# Asking social work clients on routine about violence in close relationships. Why, how and with what results?

**Abstract**

Asking on routine to detect violence in close relationships is recommended by The National Board of Health and Welfare in Sweden. By detecting a situation in the present, social workers are thought to better address current needs and prevent future harm. Using as empirical material interviews with 16 social workers, the aim of this paper is to examine the experiences and perceptions among social work professionals, of such routine asking.

We found that social worker mostly receive stories about violence in the past. This result seems not to fit the framework of the question-centred approach to violence, but asking is still perceived as important, as it may “plant a seed”. We found limitations in the support and conflicting goals and roles, lack of cooperation between divisions, in particular a problem for mothers. This provides reasonable causes for not disclosing violence to social services. The challenges with violence is not solved by standardization and de-personalization, but rather by sufficient time to work properly with each case, handling its complexity, including post separation violence, social services conflicting goals and lack of resources. The analysis challenges the idea that disclosing violence to social services is a simple and straight forward path to emancipation.

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**Instruktion till läsare:**

Det här är ett tidigt utkast till en artikel i ett projekt om socialtjänstens arbete med att upptäcka och hantera våld i nära relation. Att det är ett tidigt utkast innebär att vissa delar är ofärdiga eller inte ens skrivna ännu (i punktform) att vissa citat inte är översatta/är lite ’mekaniskt’ översatta, att litteraturlistan inte är komplett etc. Hoppas på överseende med detta! Vi har inte bestämt vilken tidskrift den ska skickas till. Vi tar tacksamt emot alla sorters synpunkter på texten!

# Introduction

From previously viewed as a marginal issue for the social services, ‘violence in close relationships’ (VICR) is increasingly recognised as a field of professional social work and as an important area of expertise for social services (Lundberg 2018). The social services hold a statutory responsibility to investigate the needs of victims of violence and to provide adequate support, based on the client’s individual need of protection and help, including for example counselling and advise, housing, parental support, and facilitating contacts with voluntary associations, health care and other authorities (HSLF-FS 2022:39, kap 6).

Identifying VICR through direct questions from the welfare professional has become an important and widely promoted strategy in health care and social services, in Sweden as well as internationally (Goicolea et al 2023, García-Moreno et al, 2013; Sweet, 2014; Lundberg and Bergmark, 2018). The responsibility of social services to actively try to detect violence has been increasingly emphasised the last decade, and since 2022, all local social services in Sweden must have routines both for asking questions about exposure to violence and for identifying those using violence in close relationships (HSLF-FS 2022:39). The routines vary between municipalities, as well as their implementation, but the general intention is to ask all adult clients of the social services if they have been exposed to, or used, violence in close relationships, regardless of why they seek support (REF).

As the policy to routinely ask about violence is being implemented, questions arise as to how these routines are being interpreted, used, and experienced by social workers in practice. In their quantitative study of self-perceived competence among Swedish social workers to routinely ask about and deal with violence in close relationships, Lundberg and Bergmark (2018) found that many felt ill-equipped to ask about and handle such cases. While administrative routines for screening for exposure to violence were in place in most municipalities, only 43 per cent of the respondents – working in all areas of personal social services – said that they adhered to these in practice, indicating that implementing this routine in practice is difficult. Knowledge is lacking, however, on why social workers refrain from asking, how they use and experience routine questions about violence, what the outcome of asking may be, and how this practice affects and is affected by other dimensions of the social services’ support. While intended to improve the social services support to victims of violence and contribute to the prevention of further abuse, we have previously shown that the question-centred approach to violence in close relationships, as it is motivated and described in national policy, tends to assume that it is a sensitive issue, connected with shame and as something that clients will not bring up spontaneously. Our previous analysis shows that in the policies it is assumed that clients have a desire to tell if properly asked and encouraged by social workers and it is assumed that asking is a prerequisite for providing support and even as a preventive measure (Goicolea et al., 2023). However, how such issues are experiences by professionals in social services has not been explored.

Against this background, this paper aims to examine the experiences and perceptions among social work professionals, of asking about violence in close relationships on a routine basis. Based on individual and group interviews with 16 social workers, working in different divisions of the social services, in different municipalities, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. How do social workers understand the purpose of asking about violence? (alt. How do social workers make sense of asking?)
2. What type of responses do they receive from clients?
3. How do the social workers perceive the practice of asking and their possibility to support clients if violence is disclosed?

By analysing these questions, the study ultimately aims to contribute to improving the support provided to those exposed to gender-based violence.

# Previous research

Research conducted within healthcare shows that women may not consistently disclose experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) to professionals, even when asked directly (Edin and Högberg, 2002). Although women generally perceive inquiries about GBV by professionals positively, their responses are heavily influenced by the manner in which such questions are formulated, the professionals' reactions to their disclosures, and the subsequent support provided (Rhodes et al, 2007; Goicolea et al, 2022). Revealing ongoing violence to professionals is not always perceived as positive, particularly in cases where professionals exhibit judgmental attitudes and fail to provide the necessary support (Edin et al, 2010). The frequency and manner in which social workers inquire about GBV vary across regions, services, and individual practitioners in Sweden (Lundberg, 2018; Lundberg and Bergmark, 2018; NBHW, 2019). On a general level, Lundberg and Bergmark (2021) further found that those asking on routine, on average identified more cases of violence, particularly in social assistance (i.e. financial support).

In our previous policy analysis (Goicolea et al., 2023) we found that women’s possible suspicion against social services is touched upon but framed as irrational and thereby made unintelligible. Recent research however shows that social services and public institutions can worsen or enable post-separation abuse. Kjellberg's (2024) study showed that while women reported positive experiences of support from social workers in VICR units, they perceived social workers in the family law system, particularly in the context of child contact issues, as facilitating post-separation violence. Consequently, they expressed feelings of betrayal from these professionals.

Other studies also touch upon issues of custody and children and how that affects the social services work with violence in close relationships (Skoog Waller, 2022). As an important context, the Parental Code (SFS 1949:381) stipulates that children have the right to maintain close and positive relationships with both parents, a factor heavily considered in decisions regarding custody, residence, and visitation. However, a survey conducted by the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (2022) indicates that courts often overlook the impact of parental violence on a child's well-being and contact arrangements. Rather than prioritizing the effects of violence on cooperation between parents, courts tend to focus on cooperation difficulties as a greater concern, disregarding power imbalances resulting from violence. Despite research showing that children's recovery and access to trauma treatment are hindered by forced contact with abusive fathers (Broberg et al., 2011), the current practice persists. Furthermore, joint custody arrangements can expose women to post-separation violence from men, implicating authorities and social actors in perpetuating this cycle (Bruno, 2016, 2018; Hardesty & Ganong, 2006; Hayes, 2012).

