture of affective family ties, early emancipation and greater individualism:

With the family [they] are more distant, they don’t have the same concept of family as we do because they become independent very young and leave home and almost cut the ties with the family, it is not like us who always wrap ourselves more in the family, in this they are totally different from us...

This sense of disconnection and weaker family contact was suggested to make it difficult for family members to identify and detect situations of violence and, consequently, to get involved in helping the victim, making it more difficult to escape from the violent situation.

There is a factor that has come to my mind now: The social perception of how things are; in the Mediterranean region, where the family comes first, and in the Nordic region, where society comes first. In Spain, when someone in the family is a victim of violence, it is normal for the other members of the family to get involved, so that’s where the family comes in. (FGP.2.4)

Maybe the Backlash Effect is the Cause of the Nordic Paradox

The category of *Backlash effect* against gender equality comprised two subcategories: *Social-feminist explanation* and *Biological explanation*.

Under *Social-feminist explanation*, higher levels of violence in the Nordic countries were explained as a reaction of men to the women's greater equality, in the sense that IPVAV in the Nordic countries may be triggered by the position of Nordic women in society. Nordic women were here defined as empowered, free and not representing traditional gender roles in family and couple relationships. As one key informant noted:

Women are empowered and no longer play the role that men expect them to play, and this is what generates more violence. These women are more empowered, less subdued, therefore, less in the position that men expect them to be. (KI.1).

It was suggested that Nordic women's demand for more equality could lead to gender role conflicts, more discussions, friction, higher conflict and more violence. Participants pointed to men's resistance to gender equality demands: "I do perceive an opposition, that is, a strong one, when you break the social norms... The woman does this, the man does this... and you start to change things, there's always opposition, right? And that opposition, the resistance..." (KI.4). Domestic work, traditionally performed by women, was specifically highlighted as a potential source of conflict between the genders: "Of course, when you work outside the home, you demand the same level of commitment from your partner". (KI.5)

Finally, the relationship between equality and violence was also discussed. Some participants even referred to IPVAV as a price to pay for equality: "As more war we are going to give to IPVAV, more cases are going to appear or more murders are going to happen..." (IP.4), and for the feminist struggle: "Many women took to the streets to demonstrate this year and then suffered violence." (KI.2). Likewise, women's use of violence was described as a reactive response to men's instrumental violent behavior. A key informant noted this idea:

I believe that women no longer keep quiet, they answer and also defend themselves and use violence as a response to aggressions, even to control aggressions, I mean, maybe he does not physically assault her but... he is controlling her. She due to anger and impotence starts to assault. (KI.2)

Finally, a possible *Biological explanation* for men's aggressive behavior towards women was suggested by two participants. According to them, the differences in IPVAV prevalence rates between the Nordic countries and other countries may be due to some biological cause. Along these lines, according to the participants, some men, due to biological causes, tend to use aggression to solve their problems more easily: "Let's say that men have it in our blood, there are those who are butch and are not human beings, because they really have no other type of control and the only way to solve problems is violence." (KI.1).

Discussion

The Nordic Paradox is a complex phenomenon that reflects the seemingly contradictory relationship between gender equality and IPVAV in Nordic countries (Gracia & Merlo, 2016). The growing interest in this paradox has led to an increasing number of studies that attempt to shed some light (Gómez-Casillas et al., 2023; Gracia et al., 2019; Ivert et al., 2020; Karlsson et al., 2022; Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2020; Wemrell et al., 2019, 2020, 2022). The aim of

this work was to further the understanding of the Nordic Paradox by analyzing how professionals working in the field of gender-based violence in Spain, one of the EU countries with the lowest IPVAV prevalence rates, explain this phenomenon. Five focus groups and ten key informant interviews were conducted with a total of 29 participants. Four categories and ten subcategories were established after the thematic.

