British Journal of Social Work (2024) **54**, 704–722
https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad240
Advance Access Publication November 17, 2023

Social Workers' Experiences of Working with Partner Violence

Helén Olsson [1,*], Anna-Karin L. Larsson[2] and J. M. Susanne Strand[2]

[1]*Department of Social and Psychological Studies, Karlstad University, Universitetsgatan 2, Karlstad SE-651 88, Sweden*
[2]*School of Behavioural, Social and Legal Sciences, Örebro University, Fakultetsgatan 1, Örebro SE-701 82, Sweden*

*Correspondence to Helén Olsson, Department of Social and Psychological Studies, Karlstad University, Universitetsgatan 2, Karlstad SE-651 88, Sweden. E-mail: helen.olsson@kau.se; helen.olsson@miun.se

Abstract

In this study, we investigated social workers' use of risk assessments and risk management in cases concerning intimate partner violence. The study examined social workers' experiences of work performance, organizational conditions, internal and external collaboration and challenges and opportunities at work. We interviewed twelve respondents in Swedish social work offices about what structures, supports and foundations they found essential for work sustainability and resilience. Support from colleagues and managers, experience, openness and trust were critical factors for work satisfaction. The study showed that work experience created trust and security, partly because the social worker became better at translating laws and regulations into practical work. Concerning the severity of the cases, collaboration was essential for building workplace confidence and well-being. A well-functioning internal and external collaboration was described as trust, reducing stress and access to open and straightforward communication with others. Sustainable routines and access to guidelines facilitated the work. An unsupportive work climate included a culture of silence, a lack of trust and generated feelings of stress. Feelings of vulnerability in the professional role arose when the workgroup and/or the management did not take a supportive approach to operational work.

© *The Author(s) 2023. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.*

BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers
www.basw.co.uk

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

Keywords: collaboration, intimate partner violence, risk assessment, risk management, social work, work resilience

Accepted: October 2023

Introduction

Intimate partner violence is a violation of human rights. According to The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), it can be defined as any form of physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering perpetrated by a current or former partner (Council of Europe, 2011). Stalking, which can occur after the break-up of a relationship, can be defined as repetitive behaviour aiming to contact the victim against their will, causing fear for the victims' safety (Kropp *et al.*, 2008a). Structurally, intimate partner violence and stalking are men's violence against women (Bradbury-Jones *et al.*, 2019), where approximately one in three women have been victims of intimate partner violence during their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2021) and one in five have been a victim of stalking (Matos *et al.*, 2019; Fedina *et al.*, 2020). Also, recidivism rates related to intimate partner violence and stalking are high (e.g., Bennett Cattaneo and Goodman, 2005; Eke *et al.*, 2011; Rosenfeld *et al.*, 2019). It should be noted that intimate partner violence can also include violence by women against men and violence within the context of LGBTQI relationships (Storey and Strand, 2013; Oskarsson and Strand, 2023).

Further, research shows that half of all police reports on intimate partner violence include children under 18 as witnesses of such violence (Petersson and Thunberg, 2022). The consequences of these types of violence are many and contribute to decreased quality of life for victims (Logan and Walker, 2017; Bradbury-Jones *et al.*, 2019). In sum, the high frequency of such violence affecting women and children and its high recidivism rates require improved working conditions for social workers to better protect victims from further violence.

In Sweden, where this study was conducted, social services play a crucial role in preventing intimate partner violence and protecting victims. They must operate at a societal level and are responsible for collaboration involving police and other agencies concerning these cases. A high-intensity work pace characterizes the social services context, often combined with high staff turnover. Swedish evaluations show that agencies' work with family violence is complex and associated with many dilemmas, requiring resources, skills and legal support (Olsson and Bergman, 2022).

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

Using risk assessment instruments in social work

In recent decades, several European countries have worked intensely with policies to manage and prevent intimate partner violence and stalking, where recommendations and guidelines have been published by the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE, 2022). At the international level, Article 51 of the Istanbul Convention establishes the obligation for relevant authorities to perform risk assessment and risk management plans to protect victims (Council of Europe, 2011). The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2014) has already recommended that social services use risk assessment instruments for intimate partner violence this year.

The importance of working with risk assessments was clarified for Swedish social workers via the regulation (HSLF-FS, 2022, p. 39) stipulated by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2022). Examples of risk assessment instruments used by Swedish social services regarding intimate partner violence include the Swedish version of the Brief Spousal Assault Form of Evaluation of Risk (Kropp *et al.*, 2008b) and FREDA (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2014).

Using risk assessment instruments to assess risks of future violence is a relatively new phenomenon in social work. In general, interventions and methods used in social work are poorly evaluated (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2011). Research into using risk assessment instruments in social work must be addressed internationally and nationally. The lack of research on risk assessment instruments in social work may further be explained by the fact that effect studies are often time-consuming and costly and require specialist methodological knowledge (Sundell and Olsson, 2021). However, structured risk assessment instruments were introduced within criminal justice and forensic psychiatric care in the mid-1990s in most Western countries (Otto and Douglas, 2010). Therefore, research is extensive and has striven to develop valid, user-friendly instruments over several decades, where four generations of risk assessment approaches have evolved (Monahan, 1984; Douglas and Kropp, 2002; Andrews *et al.*, 2006, 2011; Otto and Douglas, 2010; Belfrage and Strand, 2012; Bonta and Andrews, 2017; Viljoen *et al.*, 2018; Meloy and Hoffman, 2021).