Kjellberg (2023) has also done focus group interviews with social workers who identified structural and practical barriers hindering survivors from leaving abusers, but experienced limited possibilities to influence such barriers and instead focused on addressing emotional challenges. Also, providing comprehensive, long-term support for survivors is experienced as challenging, with support quality varying based on the provider. Women's shelters may offer more holistic support, considering both structural and emotional barriers, while social workers within other institutions might be constrained by limited resources and focus mainly on individual issues, potentially neglecting the broader social context of violence.

Various instruments and guidelines for asking about violence have been developed in countries such as Spain, Sweden, the UK, Australia, and the US to facilitate GBV inquiries across different public services in structured or less structured formats. While research examining barriers to the implementation of such recommendations exists, particularly within the healthcare sector, there is a lack of research that critically analyses social services "daring to ask" approach to GBV.

# Methodology

## Study setting

This study was carried out with social workers working in different parts of the municipal social services in Sweden. In Sweden, the social services have the responsibility to work with violence, in particular against women in close relationships. Besides the provision of support through the development of specialized VICR units and collaboration with other services, this responsibility also includes the detection of violence among clients coming to social services (Socialtjänstlag, 2001: 453). The binding regulations issued by Sweden’s National Board of Health and Welfare (xxx), state that social services are responsible for setting up their own routines for detecting violence, including routines on when and how it is appropriate to ask clients about their experience/use of violence ([NBHW, 2022](https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/view/journals/jgbv/7/3/article-p467.xml#CIT0034)). For this purpose, the National Board of Health and Welfare (xxx) has developed, and recommend, the tripartite screening instrument FREDA, that includes a short questionnaire for detecting violence, a risk assessment tool, and an extended questionnaire that can be used to gain a closer description of previous violence. Standardized questionnaires used for other areas, such as addiction and financial aid, to various extent, also include questions about violence.

In our experience, the term most frequently used in social services is ‘exposed to violence’ (sw: våldsutsatta) and ‘violence in close relationships’ (VICR) (sw: våld i nära relation) and consequently the terms we used when interviewing. While this de-gendered terminology seems standard, when talking about violence and their meetings with clients, the interviewees often referred to women being exposed to men’s violence and often corrected themselves when doing so (se Carbin, 2021 for elaborations on this matter).

* Briefly describe organisation of support and how it can differ, family law units, VINR units, assessment and support.

## Data collection and analysis

For recruiting potential participants, we presented the study to our four reference groups with regional development and research coordinators, who distributed the information to the managers within the municipal social services (March 2023). We thereafter announced the study in social media, specifically in two large national discussion groups for social workers (April 2023). We also spread the information through personal contacts and used snowballing, asking previous participants to spread the information among other potential participants.

From March 2023 to February 2024, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 social workers (one was a group interview with 4 participants) working in different areas of the social services, including: economic support, child and youth, family support, addiction, social emergencies (sw: socialjouren), centres and units specialized in violence, and management. Participants worked in 11 different municipalities located in 7 regions. Their ages ranged from 29 to 72, and they had between 5,5 and 21 years of experience working within social services. Five experienced qualitative researchers conducted the interviews, all of them via Zoom or phone. The interview guides included questions about their work with violence, with a particular focus on detecting and asking about violence: how they experienced and perceived asking, what types of violence were discovered, advantages and disadvantages with asking, what responses were offered to those who disclosed violence and suggestions for their future work. The interviews were recorded and lasted between 38 and 92 min.

The analysis was inspired by Braun & Clarke’s (2006; 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. We transcribed the interviews verbatim and each of us read all the interviews several times, taking notes of relevant aspects related to the research questions and coding parts of the interviews that corresponded to the aim. Afterwards the team met to share and discuss each other’s written impressions and to develop a preliminary set of four themes. Each researcher took one of the themes, went back to the transcripts and produced a first report of each theme including several quotes from the material. Bringing the four themes together, the team took turns to revise and discuss the written themes until the final structure of the results was agreed upon.

## Ethics

Each participant consented to participate after receiving and reading an informed consent form sent by email, in which the objectives of the study were explained, principles regarding confidentiality and termination of their participation, as well as the reason for the interview. The project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (dnr. 2021-06011-01).

# Findings

We describe and discuss in the following the participants experiences and perceptions about routine questions about violence and their ability to support clients exposed to violence. The findings are divided into four themes, examining 1. perceptions of the use and purpose of standardized instruments and routine questions, 2. clients’ responses to routine questions, 3. social workers readiness and perceived possibilities to help, and 4. how asking about and identifying clients exposed to violence is affected by the social services’ other roles and responsibilities, such as child protection and the newly assigned task to identify and work with perpetrators.

## Theme 1: The use of standardized instruments and asking on routine

The interviewed social workers are overall very positive towards asking all clients on a routine basis whether they have experienced some form of violence, even if they seek support in another matter. The participants describe several positive effects and motivations for doing so, apart from the stated policy aim of detecting ongoing violence in close relationships. In this first theme, we analyse how the social workers perceive the relevance and motivations for asking about violence on routine in general, and their experiences of doing so, using standardised questionnaires in particular.

### Routine questions make VICR a natural part of the everyday practice

According to the participants, an important motivation for routine questions, regardless of whether these follow a standardised questionnaire or not, is that having a routine does not require the social worker to remember asking and thus strengthens the awareness about violence in close relationships and their confidence and readiness to deal with such issues. Participant 7 said:

If you are used to asking, then you are also always prepared, if you know how to handle the answers. Compared to not asking regularly, then you have to rethink, "okay, what if she says yes, what do I do?" Then you have to dig up some routine for how to do it, because you don't have it in your spinal cord. So yes, no, I think it's better to ask anyway, to always ask.

Jag tänker så här att det har väl varit en lättnad att vi ändå har de här frågorna och hur vi har underlaget på hur … vad tänker vi på innan mötet, vad tänker vi på under och efter mötet. Att man har svaret framför sig redan, hur vi ska gå tillväga och att man inte själv behöver tänka på det inför varje möte (5)

Det blir liksom en del i rutinen när det förs in i en rutin. Alltså, det blir en naturlig del i att möta folk och att de får den frågan, så kommer det liksom naturligt efter ett tag. Man arbetar in det. Så det tycker jag väl är bra. (3)

If the question is always asked, the social worker is more (mentally) prepared when violence actually is disclosed. As participant 11 said “En del av syftet är just att det blir samma frågor, det blir ett naturligt sätt att ställa frågan.” Asking everyone can also contribute to making VICR a “natural” topic for the social services, several participants advocated for asking all or asking regardless of division:

Jag är förespråkare för att socialtjänsten och alla andra samarbetspartner ska använda FREDA-kortfrågor, som egentligen jag tycker är lite tunna och lite intetsägande. Jag tycker inte de är de bästa, men det är ändå ett sätt för att få hjälp att komma i gång och fråga om det. (4)

One of the mostrepeated advantages of asking on routine was that it removes bias, and as a consequence makes asking more uniform – which gets equated with more equitable. Participant 7 said regarding units which does not ask everyone: “I think that it is more common to ask when there is substance abuse or mental illness. When everything seems fine on the surface, at first glance, then I don't think you ask.” (7). Hence, participants argue that when everyone gets the question and all get the same questions, it excludes the bias of the social worker, who, for example, may ask based on prejudices.

