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Assessing Police Attitudes Toward Intervention in Gender Violence: the Role of Training, Perceived Severity, and Myths About Intimate Partner Violence Against Women

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Abstract

Purpose Even though evidence has broadly confirmed that public attitudes toward intervention shape the decision-making process when dealing with IPVAW events, rather less is known about what determines the police decision-making process. Research support that police attitudes toward intervention in IPVAW explain differences when police officers response to IPVAW events. This research analyzes the combined role of IPVAW myths, perceived severity, and IPVAW training in reactive (tolerance for IPVAW and minimal police involvement) and proactive (important police task and pro-arrest) police attitudes toward intervention in gender violence.

Methods Drawing from snowball sampling, we collected responses of 211 Spanish police officers via online subject-recruitment platform.

Results The main findings of our study confirmed that IPVAW myths lead to less proactive attitudes toward intervention both directly and through a reduction in the perceived severity of IPVAW. Importantly, we found a moderating role of IPVAW training, suggesting that the endorsement of IPVAW myths leads to less proactive responses, but only for untrained police officers.

Conclusions Our findings suggest the importance of IPVAW training on police proactive attitudes toward intervention via IPVAW myths instead of perceived severity. Police training programs to both novice and experienced officers should be focused on confronting IPVAW myths in order to improve police perception, evaluation and involvement in gender violence events.

Keywords Intimate partner violence against women · IPVAW myths, perceived severity · Police officers · Attitudes toward intervention

Introduction

Intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) continues to be a challenging health and social problem for present-day societies (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2017). This problem can be illustrated in the alarming prevalence rates. In particular, one in three worldwide women had experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence at least once in their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2021). Even in Spain, a country with the most advanced laws for IPVAW in Europe, rates have been reported of 11% for physical violence, 8.9% for sexual violence, 11.5% for economic violence, and between 13.9% and 27% for psychological violence (Ferrer-Pérez & Bosh-Fiol, 2014; Government Delegation for Gender Violence, 2019).

IPVAW is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is deep-rooted in society's social and cultural patriarchal norms (Gracia & Tomás, 2014). Attitudes toward IPVAW are empirically highlighted as drivers through which social values and norms act. Concretely, Waltermaurer's model (2012) indicates that the high proportion of the general population that endorses attitudes justifying IPVAW in certain societies produces a series of consequences. For

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example, bystanders and professionals of criminal justice promote lesser helping behaviors (Serrano-Montilla et al., 2020; Lila et al., 2013).

Within the Spanish legal system, police officers are frontline professionals and are usually the first formal source of help available to victims (Gracia et al., 2011). Since the entry into force of the Organic Law 1/2004, specialized professional groups and a standard operating procedure to guide police intervention have been established. Under a pro-arrest policy, police officers have the duty to take preventive measures, investigate and handle IPVAW complaints (using the risk assessment tool), monitor victims, and coordinate with other involved institutions and professionals. In 2022, 84% of complaints were resulted from direct police interventions (70% of complaints included victim complaints), and 58% of active cases requested police monitoring (Government Delegation for Gender Violence, 2023). At the same time, police officers also serve an important symbolic function, sending a clear message through their actions about the level of disapproval or social tolerance about IPVAW to victims, perpetrators, and the whole community (Messing et al., 2015) while possessing the ability to influence case processing (Campbell, 2008). The Spanish violence against women survey (2019) found that 25.1% of IPVAW victims who reported an IPVAW event (28.7%) were unsatisfied with the police treatment. Among the reasons victims mentioned that police officers did little to solve the case, or they made the victims feel guilty. Besides, studies in the Spanish context pointed out police officers had different preferences for intervention in IPVAW event, influenced by psychosocial variables (Gracia et al., 2008, 2011; Lila et al., 2013). Given the seemingly critical role of police officers, the discretion that the law gives them to act, as well as the attitudes that drive behaviors in IPVAW incidents (Gracia et al., 2020), there is a need for a deeper understanding of police attitudes toward intervention in these types of incidents and their determinants in the Spanish context. Such information can then be used to inform ways of improving police intervention.

Police Attitudes Toward Intervention in Gender Violence

Traditionally, police officers have handled IPVAW as a private matter (e.g., giving advice or mediating between both parties) until the early 1970s, when most worldwide governments–influenced by national women's movement–officially started to establish legal boundaries for IPVAW (Feder, 1997; Ferrer-Pérez & Bosh-Fiol, 2014). Interestingly, while most countries have policies and protocols that govern police discretion (i.e., how they must act), research suggests that police interventions are far from consistent and uniform (Durfee, 2012; Gracia et al., 2011).

The literature has focused on studying police attitudes toward intervention in IPVAW as a predictor of above-mentioned inconsistences. Generally, they can be defined as police evaluations that determine the decision-making process involved in IPVAW intervention, entailing not only preferences for specific interventions but also the evaluation of the nature, causes, determinants, involved parties, and protocols as well as their own role and responsibility in the handling of such events (Gill et al., 2019; Pérez-Trujillo & Ross, 2008). To clarify the fuzzy and diverse conceptualization of police attitudes toward intervention in IPVAW, a novel systematic review provides a framework to study such attitudes according to the traditional distinction between proactive and reactive attitudes (Serrano-Montilla et al., 2023). According to this classification, proactive police attitudes include a positive evaluation of the police task (e.g., the importance of intervention in gender violence), legal system and legislation against IPVAW (e.g., arrest policies), and understanding of the complex nature of abuse (e.g., progressive view of victim and perpetrator). Conversely, reactive police attitudes refer to the tolerance of IPVAW cases (e.g., the blaming of victims, simplistic view of IPVAW), minimal police involvement (e.g., focusing on detrimental drivers of intervention in gender violence), and a negative evaluation of the legal system and legislation against IPVAW (e.g., new laws or policies against IPVAW that favor prosecution in their home countries). Research interest in police attitudes toward IPVAW has increased, moving it from the U.S. to other non-American cultural and historical contexts, which introduced proactive legal approaches later (see review Serrano-Montilla et al., 2023). In general, studies across different cultural contexts are consistently arguing that police decision-making relative to supportive–or coercive–actions in IPVAW cases are shaped by widespread police attitudes, knowledge, beliefs about victims, perpetrators, events, law, and perceived police own ability regarding IPVAW (Islam & Mazerolle, 2022; Li et al., 2021).

