Stalked mothers and their encounters with social and legal authorities

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Stalked mothers and their encounters with social and legal authorities

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Background

There is a lack of research about intimate partner stalking when the victim and stalker have children together. Stalking entails repeated, intrusive, and harassing behaviour that is unwanted by the victim, implicitly or explicitly threatens the victim’s safety, and evokes fear and distress. If the victim of intimate partner stalking has children with the stalker, the opportunity for the stalker to access the victim increases, and so may the intensity and variety of stalking tactics and the interaction between the stalker and the victim. Stalkers can also employ aspects of the legal system to intrude and harass their victims – so-called “procedural stalking”. Victims who have children with their stalker seem to be at high risk of experiencing procedural stalking through the social and legal authorities.

The present study

This study is to our knowledge, the first study to provide insight into the specific type of intimate partner stalking in which the stalker and victim have children together. The aim of the study therefore was to increase knowledge about intimate partner stalking in cases where a mother is stalked by the father of one or more of her children and examine how the mothers experienced the stalking and encounters with social and legal authorities.

Methods

A cross sectional survey was answered by 196 women who had been stalked by the father of one or more their children. The survey included the Stalking Behavior Checklist (SBC), questions regarding the mothers contact with social and legal authorities, and open-ended questions on how the mothers experienced the contact with the social and legal authorities regarding the stalking and the children.

A content analysis was conducted on the open-ended questions about respondents’ experiences of stalking.

Results

Respondents reported high rates of harassing stalking behaviour and lower levels of violent stalking behaviour as measured by the SBC. Encounters with several agencies concerning the children and the stalking were common.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stalking Behaviour</th>
<th>No. of mothers experienced</th>
<th>No. of times reported (SD)</th>
<th>Mean no. of times (SD)</th>
<th>Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The mother reported the stalker to the police</td>
<td>68.3%</td>
<td>1-26</td>
<td>4.04 (4.65)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The stalker reported the mother to the police</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>1-11</td>
<td>2.56 (2.54)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The mother sued the stalker in court</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The stalker sued the mother in court</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The mother commenced a new case or changes in existing agreements from The State Administration*</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
<td>1-80</td>
<td>4.01 (9.11)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The stalker commenced a new case or changes in existing agreements from The State Administration</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>1-119</td>
<td>11.4 (19.97)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The State Administration in Denmark is a state authority that handles problems in relation to divorce and child custody.

Results revealed that respondents experienced extensive and long lasting case proceedings involving several different agencies and professionals and experienced not being recognised as victims of stalking by professionals. In several cases the stalkers also targeted the children. Furthermore, it was taxing for the respondents to navigate within the public system because it was difficult to distinguish between whether the father was exhibiting procedural stalking or exercising his legal right to see his children.

Discussion

The study lends insight into a complex matter of a parent stalker-parent victim constellation, as perceived by the stalked mothers, with the children at risk of becoming secondary victims. The mothers experienced high rates of harassing stalking and spent a lot of time being in contact with the social and legal authorities regarding the stalking or regarding case proceedings about the children. However, the mothers also experienced not being recognised as victims of stalking within a public system that must include the perspectives of both the mothers, the fathers and the children during the legal case proceedings.

The study calls for a special sensitivity of professionals who encounter stalked parents in their work and a multiservice coordination and cooperation.