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Managing post-separation violence: mothers’ strategies and the challenges of receiving societal protection

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ABSTRACT
Given the profound consequences of post-separation violence on the well-being and quality of life of many women and children, protecting victims from further violence is a paramount concern. Understanding the complex challenges faced by women at risk for such violence is crucial for improving strategies for managing this risk and ensuring the safety of these women and children. In Sweden, access to society's protective interventions often relies on the women actively seeking them. The aim of this study was to analyse the process of protection against post-separation violence as described by women with children in Sweden. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with women who had experienced domestic violence and were assessed with low to moderate risk of revictimization. The interviews explored strategies they employed on their own and the risk management interventions they received. Through thematic analysis, we identified five themes: activating own safety strategies, seeking societal protection, utilizing societal protection, bridging gaps in societal protection, and resigning to live unprotected. Together, they form a process of protection characterized by mothers employing numerous strategies at different phases to safeguard themselves and their children, relying on their own initiative as well as the assistance offered by society. However, despite these efforts, some mothers and children remained unprotected and were obligated to resign to live with post-separation violence. This study underscores the extensive demands placed on women subjected to violence, despite the presence of relatively strong legal rights and a well-developed societal system.

Introduction
Domestic violence and post-separation violence are structural problems in society that primarily affects women and children. It can manifest in various forms including physical, sexual, economical and psychological violence such as coercive control tactics like stalking and emotional threats (Bruno 2017; Spearman, Hardesty, and Campbell 2023; Zeoli et al. 2013). While Hayes (2012) identified a decline in physical violence after separation, separation is one of the main risk factors for lethal violence against women (Jaffe et al. 2017).

Having children also entails further risks for women as it enables the perpetrator to use additional forms of violence in multiple settings. According to Tutty et al. (2023), the most prevalent form of post-separation violence experienced by mothers is demeaning of their mothering. This was also identified in Francia et al., (2020) were women described perpetrators humiliating them and demeaning their parenting to their children. Perpetrators also use societal institutions as
an extra setting to harm the women by employing various tactics, such as filing false reports, initiating trivial lawsuits, and deliberately prolonging court proceedings. Moreover, child custody disputes are common ways for perpetrators to engage in as a means to gain access to the children and, consequently, maintain power over the women (Spearman, Hardesty, and Campbell 2023). Joint custody or visitation orders often require ongoing contact, thereby enabling the violence to continue (Eriksson 2008; Laing 2017).

After separation, many perpetrators also subject their children to violence with intentions of gaining information about the woman or retaliate against her (Nikupeteri and Laitinen 2015). Studies have shown that children have been subjected to physical and sexual violence, harassments, lethal threats, and even domestic homicide (Francia, Millear, and Sharman 2020; Jaffe et al. 2017; Nikupeteri and Laitinen 2015). Maintaining contact between the child and the perpetrator can increase the risk of re-victimization for both women and their children.

The aim of this study is to analyse the process of protection against post-separation violence as described by women with children in Sweden.

Women’s protective strategies

To protect their children, women use different strategies. While still in the relationship, women often employ strategies to anticipate and prevent episodes of violence by closely monitoring their partners’ moods and behaviours, and they may modify their own behaviour to appease their partners (Lapierre 2010; Wendt, Buchanan, and Moulding 2015). To avoid triggering the perpetrator, they may also use strategies to ensure their children’s compliance and good behaviour. These tactics may also involve physical distancing of the children from violent situations and a proactive approach to prevent them from witnessing any visible signs of abuse such as bruises or injuries (Lapierre 2010; Levendosky, Lynch, and Graham-Bermann 2000). To protect the children from being subjected to violence, women may even confront the perpetrator’s behaviour directly and resort to violence themselves (Lapierre 2010).

While some of the strategies mentioned above are still used post-separation, women may also develop new ones that suit their new situation. After separation, women’s strategies may include establishing firm boundaries to limit interactions with their ex-partners (Zeoli et al. 2013), keeping information from him (Parker et al. 2015), safety plan with children (Laing, 2017) and engage informal and formal networks to gain protection from (Cheng et al. 2022, Laing,2017; Parker et al. 2015). These strategies are implemented to create physical and emotional distance from the perpetrator and to minimize the risk of revictimization.