IPVAW Myths and Police officers' Perceived Severity of IPVAW

Drawing from Schema Theory (Robinson, 2000; Rumelhart, 1984), police officers ––through their experiences with IPVAW cases––create a generic cognitive representation or framework known as *schema*. When police officers face IPVAW events, they draw upon existing information contained in their schemes to compare it with IPVAW situation faced, shaping their attitudes toward and responses to IPVAW (Robinson, 2000). Police schemata are primarily shaped by variables related to broader socialization, training, and prior experiences within and outside the police force (Goodson et al., 2020). Overall, within an ecological framework (Heise, 1998), most studies have placed a special emphasis on the determinants

that belong to ontogenic- and micro-systems, of which the myths surrounding IPVAW and the perceived severity of IPVAW have been associated consistently with attitudes toward intervention in gender violence (Baldry & Pagliaro, 2014; Finn & Stalans, 2002; Tam & Tang, 2005).

Police officers' socialization is not only embedded in organizational police culture since they are also influenced by social messaging (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005; Fleming & Franklin, 2021). In this context, cultural stereotypes surrounding gender-based violence (i.e., "stereotypical beliefs about domestic violence that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and which serve to minimize, deny, or justify physical aggression against intimate partner"; Peters, 2008 [p.5]) lay the foundation for victim-blaming and revictimization (Garza & Franklin, 2021). Importantly, various studies have argued that the endorsement of IPVAW myths by police officers has serious implications for their evaluations and preferences for intervention in such incidents (Fleming & Franklin, 2021; Franklin et al., 2019; Garza & Franklin, 2021). For instance, police officers who endorsed IPVAW myths were more likely to blame female victims (Goodson et al., 2020; Logan et al., 2006; Twis et al., 2018) and have a narrow definition of which behaviors constitute physical wife abuse (Tam & Tang, 2005). Regarding police preferences for intervention, some nuances are found across cultural contexts. Specifically, social norms and values present in some non-western countries–for example, Confucian philosophy in China which emphasizes IPVAW as an interpersonal conflict, and morality or ethics (vs. legal system) for handling cases (Wang et al., 2020)–develop a climate where IPVAW myths have been higher linked to passive responses (i.e., mediation) (Wang et al., 2021). Conversely, studies carried out in Western countries such as Australia or U.S., did not always find a relationship between IPVAW myths and police attitudes toward intervention in IPVAW (i.e., victim service referral) (Goodson et al., 2020), or such relation was unexpected, without provide a clear rationale behind it. In this line, Ward-Lasher et al. (2017) confirmed using a police sample from the U.S. that those who endorsed myths had a comprehensive knowledge of the risk factors for intimate partner homicide.

Drawing from Banyard's bystander intervention model (2011), studies also have indicated that the perceived severity of IPVAW is an influencing factor in the decision-making process involved in providing help in gender-based violence episodes (Banyard, 2011; Gracia et al., 2008, 2009). A cross-cultural body of research has indicated that perception of severity, urgency, or high risk in IPVAW cases promoted the allocation of additional resources in Australia (Kebbell, 2022), lesser legitimization, and higher credibility and service referral in the U.S. (Goodson et al., 2022), as well as preferences for actions regardless of the victim's wishes and stronger feelings of responsibility in Spain (Gracia et al., 2008). However, even though police officers tend to recognize and prefer greater involvement, nuances have been found concerning how they evaluate the severity of different IPVAW incidents (Gracia et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2016). On the one hand, legal and policy contexts surrounding police work could explain such differences. Supporting this idea, English (vs. American) officers tended to catch subtle forms of abuse (e.g., psychological) to a larger extent, given that much attention has been paid to non-violent warning signs (e.g., coercive control) in the UK (Robinson et al., 2016). Conversely, in China–where discretion is the arrest policy–, police officers were more reluctant to apply criminal punishment (Wu et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2018). Particularly, when they faced minor physical injury and psychological abuse (Tam & Tang, 2005). On the other hand, Kebbell (2022) identified the anchoring effect, finding that the level of risk with which police officers used to work within IPVAW events, conditioned Australian police officers' intervention.