Challenges for social workers

Clarified legislation and European recommendations have given social workers the mandate and acceptance to work with issues concerning intimate partner violence (Olsson and Bergman, 2022). Nevertheless, such efforts still present challenges in everyday social work. Violence related to traditional family values and norms surrounding families and

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

parenthood has primarily been considered a private matter, thus affecting social work (Heimer *et al.*, 2018). Disagreements between researchers about how family-based violence should be theorized (Bell and Naugle, 2008) have also complicated professionals' work in practice. At the same time, research shows that international treaties and legislation cannot reduce the incidence of violence, and appropriate programmes must be developed to ensure that conventions and laws are implemented nationally and locally (Gaffney-Rhys, 2011).

Therefore, recommendations on preventing intimate partner violence and stalking are essential. Specific challenges for social workers are that intimate partner violence often involves several victims, where mothers and children are the most common victims. The help and support needed to protect victims can involve many resources and actors. Addressing intimate partner violence lies at the intersection between social work (social support) and the law enforcement system (police and court). The different professions depend on each other to successfully manage and prevent violence. Previous research has indicated that violence prevention through collaboration between social workers and law enforcement professionals is challenging due to differences in their professional cultures (Cooper *et al.*, 2008; Leonard and Van Scotter, 2023). These may include preconceived notions about other professions and laws governing their activities (Ward-Lasher *et al.*, 2017).

The concept of resilience has been used to explore how welfare professionals manage and adapt to harsh working conditions (Masten, 2001; Ungar *et al.*, 2015). A common understanding in the literature is that resilience means 'to bounce back'. Yet the capacity of individuals and organizations to recover after adversity, difficulty or defeat varies (Liu *et al.*, 2019). Carson *et al.* (2011) referred to a paradigm shift in social work literature. Whereas resilience was previously considered an individual trait, the current focus is on workplaces' capacity to contribute to resilience. McFadden *et al.* (2015) were on a similar track. They emphasized that the creation of occupational resilience must be accompanied by quality, such as a constructive organizational culture, including social and supervisory support and a manageable workload. In this study, we are inspired by the concept of resilience to explore social workers' experiences of work performance and organizational conditions when working with intimate partner violence and stalking cases. In addition, our work is based on findings from previous research on social workers' practices regarding intimate partner violence and stalking.

The present study

Social workers play a central role in the risk management of intimate partner violence, which is crucial to protect victims from further

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

victimization. However, there is a knowledge gap in social workers' experiences of this work, which needs further exploration. The following study presents the results of one sub-study within the longitudinal six-year research programme RISKSAM aiming to investigate how collaboration between social services and police more effectively can prevent intimate partner violence and stalking. The programme researches several areas, such as collaboration between the police and social services, quality of life for victims, socio-economic costs and the work environment of staff handling such violent cases. This study describes and discusses social workers' use of risk assessments and risk management, focusing on challenges and opportunities. We were also interested in investigating what structures, types of support and conditions were essential for sustainable work. The purpose was to gain more knowledge about job satisfaction and the psychosocial work environment for those who work with these issues.

The overall aim of the study was to examine Swedish social workers' experiences of work performance and organizational conditions when working with cases of intimate partner violence and stalking. In doing so, we investigated experiences of working with risk assessment and risk management to prevent intimate partner violence, including collaboration with other relevant authorities. As such, the causes and effects of social workers' work with intimate partner violence and stalking are beyond the scope of this article. Our focus is limited to the social workers' experiences of these issues. The study's aim was specified in the following research questions:

- What are the Swedish social workers' experiences and perceptions of working with risk assessment and risk management in intimate partner violence and stalking cases?
- Which structures, types of support and working conditions are essential for sustainable and resilient work to prevent intimate partner violence and stalking?

Study design

As we were interested in obtaining rich stories with detailed descriptions, we took a qualitative approach (Morse, 1995). The chosen research strategy assumes that social phenomena cannot be understood without understanding how language operates in the social world. Social phenomena can be elucidated by studying communication, focusing on being seen, read, interpreted, realized and what meaning it has for the respondents (Krippendorff, 2019, p. xii).

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

Participants and data collection

The study sample consists of carefully selected information-rich cases, so-called relevance sampling (cf. purposeful sampling), where the aim was to identify textual units that can be derived from the research question (Krippendorff, 2019, p. 122). Initially, three social services in three counties in central Sweden were asked if they were interested in participating in the study. These social services had previously given their consent to participate in the research programme RISKSAM. Subsequently, managers from two social services offices in two separate counties announced that staff were willing to participate. Eleven women and one man consented to be interviewed, and all worked with clients exposed to intimate partner violence or stalking. Seven participants provided counselling and support, and five were involved in investigations focusing on children or adults. Their median age was 38 (ranging from 28 to 64 years). Their median experience of explicitly working with domestic violence was 7.5 years (ranging from 1 to 20 years).