Societal protection

In Sweden, the main authorities that can provide victims of DV and their children with protection are the social services, the child welfare services (often a specific unit within the social services that focuses on children) and the law enforcement. To improve the safety of women and their children, these authorities should assess the level of risk and propose interventions to manage and decrease the risk of violence. However, children are often overlooked, and risk management is typically directed towards the women and may entail offering DV shelters, safety planning, protection orders, alarm packages, or protection of personal information (European Institute for Gender Equality 2019; Heimer and Pettersson 2023; Kropp 2008). Although, it is important to note that access to these protective interventions often relies on the women actively seeking them and then receives the necessary protection for themselves and their children. Figure 1 illustrates how women and children subjected to DV should be able to gain protection, either by using own strategies or seeking and gaining societal protection.

However, in practice, society do not always succeed in protecting women and their children (The Swedish national Board of Health and Welfare 2022). Risk assessment has
been recognized as a valuable tool for professionals to understand the level of risk that victims and their children face and implement targeted risk management strategies that aim to prevent revictimization by addressing the specific risks and vulnerabilities identified through the assessment process (Belfrage and Strand 2012; Kropp 2008). If the risk of violence is high, women and children may need to relocate and hide to stay safe. However, when the risk is low or moderate, alternative methods of risk management can potentially offer protection without requiring relocation. The larger group of individuals seeking protection from the police consists of victims assessed with low to moderate risk of revictimization and within this group implementation of risk management strategies, such as protection orders, has been shown to reduce the risk (Strand 2012). Nevertheless, Belfrage and Strand (2012) quantitative study, revealed that the Swedish police often overlook cases with low to moderate risk, despite the relatively high rate of revictimization within this category (also see Storey et al. 2014). Although, it is important to note that relying solely on statistics derived from police reports may impose limitations when examining protection and revictimization, as women who have not experienced severe violence may be hesitant to involve law enforcement and instead seek alternative forms of protection (Frias 2013). By analysing the accounts of mothers at low to moderate risk of revictimization regarding their process of seeking protection, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of the specific protection requirements and various dimensions that must be addressed to safeguard both women and their children. This process encompasses women’s own efforts to protect themselves and their children, as well as societal interventions.

**Method**

The study is a part of the research programme RISKSAM, which seeks to investigate effective strategies for preventing DV and stalking and enhance the quality of life for the victims. Within the research programme, interviews were carried out with women who had previously experienced DV.

**Participants**

In this study, the participants were 17 women who had experienced DV, received risk management by social services, was assessed with low to moderate risk of revictimization and had children under the age of 18 living with them at that time. They had all been exposed to psychological and physical violence and some of the participants had also been exposed to sexual, material, and economic violence, and the violence varied in extent and over time. The participants had varying socio-economic backgrounds and had separated from the perpetrator one to five years ago. They had children with the perpetrator \( N = 15 \), or from a previous relationship \( N = 2 \) and had been in contact with social service \( N = 17 \), child welfare service \( N = 16 \), law enforcement \( N = 13 \) and family law services \( N = 10 \).
Procedure

The participants in the study were recruited through a DV unit within the social services in urban Sweden. This unit provides counselling to both victims and perpetrators. The counsellors asked women who met the criteria if they were interested to participate in the study and wanted to be contacted by the researchers. The women who agreed were then contacted by one of the researchers who provided them with information about the study and asked if they wanted to participate. The participants were offered a choice between physical, phone, or video call interviews. Written informed consent was obtained for all interviews prior to the interview along with information that they can withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences.

Seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the women’s perceived quality of life and strategies to handle and care for their and their children’s life and well-being. Twelve were face-to-face interviews conducted by one or two interviewers on the research team, while five interviews were held digitally or by phone. Each interview lasted between 65 to 160 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, and later analysed by the authors. A semi-structured interview guide was used and organized around seven distinct themes: Background; Relationships to the perpetrator; Risk assessment and Risk management; Safety and Well-being; Motherhood; Emotional and Practical support; and Future wishes. Examples of questions asked: Can you tell me about the risk management interventions you have received? Do you have any risk management strategies of your own? Do you know how social services and the police have worked with your case?