Furthermore, surrounding culture and stereotypical beliefs also hinder the perception of IPVAW severity ("not serious enough"), which, therefore, translates to less proactive––and more reactive–– attitudes toward intervention in gender violence (Felson & Ackerman, 2001). IPVAW myths could undermine the perceived severity of IPVAW (Fleming & Franklin, 2021). To our knowledge, there is no evidence linking IPVAW myths with police attitudes toward intervention in gender violence through perceived severity of IPVAW. However, a recent study carried out in Portugal concluded the existence of an association between beliefs, attitudes, and values–prejudices, stereotypes of gender roles, and power inequality in romantic relationships–and perceptions about the severity of IPV situations, which in turn, may condition the militaries' practical intervention, given that they have discretion when deciding how to act in each IPVAW situation (Pereira et al., 2022). Therefore, we predict that greater endorsement of such myths is expected to have a detrimental effect on police attitudes toward intervention in gender violence directly (e.g., Goodson et al., 2020; Tam & Tang, 2005) but also via a lower perception of IPVAW severity (e.g., Gracia et al., 2008) since police officers will not interpret the situation as unequivocally requiring intervention, and will, in turn, fail to translate this intention into actual helping behavior (Banyard, 2011).

The Role of IPVAW Training in IPVAW Myths, Perception of Severity, and Police Attitudes Toward Intervention in Gender Violence

In the Spanish context, the availability of trained professionals is considered a key explanation for the

relatively low prevalence of IPVAW in comparison to other European countries (Castro et al., 2021). Indeed, research have supported the impact of IPVAW training have on perception of self-efficacy, confidence in the handling of IPVAW, consideration of police intervention as important, pro-activity to act in IPVAW, and the lack of negative beliefs about wife-beating (Chu & Sun, 2014; Islam & Mazerolle, 2022; Muftić & Cruze, 2014). However, IPVAW training is not mandatory for police officers that do not belong to specialized IPVAW groups in Spanish police forces. In addition, empirical evidence from Australian and Chinese contexts suggested the importance of training content (Lin et al., 2021), namely, it should be specialized and over time (Islam & Mazerolle, 2022). Therefore, we might assume that IPVAW training could influence how the endorsement of myths, the perceived severity of IPVAW, and police attitudes toward IPVAW are related. Beyond police attitudes toward intervention in IPVAW, training in gender violence has been related to the perception of IPVAW severity (Robinson et al., 2016), and the deconstruction of false beliefs about IPVAW (Gover et al., 2011). Therefore, we propose that gender-based violence training has a role on the impact of IPVAW myths and perceived IPVAW severity as triggers for police reactive or proactive attitudes.

Overview of the Research

The present study aims to examine whether IPVAW myths, perceived severity, and police officer training in IPVAW are linked to police attitudes toward intervention in gender violence. Specifically, we predict that higher endorsement of IPVAW myths (Hypothesis 1a), less IPVAW training (Hypothesis 1b), and lower perceived severity of IPVAW (Hypothesis 1c) lead to less proactive and more reactive attitudes toward intervention in gender violence among police officers. In addition, we also explore the explanatory role of the perceived severity of IPVAW as an underlying mechanism that governs the relationship between IPVAW myths and reactive/proactive police attitudes toward intervention in gender violence. Indeed, we expected that police officers who more strongly endorsed myths about IPVAW would also show more reactive and less proactive attitudes toward intervention in gender violence via a lower perception of severity (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we test the moderator role of IPVAW training in each path of the previously described model. However, based on previous literature, it remains unclear which path will be moderated by IPVAW training. Therefore, no hypothesis is formulated about this moderation effect, and we instead include it as an exploratory goal (Fig. 1 shows proposed models).
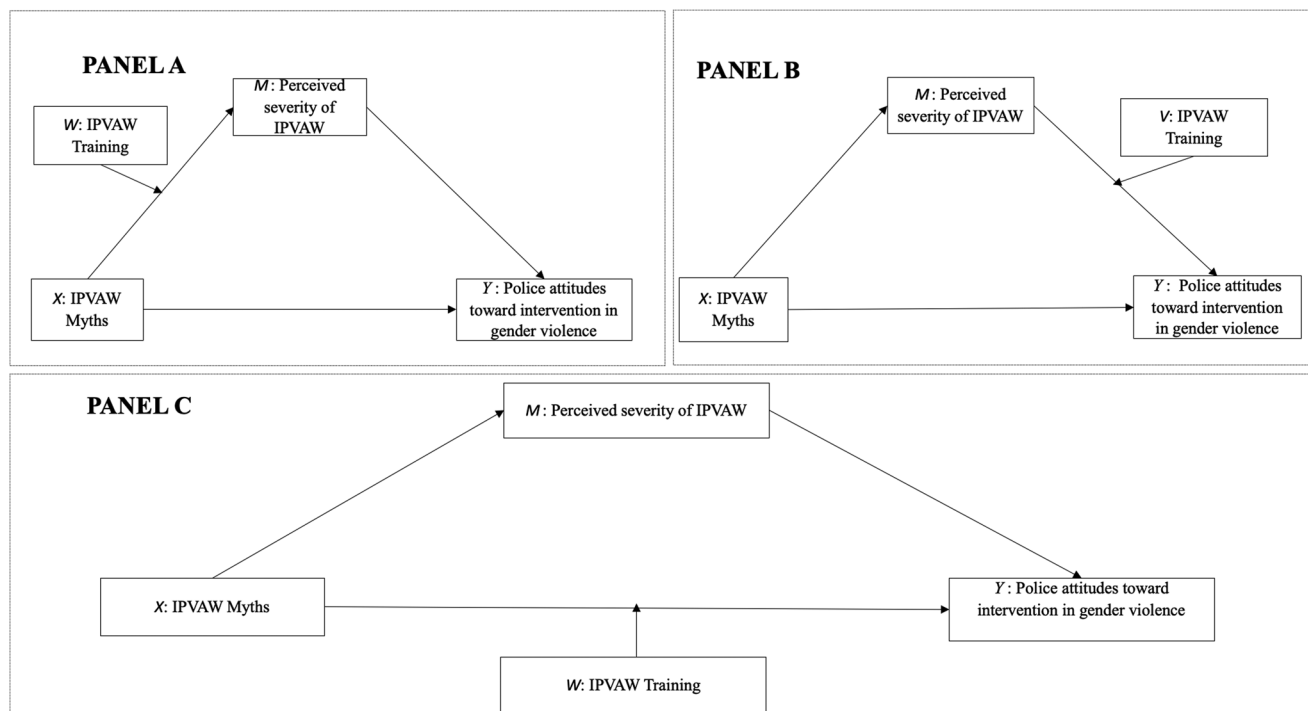