The first category, *Macro-micro disconnect*, grouped the largest number of references. The differences between the legislative advances achieved in favor of gender equality at the macrosocial level and their reflection in intimate relationships were discussed in all focus groups and interviews. The participants suggested an incongruity between the image of the Nordic countries as the "most equal" and the actual equality. These differences were explained from two perspectives grouped under the subcategories of *Failure in the socialization process of gender equality* and *Unexpected effects of macrosocial gender equality*. On the one hand, several participants suggested that while the Nordic countries had achieved very high levels of equality at the country level, i.e., a normative framework that advocated equality, greater access for women to the labor market, education, etc., perhaps the attitudes and beliefs of Nordic people did not reflect the legislative and normative advances made. As a result, traditional gender norms being reproduced in the private sphere, leading to some incongruence between the laws of equality and the internalization of these norms at the individual level in intimate relationships. Some researchers have pointed to a clash between Nordic discourses on gender equality and the realities of IPVAV (e.g., Gottzén & Jonsson, 2012). Although gender equality at the country level has been linked to a reduction in the perpetration of physical or sexual violence, research has provided inconsistent results explaining the relationship between country-level gender equality and IPVAV rates in EU (Sanz-Barbero et al., 2018). For example, the study conducted by Ivert et al. (2020) found that gender equality at the country level explained only 22% of the variance at the contextual level, suggesting that it is an important factor in understanding individual risk of IPVAV, but nevertheless, a percentage of variance at the contextual level remains unexplained. In addition to gender equality at country level, public beliefs, and attitudes toward IPVAV are an important part of the social context and can influence the prevalence of IPVAV (Copp et al., 2019; Gracia et al., 2018, 2020; Martín-Fernández et al., 2022). Previous research has suggested that attitudes and beliefs towards IPVAV seem to be mediated by contextual and individual factors (Karlsson et al., 2022). In order to study individual attitudes toward gender equality, the King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership (2019) conducted a total of 18,800 online surveys among adults aged 16–64 across 27 different countries. The results showed that only 65% of people in Sweden stated that achieving equality between men and women was personally important to them, in contrast to the European average (70%) and below the percentage of countries such as Spain (76%). Also, only 25% of men and women in Sweden indicated that it was important to educate boys and girls about equality in schools, compared to 40% who agreed with this idea in countries such as Spain. On the other hand, in the subcategory *Unexpected effects of macro-social gender equality*, participants suggested a lack of recognition of IPVAV as a social problem, which would lead to a neglect of IPVAV laws and policies. In this line, some authors have pointed to a relative invisibility of the IPVAV in Sweden (Brännvall, 2016). Specific IPVAV laws have been seen as important tools to reduce IPVAV (Sanz-Barbero et al., 2018). Although governmental initiatives and laws in the Nordic countries reflect a gender equality perspective, this does not always

seem to be reflected in actual practices (Wemrell et al., 2019). The issue of shame among IPVAW victims in the Nordic countries was also noted. Some participants indicated that women were more likely to have stronger feelings of shame than women in other countries due to expectations of gender equality. Some authors such as Brännvall (2016) noted that gender equality expectations may create additional difficulties for women in identifying and disclosing IPVAW. Specifically, Gottzén and Korkmaz (2013) noted that Swedish women's notions of gender equality may lead them to interpret IPVAW as their responsibility or failure as victims.

In the second category *Multicausal phenomenon*, we grouped together all comments that mentioned other factors related to IPVAW but not directly related to gender equality that could contribute to the Nordic Paradox. Participants pointed to IPVAW as a multicausal phenomenon that does not necessarily have to be associated with gender equality. Three factors were discussed and grouped into subcategories: *Climate*, *Alcohol consumption style*, and *Other mental health problems*. *Climate* was the most discussed subcategory. Participants mentioned that adverse weather conditions in the Nordic countries (i.e., more rain, snow, lower temperatures) could decrease social support, increase loneliness, and reduce social interactions, leading to difficulties in identifying violence and disclosure IPVAW. Some studies have indicated that isolation, as would happen due to adverse weather in the Nordic countries, significantly reduce the protective capacity of social networks to mitigate the risk of violence and keep victims safe (Mahapatro, 2021). Increased isolation would also make it more difficult to assess IPVAW situations and to respond adequately to victims' needs (Gregory et al., 2021). The second subcategory, *Alcohol consumption style* was discussed as a risk factor for IPVAW, with participants highlighting the high rate of hard alcohol consumption and solitary drinking in the Nordic countries. Alcohol consumption by men has been associated with reports of male IPVAW perpetration and reports of female victimization. For example, Kiss and colleagues (2012) found that partner binge drinking at least once a month was associated with greater physical/sexual IPVAW victimization. Although alcohol consumption is a risk factor for IPVAW (Field et al., 2004), some studies point to a weak correlation between alcohol consumption and the perpetration of IPVAW (Scheffer Lindgren & Renck, 2008) and others argue that the degree of relationship between alcohol consumption as a causal factor and IPVAW is a topic of debate (Gil-González et al., 2006). The third subcategory, *Other mental health problems*, specifically the higher suicide rate in Nordic countries, was also mentioned as a potential factor contributing to the Nordic Paradox, as it could reflect greater dissatisfaction with life and lead to aggressive behavior towards oneself and others. Alcohol and suicidal behavior are highly correlated. For example, some studies have found that suicide and alcohol is more closely connected in dry cultures than in wet cultures (Ramstedt, 2002). Furthermore, suicide rates in some rural areas in the Nordic countries also point to the link between suicide and social isolation (Hirsch, 2006).