Data analysis

The transcribed interviews served as a foundation for our inductive analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. To extract meaningful insights, we employed a thematic analysis procedure to identify, analyse and present themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). The primary objective of this analysis was to discern patterns and themes within the data, ultimately addressing the aim and gaining a coherent understanding of the data.

Initially, the first and second author read through the interviews thoroughly in search of codes and themes that could help answer the aim of the study. Then all authors discussed the identified preliminary codes and themes. Thereupon, the first author used NVivo Software to conduct an open coding of each interview to identify segments or units that were meaningful in relation to the aim of the study, then categorized these under the preliminary themes. The coding focused on what was said rather than the meaning or interpretation of the text. The codes varied in length, ranging from individual sentences to entire paragraphs.

The authors then discussed the result of this coding and found that the identified themes did not adequately represent the richness of the data. Consequently, the codes and themes were simultaneously revised, and new ones were identified, and the first author re-coded the data in NVivo. Subsequently, all authors together carefully reviewed the codes and themes, resulting in some final minor revisions. Having identified and reached consensus on five core themes, the authors were satisfied and chose excerpts that best represented each theme with a variation of interviewees. The themes were then theorized into a process of protection or resignation.

Ethical considerations

The study strictly adhered to the guidelines of both The Swedish Research Council of Good Research Practice (2017) and how to process data (General Data Protection Regulation; GDPR). It has been approved by the Ethics Review Authority (Dnr 2021–05889–02). To protect the participants’ identities, names have been changed and cities have been anonymized.
Findings

Through the analysis, we identified five themes representing different ways in which the women’s individual efforts, and the societal protection contributed to safety for the women and their children. These themes were activating own safety strategies, seeking societal protection, utilizing societal protecting, bridging gaps in societal protection, and resigning to live unprotected. Together they form a process of protection characterized by mothers employing numerous strategies at different phases to safeguard themselves and their children, relying on their own initiative as well as the assistance offered by society such as the social services, child welfare services, police, DV shelters and family law. Not all women interviewed described all strategies, but most of them described several. However, despite these efforts, some women found themselves and their children unprotected and were obligated to resign to live with post-separation violence.

Activating own safety strategies

Most women employed a range of safety strategies to manage the violence on their own. These strategies involved devising plans for handling potential aggression from the perpetrator and being prepared to escape if necessary. The women attempted to reduce the risk of violence by limiting contact with the perpetrator, avoiding him whenever possible, and maintaining a safe physical distance when required to interact. They also described researching how to handle narcissists and modifying their behaviour according to it to prevent unintentionally triggering him. This included displaying confidence instead of fear, responding politely while still maintaining a certain distance, being friendly but firm, and concealing information that could potentially provoke him. Such information could involve details about loved ones babysitting the children or the woman's involvement with a new partner. ‘Lily’ described some of this as tiptoeing around the perpetrator.

If he sent a message and I tried to respond politely but still maintain a distance, but in a, well, in a friendly way. And when he wanted to give me things - he wanted to give me gifts and such, I tried to, instead of saying that... well, that he shouldn’t... well, it was more like 'well, I don’t need it. You can buy things for someone else. Buy it for... well, I don’t know, your family'. Yeah, but trying to frame it that way instead of being ungrateful, you know. I tried... Yeah, constantly tiptoeing around, so to speak. – Lily

In addition to behavioural adjustments, the women took steps to secure their homes. They changed locks, sealed mailboxes shut with tape, and kept curtains closed. When possible, they blocked the perpetrator from their own and their children’s phones, changed phone numbers, and updated passwords for various digital accounts to prevent him from accessing. These measures were aimed at creating a safer environment and limiting the perpetrator’s ability to track or reach them.