When asking becomes a routine it is argued to become less dependent on the willingness and bias of the social worker, and so it makes it harder to skip. Routine questions hence become a way of keeping social workers alert to violence, forcing them to be prepared, but also claiming organizational space for the issue, making violence a recognized and natural part of social work practice and expertise (cf. REF A new area of expertise… )

### Routine questions as “planting a seed” and continuing to ask

As developed in theme 2 below, our findings indicate that clients who seek support from the social services in another matter, rarely disclose exposure to ongoing violence spontaneously, when asked the first time. Despite this, several interview participants emphasise the importance of asking as “planting a seed”, participant 2 said:

Och det är jättebra att man frågar alla, för många som har varit utsatt för våld tidigare, länge tillbaka, kan i samtal med oss säga ”men det var ingen som frågade. Jag visade signaler på olika sätt, men det var ingen som frågade.” (…) Och så kanske det sår någonting, och man är redo att berätta om en månad eller om ett år, (2)

Jag tycker att det är jättebra. Jag tänker att det visar på att så här … Även fast klienten i fråga säger nej, så vet klienten om att det … hit kan man vända sig till om det är så att man blir utsatt. Och att så här … Ja, många vågar inte berätta själva, så om man får frågan ställd till sig så kanske det är enklare att antingen här och nu eller någon gång i framtiden våga berätta (12)

Generella frågor blir väldigt bra i såna här sammanhang, och att man kan våga komma tillbaka. Om man inte vågar första gången så kan man komma tillbaka senare. (4)

When asked if routine questions make any difference, participant 9 says:

Det är svårt att säga om det gör någon skillnad, men jag tänker ändå att det blir ... man gör det än mer pratbart, så att någon liten vikt har det ändå, tänker jag. Jag skulle inte vilja att man inte ställer frågan, jag tycker att det är viktigt att man öppnar den dörren (9)

As seen above, several participants touch upon issues of “planting a seed”, opening the door or making something speakable, and this stands out as the most important possible effect of routine questions, according to the social workers. By asking about exposure to violence, the social workers hope they signal that they (or others in the social services) can help, if the client wants or needs support later on. Planting a seed can also entail to explain what violence can mean, participants 5 said:

Det känns bättre för vi fångar upp fler. Inte bara där man kanske misstänker eller har en tanke om att det kan finnas våld, utan det är även att man kanske sår ett litet frö hos de som kanske inte ens tänker på att det är våld. För att i samband med att vi ställer frågan så pratar vi även om vad våld är för någonting, så vi kan fånga många fler än innan. (5)

För att upptäcka våldet, att alla får en chans att berätta. Sen är det också en fördel att se sambandet när man frågar, att också upplysa om olika typer av våld. Många har inte insikt vad folk faktiskt … hur brett det är. Så att i ett informativt syfte är det också en fördel att man får chans att utnyttja det. (6)

Especially for other expressions of violence than assault, the participants mentions that routine questioning can plant a seed of how psychological, economic, or sexual abuse is ‘in fact’ violence and a chance to inform the client about what the social services can do to help.

Asking as a routine, in all areas of the social services, can also increase the number of times a client is asked about violence

Fördelarna är ju att de personer som träffar socialtjänsten kommer få frågan vid flera tillfällen. Det är ganska sällan man svarar ja, och berättar allt första gången man får frågan. Men om man bara frågar om det finns misstanke, då kanske de bara får frågan en gång också. Och eftersom de flesta skulle svara nej första gången de får frågan kommer vi nog att missa det. Det tror jag. Det är bättre att fråga för mycket än för lite. (7)

Asking too often is better than asking too seldom and the idea is that asking several times will increase the likelihood that the client eventually will disclose exposure to violence. Nr5 says: if you “systematically ask questions, then eventually one dares to tell”, “when that person is ready”. (5). This is similar to Nr4 who replied: “you may need to ask more than once before they dare to tell” and explains that it is because “you’re so normalized, you don’t always realize that this is violence”. So, apparently, social workers keep on asking even if they do not expect the client to disclose violence right away. According to the social workers, he primary motivation for routine asking is not however that it directly increases the number of identified cases of ongoing violence. Rather, the question is perceived as positive because it invites the clients to seek support later on, when they are ready or when they realize what they have experienced, and because the routine in itself is perceived to strengthen the social workers preparedness to deal with issues concerning violence, as we will also get back to in theme 3.

### Asking on routine with standardized instruments

Participants articulated that it was positive not just having a routine to ask, but also a standard for *how* to ask; there were several advantages mentioned with using instruments for asking versus not using them, both for the social worker and for the client.

First, instruments help people remember. Instruments help putting violence ‘*in the back of social workers’ minds’ (6)*, making it less likely to forget things. Even if there may be limitations with instruments like FREDA, as one of the participants argued, it is still ‘*more than I can keep in my head’*:

 And then I think there is a lot to develop in Freda, for example. The sexual vulnerability is very little asked about, the context of honour is like nothing. So there is a lot to develop. /.../ There's more there than I have in my head to pick out right away, so I think it's better than nothing, absolutely. Then you have to supplement, there are several other methods to use (7).

For the clients, the use of instruments was perceived also as helping them remember. Through this help to remember, instruments were perceived as relieving the responsibility from clients to tell spontaneously, and as contributing to equity through providing everyone a chance to tell. Moreover, instruments like FREDA were perceived as offering an opportunity to speak, offering a frame of what can be spoken about:

The description is those who find it difficult to put it into words, or something like this: "I don't really know what has happened." Then going through FREDA can be helpful as a basis for conversation. But most of the time we get all that and even more out in our normal conversations. But sometimes when you don't get further, it becomes like a supplement.[…] If you use it as a supplement, at least with us, then I don't think there will be any disadvantage. But it can be an advantage precisely on the basis that those who find it difficult to put into words and remember what has happened to them. Then you can get help remembering the description (4)

Second, the ‘physicality’ of instruments like FREDA and the claims that they are used for everyone, makes the question seem more ‘objective’ and hence easier to pose and to receive:

Having the standardized ones can be quite disarming so that you pull out a piece of paper and it's very clear that this is not something that I'm just making up, but we have this paper, and we have this routine. And that's a huge advantage, and it's also an advantage to have them because then you know you're not missing anything. It can be easy when you are sitting in a conversation, that something just disappears. (6)

That all clients are asked the same questions can also be an argument used in the encounter with the client:

Där jag tänker att standardiseringen är till stor hjälp, jaja det här frågar vi alla, vet du, både Ahmed och Lisa och Fatima, alla får den här frågan. Vi måste fråga alla, att man försöker avdramatisera (1)

Och det är det som är fördelen också med generella frågor, att man verkligen betonar att “jag har träffat så många som har varit det, och därför frågar jag alla numera.” (4)

For social workers, standardisation provides a sense of security, of knowing what to do before, during and after the meeting. For the clients, the social workers argue, asking questions in this standardized way is perceived as less personal and as a result prevent them from feeling that they are singled out; instruments make the questions ‘disarming’. As developed below, a degree of personalization and adaptation is desirable, but above, not demanding social workers to remeber, and here, making things less personal, as instruments and standards allow, was also considered as easing people to disclose violence.