The third category, *Cultural pattern of social relationships* comprised the subcategories *Social isolation and reduced social networks*, *Family relationships* and *Low emotional expressiveness and open communication in interpersonal relationships*. The participants suggest that relationships in Nordic countries may have specific characteristics which make it difficult for individuals to find outlets to share their problems. Individualism or superficial social relationships can be a barrier to finding social support. Loneliness is associated with low well-being, poor physical and

mental health and mortality (e.g., Solmi et al., 2022). In this line, a study by Statistiskmyndigheten SCB [The Sweden Statistics Authority] (2018) found that more than 55% of 16–24 year-olds did not socialize with any close relatives, leading to a reduction in social support. Individualism is a characteristic factor in Swedish society (Daun, 1991), but, at the same time, has been highlighted as a possible risk factor for IPVAW (Flinck et al., 2005). The family type characteristic of Nordic countries was also seen as a risk factor. For example, Agevall (2012) discusses how the nuclear family can increase vulnerability by reducing understanding and social support. On the other hand, participants suggested that low emotional expressiveness and limited communication in interpersonal relationships may also be a contributing factor to IPVAW in Nordic countries. As explained by participants in the focus groups and interviews, emotional education in childhood may be related to the reduced ability to express emotions in adulthood. Previous studies have linked poor emotional expression, and difficulties in emotional regulation to increased risk of male perpetration of IPVAW (Clare, 2021).

The last category, the *Backlash effect* against gender equality, comprised two subcategories: *Social-feminist explanation* and *biological explanation*. The social-feminist explanation suggests that the position of Nordic women in society, where they are empowered and not confined to traditional gender roles, may trigger men's violent reactions to maintain their perceived power and control (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2020; Wemrell, 2023). This explanation highlights the potential gender role conflicts that arise when women demand more equality, particularly in domestic work. This is in accordance with previous research pointing to increased levels of conflict due to efforts towards gender equality (Grönlund & Halleröd, 2008) and framing IPVAW in relation to backlash and challenged norms of masculinity (Gottzén, 2014; Wemrell, 2023). Specifically, some participants suggest that intimate partner violence against women could be a price to pay for equality. This idea raises important questions about the cost of gender equality and the challenges that women face in their struggle for equality. Furthermore, participants noted that some men may resort to aggression to solve their problems more easily, which could be related to a biological cause. Regarding the biological explanation for men's violent behavior towards women, this idea has been widely debunked by researchers (Heise, 1998). While it is true that men have higher levels of testosterone, which has been linked to aggression, this does not necessarily mean that men are inherently violent towards women. Social and cultural factors, such as gender norms, play a crucial role in shaping men's attitudes and behavior towards women (Barker et al., 2010).

This study has some limitations. On the one hand, it is important to note that the results of the study are based on the perspective of the participants and cannot be generalized to the general population. Furthermore, the research focuses on Sweden, so more research is needed on how these findings apply to other countries and cultures. Overall, this study highlights the importance of considering cultural factors in the prevention and treatment of intimate partner violence.

In conclusion, this study aims to advance knowledge of the Nordic Paradox from a qualitative perspective. From the focus groups and key informant interviews, some factors emerge that could be important in understanding the Nordic Paradox. It is essential to note that these are possible explanations for the Nordic Paradox, and further research is needed to explore these ideas in-depth. However, these findings highlight the complexities and challenges of achieving gender equality.

Authorship credit. A.C.: Formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft. M.L.: Conceptualization, data curation, funding acquisition, project administration, resources, supervision, writing—review & editing. M.W.: Methodology, writing—review & editing. E.G.: Conceptualization, funding acquisition, writing—review & editing.

Data sharing. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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