

# PRACTITIONERS' VIEWPOINTS ON SOCIO-LEGAL INTERVENTION IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

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In the Province of Québec, as in other Western states (Breckenridge, Rees, Valentine and Murray, 2015), the preferred approach in the fight against intimate partner violence (IPV) requires both psychosocial and legal actions on the part of numerous actors. In *la Politique d'intervention en matière de violence conjugale* (IPV intervention policy, Gouvernement du Québec, 1995), this approach is qualified as "socio-legal". It is rooted, on the one hand, in the social recognition of the criminal nature of the violent acts perpetrated by intimate partners (Buzawa, Buzawa and Stark, 2012; Gouvernement du Québec, 1995). And it is explained, on the other hand, by the complexity of situations involving intimate partner violence, where no one service is able to respond to all of the needs of the persons who are confronted with this problem. Despite the recognition of this approach in responding to IPV, few papers in Québec have focused on this type of intervention. Those that have done so have made it possible to identify certain specific practices, to draw up their portrait and, for some, to report on their development and implementation. They do not however allow us to take a more general view of socio-legal intervention.

To make up for this gap, we conducted a study to acquire an overview of the practices and contexts that were found in socio-legal IPV interventions in a given region in Québec based on the representations of experienced practitioners.<sup>1</sup> This study helped us to identify the practitioners' viewpoints about how the psychosocial aspects in this field aligned with the legal aspects, and how collaboration took place. The goal of the present study was to summarize these perceptions, and thereby add to the available data on the effects of this type of intervention and highlight the factors that contribute to or detract from its success.

<sup>1</sup> Given the strong representation of women in the field of IPV intervention, the feminine is used as the neutral gender in this study summary.

## Methodology

Based on a single case study approach<sup>2</sup>, this qualitative study was conducted in one of the 17 administrative regions of the Province of Québec.<sup>3</sup> The information source used to collect data on this case was interviews with practitioners who were recognized for their professional experience in socio-legal IPV intervention. Thirty-seven semi-structured individual interviews were conducted in 2015-2016 with practitioners from 10 types of organizations responding to IPV. The results reported in this paper stemmed from the practitioners' answers to the following questions:

1

How do the social and legal aspects fit together (or not) in your profession?

2

What do you think of the professional relationships between the various practitioners involved in socio-legal IPV intervention?

Interviews were analysed with content analysis strategies, such as first level coding, thematic coding, and comparison matrices (Miles and Huberman, 2003). These analyses and their results were interpreted through the theoretical framework of professional representations (Blin, 1997) and pragmatic constructivist epistemology (von Glasersfeld, 2004). For the analyses, we divided the interviewed practitioners into three subgroups corresponding to their own representations of themselves and of the others participants, namely legal,<sup>4</sup> psychosocial,<sup>5</sup> and socio-legal workers.<sup>6</sup>

SEMI-STRUCTURED  
**37** individual  
interviews

**2015-2016**

**10** TYPES  
of organizations

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- 2 A research method consisting in the intensive analysis of a single unit. In the present case, this was an administrative region in the Province of Québec that was examined with a view to understanding a particular phenomenon (Gagnon, 2012).
- 3 So as to preserve the confidentiality of the people who participated in the study, the identity of this region is kept confidential. It is worth noting nonetheless that the selected administrative region had both an urban and rural zone so that the study would cover the two contexts.
- 4 That is, judges, defence lawyers, and the police.
- 5 That is, psychosocial practitioners from CLSCs (community health-care centres), youth centres, women's shelters, and organizations for violent partners.
- 6 That is, practitioners from CAVACs (crime victims assistance centres), community residential centres, and probation officers.

## RESULTS

### The contribution of a socio-legal approach to IPV intervention

To begin with, close to half of the sample reported having a **better understanding of the various aspects** of social-legal interventions in IPV due to the combining of psychosocial and legal approaches in their practices. The legal practitioners mentioned that adopting more of a psychosocial perspective in their IPV work in the judicial system led to a better understanding of the situations encountered in the field. Psychosocial practitioners, especially those who practice in youth centres, stated that the passing on of information from other actors, particularly from the police, was essential to understanding situations and consequently led to more suitable assessments and interventions. The same was true for socio-legal practitioners, of whom two thirds mentioned that their professional collaboration helped to increase their understanding and skills. This increased expertise referred in particular to available services and resources.

Secondly, close to half the people we met with, primarily psychosocial practitioners, reported being **more effective in their interventions** due to the combination of psychosocial and legal aspects in their response to IPV. Close to one third of the legal practitioners also mentioned that the professional collaborations and references increased the access to aid services for people experiencing IPV.

A third aspect of the socio-legal intervention about which the participants had positive comments was the **proximity and frequent contacts** that were thus created between certain organizations and actors. Indeed, close to one quarter of the participants mentioned that this proximity was advantageous in that it permitted discussions about different intervention methods and consultation between actors.