### Asking on routine, but not mechanically - keeping the balance between standardization and gut feeling

Participants perceived that asking about violence required to keep a difficult balance between asking the same broad questions to every client in a standardized way to avoid bias and increase the chances of detecting any type of current or past violence, while at the same time doing it as an individualized practice, where the social worker needs to use their own expertise and experience to adapt the questions to the specific circumstances of each client.

And then of course, you have to choose your opportunity, you can't ask just for the sake of asking, you also have to feel that it's appropriate. (7)

[…] sometimes it's a gut feeling […] but what's to say that that feeling is right or not? So, what I spontaneously think is that we need to get better at asking everyone the same things. And ASI is part of that. But we don't do ASI on all cases, because it could be that they have such mental difficulties or that there are other circumstances that make it so that this person does not have the ability to sit down like that for a long time and answer all these questions. And then they should not be lost simply because they are not asked questions according to a standard form (11)

In the previous quote, ASI is mentioned as an instrument to guide the asking; FREDA was another instrument mentioned, and widely used in social services. However, many participants emphasised that instruments or routine asking should not be used mechanically. Social workers do and should adapt the existing instruments depending on their knowledge, experience, and the client they have in front of them and their circumstances.

While some participants emphasises that social workers have to be unbiased when asking so that they don’t miss out, or question their gut feeling: “ibland är det magkänsla och sånt, och bara, men vad är det som säger att den känslan stämmer eller inte” (11), at the same time they have to ‘*use themselves’ (1)* or trust the “gut feeling”, participants 5a said:

Man kan få en magkänsla i vissa ärenden, att man misstänker att någon är utsatt för våld. Då försöker man ställa in… Då kanske man inte ställer Freda kortfrågor, man kanske försöker lirka fram det på något sätt.

Nr 9 also mentioned using the gut feeling and when asked what that means they said:

Man pratar om det med magkänsla att det är ett av våra bästa arbetsverktyg. Men vad är magkänsla? Det brukar vår psykolog säga som vi har jobbat med i handledning, “vad är magkänsla?” Det är beprövad erfarenhet av att man har träffat oerhört mycket människor, men det är också en stor, stor ryggsäck av teori. (9)

Participant 10 also emphasises professional experiences and how violence can be detected in different ways:

Det finns ingen blankett 1A, “så här går det till”, utan det är att använda öronen, höra vad de egentligen säger, och också konkret fråga rakt upp och ner, ”är du utsatt för våld?” Och då säger en del ”nej det är inte så farligt.” Eller om det kommer in via barnen. /.../ Så att förstå att jobbet tar tid. Jobbet går inte att skötas med … jag brukar säga enligt blankett 1A. Det finns fler, A-, B-, C-, D-, E-, F-, G-frågor, så att säga. Och att ge möjlighet att kunna göra … ställa de frågorna, då blir det ett bra socialt arbete. Och att inte glömma bort att göra hembesök. Det tappas bort mer och mer i dag. Hembesök säger väldigt mycket. Så skulle jag tänka. (10)

Hence, participants describe how they use several ways to identify violence, and as nr 10 above, others also mention kids as one “entry point”:

så fort vi får misstankar om att det kan vara barn som är våldsamma mot djur, det kan vara barn som är våldsamma mot kompisar eller mot sina föräldrar, eller man upplever att det är någon som tassar på tå. Så fort man märker någonting som antyder att det kan vara våld, då frågar vi om det. Men det är inte så att vid alla familjer lyfter det, för det ska redan vara lyft i utredningen. (8)

Om man lär sig att om man har två stycken i ett rum, och så den ena är tyst och den andra är väldigt social, trevlig och manipulativ, då kanske man inte ens ser att det är det. Men att börja våga scratch:a och se vad är det egentligen bakom olika fasader. Det är egentligen tid att se vad som man egentligen har framför sig (4)

Hence, instruments or routine asking cannot stand alone, they have to be used by social workers who are knowledgeable on violence and violence can also be detected in other ways. Instruments do not solve all the challenges and can in fact bring new ones; for example:

Sometimes I think that the advantage is that if you think you have had a good conversation with the client and are moving on, then we can also be more disarming, that... But that it becomes quite relaxed, you just talk about it and so on you get into violence a bit as part of the conversation. But if you interrupt that because of of piece of paper, then the client may react a little more, that "oh, now it got very serious all of a sudden".(6)

Also, as illustrated in the opening quote for this theme, standardized instruments or questions may not be suitable for all clients, according to the participants, e.g. those with certain disabilities. In sum, the use of standards and instruments have gained ground in social services, and this was very rarely questioned or criticized; instruments were not perceived to be in conflict with having an ‘encounter’ and being empathetic with the clients, as long as they are adapted and used with flexibility and in a way that ‘fits’ the client.

## Theme 2: Clients’ responses to routine questions

There is a widespread idea of both the unease associated with being asked and the idea that asking on routine, preferably in a standardised way, will improve the detection of ongoing violence (Goicolea et al 2023). To our surprise, social workers confirm neither of these assumptions. But probing deeper, beyond these initial conclusions, a more nuanced and complicated picture emerges that point to new insights.

### Routine questions are received positively

When asked about the usual reaction to asking participant 1 says ”nobody has ever been particularly angry or chocked”, similar to nr6 who says no one has ever been ”angry or upset” and Nr13 says that ”Det är ju inga svårigheter att få svar på frågan. […] Det kanske inte är någon jättegrej.”. Nr5 who works in a municipality who had a recent ”drive” to ask all new clients, replied that most women are “grateful for being asked” and that only one out of a hundred had a negative reaction. In fact, nr3, who works as a manager in another municipality says that he is "a bit surprised that they all take is so well and think it’s OK”

Hence, unease was practically unheard of as a reaction among women to being asked. Those who asked men however got a different response, illustrated in the following: “men can be more like, think it's a weird question” (nr11), similar to nr5: “when you ask men these questions, they´re like: ‘why are you asking these questions?’”. As is well documented, men can be subjected to violence by partners. While such violence *in general* is less grave (refxx), dominant ideas about masculinity presumably makes it is harder for men to identify as a potential victim (refxx). It appears that women in general are not uneased by being asked, and dominant ideas about gendered violence affects who can identify as a potential victim.