Women also developed safety plans or protective strategies in response to the perpetrator’s display of violent behaviour. These included threatening with police involvement or mobilizing their social networks to intervene by communicating with the perpetrator, physically remove him from the situation, or helping the woman to escape. ‘Emma’ explained how she utilized her connections to gather information about further protection in case it would be necessary without initially involving the social services.

I know a woman who works at the social services in another municipality. So, I have talked to her privately based on her professional role, about how domestic violence shelters works and similar matters. – Emma

By implementing these strategies, the women demonstrated a proactive approach to safeguarding themselves and their children without immediate involvement of authorities. However, when these strategies were insufficient, they turned to society for protection.
**Seeking societal protection**

The women actively sought protection through social services, child welfare service, police and family law. Their primary objective was to collaborate with these authorities by providing crucial information and emphasizing the gravity of the situation, ensuring that the authorities comprehended the risks and imminent threats that the women and their children faced.

Women reported incidence of reoccurring violence against, particularly when it was directed towards the children, and sought protection multiple times at different authorities in order to gain it. To demonstrate the severity of the situation and secure protection, the women actively assisted in the investigation process by providing authorities with information and evidence such as screenshots of text messages, emails, or journal entries. Additionally, they made child welfare and social service aware of siblings whose situation was not investigated or children above the age of 18 residing in the household. ‘Lisa’ illuminates the challenging nature of the situation she faced when getting in contact with child welfare services, but also underscores the importance to gain protection for the children.

I was so traumatized myself, and I was completely shattered, you know, my whole being. My whole head. I could barely think. But then, it was, this was to protect the children, so I knew I had to speak up. So, I told them everything, but I was also afraid that he would kill me. – Lisa

‘Lisa’ as well as other women recognized that the protection of her children required them to overcome their own distress and convey the gravity of the circumstances to the authorities. Although, after reporting the violence, many women felt that reports or investigations were not handled properly. Some individuals questioned their own communication skills and made efforts to adapt their communication approach by identifying the information that could be relevant to share depending on the different authorities. Women also advised professionals on actions they could take to gather further evidence. This could involve proposing home visits to the perpetrator’s residence, demanding drug tests from the perpetrator, or engaging with the children’s school/preschool or other professionals the family had been in contact with whom had knowledge of the violence. Women also sought support from their personal networks, particularly to provide child welfare services with insights and information about their circumstances. ‘Delila’ described that even after providing the child welfare service with information and advice, they failed to provide the children with protection. Thus, she contacted school staff who had witnessed injuries and received accounts from her son about violence occurring during visits with their father, aiming to facilitate communication with child welfare.

I have asked the school. I had a meeting with the school yesterday, my oldest son’s school. They told me ‘We can help you with a meeting with child welfare services. We schedule a meeting’. I said ‘I want to do everything possible’. – Delila

To ensure that the professionals, specifically at child welfare service, police, and family law, conducted thorough investigations, some of the women took notes after meetings and maintained regular contact to track the progress and ensure their cases were being properly handled. After the investigations concluded, they carefully reviewed the documentation and contacted the professionals when information was inaccurately presented. This included instances where information was omitted, misunderstandings occurred, or when the investigation included details from the women that could potentially trigger violence from the perpetrator. The intention with some of the information was to provide authorities with a comprehensive understanding of the situation but not for it to be included in the official investigation report the perpetrator would have access to. ‘Sofie’ explained that past miscommunications with authorities prompted her to take notes after meetings, which she then compared with the information presented in the investigation.

I was so afraid of what I said, how I conveyed myself, so after the conversations with [the family law secretaries], I sat down and wrote down what I remembered. […] How did it feel? What did I get - what I had noted down, I could see in theirs. So, I could relax a bit. – Sofie
By relaying on her own notes, she had a sense of control over the information presented in the investigation document. Nevertheless, several of the interviewed women reported that professionals from various authorities overlooked the violence during the investigation processes. Consequently, compelled to act and employ various strategies to secure some protection for themselves and their children.

