UNDERSTANDING THE HELP-SEEKING DECISIONS OF FEMALE VICTIMS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

One in three women is at risk of experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) at some point in her life. There are many consequences of IPV which can affect victims’ short- and long-term wellbeing. However, victims often do not receive the support they need to stop the abuse. This shortcoming is partly the result of victims’ decision to remain silent about the abusive experiences, at least temporarily. In addition, it is associated with victims’ choices of support and the responses they receive.

Victims’ help-seeking decisions are influenced by a range of different factors, including victim and partner characteristics and factors relating to the nature and extent of experienced abuse and control. Victims’ responses to IPV, including the decision to remain silent as well as the decisions to disclose the abuse to informal and/or formal sources of support, are commonly well-informed decisions made to the best of the victim’s knowledge and personal risk assessment. While the decision to remain silent may seem unreasonable from an outsider’s point of view, it often fulfils the purpose of minimising experiences of risk and harm for both victims and their children. An understanding of the complexity of factors associated with victims’ responses to IPV is therefore crucial to address victims’ needs and enable them to stop the abuse permanently.

This thesis is a comprehensive examination of victims’ different help-seeking decisions and the diversity of factors associated with such decisions. It is theoretically informed by feminist, coping, social learning, cognitive, and attachment theories and uses a multi-method approach to reveal generalisable results combined with in-depth
knowledge on predictors of victims’ help-seeking decisions. Study 1 examines the help-seeking decisions of IPV victims \( N=2,276 \) in a national household sample, initially surveyed for the *International Violence Against Women Survey* (IVAWS) 2002/03. The data, provided by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), were analysed using SPSS to identify predictors of victims’ different responses to an incident of IPV. Findings reveal that victims’ help-seeking decisions are informed by a range of different factors, including victim-, partner-, and violence-related factors.

The cross-sectional findings observed in Study 1 are further examined through victim narratives utilised for the second study. Study 2 uses face-to-face in-depth interview data collected from victims \( N=29 \) living in Southeast Queensland. Victims interviewed for Study 2 were approached through a number of different specialised victim services they had recently been in contact with. Findings from Study 2 provide greater insights into the complex nature of some of the help-seeking-related factors identified in Study 1. Due to its focus on victims’ responses to IPV at different points throughout their abusive relationship, Study 2 allows an identification of changes in the dynamics of victims’ help-seeking decisions over time.

An integrated discussion of findings from Studies 1 and 2 reveals the salient role of child exposure to IPV, victims’ realisation of abuse severity and outcomes of past help-seeking experiences in victims’ help-seeking decisions. While findings identify victims as active players with agency, several factors can complicate victims’ help-seeking decisions and prolong their victimisation. Implications for theory, future research, policy and practice are discussed.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma to any university.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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### LIST OF ACRONYMS

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<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIHW</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJS</td>
<td>Criminal Justice System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMC</td>
<td>Crime and Misconduct Commission (Queensland)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSS</td>
<td>Child Safety Services</td>
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<td>FaHCSIA</td>
<td>Department of Family, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>IPV</td>
<td>Intimate Partner Violence</td>
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<td>IVAWS</td>
<td>International Violence Against Women Survey</td>
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<td>HREC</td>
<td>Human Research Ethics Committee</td>
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<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Post Traumatic Stress Disorder</td>
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<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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