### Ongoing violence is seldom detected by routine questions

So, what was detected by asking? Nr13, who has worked in financial support for six years and during those years has asked all new applicants “if they have been subjected to violence or threats”, recalls getting an affirmative response to that question "a few times” but some of those were about violence outside of close relationships. The last affirmative response he can recall concerning VICR was:

En som var utsatt av sin familj i utifrån heder, och personen ville ju…nu ska vi se, ville studera, men det tyckte inte familjen utan att, eller om det var tvärtom att hon ville jobba men familjen tyckte att hon skulle studera och hon skulle göra allt på ett visst sätt, enligt familjen.

Nr9 says that they always ask about experiences of violence, but “very seldom” get an affirmative response and Nr1 says it is “not common” to detect ongoing violence. Nr11 “cannot recall any instances” of detecting ongoing violence. She says however that violence is detected in ”vanliga utredningssamtal”.

Det kommer inte fram på screeningen att det är aktuellt nu. Men de enstaka tillfällen som det har hänt, då har det ändå inte varit liksom, kanske inte så intresserad av att ta tag i det just nu… (1)

Vi har inte upptäckt våld på de här rutinmässiga frågorna men vi har ärenden där vi pratar våld utifrån att vi får vetskap om det under tiden vi träffar här personerna, att de är utsatt för våld. Så jag tänker att det är i samband med att man bygger en relation till personerna så blir det lättare för dem att uttrycka att de är utsatta. (5)

These excerpts illustrate the most common reply to our question: asking as a routine rarely detects ongoing violence. If or when current exposure to violence comes up, nr 5 contends above, it is after establishing a relationship, not through the screening procedure. What is however often detected is “past violence” (nr2), “in the past, they ponder, there were various forms of violence” (nr9), “not that many are exposed to violence here and now” (nr3) but:

Alla har väl någon gång varit utsatt för våld av något slag, så då. Men det blir lite tillbakablickande så där. Vi hanterar mest problem som är aktuella här och nu, och inte problem som var aktuella för tre år sen (nr3).

While Nr3 above says that past violence is not dealt with in the social services in her/his municipality, others point to the need to process and sometimes treat such experiences. Nr12, who works in a VICR team says that many that have been exposed to violence in a close relationship ”suffer from PTSD” and Nr2 says

Ibland kan de söka stöd att det är de har varit utsatt för våld för långt tillbaka, och behöver bearbeta det, stödsamtal eller på annat sätt. Det är det vanligaste, skulle jag nog ändå säga. (nr2)

Also Nr11 talk about clients that “ask for support to process what has been in the past, in order to move on”, but according to both Nr2 and Nr11, this concerns clients who turn to the social services with an open wish to process past violence, i.e. not those detected through routinely asking.

From the above, we conclude that asking (women) about violence is not “a big thing” or perceived as sensitive, and at first glance, detects only past violence and rarely ever current violence. But probing deeper, this last claim needs to be nuanced.

### Some forms of violence seem easier to disclose than others

As it turns out, the initial negative response to our question, is nuanced when asking more about what is detected. Consider that Nr9 says:

Det är väldigt sällan någon som säger “han slog mig.” Det fysiska våldet är inte det som kom först, utan det är mer, skulle jag säga, kontroll eller sex eller ... framför allt kontroll (nr9)

Also Nr1 distinguishes between different forms of violence when explaining that her clients have not disclosed current violence, she says it has “never been physical” but rather that in the process of applying for financial support, the client explain that “he has all the money”. Nr5 explains that, although a client may refrain from disclosing exposure to violence, using the FREDA short questionnaire as a routine can open the conversation for talking about other forms of violence:

Vi ställer flera olika frågor på de här enskilda samtalen, det är en del i handläggningen. Det kan exempel vara ekonomiskt våld. Men då kanske man kommer fram till att ’ja, men det är mannen som har pengarna, jag får inte så mycket varje månad’. (nr5)

According to Nr7, talking about economic violence is easier than physical violence:

Det är ganska lätt att ta på, att en person i hushållet är skriven på alla konton och kreditkort, och att man behöver få veckopeng från sin partner, för att man får inte hantera pengar själv. Det är ganska lätt att ta på och sen prata vidare om, ”ja, men vad beror det på, vad grundar sig det i?” Och sen tänker jag det latenta våldet, det här hotet som alltid hänger i luften utan att det egentligen är uttalat. (nr7)

Nr1, Nr5, Nr7 and Nr9 in the excerpts above, suggest that some forms of violence are easier to detect when asking about ongoing violence. Nr1, Nr5, Nr7 mention economic violence and Nr9 talks about (coercive) control or sexual violence. What is termed coercive control is also denoted in the term psychological violence, and is mentioned by Nr6, nr7 and nr13:

Det är lättast att identifiera psykiskt våld för att det är oftast det som folk vågar prata om. De inser nog sällan själva att det är psykiskt våld, utan att det är lätt att berätta att man kanske blivit kränkt av sin partner eller så, att man tänker att det inte är en så stor grej. Medan om man har blivit utsatt för fysiskt våld så är det någonting som man mer håller tyst om, att det är en starkare tystnadskultur kring det, och då blir det också svårare att identifiera. (nr6)

Om man pratar kränkningar, att man har blivit kallad fula ord eller … det är ganska sakligt. Medan ordet våld är så laddat på något vis. Och det finns ju … ja, om vi tänker att man har ett inbyggt försvar i sig, som säger att ”stopp, det här är läskigt, det här är farligt, det ska vi inte prata om”. Ja, nej, men ofta är det lättare att prata runt. Också det sexuella våldet. För ordet våldtäkt är ju jätteladdat. Och då kanske man istället pratar om tjatsex. (nr7)

Det är ju inte mycket kring det här ekonomiska och sexuella som kommer fram. Det skulle jag inte säga, i alla fall inte i ett första möte. Utan det man får höra är ju mycket det här psykiska. (13)

While nr13 uses the term psychological violence, both Nr6 and Nr7 above use the term ”violations” of clients (swe: kränkningar), and Nr7 uses the term “coerced sex” (tjatsex) instead of rape or sexual violence and argues that using such words is easier because the term violence and rape is super sensitive (swe: “jätteladdat”) and harder to talk about. It seems that although ongoing *physical* violence is rarely detected by asking on routine, it opens a conversation about other forms of violence.

How can these responses be understood? Asking about “violence” does not mean that all expressions of violence are equally acknowledged and disclosed: physical violence is easier to be aware of, but harder to acknowledge publicly, while it’s the other way round with psychological violence, coercive control, latent violence or economic violence. It seems that some of our interviewees instinctively associate our question of detecting ongoing violence with physical assault, like punches and blows, thereby implicitly narrowing down the very same broad definitions they explicitly adhere to and argue are useful.