**Utilizing societal protection**

Women who received protection primarily received it from social services that worked with adults. Thus, the interventions such as DV shelters and counselling were directed towards the women even though the children also were relocated to the shelter. Some described that the interventions did not address the unique circumstances of their family, and felt compelled to either accept and modify, or decline the interventions. Women who accepted to relocate to shelters did so due to a perceived threat to their safety or by pressure from child welfare services, which threatened to remove their children from their care if they did not relocate. However, some women chose to return to their homes shortly after moving to the shelter. The decision to leave the shelters was influenced by concerns about the negative impact on their children’s well-being, including disruptions from school and friends, as well as worries about employment and housing. ‘Alicia’ felt pressured to relocate and perceived a lack of support from social services and child welfare in helping her stay in her hometown and avoid losing her job and apartment.

After sitting [in the shelter] for a while, I thought, ‘Should I just sit here twiddling my thumbs while I lose everything at home?’ And then [the social worker] said something like, ‘Well, you’re not here… you’re here voluntarily, but if you go back home, we may consider that you’re not properly caring for [the daughter]’. Essentially, they meant ‘if you go back home, we will take your child’. So, I… well, I thought it was a bit unfair. Because they didn’t really come up with ideas for my return home or possibilities for me to come home, instead they wanted to provide me with protected identity and relocate me and [the daughter]. That seemed to be their only option. – Alicia

When dissatisfied with the relocation, they took matters into their own hands, either by receiving protection from family members or seeking and obtaining interventions from the police, enabling them to return home. However, it was very unusual to receive interventions from the police and most women described how the interventions were limited to shelters or counselling. Thus, when they did not wish to relocate, counselling was the intervention offered to them.

Women who received counselling were provided with advice and safety planning for them to protect themselves and their children. Some of these strategies, such as limiting contact or structure the contact visits, were already used by some of the women prior counselling, while others acquired them through the counselling sessions. ‘Delila’ described her struggles in attempting to limit the contact with the perpetrator, particularly challenging as he was the children’s father and they resided with him every other week, which he used to maintain control over her.

He has me in a tight grip because he knows that when the children are with him, all he has to do is call me and I will drop everything for my children. He lied to me and said, ‘Answer now!’ because they [the counselors] have told me, ‘He should take responsibility, you don’t need to answer when he has the children either’. But then he lied to me and said, ‘It’s about [the son], something has happened’. Then I call. – Delila

Other women described that breaking the contact with the perpetrator completely could trigger him and expose them to danger, so they attempted to gradually phase out the contact instead of severing it. However, some women expressed they had to advocate for their choices when their decisions deviated from the counsellor’s recommendations even when they had perceived it as safer. If the women needed more protection, they were informed about available resources for additional protection, such as child welfare services or the family law system, including legal professionals that could help during the family law proceedings. They also received guidance on when to involve the police due to the perpetrators behaviour.
Women sometimes perceived the protection as insufficient as it did not extend to their children or some of the situations they had to face as mothers. These women experienced that they and their children needed more protection to avoid revictimization.

**Bridging gaps in societal protection**

Women who experienced the offered protective interventions inadequate often faced ongoing violence and employed further strategies on their own in order to bridge these gaps. This meant they had to strive for sole custody, plan for their own security and in the worst case, leave their hometown. To ensure the safety of their children, they made safety plans with the children, instructing them to contact them if anything happened during visitations with their father. Women also told the children to avoid calling them while their father was present. In addition, they coordinated safety plans with their workplaces and their children’s schools or preschools. However, as ‘Sarah’ explained, joint custody posed a challenge when requesting the school or preschool to deny the father access to the children.

**Sarah:** The daycare staff is informed because there is a high risk that he will pick up [the daughter]! Just because-

**Interviewer:** So, is it an agreement that only you are allowed to pick her up?

**Sarah:** Yes, the problem is that we have joint custody. So, the next step now is for me to seek sole custody. – Sarah

In fact, joint custody and visitation hindered women to sever contact with the perpetrator and deny him access to the children, which was the advice they often received from social service and child welfare. To bridge this gap, women applied for sole custody and requested limited or no contact between the children and the perpetrator. However, some women experienced they had to compromise and agree to visitation arrangements in order to obtain sole custody even though they did not perceive it as safe. While sole custody granted them the ability to make decisions without the perpetrator’s involvement, they were still required to maintain contact regarding visitations. Women were often left to handle visitations on their own, even when social services and child welfare perceived the danger as high enough to recommend relocation to a shelter. This left the women and their children vulnerable and unprotected. Nevertheless, some women were able to exert control over the visitations by being allowed to choose if they would occur as well as where and when. ‘Patricia’ described how she arranged these meetings in public places to ensure the safety of both the children and herself.