Finally, for some of the practitioners we met with, the combination between psychosocial and judicial approaches was both complementary and necessary, in particular to protect the victims. From this perspective, the participants' representations were primarily focused on the fact that each actor had a different role and "hat," and that each one was essential. The complementary nature of these roles was mentioned in particular by the legal actors regarding the contribution of the psychosocial approach to IPV work. This approach helped legal practitioners to accompany people through the judicial system, which was an aspect of the intervention that was more difficult for them to conduct:

“ These aid services, like the CAVAC and YPS, they make our work much easier, I'm sure of that. They complement it too. In my opinion, the one can't function without the other. (Interview 21, police women) ”

For some of the practitioners we met with, the combination between psychosocial and judicial approaches was both complementary and necessary, in particular to protect the victims.

## The difficulties of a socio-legal approach to IPV intervention

It is noteworthy that, while certain collaborative relationships were considered to be more difficult, the practitioners did not consider this to be generally the case for all of their collaborations. Obstacles occurred most notably between practitioners from some of the women's shelters and the other organizations (community health-care centres, youth centres, organizations for violent partners). However, these difficulties were only reported by practitioners working in an urban setting, whereas collaboration with the rural shelters was positively assessed by the practitioners concerned. As stated by one practitioner, the greater proximity between services in rural settings may have favoured better collaboration:

“ People coordinate their work with other people's work. It goes pretty well because everyone talks to each other. We don't send emails then letters. We're okay picking up the phone, stopping by at their work, saying, "Look, I have the victim with me, can you see us now?" We communicate well, we communicate a lot, and the services fit together really, really well. (Interview 10, women's shelter practitioner) ”

That being said, practitioners in women's shelters also reported having collaboration difficulties, in particular in their relationships with youth centre practitioners. One of the possible explanations for this difficulty might be the lack of knowledge or recognition of the specificities and expertise of some partners.

Recognition was moreover a theme noted by several participants even though no specific question on this topic was asked during the interviews. It was clearly an important theme for many of the practitioners. It was however difficult to acquire an overall view of the experiences of the different subgroups, since there was considerable individual variability across the whole range of the reported experiences involved. In terms of negative representations, more than a quarter of the participants felt they had to confront a lack of recognition or a poor understanding of their services from the other partners and actors involved in IPV interventions. In the case under study here, it was mostly practitioners working in community organizations who were faced with this challenge. The collected statements likewise revealed that some psychosocial practitioners felt they received little recognition from legal actors:

“ [...] crown attorneys and judges forget that women's shelters provide good support that is just as professional as any other organization, as any other community health-care centre. (Interview 3, women's shelter practitioner) ”

Finally, some other practitioners, particularly those working with violent partners, said that they felt marginalized by actors who were working with victims:

“ To sum it up, [...] we come up against a lot of marginalization from certain community organizations that work with women. Some of them marginalize us a lot. (Interview 11, practitioner from an organization working with violent partners) ”

These practitioners had the impression that they were not seen as being a part of the socio-legal interventions in IPV and even less so as potential collaborators. Lack of recognition of these actors might be explained by the fact that they were not always part of the other practitioners' representations of IPV.