This seems to be shared with clients narrow understanding of violence but in both cases is something that can come up after a bit of conversing. In fact, Nr4 claims that some twenty years ago, this narrow understanding was dominant in the social services:

I början på 20-talet, det är hemskt att säga. Man såg ibland att det är våld, men då var det mer det här klassiska, slag och allt det här. Nu har vi breddat det, så ser man att våld är nästan i alla ärenden. Och det är en stor förändring, tänker jag. Att man ser att orsaken bakom föräldrakonflikter eller föräldrasvårigheter, och begränsningar och sånt här, kan vara … Både på familjerätten, i utredande, och i öppenvård, barn och unga, så ser man att de flesta ärenden beror på våld. Och det tror jag inte man gjorde förr, början av 2000. (nr4)

Nr4, who works exclusively with those exposed to violence, makes the bold claim that having the more contemporary and wider understanding of violence leads to the conclusion that some form of violence is in fact present in almost *all* cases that concern family matters, children, and youth in the social services and is the *main* *reason* behind most cases.

## Theme 3: Social workers’ readiness and possibilities to support when violence is disclosed

The participants describe the importance of “being ready to handle the answer”, as a prerequisite for asking clients about violence. This theme examines how “being ready” is understood by the social workers, as well as their perceptions of their possibility to offer adequate support to clients that are or have been exposed to violence from an intimate partner.

### Being ready and having time

This theme illustrates how the social workers describe how they must “be ready” in order to provide appropriate help and support. Participant 1 said;

Ställer jag frågan så måste jag ju vara redo, inte precis i rummet och inte själv, men jag måste ju vara redo för att det kan komma någonting. Oj, vi behöver plocka dig och kanske några barn och åka hem med polis till dig, vi måste ta kort på dig nu… eller, om det inte är så, man behöver veta, vad har man för strategi för det hela. (1)

Participant 11 voiced a similar perspective:

Sen tänker jag också att mycket handlar om att du måste också ha kunskapen eller känna dig bekväm i att kunna ta emot svaret /…/ ”ja, vad gör jag med informationen jag får?” (11)

Hence, these two social workers articulate that to ask questions about violence, they need to be ready for what the client might tell and have knowledge about what to do with that information. To have such knowledge can also make it easier to ask questions about violence:

Jag tänker så länge man vet med sig att man vet vad man ska göra med informationen man får, så känns det lättare att fråga. /.../ Den andra personen [client] kommer kunna läsa av det, att jag blir obekväm, att jag blir otrygg, och då vill ju inte de berätta något mer. (7)

Då känner man sig trygg i att kunna ställa frågorna och vet var man ska hänvisa /…/. Utan vi har redan svaret på ”vad ska vi göra med det här” om vi får veta någonting i ärendena. (5)

Being ready to pose questions about violence is also about being able to handle one’s own feelings and reactions when clients talk about violence. Here the participants emphasized supervision and collegial support. Participant 10 argues that supervision is important to...

...för att komma ner i frågeställningarna “vad gör det här med mig, hur blir det här för mig, hur kommer jag orka se det här? Hur ska jag hantera att jag träffar en person som har huggit ihjäl någon och hör beskrivningen, hur personen ifråga gick tillväga?” Det sätter ärr på hjärnan. Och för att kunna gå hem sen och släppa det så behöver man få hjälp att släppa det. (10)

Participant 9 talks about working with violence as “ganska energikrävande och frustrerande” and especially mentions cases where children are involved but that she is “glad att vi har handledning, det är också det som gör att man får ur sig sånt där. För det lagras lite, tyvärr.” (9). Very few participants bring up secondary traumatisation but participant 2 says:

Även om det inte blir någon sekundär traumatisering så är det viktigt att se tecken på kanske sånt som empatitrötthet och såna saker. Men jag tänker att det är något som vi är medveten om att ha koll på, men inte får tappa fokus på. Vi har handledning och vi har stöd av varandra i kollegor och så. (2)

Participant 8 also mentions “supervision regularly” but also “Vi jobbar ganska ofta två. Så att vi har ofta varandra”. Participant 7 says that “one has to engage a collegue if one needs to talk but that they also have “ärendedragningar och handledningstillfällen och det är bra tillfällen att ta upp saker på.” (7) Supervision, collegiality and not being alone on cases are hence described as important aspects in order to handle frustration, having an outlet when dealing with difficult cases, and to minimize the risk of “bringing work home” (Nr??). Lastly, to achieve collegial support and have prepared social workers, ready to support victims of violence in adequate ways, some participants emphasize that time and resources are paramount, but often lacking. In response to having “anything to add?”, Nr10 says:

Det enda jag tänker på, det är att om ni får fram i er studie vikten utav att socialsekreterarna i dag får utrymme att hantera de här frågorna. Och då menar jag tidsutrymme. Det är inte bara ekonomi, utan tid att faktiskt gå igenom ärendena ordentligt. Att få handledning, att få stöd och få backup utav sina chefer. (10)

### To pose questions about violence one must be have resources to provide support

While having knowledge of the administrative routines for cases involving violence is described as important, the participant’s feeling of “readiness” is also connected to how they perceive their ability to offer adequate support in practice. The social services are legally obliged to offer individually adjusted support to victims of violence and must be able to provide temporary safe housing (HSLF-FS 2022:39). The support shouldbe defined by needs and include things like information and advice, therapeutic conversation (*stödsamtal*), parental support, help with permanent housing, and help with contacting other authorities. While all offer some form of emergency shelter, other forms of support available and the organization of the support vary between municipalities, and so do the participants’ perceptions of how well they can meet the needs of the clients.

Participant 7, working with xx, expressed satisfaction with her ability to help: ”Det finns ju allt från olika sorters stödsamtal till skyddat boende samma dag. Det är ett ganska stort spann ändå på insatserna som går att få.” Apart from shelter, different kinds of therapeutical conversations (sometimes named treatment, sometimes not) are frequently mentioned as available measures by the participants. To get therapeutical measures (insatser), often in the form of 5-10 sessions with a counselor (behandlare), the client is, at least in bigger municipalities, often referred to special divisions that works with violence in close relationships.

In contrast to the participant quoted above, others expressed frustration over limited possibilities to provide the support that victims of violence may need the most, in particular when they have left an abusive partner, but are still struggling to move ahead.

Ja, men min upplevelse här är att nästan hälften av våra ärenden är våld i nära relation, och vi har två insatser att erbjuda, det är en kuratorskontakt på Centrum mot våld, och det är skyddat boende. Så det finns två grejer, men när man är utsatt för våld så är det så himla mycket som man behöver hjälp med. (11)

Several participants described the many practical needs that women have when leaving a violent relationship, and regret that the social services seldom can assist with all that is needed. Participant nr 11 described that they often have to delegate such matters to the protected shelter (see Kjellberg, 2023 for similar conclusion).