He writes messages and wants to see the children. I say ‘Ok, you want to see the children’. He says ‘Ok’. [She then says] ‘Go to [the mall]. Sit in a cafeteria or McDonalds and I’ll come by with the children. Sit with them, be with them. Do not come to my house’. – Patricia

Although, visitations made it nearly impossible for women to protect themselves and their children, obtaining sole custody also provided an opportunity to move from the city the perpetrator resided in. A few of the interviewed women did so with the intention of escaping the violence or getting closer to loved ones, thereby securing themselves and their children. One of them explained that after numerous court proceedings, she and the children moved several hours away from the perpetrator. Even though the perpetrator had visitation rights, the court allowed the woman and her children to determine where contact visits should occur.
Well, he can come by and get the children and return them as their school is in [residing city]. So, I do not have any obligation to travel with the children [to the perpetrator] and the children do not have to do it. ‘So, if you want to, go to [residing city]’ and since then he has not contacted us. – Olivia

In this case, the perpetrator showed no interest in making the necessary travel for visitations, resulting in the violence ending. However, for most women, relocating to a different city and leaving loved ones, work, their children’s school or preschool, and their homes behind was not considered a viable or possible option.

Even though seeking sole custody could potentially improve the situation for women and children to some extent, it often requires that women had access to resources.

I have another friend who went through the same custody process. … a custody process that ended in visitation rights only, but she paid up to 60,000 SEK in attorney fees and is still paying it off. I believe that because I was going to (the lawyer) with what was relevant. … When I attended the meeting, we talked concisely; we didn’t discuss emotions and so on, which allowed me to bring my attorney fees down to 17,000 SEK even though it was a prolonged process over a year. – Sofie

Sofie had the advantage of understanding what information the lawyer needed, which helped her keep costs down. However, for women who lack this knowledge and do not have financial resources, legal fees can become a significant burden.

**Resigning to live unprotected**

Women and children who had not received sufficient societal protection and did not relocate found themselves vulnerable and unprotected. They expressed that they had exhausted all their own strategies, and without further assistance from society, they were unable to shield their children or themselves from ongoing violence. This was particularly apparent among women who had younger children with the perpetrator and were therefore forced to maintain contact with him. These women explained their attempts to seek additional protection from child welfare services but received none but advice to not leave the children with the perpetrator, even when there was a court order for visitations rights. In some instances, failure to comply with visitation orders would result in expensive fines or police returning the children to the perpetrator, making this advice impossible to follow. As already mentioned, most of these women were compelled to handle visitations independently and remain in continued contact with the perpetrator. ‘Lisa’ described how exhausting and hopeless this situation was.

I would do anything for my children, and I have done that. But under these circumstances, one becomes very burned out, tired, and hopeless. Hopeless because no matter what I do, no matter what I have done, there is no help. So, I am the one carrying everything. It’s only me carrying everything. Everything is my responsibility. – Lisa

Repeatedly seeking protection without receiving it left some of the women with the overwhelming perception that no assistance from society was adequate or available to them. As a result, they found themselves faced with the impossible task of protecting their children while simultaneously exposing them to the perpetrator, thereby placing both themselves and their children at risk. Trapped in this complex situation with no viable alternatives, they reluctantly accepted a life marked by violence.

**Discussion**

This study aimed to analyse the process of protection against post-separation violence as described by mothers exposed to such. The overall finding is that protecting themselves and their children puts extensive demands on women subjected to DV, even though Sweden has a relatively well-developed rights-based societal system for protection. We found that the different strategies women use is connected to potential phases constituting a theoretical process of protection.
Typically, women described that when they needed to protect themselves and their children from violence, they developed strategies like limiting contact with the perpetrator, making safety plans, and activating their social networks – trying to handle the threat without involving any authorities. These identified strategies reminisce those identified in previous research by, e.g. Parker et al. (2015) and Zeoli et al. (2013).