Fig. 1 Proposed moderated mediation models. *Panel A*: IPVAW Training as moderator of the relationship between IPVAW Myths and perceived severity of IPVAW on police attitudes toward intervention in gender violence. *Panel B*: IPVAW Training as moderator of the relationship between perceived severity of IPVAW and police attitudes toward intervention in gender violence. *Panel C:* IPVAW Training moderator of the direct effect of IPVAW Myths on police attitudes toward intervention in gender violence.

Method

Participants and Design

The sample consisted of 211 police officers from Spain (50 women and 161 men), ranging from 23 to 53 years ($M = 35.10$, $SD = 6.31$). In addition, the police officers had an average of 8.52 years of experience as agents ($SD = 6.83$), and all of them had some professional experience dealing with gender violence cases ($M = 4.60$ cases; $SD = 0.99$). Furthermore, 43.4% of participants ($n = 102$) had received specific training in IPVAW, and 13.7% had worked in specialized gender violence units ($M = 19.35$ months; $SD = 30.33$).

A sensitivity analysis (linear multiple regression test in G*Power; Faul et al., 2009) was conducted to determine the ability to detect the contribution of IPVAW myths, IPVAW training, and perceived severity of IPVAW on proactive responses. The results indicated a design sufficiently sensitive (80% power) to detect a minimum effect size of $f^2 = 0.03$. This study employed a non-experimental cross-sectional associative design.

Procedure and Materials

Participants were recruited through a non-probabilistic snowball sampling procedure via different social networks (WhatsApp and Telegram). Concretely, a designated liaison officer—that is, a police officer from the Spanish National forces—requested the online collaboration of other police officers from various Spanish cities. Specifically, participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study, the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, and the estimated study duration (approximately 15 min). Following informed consent, participants completed the measures reported here within the context of a larger questionnaire survey via an online subject-recruitment platform (i.e., Qualtrics web host). No monetary incentives were provided for participation. Participant inclusion criteria were to report previous experience with IPVAW victims by answering the question employed by Lin et al. (2021). Moreover, participants who did not respond correctly to an attention check were not included in the analysis. The response rate was 63.17% (i.e., police officers who accessed to online questionnaire and completed the full survey). All measures and procedures were approved by the research ethics committee of the last author's university.

Measures

IPVAW Myths *The Acceptance of Myths about Intimate Partner Violence Against Women Scale* (AMIVAW; Megías

et al., 2018) was used to assess IPVAW myths. Participants responded to fifteen items (e.g., "Once a complaint about abuse has been filed, men are unprotected by law", "Only a minority of all cases of domestic violence that are made public is true") using a 7-point response scale from 1 (*completely disagree)* to 7 (*completely agree*). Responses were averaged so that higher scores indicated greater acceptance of IPVAW myths. The Cronbach's alpha value for this scale was 0.84.

Perceived Severity of IPVAW Perceived Severity of incidents of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women was evaluated using the PS-IPVAW (Gracia et al., 2009). Police officers had to rate on a 10-point scale the severity of eight hypothetical scenarios of IPVAW (e.g., "A couple has an argument, he hits the woman, and later asks for her forgiveness", "A woman is threatened and insulted constantly by her partner, who sometimes pushes or hits her"). Responses were averaged so that higher scores indicated higher perceived severity of incidents of IPVAW. The Cronbach's alpha value for this scale was 0.85.

Attitudes Toward Intervention in Gender Violence Police officers' attitudes toward intervention in gender violence were measured using a scale created by Chu and Sun (2014) based on two supported theoretical dimensions: reactive and proactive attitudes. The *Reactive attitudes* dimension is composed of *minimal police involvement* (5 items, e.g., "The involvement of the police in a domestic violence case cannot help resolve the domestic conflicts"), and *tolerance of domestic violence* (4 items, e.g., "Domestic violence victims are partially responsible for the violent behavior of the offenders"). The *proactive attitudes* dimension comprised *important police tasks* (2 items, e.g., "Responding to intimate partner violence against women is a very important part of police work"), and *pro-arrest* (3 items, e.g., "Arresting offenders for domestic violence is a good policy"). These items were adapted to the cultural and linguistic Spanish context using an assembly translation procedure during a prior pilot study (Serrano-Montilla, 2017) such as that recommended by Van de Vijver and Tanzer (2004) when an incomplete overlap of construct definition occurs across cultures. Participants responded using a 5-point response scale from 1 (*strongly disagree)* to 5 (*strongly agree*). To support Chu and Sun's proposed structure (2014), principal component analysis (PCA) with Oblimin rotation was performed, yielding a two-factor solution that explained 36.7% of the total variance (KMO index was 0.78, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant, $\chi2 = 577.6$, $df = 91$, $p < 0.001$). The first factor included five items that assessed proactive attitudes, and the second factor comprised nine items that evaluated reactive attitudes. However, some reactive attitudinal items did not load on the reactive factor.