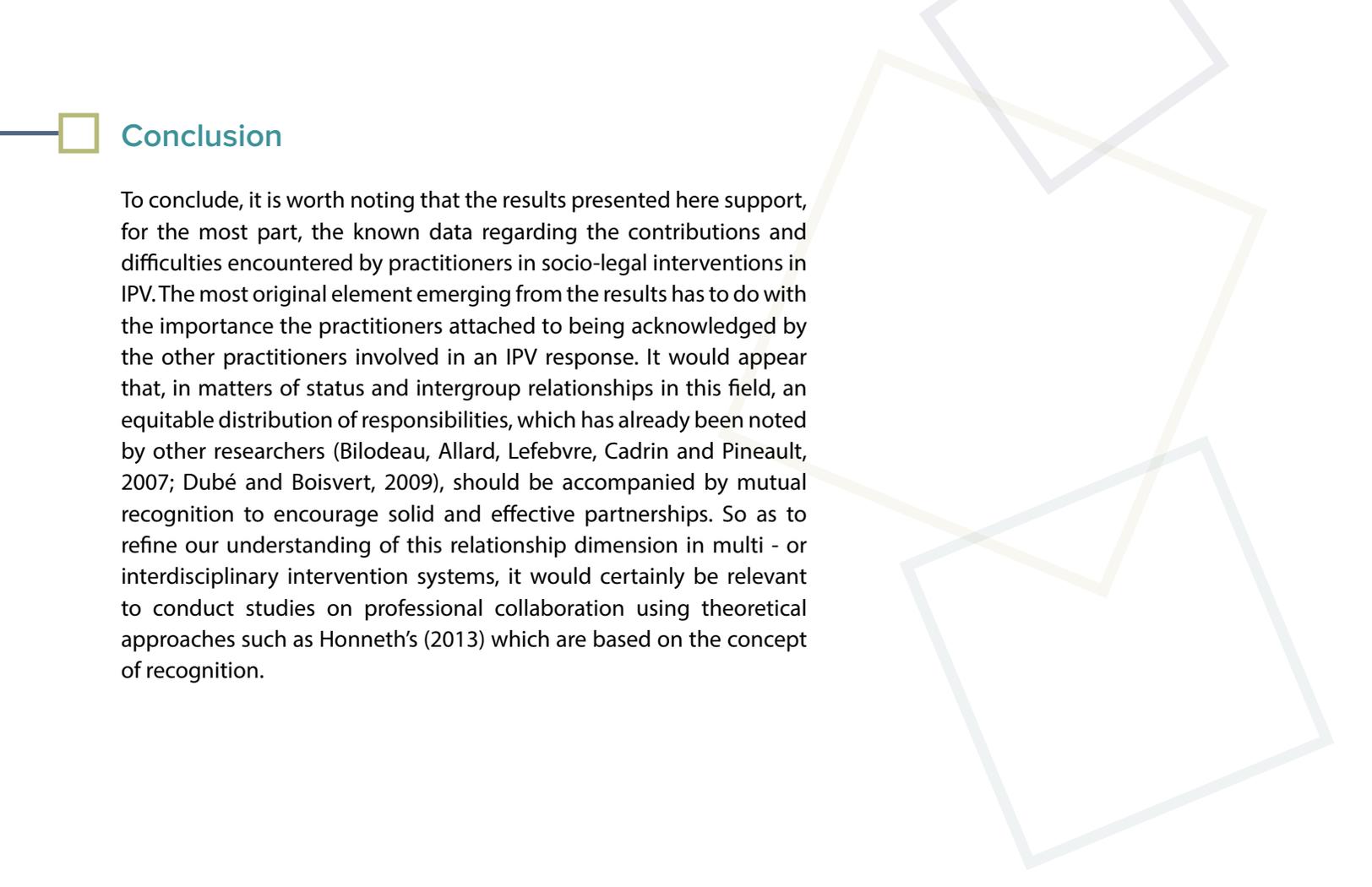
Another challenge in these professional collaborations was found in the misunderstanding concerning the differing analyses of the IPV situations. For some practitioners, especially those working in women's shelters, this difficulty in understanding the others can be explained primarily by a lack of understanding of IPV among certain actors, particularly legal practitioners, which hindered partnerships and interventions.

## Discussion

Generally speaking, it is worth noting that, as regards both the advantages of the socio-legal interventions reported by the participants and the more negative and difficult aspects, the results presented here are generally in agreement with those seen in the literature. Practitioners have mentioned that a better understanding of the services (Allens *et al.*, 2013), and of the intervention system in the community (Nowell and Foster-Fishman, 2011, quoted in Brekenridge *et al.*, 2015) and a greater mutual understanding between the partners (Sauvain, Anstett, Jacob, Morin and Lamari, 2014) constituted the main contributions of these interventions and collaborations.

On the other hand, it has likewise been reported that poor relationships between partners (Groulx, 2002; Malik, Ward and Janczewski, 2008; Rondeau, Sirois, Cantin and Roy, 2001; Wendt, 2010), a lack of knowledge of the other services (Groulx, 2002; Stanley, Miller, Foster and Thomson, 2011; Wentd, 2010) and varying understanding of IPV among the actors (Brekenridge *et al.*, 2015, Ritchie and Eby, 2005; Rondeau *et al.*, 2001; Wendt, 2010) are considered to be detrimental in this field of practice. Our results thus confirm the "bumps" that need to be flattened to maximize the gains and minimize the difficulties in socio-legal interventions.

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## Conclusion

To conclude, it is worth noting that the results presented here support, for the most part, the known data regarding the contributions and difficulties encountered by practitioners in socio-legal interventions in IPV. The most original element emerging from the results has to do with the importance the practitioners attached to being acknowledged by the other practitioners involved in an IPV response. It would appear that, in matters of status and intergroup relationships in this field, an equitable distribution of responsibilities, which has already been noted by other researchers (Bilodeau, Allard, Lefebvre, Cadrin and Pineault, 2007; Dubé and Boisvert, 2009), should be accompanied by mutual recognition to encourage solid and effective partnerships. So as to refine our understanding of this relationship dimension in multi - or interdisciplinary intervention systems, it would certainly be relevant to conduct studies on professional collaboration using theoretical approaches such as Honneth's (2013) which are based on the concept of recognition.

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