When their own strategies for protection were insufficient, they described seeking protection from society. Help-seeking strategies by women subjected to DV have been studied previously with a focus on the service they turn to and the response they receive from the professionals (Cheng et al. 2022). Our study contributes to this field of knowledge by also revealing that the help-seeking strategies may additionally include women’s active involvement in trying to make authorities recognize the severity of their situation and trying to control that authorities do their investigations thoroughly. The women was forced to act themselves due to professionals’ inadequate investigations and failure to recognize them and their children as victims of DV.

The societal protection they were offered was typically either a place at a DV shelter or counselling including safety planning. However, such interventions were often described as coming with costs. Similar to Fisher and Stylianou (2019) study, we found that the women confronted adverse repercussions stemming from residing at a shelter, such as a negative impact on their children’s well-being or financial situation. Living paycheck to paycheck and lacking a financial safety net made it difficult for women to leave their work or housing situations. This left some of them feeling as if they had no option but to move back home despite the potential risks of violence. Thus, being offered protection was not equivalent to being able to accept it. Their life situations as well as social and financial resources could hinder them from fully utilizing the potential benefits and protection provided by a DV shelter.

Women who did not relocate or moved back home were often offered safety planning in form of counselling. Safety planning and safety strategies can be successful if the women have the necessary prerequisite to follow these (Parker et al. 2015). However, some women in this study described the need to adapt the safety plans to suit their family’s situation. For example, limiting contact with the perpetrators was difficult in relation to joint custody or contact visits without further protection. In addition, there was an overall lack of risk management interventions by law enforcement among the women, which aligns with Belfrage and Stands results (Belfrage and Strand 2012) that low to moderate risk cases are often overlooked by the police. This indicates that law enforcement does not recognize women at low to moderate risk of re-victimization as vulnerable and in need of protection, and that less severe abuse may be tolerated.

The received protection was not always enough to protect women and their children from further violence. As a result, they tried to bridge these gaps by safety planning with their children, children’s school or preschool or their own work or applying for changes in the custody, residential or contact situation for the children. This phase often included contacting family law as they found that their own safety planning or the protective interventions they received from social services was not applicable due to custody or contact arrangements. As previous research has highlighted, the family law system plays a key role in protecting women and children from post-separation violence (Hester 2011). However, family law proceedings can be financially demanding, posing a barrier for women with limited financial and/or social resources. This highlights how class dynamics intersect with power.

Although, in line with the findings of Laing (2017) and Eriksson (2008), this study demonstrates that even though women pursued family law proceedings, it did not guarantee protection. Most perpetrators were granted court-ordered visits with the children, while the women received no support in managing these. This highlights the shortcomings of the family law system in addressing the victimization of both children and women. Eriksson (2008) underscores that when abused women attempt to challenge and reduce the power of the child’s father, they are also taking on the broader gender power dynamics within society. This presents a clear conflict with the Swedish family law system that perpetuating gender power
imbalances by often overlooking and inadequately addressing male violence and dominance over both children and women (see Knezevic et al. 2022; Swedish Gender Equality Agency 2022).

Court ordered visits also hindered protective interventions from social services. Abusive fathers that are allowed to maintain control over the children also retain power over the women, despite potential recognition and protective interventions from other actors. This exposes a power imbalance between the systems as well, where the family law system has the power to obstruct other systems efforts to safeguard women and children.

When the existing societal protection failed to address the women and children’s needs, and they were unable to bridge the gaps themselves, some entered a fifth phase, characterized by resignation and living without adequate protection. These women had typically experienced the second to fourth phases repeatedly. Each time they had to navigate between different authorities. For example, when the family law system couldn’t ensure protection through custody or contact decisions or restrictions, women often turned to child welfare agencies to safeguard their children. If this also proved ineffective, women and their children were left without protection, with no choice but to resign. This illustrates a societal pattern wherein violent men are allowed to exert power and abuse women and children, often without interventions from authorities that are supposed to protect them. It became evident that Figure 1 in the introduction was too simplistic to illustrate the complex process these women underwent. Instead, Figure 2 serves as a theoretical representation showing the diverse strategies employed by women during various phases of the process.