Similarly, only one of the factors showed an adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha values were 0.64 for reactive attitudes and 0.73 for proactive attitudes). The sum of the item scores for both factors was computed, with higher scores indicating greater reactive and proactive attitudes toward intervention in gender violence.

IPVAW Training One question evaluated whether participants had received training regarding IPVAW: "Have you received specific training in gender violence?" All participants' responses were based on a dichotomous scale (1 = *yes*; 2 = *no*).

Covariate Variables As in previous studies (Chu & Sun, 2014; Finn & Stalans, 2002; Lin et al., 2021), self-identified gender and years of service ("How many years of experience do you have as a police officer?") were included as covariates.

Statistical Analysis Strategy

The SPSS Statistics Version 21 package was used for the analyses. The reactive attitudes toward intervention in gender violence variable did not yield a sufficient alpha value to show adequate reliability in the Spanish sample (i.e., not an accurate measure and could be subject to error). Likewise, PCA yielded no strong evidence regarding entity of this variable. For both reasons, we decided to exclude this variable from the analyses, focusing exclusively on proactive attitudes.

First, the relations between the study variables were explored using bivariate correlation analyses (see Table 1). Next, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test whether IPVAW myths, IPVAW training, and perceived severity of IPVAW predict proactive attitudes (Hypothesis 1a, 1b, and 1c). We established the order under empirical and theoretical criteria. The control variables (gender and years of service)–which prior research pointed out as predictors of police attitudes toward intervention in IPVAW (Chu & Sun, 2014; Ward-Lasher et al., 2017)– were entered in Step 1 (method: enter). Then, IPVAW myths (Step 2; method: enter), IPVAW training (Step 3; method: enter), and perceived severity of IPVAW (Step 4; method: enter) were added as predictor variables in the regression model, and proactive attitudes as the outcome variable. Then, to examine the indirect effect of IPVAW myths on proactive attitudes after the perceived severity of IPVAW (Hypothesis 2), a mediation analysis was run using PROCESS (Model 4; Hayes, 2018). The IPVAW myths were included as the predictor (X), proactive attitudes as the criterion (Y), and perceived severity of IPVAW as the mediating variable (M). Furthermore, gender and years of service were included as covariates. Finally, to address our exploratory goal, three different moderated mediation analyses were run using Model 5, Model 7, and Model 14 from PROCESS (Hayes, 2018) to examine whether IPVAW training could moderate the indirect effect of IPVAW myths on proactive attitudes based on rates of perceived severity of IPVAW (see Fig. 1, Panel A and B), or the direct effect of IPVAW myths on proactive attitudes (see Fig. 1, Panel C). IPVAW myths were included as the predictor (X), proactive attitudes as the criterion (Y), perceived severity of IPVAW as the mediating variable (M), and IPVAW training as the moderator (W for Models 5 and 7, and V for Model 14). Again, gender and years of service were included as covariates. Following the procedures recommended by Hayes (2018), indirect effects were estimated based on 10,000 bootstrap samples, and indirect effects were statistically significant when the 95% confidence interval did not include 0.

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Variables

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. IPVAW Myths	3.04 (1.00)	–	-.210**	.033	-.352***	.253***	.015
2. Perceived severity of IPVAW	7.69 (0.99)		–	.071	.317***	-.029	-.121*
3. IPVAW Training[a]	–			–	-.076	.074	-.303***
4. Proactive attitudes	20.07 (4.00)				–	-.012	-.024
5. Gender[a]	–					–	.000
6. Years of service	8.52 (6.83)						–

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

[a]Categorical Variables

Results

The means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables are shown in Table 1.

Predicting Proactive Attitudes

Table 2 displays the results from the hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting proactive attitudes toward intervention in gender violence, based on IPVAW myths,

Table 2 Predictors of Proactive Attitudes

Predictors	Proactive Attitudes			
	ΔR^2	b	t	95% CI
Step 1	.01			
Gender		−0.12	−0.17	[−1.45, 1.22]
Years of Service		–0.01	–0.34	[–0.09, 0.07]
Step 2	.13***			
Gender		0.70	1.07	[−0.58, 1.98]
Years of service		–0.01	-0.28	[−0.09, 0.06]
IPVAW Myths		-1.48	-5.45***	[-2.01, -0.94]
Step 3	.01			
Gender		0.75	1.16	[–0.53, 2.04]
Years of Service		–0.02	–0.63	[–0.10, 0.05]
IPVAW Myths		-1.47	-5.43***	[-2.00, -0.94]
IPVAW Training		-0.66	-1.19	[–1.75, 0.43]
Step 4	.06***			
Gender		0.71	1.13	[–0.53, 1.96]
Years of service		–0.01	–0.25	[–0.09, 0.07]
IPVAW Myths		-1.25	-4.67***	[–1.77, -0.72]
IPVAW Training		-0.75	-1.41	[–1.81, 0.30]
Perceived severity of IPVAW		1.04	3.94***	[0.52, 1.56]

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

IPVAW training, and perceived severity of IPVAW, controlling for gender and years of service.