The interview guide was designed in consultation with social workers. It included questions on internal and external collaboration regarding risk assessment and risk management within the framework of intimate partner violence and stalking. The interviewer also asked questions about experiences in the work environment and working conditions concerning the work area. The interviews were conducted by the first author HO from March to May 2021 and were carried out through a digital meeting platform. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

The Swedish Ethical Review Authority approved the study (Dnr 2021–05889-02). Several ethical questions regarding research on humans and data processing were handled accordingly in this project (Good Research Practice, 2017). We obtained informed written and oral consent to ensure participants' anonymity and confidentiality. The participants were free to end participation at any time. We endeavoured to handle data correctly and respectfully. All personal identification was removed during data collection. Data were then safely electronically stored according to data management rules for the research programme RISKSAM.

Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a valuable technique in the social sciences because it gives researchers a transparent guide for research design and conduct. Qualitative content analysis is functional in searching for patterns and themes in people's experiences and then describing the structure of these experiences (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004; Krippendorff, 2019). To validate the data, the three authors have strictly adhered to

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

the research question throughout the analysis process. Following Krippendorff's (2019, pp. 39–40) advice, following the research question protects analysts from getting lost in mere abstractions or self-serving categorizations. Initially, HO and AKL read and analysed the data separately to increase validity. The two resulting analyses were compiled, and it turned out that they did not differ much. In the final analysis, all three contributors in the research group were involved in reaching a consensus on themes.

The analysis was performed in the following steps: After re-reading the data, the first step identified several condensed units of meaning describing how the social workers' experiences materialized, which were then developed into subthemes. During this process, we posed broad questions to the material: 'How is the work with violence described—what is going on here?' and 'What are described as success factors or difficulties in the work?' The next step was to identify patterns within and connections between the content of these subthemes, which focussed on identifying variations and similarities in the participants' stories. In the final analytical step, the subthemes were further condensed into three main themes: *To be confident in the professional role*; *The importance of structure*; and *Clear and straight communication paths*. Each main theme contains numbered quotes from any of the twelve interviews.

Findings

Theme 1: To be confident in the professional role

Confidence was a recurring word. In almost all interviews with social workers, the importance of feeling confident in their professional role was consistently mentioned. Confidence means thriving, doing a good job and reaching job satisfaction. We found that confidence was based on *experience*, *collegial support* and *openness and trust* in the workplace. These three subthemes form the basis of this main theme.

The respondents testified that confidence arises partly from the experience of working with challenging cases of violence in close relationships and partly from good support from managers and colleagues. Social workers with many years of experience in social services, especially with cases concerning intimate partner violence and stalking, emphasized that experience generated confidence. One respondent, now a senior administrator, described how she felt insecure and unsure about the content of the assignment and how she would apply laws and handle situations that arose when she started her position. This improved over time with more experience: 'Now I feel very confident in my role and mission. I know the legislation, and yes, I have methods for

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

different situations as well' (Interview 3). Another respondent with more than fifteen years' experience in the profession also emphasized the importance of experience:

> You should be so confident in yourself, in your knowledge and experience, that you dare to make these difficult decisions…, and face what you get in your lap. Because it is not easy to sit and talk about abuse and violence every single day. I am very grateful that I have worked for so long to get it. (I10)

Several respondents described how they have grown into their professional roles and become confident and thus happy with their work tasks and workplace. A respondent with shorter work experience reflected on the importance of expertise for confidence:

> It is actually experienced, […] that you have had it as work tasks; it is what, at least in my world, makes a person confident that you can do the work. It does not matter how much you read theories; you still have to do it and apply them in reality. It is only then that you learn. (I12)

Another subtheme from the interviews was confidence in having good collegial support, working together on issues, trusting each other and sharing experiences. The social workers expressed the need for a well-functioning forum where they meet, share problems and questions and talk openly about solutions and management. Accordingly, openness and trust also formed a subtheme in the analysis. Several respondents mentioned having good workplace support from their colleagues and group leader. They said it is crucial to be allowed to address and get rid of emotions that arise and to hear others share the feelings and frustration that sometimes occur (I3, I9). Hence, a recurring theme in the interviews was that talking to colleagues and group leaders generates confidence: 'Confidence and well-being […] are created in me when I know that I'm not alone in this' (I12). Having colleagues one trusts, and a supportive manager who can resolve disagreements and help with priorities, were seen as essential confidence-creating factors.

Several interviews mentioned external supervision and mentorship in groups and individually as vital factors. Several respondents described how they usually work in pairs with cases, which also said is essential for feeling confidence and job satisfaction. One person expressed that when she had support around her, her confidence and well-being were strengthened when she did not feel alone in her work (I12). A stable team was essential for the work environment and confidence. 'We feel safe with each other', one social worker said. The work becomes more enjoyable and more legally secure, said one of the respondents: 'I never feel alone in my assessments' (I3). The security of being two who look at a case, make an assessment and handle it was also described as more effortless and less stress-inducing. One respondent expressed that working

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

together on more challenging matters makes it less complicated and much more straightforward:

> That you can be two, especially when you are in a meeting and afterward: What did you see? How did you feel about this? So that you can have someone to bounce ideas with. (I9)

Although working with intimate partner violence and having scarce resources in the workplace felt complicated and sometimes weighed heavily emotionally, there was a sense of reassurance in having competent, experienced and reliable colleagues to lean on. On the other hand, in the event of uncertainty and stress where the team and management do not take a supportive approach to operations, feelings of vulnerability in their professional role result. One respondent described the inadequate work environment as characterized by stress, a culture of silence and a lack of trust. She expressed that insecurity appeared when no colleague was available for talks or if they lacked the confidence to talk about difficult or complex matters. Thus, social workers claimed that support from colleagues and managers, experience, openness and trust were critical factors for work satisfaction, good job and confidence.

