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'It's Not a Subject You Can Sugar-Coat'—An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Service Providers' Experiences of Delivering a Domestic Abuse Awareness Intervention

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Abstract

With 2.3 million people in the UK having experienced domestic abuse (DA) in the year ending March 2024, DA represents a severe public health issue. Public interest in DA remains high, with its importance and impact re-emphasised through recent legislative changes. Thus, educating the public about the predictors and consequences of DA and barriers to gaining support can both empower potential victims and enable them to recognise and support others. The CEASE Educational Programme is one such intervention, provided by UK-based DA charity RemediUK. This study employed semi-structured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the experiences of staff (n = 6) who had facilitated the CEASE Educational Programme. Two overarching themes relating to barriers to delivery were highlighted: (1) understanding participants' lack of engagement, and (2) a desire to fill the gaps. Our findings indicate a need to explore how DA education can best target those who would benefit from it the most, and in doing so, identify attitudes and beliefs endorsing DA, and how to best educate those with personal experiences of abuse.

Keywords: domestic abuse; education; prevention; practitioners; interpretative phenomenological analysis

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1. Introduction

Domestic abuse (DA) is a major public health concern (World Health Organization 2013), with an estimated 2.3 million adults across England and Wales having experienced DA in the year ending March 2024 (Office for National Statistics 2024). Moreover, despite recent legislative developments within the United Kingdom (UK; e.g., the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 or the Online Safety Act 2023), 37% of DA-related incidents reported to the police resulted in no identifiable crime having been committed (Office for National Statistics 2024). This statistical backdrop is important given that victims of DA already face barriers to reporting, such as fear of being disbelieved, limited access to support services (e.g., legal, financial, and housing assistance), and concerns about the continuation and/or escalation of abuse (Artz 2011; Felson 2002; Gracia 2004; Rose et al. 2011).

Obtaining justice for victims of DA is further complicated when abuse is experienced in less explicit ways, such as through emotional, financial, and coercive means that despite

being difficult to evidence (McMahon and McGorrery 2016; Westera and Powell 2017, can both precede and be more common than physical abuse (Outlaw 2009). Such victims suffer interpersonal, physical, and mental health consequences, and may not even see themselves as victims (Estefan et al. 2016). In practice, such distancing impacts accurate reporting of DA prevalence, which is further detrimental by questions within the Crime Survey for England and Wales potentially failing to adequately capture lived experiences of DA (Hester et al. 2023). Thus, developments in stakeholder training, education, and victim support are vital to increase recognition of DA-related behaviour and to encouraging victims to both report DA and to persist throughout the legal system.

When examining societal beliefs and attitudes of DA and its victims within the UK, Women's Aid indicate that whilst the majority (87%) feel that '*domestic abuse should be reported to the police or formal support services*', males, especially, not only demonstrate less knowledge of how to support those experiencing DA, but are less aware, more tolerant, and less likely to report abusive behaviour as *'extremely wrong*' and generating '*a great deal of harm*' (Davidge 2022). With Davidge also reporting that 43% of people feel that they '*should not get involved*' in incidents of abuse, this indicates a gap in education pertaining to DA awareness, which might contribute to victims failing to obtain support from others. This might also be amplified through the bystander effect (Darley and Latané 1968), which in the context of DA, describes how somebody may perceive their responsibility to be diminished and thus refrain from intervening (e.g., confronting perpetrators or reporting incidents).

It is also important to understand developmental and social drivers for tolerating (and in some circumstances, accepting) DA (McCarry and Lombard 2016). For example, exposure to familial violence is associated with developing attitudes that justify and endorse DA as an acceptable conflict resolution strategy in young people (Copp et al. 2019). Specifically, young women show a greater tendency to accept violence in intimate relationships when asked to consider conditions under which one's actions might be deemed understandable (Copp et al. 2019), whilst young men are more inclined to blame victims of abuse (Bryant and Spencer 2003). Such evidence highlights a significant need for DA education in young people to minimise these effects. This is additionally important given the centrality of gender politics in contemporary debates, and particularly the prevalence of misogyny in online spaces (Victims Commissioner 2025).