The results revealed, in line with Hypothesis 1a, that IPVAW myths significantly contributed to the prediction of proactive attitudes in Step 2 after covariates were controlled in Step 1, increasing the explained variance of proactive attitudes by 13% in Step 2 of the regression analysis, $F(3,204) = 9.97$, $p < 0.001$. Then, as Table 2 illustrates, higher endorsement of IPVAW myths was indicative of lower proactive attitudes. However, the results indicate that the incorporation of IPVAW training in Step 3 did not yield significant results for predicting proactive attitudes (falling to support Hypothesis 1b), although IPVAW myths continued to predict proactive attitudes after the addition of IPVAW training. Finally, the inclusion of the perceived severity of IPVAW in Step 4 yielded a significant contribution to the prediction of proactive attitudes beyond covariates, IPVAW myths, and IPVAW training. Specifically, in line with Hypothesis 1c, greater perceived severity of IPVAW predicted greater proactive attitudes toward intervention in gender violence. Again, IPVAW myths remained significant predictors of proactive attitudes after adding the perceived severity of IPVAW. The amount of explained variance of proactive attitudes increased by 6% in this last step of the regression analysis and was statistically significant, $F(5,204) = 9.85$, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, IPVAW myths and the perceived severity of IPVAW emerged as the main predictors of proactive attitudes.

Indirect Effect of IPVAW myths on Proactive Attitudes through Perceived Severity of IPVAW

Figure 2 illustrates the results of the mediation analysis examining the indirect effect of IPVAW myths on proactive attitudes via the perceived severity of IPVAW, controlling for gender and years of service.
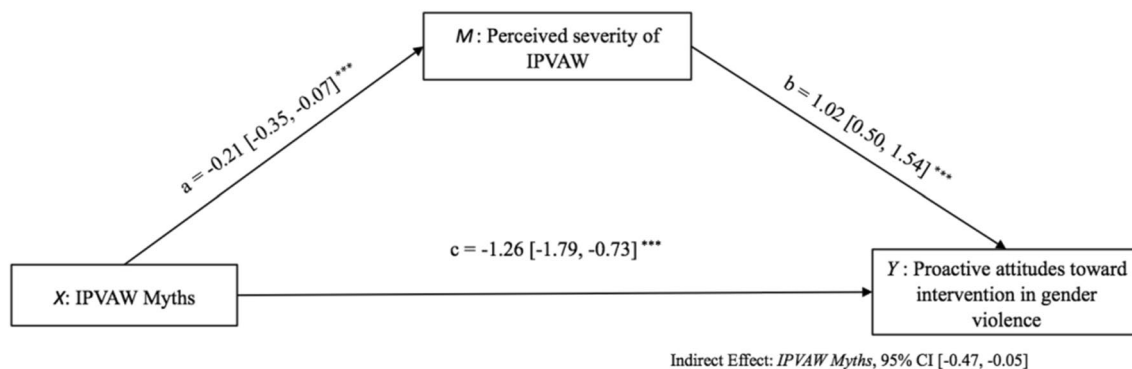
Fig. 2 Mediation model displaying the indirect effect of IPVAW Myths on proactive attitudes via perceived severity of IPVAW. All response values are unstandardized estimates (b values), with their 95% CI reported in parentheses. Total effects appear in bold text. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Inspection of Fig. 2 indicates that IPVAW myths were associated with lower perceived severity of IPVAW, which also decreased the proactive attitudes toward intervention in gender violence. Specifically, the results revealed that the indirect effect of IPVAW myths on proactive attitudes ($b = -0.22$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [–0.47, -0.05]) was driven by the perceived severity of IPVAW. This finding suggests, in line with Hypothesis 2, that greater endorsement of IPVAW myths is associated with lower perceived severity of IPVAW, which, consequently, decreases the proactive attitudes toward intervention in gender violence.

Exploring the Moderated Role of IPVAW Training

Figure 3 shows the significant results after examining three moderated mediation models for the moderated role of IPVAW training on the indirect effect of IPVAW myths on proactive attitudes via perceived severity of IPVAW (for a graphical representation, see Fig. 1, Panels A and B), and on the direct effect of IPVAW myths on proactive attitudes (see Fig. 1, Panel C), controlling for gender and years of service.

As indicated in Fig. 3 (Model 5; Hayes, 2018), the results revealed that IPVAW training moderated the relationship between IPVAW myths and proactive responses, $b = -1.21$, $p = 0.042$, 95% CI [–2.38, -0.05]. Specifically, the analysis yielded a conditional direct effect of IPVAW myths on proactive attitudes in the absence of police officer training in IPVAW, 95% CI [–2.85, -0.88], but not in the presence of such training, 95% CI [–1.35, 0.04]. However, the results also revealed that IPVAW training did not moderate the relationship between IPVAW myths and perceived severity of IPVAW, $b = -0.05$, $p = 0.706$, 95% CI [–0.34, 0.23], or the relationship between perceived severity of IPVAW

and proactive responses, $b = -0.24$, $p = 0.682$, 95% CI [–1.38, 0.90]. Consequently, no evidence was found for a conditional indirect effect of IPVAW myths on proactive attitudes via perceived severity of IPVAW in the presence or the absence of IPVAW training (Models 7 and 14; Hayes, 2018).

Taken together, these findings suggest that IPVAW training does not interact with IPVAW myths to predict proactive responses via perceived severity of IPVAW or with perceived severity to predict proactive responses. Instead, the indirect effect of IPVAW myths on proactive responses based on the perceived severity of IPVAW occurs regardless of the police officers' training in IPVAW. However, the results indicate that IPVAW training interacts with IPVAW myths to directly predict proactive responses. More endorsement of IPVAW myths leads to less proactive responses, but only when police officers have not received IPVAW training.