Theme 2: The importance of structure

The social workers described the importance of an exemplary structure as key to sustainable work, well-being and job satisfaction. They described a system built on *routines* and valid *documents*. The respondents emphasized the importance of structure in regular meetings and discussion forums and design in established workplace routines, documents and guidelines. They spoke positively about regular weekly group meetings with guidance or consultation on matters they can talk openly about the cases they are working on. The importance of a recurring and functioning discussion forum was illustrated in one interview where the respondent experienced a culture of silence and a non-functioning team. She talked about the difficulty of not having someone to talk to after a challenging meeting with a client: 'You just want to say, today I had a tough conversation, but you don't have anyone to share it with' (I10). Recurring meetings with external supervision were also frequently mentioned as positive and valuable. Altogether, the informants requested more supervision and case support.

Besides routines, the respondents also discussed the importance of documentation, written action plans, guidelines and checklists. In the interviews, they were asked if their workplace had these documents, if they had sufficient access to them, and if tools in the form of risk management instruments were available. They were further asked whether they used these and thought them valuable. Here, opinions amongst the

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

respondents differed: it was clear that respondents had varying experiences with the availability of guidelines and action plans. One of the respondents answered that they do not have such documents at her workplace but were in the process of drawing them up: 'There is a culture in which we do not write down routines' (I3).

The same respondent further believed that there were advantages to written routines and that having them would be desirable since there could be a risk of missing critical issues when working with case management without a clear structure. Another social worker believed no manuals or checklists were at her workplace but thought having them would be appropriate and desirable. More standardized work would be preferable; otherwise, dealing with and remembering all parts of a case would be challenging (I6). Some respondents stated that workplace guidelines and action plans were primarily aimed at new employees. They also thought that recent employees employed mainly needed and benefited from these documents. Some respondents with long experience believed they did not need these documents. One social worker with less experience in the profession mentioned that she had wished there were more routines and action plans when she started:

> I felt that I had to, as it were, up to shape my conversations in a way, and if I look back, I wish there were more routines that I could have leaned towards. (I12)

Methods and questionnaires make conversations with clients standardized and equal, regardless of which social worker was responsible for the meeting. Standardized questionnaires were described as necessary because there is a big difference between a completely inexperienced social worker and a social worker with many years of experience in the field who has also undergone training in intimate partner violence. Most respondents used some form of tool or risk assessment instrument in client meetings. All but one of them mentioned regularly using the FREDA assessment method. They held that the assessment method was excellent and valuable in several ways. One opinion was that the questions in FREDA were helpful because the work does not become person-dependent, and it is easier for clients to answer direct questions. Such questions are also beneficial if clients find it difficult to talk about what they have been through. It can be 'easier as if I were reading out questions from a piece of paper. So, it will be a question that many others have received. It is as if not explicitly aimed at them' (I11). Hence, an assessment tool with specific questions could be a great support. One of the respondents told us she had already worked with the risk management model RISKSAM. She believed that FREDA was suitable for making violence visible, but it did not give guidance on how to continue the work. RISKSAM enables follow-up and structure and broadens the assessment, capturing more components, such as collaboration (I7). Some respondents stated that they knew the assessment methods and, for

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

example, had studied the FREDA assessment method. However, they did not use the manual with questions when meeting with the client. A social worker said: 'We have FREDA questions with us, whether we implement it explicitly or if we just have it in our heads' (I4).

This section shows that clear routines and regular meetings are essential to managing the job and doing a good job. Good documentation of practices and tools for risk assessment, along with guides for conducting conversations and errands, was also necessary. Still, some respondents considered this more essential for those new to the workplace and the profession.

Theme 3: Clear and straight communication paths

Most of our respondents had a similar experience collaborating with others within and outside the organization. They also had similar opinions on how it should be formed to function optimally. What stood out was that *proximity* and precise *role distribution* were essential for efficient collaboration and communication. Those two factors were also subthemes of the third theme.

Some respondents thought that internal collaboration with other social services worked well. Others felt it was complicated internally but worked better externally with partners such as the police. Further, the collaboration described as well-working was where the communication was clear, had straightforward communication paths, and where they had personal contacts and *physical proximity*. To be near, in the same building, or even in the same corridor was seen as an essential factor for functional collaboration. One respondent described that collaboration with one of the police units worked very well because: 'We are very close to them, and it is an incredibly nice collaboration we have with each other [. . .] we sit next to each other in the same building' (I7).