Taken together, many of the aspects identified in our study have previously been identified in other studies (Cheng et al. 2022; Hester 2011; Parker et al. 2015; Zeoli et al. 2013). However, this study contributes to the knowledge of women’s experiences of protection and resignation. It shows that women’s process to either protection or resignation can be understood as a process of phases that necessitates women’s active involvement and suggests that women employ diverse strategies in different phases which they adapt according to the specific challenges they face. The well-being and safety of their children, also influence women’s choices of safety strategies and their engagement with professional risk management interventions. Parker et al. (2015) emphasized that ‘it is important to understand the relationship between safety strategy use, strategy effectiveness, experience of violence, and perception of danger from IPV’. Our findings suggest that the presence of children also can be a motivating factor and a crucial consideration in shaping women’s decision-making processes regarding strategies, acceptance of interventions and the possibilities to apply interventions.

While certain women and children received protection during the first, third or fourth phase, others – primarily those who had children with the perpetrator – found themselves in the fifth phase, resigning and living unprotected. Consequently, it becomes apparent that societal protection cannot be taken for granted; it necessitates substantial resources and agency on the part of women to be recognized as victims deserving protection. Additionally, the victims social and financial
resources as well as society’s response (or lack of response) to men’s violence, further impact the possibilities for women and children to receive the protection they need.

**Implications for practice and policy**

Our findings carry implications for both practice and policy concerning women and children facing risk of post-separation violence. Firstly, our research can provide valuable insights to professionals regarding the challenges that women at risk of post-separation violence encounter when seeking protection for themselves and their children. By considering the actions of various authorities, the multifaceted aspects of women’s lives, and recognizing the proactive efforts women exert in seeking protection, professionals can better address their individual needs. For instance, safety planning can be enhanced by considering the addition of protection orders, which have previously demonstrated effectiveness in low to moderate risk cases (Strand 2012).

Secondly, our findings indicate that the process of seeking protection is a challenging task for victims, necessitating them to navigate through various authorities offering different protection possibilities. This process demands knowledge of which sources to approach and what specific information each authority or organization requires. This underscores the importance of professionals being sensitive to the needs of women who may also be struggling with trauma, mental health issues, cognitive or physical disabilities, addiction, or lack familiarity with societal and legal systems.

Thirdly, what the women describe during the phase of resignation resonates with Hester’s, 2011 Three Planet Model, which illustrates how different perspectives on domestic violence within the fields of social services working with adults, child protection, and family law hinder collaboration, ultimately leaving women and their children vulnerable. Our interviews feature numerous examples of family law compelling women to act counter to the advice and recommendations they receive from social services and child welfare. Consequently, our study suggests a pressing need for a family law system that aligns with, rather than obstructs, and supports risk management interventions implemented by other authorities.

Based on our findings, we recommend efforts to improve the accessibility and coordination among authorities involved in protecting women and children at risk of post-separation violence, even in cases where the risk may not be considered high. Policymakers should prioritize the development and implementation of comprehensive strategies that address the needs of domestic violence victims and their children.

**Limitations and suggestions for future research**

This study is not without limitations. First, in hindsight, it would have been insightful to conduct follow-up questions on specific themes from the interviews. One such theme concerns whether and under what circumstances the strategies employed in the different phases indeed served to protect the women and their children.

Second, due to our recruitment and inclusion criteria, our findings may not fully capture the experiences of women at a high risk of revictimization or women who did not receive any assistance from social services.

Consequently, we encourage future studies to address these questions but also to explore whether the strategies and phases identified in this study resonate with the experiences of women in diverse contexts, including rural and remote areas. Additionally, we encourage future research aimed at exploring children’s own strategies for protection against post-separation violence and studies assessing whether mandating perpetrators to seek help for their aggression can genuinely ensure the safety of women and children.
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