Discussion

Police officers' attitudes determine their tendency to respond to IPVAW (Zhao et al., 2018), with prointervention schemes–based partly on beliefs, training and experience–being a crucial variable in shaping police perception of IPVAW events and, indeed, for preventing this public and social problem (Voith, 2017). The present study tested a mediational model for predicting police officers' attitudes toward intervention in gender violence to explore the explanatory role of IPVAW myths, the perceived severity of IPVAW, and the moderation role of the IPVAW training received. To contextualize the current study, it is necessary to note that previous research has shown that while Spanish police officers generally prefer a high level of involvement
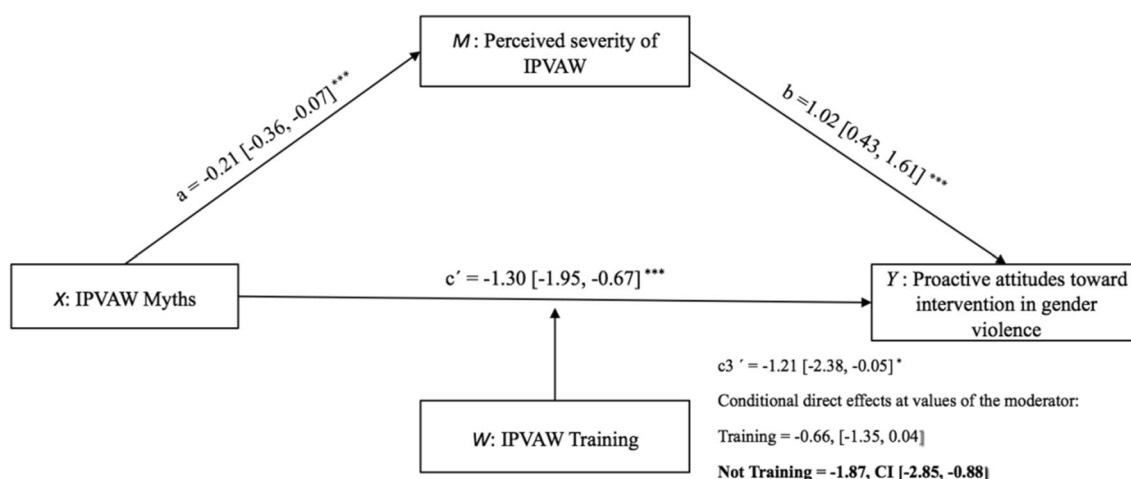

Fig. 3 Moderated Mediation (model 5; Hayes, 2018) displaying the conditional direct effect of IPVAW Myths on proactive attitudes in the absence of training in gender violence. All response values are unstandardized estimates (b values), with their 95% CI reported in parentheses. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

in response to hypothetical IPVAW scenarios (Gracia et al., 2008), attitudes favoring conditional interventions are still prevalent (Gracia & Lila, 2015).

First, the study presented how IPVAW myths were negatively related to proactive attitudes, confirming Hypothesis 1a. Given that we used an improved theoretical and psychometric instrument of IPVAW myths, we ensured validity of our results in the Spanish context (Megías et al., 2018). Unlike some studies carried out in U.S. and Australia (Goodson et al., 2020; Ward-Lasher et al., 2017), our results are in accord with those showing the detrimental effect of police IPVAW myths on importance given to police work in IPVAW events and the decisions to intervene proactively (Franklin et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2018). Despite the moderate mean score ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.99$) on IPVAW myths endorsed by the Spanish police officers, any level of myth endorsement is problematic because of the potential impact on, as shown by this study, the less proactive attitudes toward intervention. We provide empirical evidence to support the assumptions of the Schema Theory (Rumelhart, 1984). Police officers are also members of the society. In Spain, broader socialization and social message still include references to gender stereotypes, and even trauma misconceptions (i.e., expectations that victim displays hysteria or emotionality as evidence of truth-telling) (Fleming & Franklin, 2021). It could be shaping police schema, influencing their preferences for intervening in IPVAW events.

Second, the results of our study did not allow us to confirm Hypothesis 1b since we failed to show the direct effect of training on proactive attitudes toward intervention in IPVAW, although we found it interacted with IPVAW myths. Specifically, higher endorsement of IPVAW myths was associated with less proactive responses for police officers who had not received training in IPVAW intervention. In the first instance, high scores on police proactive attitudes toward intervention in IPVAW could explain the null effect of IPVAW training found. Probably, dichotomized self-response item used or homogeneity of the sample could be behind this result. Therefore, efforts in future research should reach more accurate conclusions. Furthermore, our results highlighted the role of IPVAW training on shaping police schemas and, in turn, police pro-activity for those police officers who endorsed IPVAW myths, as Schema Theory indicates (Rumelhart, 1984). Previous studies have shown that not every type of training is effective (Millar et al., 2022). Recent research has recommended continuous and specialized training to improve officers' attitudes and perceptions (Islam & Mazerolle, 2022). Between the training content must be included, our study highlights common IPVAW myths (e.g., false beliefs about victims, perpetrators, IPVAW events) and, indeed, their potential causes as stereotypes of gender roles and stereotypical trauma expectation of IPVAW (Eigenberg et al., 2012; Fleming & Franklin, 2021; Ward-Lasher et al.,

2017). Besides, it is important to discuss police officers' mythical beliefs and personal biases, emphasizing how these can affect police intervention in IPVAW (Blaney, 2010), as well as IPVAW training should be aligned with institutional and national message (Li et al., 2021).