Several respondents mentioned personal contacts and the importance of having an established network of contacts. It is easier to make personal contact when they sit next to each other and share the same spaces and facilities. The proximity also allows one to pop in and say hello, ask a quick question or talk and brainstorm thoughts and solutions. It is flexible, and it facilitates their work. One social worker said that she preferred using her contacts. She believed that people in collaborating positions spoke the same language (I1).

A shared experience is that collaboration works well when there is trust and confidence, which each person knows and sticks to their role. One respondent explained that internal collaboration worked well when there was an understanding of each other's different assignments and roles (I3). When collaboration works well, 'you feel more skilled in what you do, and you feel that you do good', she said (I3). Several

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

respondents expressed the importance of good collaboration. One said, 'Collaboration is the Alpha and the Omega in this type of case' (I7). She believed that she alone could not do enough and that collaboration must happen fast and early on in the case:

> . . .things should happen quickly because there are such significant risks, and then you need to gather around a structure. Everyone needs to know what they are and what role they have, and then you need to gather and collaborate on this. (I7)

When collaboration works, and everyone knows their role, clients receive better support and social workers also seem to enjoy their work more and rate their job satisfaction higher. However, there were also examples of non-functioning collaboration and communication. One respondent affirmed that there were no routines for collaboration at their workplace and that the job, therefore, became even more person-dependent. It worked well to collaborate with some but worse with others. Collaboration could be complicated, and sometimes, they did not trust each other's assessments. Lack of trust and unclear roles could complicate and, therefore be time-consuming (I12). This theme can be concluded by stressing the importance of effective communication for job satisfaction. Communication also seems to be a prerequisite for doing a good job. Such communication was based on physical proximity and a clear division of roles.

Discussion

The study aimed to examine social workers' experiences of work performance and organizational conditions when working with intimate partner violence and stalking cases. Specifically, we wanted to know what factors they believed were essential for sustainable and resilient work to prevent intimate partner violence. We investigated experiences of working with risk assessment and risk management as well as the social workers' experience of internal and external collaboration.

From the result, several self-reported perceptions of resilience emerge. Key factors perceived to support their work were strongly linked to organizational factors. The interviews showed that working with intimate partner violence is complex and challenging. The respondents understood that unconsidered risk management plans and wrong decisions could lead to devastating consequences for victims. Furthermore, it emerged that authorities, particularly social workers, must possess skills in several areas. This study shows that work experience creates confidence, partly because it contributes to knowing how social workers should handle cases according to regulations. Experience and routine were also described as counteracting emotional strain; as one of the

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

participants said, it is hard to talk about violence and abuse daily. Access to experienced colleagues who willingly shared their experiences contributed to an organizationally constructive environment that generated confidence and well-being. McFadden *et al.* (2019) also showed that social workers with education and experience were an asset in organizations because they had significantly higher resilience than their less experienced colleagues. Moreover, they emphasized convincing employers to retain the workforce and avoid turnover to maintain organizational stability and experience.

The social services work with victims of intimate partner violence must follow several procedural steps and must therefore include multiple well-thought-out considerations. Research shows that authorities must work together to create a sustainable security plan for the abused client (Robbins *et al.*, 2014; SafeLives, 2014). Social workers must initially assess risk based on the victim's story. The next step is to use the risk assessment outcome to guide risk management. In cases where collaboration is necessary, the risk assessment and risk management plan must be communicated with other actors, such as the police and healthcare, responsible for the suggested interventions within their organization. Next, all involved parties and appropriate authorities should collaborate on a joint risk management plan. It is also crucial that risk management is preceded by regular reconciliations in which the involved actors participate. Assessing the risks of intimate partner violence is a job that needs to be constantly updated because this kind of violence is seldom an isolated incident. Instead, the violence continually recurs.

It is crucial to have access to established networks with other actors and to a workplace with solid routines and structures. This study shows that collaboration is essential to building workplace confidence and well-being. An element of resilience involved sharing responsibility with others in complex decision-making processes. Other resilient elements at the organizational level were opportunities to work in pairs, have access to supervision or a mentor, and receive support from a senior colleague. Regular internal meetings with room to discuss complex matters were stated to be stress-reducing, as was physical access to external collaboration partners, for example, being located on the same premises and quickly obtaining reflections on unexpected problems in cases. A well-functioning internal and external collaboration was described as entailing trust, reducing stress and providing access to open and straightforward communication with others. A recurring statement from the respondents was that trust and confidence were about clear roles and, at the same time, understanding each other's different assignments. Our findings are supported by previous research by Rumping et al. (2019), who in a literature review, found that several factors stimulated collaboration, that is, awareness and understanding of the other discipline, communication, interaction, feedback, reflection, evaluation, team structure, willingness to

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

work together, shared responsibility and mutual trust. It is also essential to note that management is crucial in creating conditions for sustainable collaboration (Lalayants *et al.*, 2011; Davidson *et al.*, 2012; Ambrose-Miller and Ashcroft, 2016). Thus, leaders are essential in successful collaborations because the work needs to be legitimized and encouraged. A recurring theme in the current study was that management was crucial in creating feelings of shared responsibility, providing guidance and helping to prioritize and resolve disagreements.