Att när man kommer och är utsatt för våld så har ... det är ju ett trauma. Och man har gemensam ekonomi kanske, du måste spärra kort, öppna bankkonton. (…) Det är så mycket praktiskt kring det där, hur ska du komma åt dina grejer i lägenheten eller i bostaden du har? Hur ska du få tag i nya möbler? Det är försörjningsstöd ...

Men hur löser du det, eller hur löser ni det då, om det ...?

Nej men mycket är att man får delegera till det skyddade boendet. (11)

Another practical and important obstacle that not all social services can assist with is permanent housing. In some municipalities there is ”samverkan med kommunala hyresbolag för att ha förtur till lägenhet” (8), but in many locations, in particular where there is a housing shortage, arranging a permanent new residence is often up to the individual.

För just nu så erbjuder vi dem bara skyddat boende. Men vi har inga bostäder, alltså den … (…) … De tenderar att stanna kvar i den våldsamma relationen för att de kan inte … De kan inte frigöra sig helt (12)

Då läggs ansvaret mycket mer på individerna att hitta eget boende. (6)

Apart from more structured counselling, a social secretary or similar, often function as a contact person that can, for example, facilitate contacts with other authorities, support a client in court proceedings, or just by being “someone to hold on to när det blåser” (5)

The support most commonly offered according to the participants is hence focused on acute needs, such as temporary housing, and various forms of structured counselling, primarily intended to cover past trauma. But as several participants note, many clients are positioned somewhere “in between”, in particular when the couple have joint children.

Vi upplever också att det finns något så här mellanting av att man har levt i en relation med en partner, men man har barn tillsammans, så det innebär att det förekommer en del eftervåld, eller mycket … Ja, eftersom man behöver ha kontakt för att man har gemensamma barn, så innebär det att man blir aldrig av med sin våldsutövare på det viset.

In particular, the participants recognise that matters of custody is an arena for post-separation violence and coercive control, but that offering adequate support to women in this situation can be difficult for the social services (Ref research on this, Waller Skoog, Kjellberg etc xx). Several participants highlight that custody disputes can be a barrier for providing support like counselling.

Och vi vet också i behandlingssyfte att har man inte ordnat upp kring barnens situation så är det också svårt att gå vidare i en behandling. Det stoppar upp, och det blir väldigt mycket fokus på själva vårdnadsfrågorna (4)

Det blir så mycket praktiskt (behandlarna) måste hjälpa till med så det är svårt att fokusera på att bearbeta våldet. För det blir det här ... Det är så himla mycket kring barn. Och när det är rättsprocesser och det krånglar i skolan (11)

As developed in the next theme, the difficulty for the social services to offer adequate support to women in this situation is, according to the participants, partly connected to their broader responsibilities and tasks, such as child protection, supporting families as a whole, and working with perpetrators. The difficulty to support clients in custody disputes is however also a consequence of social secretaries’ lack of influence on legislation and decisions from courts that often have the “final say”. The family law “is what it is”, as participant 4 puts it.

Due to what the participants describe as “strong parental rights” and the emphasis on parental cooperation and shared custody in policy and legislative praxis, women are to a high degree expected to cooperate and relate with the father, which may allow violence to continue despite separation (Waller Skoog xxx; Bruno 2016, 2018, Kjellberg 2023). Assisting women to handle this situation can be one supportive task of the social worker. “Vi måste ändå hitta vägar, hur ska de hantera sina barn gemensamt, fast hon ska slippa ha med han att göra?” (9).

##

## Theme 4. Conflicting roles and broad perspectives - how social workers’ different responsibilities affect the practice of asking and the responses they get

In this final theme, we discuss how the practice of asking about violence, the responses social workers receive from clients, and their (perceived) ability to help are all affected by the social services’ *other* roles and responsibilities – apart from supporting victims of violence. The first sub-theme addresses how the social workers perceive that the social services’ responsibilities for child protection and their obligation to report suspicion of child maltreatment affect their possibilities to identify and support victims of violence. In the second sub-theme, we describe how the broad and gender-neutral policy frameworks for social services’ work in relation to gender-based violence – that they should screen for and support both perpetrators and victims of violence – is dealt with in practice.

### Goal conflicts, trust, and child protection

The participants’ narratives demonstrate that their obligation to report suspicion of child maltreatment can be a likely barrier for clients to disclose violence, but also that this possibility is referred to and used strategically in dialogue with clients exposed to violence. While the social services’ responsibility for child protection and for supporting victims of violence ideally complement each other, these two different tasks also bring forth the balancing act that social workers need to master to identify violence, between building trust and creating a relationship, on one hand, and assessing and investigating needs and trustworthiness, on the other. (Ref xxx?)

When children witness or risk witnessing violence, the social services have the obligation to report and pursue an investigation. Participant 5 explains that in the very moment they tell a client (at financial support) that they are going to ask about violence, they also inform about this responsibility.

Finns det barn så behöver vi göra en orosanmälan så klart. Vilket vi också informerar om när vi förklarar att vi ska prata om de här frågorna, att förekommer det oro för barnen så har vi skyldighet att göra en orosanmälan. (nr5)

Är det en mamma till exempel som har småbarn, så då blir vi lite mer engagerade. För inget barn ska ju växa upp i ett hem där det förekommer våld. Så det kan i förlängningen, är det här våldet allvarligt, så kan det leda till att barnet placeras utanför hemmet. (3)

In a first contact with our client, we always inform them about our reporting obligation to the children and youth unit. And it's something that we really take very seriously, so that regardless of whether our client says no, ‘but my children have not seen or heard anything!’, we all take the safe card there and always make a report of concern (orosanmälan). And if that in turn... If the client is asked... declines support from us, then there may be a concern at the children's unit, for example, and then they may need to review how we can help this client together? How can we try to motivate and talk to the client and see like ... understand how seriously we take it?.(int 12)

Emphasizing the needs of children can also be used as an argument by the social workers to ‘push’ women to receive help, participant 5a said: “Och det kan vara en motivation för föräldern också att faktiskt söka hjälp när man pratar om hur det här är för barnen, att barn märker.” and 5b added:

Ansvaret man har som förälder att skydda sitt barn, att det blir åt det hållet att man förstår det och att man då kanske hellre vill ha hjälp än att man säger att man inte behöver den.

One participant (10), working in a socialjour, said that referring to their possibility to immediately omhänderta the children can be used as a way to force a woman to leave, in an acute situation.

The task of asking parents about violence thus often comes with the implicit threat of reporting, which according to the participants is very likely to affect the client’s willingness to tell. The difficulty of building trust, while at the same time having a controlling role is further complicated by the work division and different objectives of the social services, in particular the division between social secretaries and counsellors specializing in VICR support, and family law units. Participant 6 described a sense of insecurity when referring a client for which she has identified a need, to her colleagues.