Third, supporting Hypothesis 1c, our results showed that perceived severity of IPVAW was related to proactive attitudes towards intervention in IPVAW cases, which is in accord with prior research (Goodson et al., 2022; Gracia et al., 2008; Kebbell, 2022). Importantly, the tested mediation model confirmed that the perceived severity of IPVAW is the explanatory mechanism that underlies the negative relationship between IPVAW myths and proactive attitudes toward intervention in gender violence, confirming our Hypothesis 2. Our indirect effect suggests that perception of severity is promoted by the lower endorsement of IPVAW myths, and it is a predictor of proactive attitudes toward intervention. Prior literature proposed anchoring effect (Kebbell, 2022) and legal and policy context (Robinson et al., 2016) as drivers of perceived severity of IPVAW. Going beyond our result provides a new mechanism. In line with Schema Theory (Rumelhart, 1984), we close the ongoing debate on the literature (e.g., Pereira et al., 2022) about which promote perception of IPVAW severity and, in turn, police attitudes toward intervention in IPVAW. Empirically, we confirmed that higher IPVAW myths affect the cognitive representation of how IPVAW incidents typically look affecting its perceived severity, as well as the attitudes toward its intervention. The importance of perceived severity is due to its key role as a pre-requisite for the decision-making on reporting IPVAW to the police (Gracia et al., 2009) and supporting proactive intervention (the current study). The indirect effect suggests that greater endorsement of myths–which encourages the blaming and re-victimization of IPVAW victims while stereotyping IPVAW events–hinders the perceived severity of such violence, having serious implications for the willingness of the police to respond. Regardless of the level of endorsement, any myth has a detrimental effect on police responses. Thus, psychoeducation aimed at reducing those myths among police officers will modify their perceived severity and subsequent actions for protecting IPVAW victims.

Our results provide empirical support for Banyard's bystander intervention model (2011) applied to other types of gender-based violence and populations such as IPVAW and police officers. In line with the model, we confirmed that police decision-making about handling IPVAW events appears to be influenced by IPVAW myths and perceived severity, and conditioned by IPVAW training. Interestingly, such variables appear to play an essential role in Spanish police officers' awareness, self-efficacy, and interpretation of the IPVAW situation, leading to different levels of proactive attitudes towards intervening in such events.

Limitations and Practical Implications

Despite the novelty of the current findings, the present study is not without limitations. Although we had a police officer serving as a liaison, thus reducing the value judgments related to answers about IPVAW, the sensitivity toward this social problem is intrinsic in present-day societies. Therefore, our data might include responses that only represent those police officers who were more willing to engage voluntarily in a study related to police assessment on IPVAW situations instead of those with negative attitudes toward IPVAW. In addition, the difficult accessibility to the sample because of the nature of police work prevented us from collect data under control situations (e.g., group sessions in police departments). Therefore, we employed a non-probabilistic snowball sampling and used different social networks to disseminate our study. While it could promote selection bias and hinder the generalizability of our findings, in contrast, this sampling method reinforces the idea that participants could have answered free of institutional pressure, showing lesser social desirability. Although the sample size was sufficient for statistical analysis, it was not sufficiently diverse in terms of gender, with 76.2% of the participants being male. Despite the formal integration of women into police organizations across most countries, data indicate that their true representation in the police force is scarce. For example, In the U.S., 12.8 percent of the total patrol officers in local police and sheriff departments were women, with an estimated average increase of 4.5 percent per decade (Poteyeva & Sun, 2009). In Spain, non-official data point in the same direction (police forces are around 7%-12% female; Gómez, 2021). Consequently, we assume that our sample reflects society at large and, therefore, we only controlled for the gender and year of experience effect in this study. The lack of construct validity and reliability for the reactive attitudinal dimension is also a limitation of our study. Importantly, a deeper understanding of reactive attitudes toward intervention in gender violence in the Spanish context will result in a better conceptualization and operationalization of this dimension, and in turn, an improved measure (i.e., items) for analyzing its role. Finally, our design study is non-experimental and cross-sectional, we only provide tentative conclusions which should be tested with longitudinal or experimental design.

Drawing from Schema Theory (Rumelhart, 1984), police schemas are an active process (Robinson, 2000), and our findings reveal several variables that could be targeted to train and improve the structure of such schemata, triggering more appropriate interpretations, attitudes, and responses for dealing with IPVAW events. Therefore, as implications for programs targeting police officers, our results point out the importance of reducing IPVAW myths and increasing the levels of perceived severity for increasing the proactive attitudes toward intervention in IPVAW. Police misconceptions regarding how an IPVAW looks or behaves lead to the lower perceived severity of these events and encourage less proactive attitudes toward intervention. Moreover, our moderated mediational model implies that training on IPVAW could buffer the detrimental effect of myths on proactive attitudes toward intervention. Thus, specific interventions focused on dispelling IPVAW myths and achieving a comprehensive understanding of IPVAW complexity will help police officers adequately perceive the severity of specific risky situations, preventing the personal bias produced by IPVAW misconceptions.

Overall, our results confirm that IPVAW mythology has a detrimental effect on police officers' perception of its severity and affects their willingness to intervene in potential gender violence situations. Therefore, it is extremely important to design effective interventions for addressing these misconceptions concerning the meaning of IPVAW. Our results also suggest that training could effectively block the negative effect of mythical beliefs on proactive attitudes. Furthermore, more proactive attitudes among police officers will lead to less tolerance among the general population, which will serve to reinforce the message of zero tolerance (Gracia, 2004).

Data Availability The data of this study are available from the corresponding author, MG-M upon request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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