This study shows the value of working in an organization governed by sustainable routines and access to guidelines. On the other hand, handling cases following well-defined guidelines seemed to be the most critical need for new employees. One of the interviewed social workers said there was no culture of writing down their routines. Possibly, a contradiction was perceived in social work here because work-based resilience for social work professionals is often described as consisting of undocumented practice wisdom and tacit knowledge, so-called informal learning (Carson *et al.*, 2011).

In this regard, social work has two different lines of thought. On the one hand, for example, Ponnert and Svensson (2016) claim that social work is undergoing a transitional trend towards standardization, undergirded by new public management and the evidence-based movement. Furthermore, the authors fear that the competence that comes with the profession will be lost or reduced if social workers use standardized manuals and formal guidelines. Similarly, social workers and researchers fear that the relationship-based encounter with the client can be lost if standardized work processes govern social work (cf. Devlieghere and Roose, 2018; Featherstone *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, research shows that social workers welcome clarified regulatory frameworks and opportunities to base complex decision-making on, for example, assessment instruments and formulated standards (cf. Olsson and Bergman, 2022). In addition, research points out that social workers should be more involved in policy formulation because it can facilitate their structural understanding of issues such as inequality and social justice (Weiss-Gal and Gal, 2008). However, we conclude that policy implementation relating to the governmental directive concerning preventing men's violence against women should primarily be the responsibility of management and local politicians.

Conclusion

This study describes and discusses social workers' use of risk assessments and risk management and their experience dealing with challenging cases concerning intimate partner violence. Key factors that supported their efforts were strongly linked to organizational factors. The study shows

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

that clear routines and regular meetings were essential to managing the job and doing a good job. Good documentation of practices and tools for risk assessment, along with guides for conducting conversations and errands, was necessary. An element of resilience involves sharing responsibility with others in complex decision-making processes. Social workers described the collaboration as working well when the communication was clear and followed straightforward paths and when they had personal contacts and physical proximity. Other resilient elements at the organizational level were opportunities to work in pairs, have access to supervision or a mentor, and receive support from a senior social worker colleague. Well-functioning internal and external collaboration was connected to trust, manageable stress levels and open, straightforward communication. Sustainable routines and access to guidelines facilitated the work. An unsupportive work climate was linked to a culture of silence, lack of trust and high stress levels. When work teams and management did not take a supportive approach to operations, feelings of vulnerability in the professional role evolved.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. It is, for example, not possible to generalize the results based on such a small qualitative sample. Instead, readers should decide whether results may be transferred to other similar contexts. Preliminary results were presented to other social workers with similar tasks to confirm the credibility. They perceived the results as neither alien nor provocative. Another limitation is that the interviews were conducted during the pandemic, which did not allow real face-to-face meetings. However, most participants felt that online interviews could be better accommodated given their chronic lack of time at work. The recruitment process risked skewed selection if managers had only chosen satisfied employees. This was pointed out and discussed with involved managers during the recruitment process. Our perception of the participants was that they did not avoid criticizing their employers. They were also considered experienced and well-educated in the field, yet representative of the context. Unfortunately, the gender distribution was skewed as only one man participated. In a Swedish context, this is unsurprising, as social work is a highly gendered profession, and 85 per cent of professionals are women.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the interviewed social workers for their willingness to share their experiences with us.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

Funding

This work was supported by Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE). Grant number: STYA-2019/0004. Read more about the Structured cooperation for the prevent of stalkning and intimate partner violence (RISKSAM) project here: https://www.oru.se/english/research/researchprojects/rp/?rdb=p2079

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

References

Andrews, D. A., Bonta, J. and Wormith, J. S. (2006) 'The recent past and near future of risk and/or need assessment', *Crime & Delinquency*, **52**(1), pp. 7–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128705281756.

Andrews, D. A., Bonta, J. and Wormith, J. S. (2011) 'The risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model: Does adding the good lives model contribute to effective crime prevention', *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, **38**(7), pp. 735–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854811406356.

Ambrose-Miller, W. and Ashcroft, R. (2016) 'Challenges faced by social workers as members of interprofessional collaborative health care teams', *Health & Social Work*, **41**(2), pp. 101–9. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/hsw/hlw006.

Belfrage, H. and Strand, S. (2012) 'Measuring the outcome of structured spousal violence risk assessments using the B-SAFER: Risk in relation to recidivism and intervention', *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, **30**(4), pp. 420–30. DOI: 10.1002/bsl.2019.

Bell, K. M. and Naugle, A. E. (2008) 'Intimate partner violence theoretical considerations: Moving towards a contextual framework', *Clinical Psychology Review*, **28**(7), pp. 1096–107. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2008.03.003.

Bennett Cattaneo, L. and Goodman, L. A. (2005) 'Risk factors for reabuse in intimate partner violence A cross-disciplinary critical review', *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, **6**(2), pp. 141–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838005275088.

Bonta, J. and Andrews, D. A. (2017) *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, 6th edn, Abingdon, Routledge.

Bradbury-Jones, C., Appleton, J. V., Clark, M. and Paavilainen, E. (2019) 'A profile of gender-based violence research in Europe: Findings from a focused mapping review and synthesis', *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, **20**(4), pp. 470–83. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838017719234.