… säg att jag tänker (…) att någon behöver skyddat boende, då kan inte jag känna mig säker på att mina kollegor (…) Jag vet var jag ska hänvisa, men det finns en viss osäkerhet (6)

Confirming this insecurity, previous research (Kjellberg 2023; Bruno? xxx) has demonstrated lack in the social services’ ability to support victims of violence, related to their partly conflicting responsibilities and ill-functioning cooperation between units. In practice, this can mean that even when a woman chooses to disclose violence from a partner to a social secretary in the first instance, other social workers or actors, e.g. family law units or tingsrätt, may not trust her story and see her story as a way to obstruct the legal process (Kjellberg 2023). In particular, women’s narratives about violence are not seldom interpreted as manipulation and attempts to get sole custody (Kjellberg xxx; Skoog Waller 2022). This leads to conflicting goals and tensions for the social services, who are both to support parents to “cooperate”, protect children, and to support victims of violence. Social services “bollar mellan familjerätt och utredande och där hamnar [the women] emellan”, participant 4 contends, which forces the women to ”dare more and do things they would need more support and help to do”. This problem is confirmed by several participants.

De berättar om våldsutsatthet, de flesta av dem, men man blir inte trodd. Man tänker att det här är ett sätt för dem att manipulera och stänga ute, då oftast pappan. Men då kanske man berättar hur det verkligen är och att barnen verkligen inte vill, och tycker att det är jättetungt att tvinga barn till umgänge. Men det blir mamman som ska tvinga och visa att hon verkligen vill att han ska ha umgänge (nr4)

det har funnits våld och så ska man ändå jobba för att föräldrarna ska kunna samarbeta. Det krockar ju ganska mycket, de målen. “Hur ska vi göra det här, då?” (9)

Referring to a recent and debated case where a child was killed by his father during umgänge, to which both the mother and child had objected, participant 4 notes that it is not only fear of losing custody that may hinder women from seeking help from the social services, but also the lack of guarantee that the authorities, social services included, will not enable further post-separation violence towards both her and the children.

Ja, men man är rädd att man ska förlora vårdnaden, för det har man också sagt. Och sen så är man också rädd att umgänget kommer att fortsätta, och då är man kanske ibland kvar för att man inte vill att barnen själv ska vara med pappan, beroende på hur han är som förövare.

Acknowledging the difficulties for the social services to protect women from further violence post-separation, these statements raise questions about what is considered a legitimate response from clients. Is post-separation violence recognised as a kind of violence that can be detected and effectively handled by routinely asking? And is post separation violence considered past violence or ongoing?

We argue that (?) the idea of disclosing as a route for mothers’ emancipation needs to be nuanced and perhaps questioned. When joint children are involved, fear of having children removed, or even losing custody to a violent partner, is salient. Staying in a violent relationship (i.e. not disclosing to social services) may therefore be a strategy to protect one’s children. This is elaborated in Kjellberg (2023) who provides a fair ground for suspicion towards the family division of the social services and the family court (?) (swe: tingsrätten).

The responsibility of social services to investigate and possibly report crimes or children at risk, might impair their possibilities to provide support and help to clients exposed to violence. This also shows how the participants articulate that there can be complex relationships between asking, revealing/telling, and providing support.

### Challenges of broad perspectives and “doing everything”

The following quote summarizes what routine questions and standardized instruments aim to cover:

So right now, we have the short question you could say, which is, basically, have you been subjected to or subjected someone else to violence in any close relationship? (interview 1)

As illustrated in the quote and also reflected in instruments such as FREDA, the scope of the question(s) is broad; both current violence and past violence is asked for, and different forms of violence; both men and women are asked, and clients are asked about perpetration and victimization. As touched upon before, this broadness is perceived as important because violence is complex, reduces bias and prejudices. One such bias is gendered bias:

Yes ... No, but yes, I think that in part we try to highlight that no matter who we meet, we should ask the question because we notice that it is so easy to fall into the trap that women we often ask the question to because there we think it is highly probable. While we may not ask men the question at all, because there we think that if there is something they are doing, it is to expose them to violence and not that they themselves are exposed. There, I think that we ... there, I know, we have also talked a lot about the advantages of this ASI interview, among other things, that it is an argument that we should do it on everyone because then everyone gets the same questions regardless of whether they are men or women. It becomes a natural way of asking the question (int 11)

Hence, there is an effort to de-gender violence and de-gender the practice of asking. Participants emphasized that both men and women can be victims and perpetrators, and both should be asked. Asking everybody therefore reduces bias (gender bias, bias based on ‘violence is something that happens to certain people’, heteronormativity bias) and is coherent with approaching violence as something common that can happen to anyone.

However, it can also make the ‘task’ overwhelming and place more requirements to adapt the questions to the context: diverse target groups and diverse problems. It brings challenges in relation to how to ask about perpetration, how to ask both persons in a couple without making it risky for victims. A few asked the question to all new clients, even when both people in a couple were present (nr13), while others described the use of strategies to ask individuals separately. Yet also the latter can be a problem as it may alert a perpetrator that their partner will also get the question.

But that's still the ambition, that if it's a couple, then you have one together and one separate with both clients, to be able to take up, for example, this. But it can also be sensitive! Because if I go in and ask him, he understands that I'm also asking her. So, it's very much like that, whether it's right or wrong, whether to ask jointly... (int 1)

Despite the acknowledged challenges in the implementation of this approach of ‘ask everybody about everything’, the core of the approach was not questioned: it was considered as a ‘good’ strategy.

# Concluding discussion:

* Women rarely disclose ongoing violence when asked, but asking is still perceived as very important, as you “plant a seed”. Renegotiating the point of asking, we challenge that the main point is to detect ongoing physical violence. Past violence and other forms of violence are sometimes detected, it depends on what is considered to constitute violence, both by social workers and clients.
* Why do women not disclose? Challenge that disclosing violence to social services is a simple path to emancipation; limitations in the support and conflicting goals and roles, lack of cooperation and “samsyn” between divisions, in particular a problem for mothers.
* Reasonable causes for not disclosing violence to social services, beyond stigma and the individual “not being ready” must be acknowledged by social services and other public institutions, to improve the support.
* The big challenges are not solved by "ticking off" the issue – routine questions and standardisation are percieved as helpful by social workers, but the SS must have time to work properly with each case, support each other, build relationships, handle all the complexity, have the right knowledge and competence.
* Social workers and client's perceptions of the social services’ ability – or inability – to help are central to understand when and why (not) professionals choose to ask, and clients choose to disclose.
* Post separation violence and past violence - how to deal with it? What can social services do? Way back, not relevant anymore; nothing? Post separation violence; some support in custody disputes, etc., but not only up to social services officers; complicates treatment.
* Emergency situation; shelter, money, emergency help, to some extent can help quite well, some municipalities better than others. Most offer counselling - but not always what you need/complicated by post-violence.

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