Carson, E., King, S. and Papatraianou, L. H. (2011) 'Resilience among social workers: The role of informal learning in the workplace', *Practice*, **23**(5), pp. 267–78. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2011.581361.

Cooper, L., Anaf, J. and Bowden, M. (2008) 'Can social workers and police be partners when dealing with bikie-gang-related domestic violence and sexual assault?', *European Journal of Social Work*, **11**(3), pp. 295–311. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691450701733317.

Council of Europe. (2011) *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210) (Istanbul Convention). [EU-konvention]*, Strasbourg, France, Council of Europe, 2022–01-02 från Full list (coe.int).

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

Davidson, G., Duffy, J., Barry, L., Curry, P., Darragh, E. and Lees, J. (2012) 'Championing the interface between mental health and child protection: Evaluation of a service initiative to improve joint working in Northern Ireland', *Child Abuse Review*, **21**(3), pp. 157–72.

Devlieghere, J. and Roose, R. (2018) 'A policy, management and practitioners' perspective on social work's rational turn: there are cracks at every level', *European Journal of Social Work*, **23**(1), pp. 144–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1460324.

Douglas, K. S. and Kropp, P. R. (2002) 'A prevention-based paradigm for violence risk assessment—clinical and research applications', *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, **29**(5), pp. 617–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/009385402236735.

EIGE—European Institute for Gender Equality. (2022) *Risk Management European Institute for Gender Equality (europa.eu) 2022-06-16*, Vilnius, Lithuania, European Institute for Gender Equality.

Eke, A. W., Hilton, N. Z., Meloy, J. R., Mohandie, K. and Williams, J. (2011) 'Predictors of recidivism by stalkers: A nine-year follow-up of police contacts', *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, **29**(2), pp. 271–83. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/bsl.975.

Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., Morris, K. and Warner, J. (2018) 'Let's stop feeding the risk monster: towards a social model of 'child protection'', *Families, Relationships and Societies*, **7**(1), pp. 07–22. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674316X14552878034622.

Fedina, L., Backes, B. L., Sulley, C., Wood, L. and Busch-Armendariz, N. (2020) 'Prevalence and sociodemographic factors associated with stalking victimization among college students', *Journal of American College Health*, **68**(6), pp. 624–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1583664.

Gaffney-Rhys, R. (2011) 'International law as an instrument to combat child marriage', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, **15**(3), pp. 359–73. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642980903315398.

Good Research Practice (2017) *Vetenskapsrådet, Sweden*. https://www.vr.se/download/18.2412c5311624176023d25b05/1555332112063/God-forskningssed_VR_2017.pdf.

Graneheim, U. H. and Lundman, B. (2004) 'Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: Concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness', *Nurse Education Today*, **24**(2), pp. 105–12.doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2003.10.001.

Heimer, M., Näsman, E. and Palme, J. (2018) 'Vulnerable children's rights to participants, protection, and provision: The process of defining the problem in Swedish child and family welfare', *Child & Family Social Work*, **23**(2), pp. 316–23. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12424.

Krippendorff, K. (2019) *Content Analysis. An Introduction to Its Methodology*, Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE.

Kropp, P. R., Hart, S. D. and Lyon, D. R. (2008a) *Guidelines for Stalking Assessment and Management (SAM) Manual*, Vancouver, Canada, Proactive Resolutions.

Kropp, P. R., Hart, S. D. and Belfrage, H. (2008b) *Bedömning av Risk För Upprepat Partnervåld (SARA:SV: Version 2). Användarmanual. In Sundsvall: Rättspsykiatriska Regionkliniken. [Swedish Translation of the Brief Spousal Assault Form of the Evaluation of Risk (B-SAFER). User Manual*, Sydney NSW, Proactive Resolutions.

Lalayants, M., Epstein, I. and Adamy, D. (2011) 'Multidisciplinary consultation in child protection: A clinical datamining evaluation', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, **20**(2), pp. 156–66. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2010.00741.x.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

Leonard, K. M. and Van Scotter, J. R. (2023) 'Management issues in police and social worker alliances: Using the lens of occupational culture', *Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management*, **23**(1), pp. 42–50. http://dx.doi.org/10.21818/001c.73645.

Liu, Y., L. Cooper, C. and Y. Tarba, S. (2019) 'Resilience, wellbeing and HRM: A multidisciplinary perspective', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, **30**(8), pp. 1227–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2019.1565370.

Logan, T. K. and Walker, R. (2017) 'Stalking: A multidimensional framework for assessment and safety planning', *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, **18**(2), pp. 200–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838015603210.

Masten, A. S. (2001) 'Ordinary magic. Resilience processes in development', *The American Psychologist*, **56**(3), pp. 227–38. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.227.

Matos, M., Grangeia, H., Ferreira, C., Azevedo, V., Gonçalves, M. and Sheridan, L. (2019) 'Stalking victimization in Portugal: Prevalence, characteristics, and impact', *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, **57**, 103–15. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2019.03.005.

McFadden, P., Mallett, J., Campbell, A. and Taylor, B. (2015) 'Resilience and burnout in child protection social work: Individual and organisational themes from a systematic literature review', *British Journal of Social Work*, **45**(5), pp. 1546–63. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct210.

McFadden, P., Mallett, J., Campbell, A. and Taylor, B. (2019) 'Explaining self-reported resilience in child-protection social work: The role of organisational factors, demographic information and job characteristics', *The British Journal of Social Work*, **49**(1), pp. 198–216. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1093/bjsw/bcy015.

Meloy, R. J. and Hoffmann, J. (2021) *International Handbook of Threat Assessment*, Oxford, Oxford University Press Inc. ISBN: 9780190940164.

Monahan, J. (1984) 'The prediction of violent behavior: Toward a second generation of theory and policy', *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, **141**(1), pp. 10–5. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1176/ajp.141.1.10.

Morse, J. M. (1995) 'The significance of saturation', *Qualitative Health Research*, **5**(2), pp. 147–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/104973239500500201.

Oskarsson, S. and Strand, S. J. (2023) 'Intimate partner violence in same-sex relationships', in Shackelford, T. K. (ed), *Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence*, Switzerland, Springer Nature Switzerland AG. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85493-5_641-1.

Olsson, H. and Bergman, A. (2022) 'From silence to recognition: Swedish social services and the handling of honor-based violence', *European Journal of Social Work*, **25**(2), pp. 198–209. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.1882395.

Otto, R. K. and Douglas, K. S. (2010) *Handbook of Violence Risk Assessment*, New York, NY, Routledge.

Petersson, J. and Thunberg, S. (2022) 'Vulnerability factors among women victimized by intimate partner violence and the presence of children', *Journal of Family Violence*, **37**(7), pp. 1057–69. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-021-00328-8.

Ponnert, L. and Svensson, K. (2016) 'Standardisation—the end of professional discretion', *European Journal of Social Work*, **19**(3–4), pp. 586–99. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2015.1074551.

Robbins, R., McLaughlin, H., Banks, C., Bellamy, C. and Thackray, D. (2014) 'Domestic violence and multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs): A scoping review', *The Journal of Adult Protection*, **16**(6), pp. 389–98. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JAP-03-2014-0012.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026

Rosenfeld, B., Galietta, M., Foellmi, M., Coupland, S., Turner, Z., Stern, S., Wijetunga, C., Gerbrandij, J. and Ivanoff, A. (2019) 'Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) for the treatment of stalking offenders: A randomized controlled study', *Law and Human Behavior*, **43**(4), pp. 319–28. https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000336.

Rumping, S., Boendermaker, L. and de Ruyter, D. J. (2019) 'Stimulating inter-disciplinary collaboration among youth social workers: A scoping review', *Health & Social Care in the Community*, **27**(2), pp. 293–305. https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12589.

SafeLives. (2014) 'Frequently Asked Questions Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) [Online-document]', available online at: https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/MARAC%20FAQs%20General%20FINAL.pdf.

Storey, J. E. and Strand, S. (2013) 'Assessing violence risk among female IPV perpetrators: An examination of the B-SAFER', *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, **22**(9), pp. 964–80. DOI: 10.1080/10926771.2013.835015.

Sundell, K. and Olsson, T. (2021) 'Swedish Effect Evaluations of Behavioral, Psychological and Social Interventions 1990–2019'. Forte, the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare, available online at: https://forte.se/app/uploads/2021/04/fort-0035-rapport-effektutvarderingar_ta.pdf.

Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare. (2011) *Swedish and International Research on the Effects of Social Interventions*, Stockholm, Sweden, Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, ISBN 978-91-86885-12-0.

Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare. (2014) *Manual for FREDA Standardized Assessment Methods for the Social Services' Work against Violence in Close Relationships*, Stockholm, Sweden, Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, ISBN 978-91-7555-189-0.

Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare. (2022) *The Joint Constitutional Collection Regarding Healthcare, Social Services, Pharmaceuticals, Public Health, etc.* (HSLF-FS 2022:39), Stockholm, Sweden, Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare.

Ungar, M., Theron, L., Liebenberg, L., Tian, G. X., Restrepo, A., Sanders, J., Munford, R. and Russell, S. (2015) 'Patterns of individual coping, engagement with social supports and use of formal services among a five-country sample of resilient youth', *Global Mental Health*, **2**(21), pp. 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2015.19.

Ward-Lasher, A., Messing, J. T. and Bill Hart, B. (2017) 'Policing intimate partner violence: Attitudes toward risk assessment and collaboration with social workers', *Social Work*, **62**(3), pp. 211–8. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/sw/swx023.

Weiss-Gal, I. and Gal, J. (2008) 'Social workers and policy-practice: The role of social and professional values', *Journal of Social Service Research*, **34**(4), pp. 15–27. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01488370802162301.

World Health Organization. (2021) 'Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: Global, Regional and National Prevalence Estimates for Intimate Partner Violence against Women and Global and Regional Prevalence Estimates for Non-partner Sexual Violence against Women', available online at: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240022256.

Viljoen, J. L., Cochrane, D. M. and Jonnson, M. R. (2018) 'Do risk assessment tools help manage and reduce risk of violence and reoffending? A systematic review', *Law and Human Behavior*, **42**(3), pp. 181–214. https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000280.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/54/2/704/7425589 by guest on 22 October 2026