Extant interventions aimed at increasing DA-related knowledge have yielded positive results among student samples (Fox et al. 2016; Stanley et al. 2015) and have enhanced confidence in taking positive action and overcoming bystander effects (Bovill and White 2022; Fenton et al. 2016). Despite this, DA awareness remains limited in the general population (Sivarajasingam et al. 2022), including those with safeguarding responsibilities, such as teaching staff, who report varying levels of awareness and confidence when responding to DA disclosures (Ellis 2018; Fox et al. 2016; Lloyd 2018). Such findings are important, given that the UK National Curriculum's 'Relationships and Sex Education' curricula states that "*schools are free to determine how to deliver the content set out in this guidance, in the context of a broad and balanced curriculum*" (Department for Education 2019, p. 8). Though such delivery flexibility is welcome, it raises concerns about teachers' expertise and confidence in DA and compounds the need for training and the utilisation of partner organisations to deliver DA-related education to a high standard and without bias. This is important given that attitudes of young people have long been known to be influenced by social experiences with individuals (e.g., teachers) and settings (e.g., school) (Bryant and Spencer 2003; Jin et al. 2007; Truong et al. 2022).

The Present Study

One DA-related and UK-based educational programme delivered to 13–24-year-olds is the CEASE programme (Remedi 2022). Typically delivered over four sessions and to groups of 10–15 people, CEASE aims to help young people to [1] recognise subtle indications of an abusive relationship, [2] understand the options available to them should they encounter or witness such behaviour, [3] identify local sources of socialist support and support access to those services, and [4] Create Empowerment and Self Efficacy (Remedi 2022). However, despite the substantial quantitative and qualitative empirical literature reporting the educational efficacy of such programmes (e.g., Fox et al. 2014), there remains a need to document the perspectives of the facilitating practitioners. Being able to identify barriers and conflicts to successful implementation can increase programme efficacy, provide greater value for money, and confer substantial societal impact in empowering victims of DA. Thus, this study explored the experiences of facilitators of the CEASE programme using semi-structured interviews, which were later analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Participants comprised six practitioners (five female) who were employed by RemediUK (the charity who developed the CEASE programme). Each participant had delivered the programme for between 3 and 18 months, with many employed for longer whilst undergoing training and/or the delivery of comparable interventions. Participants were aged between 20 and 25 years, with education levels ranging from having A-levels (UK College) to Master's (Postgraduate University) qualifications.

2.2. Data Collection and Procedure

After undergoing institutional peer review (College of Health, Psychology, and Social Care [University of Derby]: ETH2223-2278, 21 December 2022), an e-mail invite was circulated via a gatekeeper at RemediUK, who had no further involvement in the project thereafter nor knowledge of participants who did and did not take part. This invite comprised a link to a Qualtrics survey, which housed a participant information sheet detailing information on the voluntary nature of the project, their right to withdraw at any point prior to data analysis, and further details on how the research team sought to maintain their anonymity (e.g., paraphrasing potentially de-anonymising quotes whilst maintaining original meaning). Participants then gave consent via a series of tick boxes, completed demographic questions (i.e., age, sex, education level), and used an online calendar to book an interview slot. Interviews were conducted and recorded through MS Teams and followed a semi-structured schedule to flexibly guide our exploration of how practitioners made sense of their experiences of delivering the CEASE programme. For convenience and replication, the interview schedule has been made available here: https://osf.io/weux8/, accessed on 28 July 2025. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 min, and upon completion, participants were debriefed.

2.3. Analytic Strategy

The audio file of each interview was automatically transcribed verbatim using functionality of MS Teams before being listened to by Keeley Froggatt to both immerse themselves with the data, and to make transcription corrections. Subsequently, transcripts were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al. 2009) following existing guidance (Nizza et al. 2021; Pietkiewicz and Smith 2012). Interpretative phenomenology (Reiners 2012) was adhered to, in alignment with the critical realist

perspective (Jeong and Othman 2016) and Heidegger's hermeneutic circle (Giorgi 2007). The use of IPA had significance for our sample due to the study's aim of making sense of the participant's lived experiences of both their self and social world within the context of facilitating the CEASE programme. The extant literature has used IPA within similar concepts, including experiences of prison officers delivering interventions (Connell and Johnson 2022) and explorations of barriers faced by healthcare practitioners in addressing DA (Tarzia et al. 2021).

2.4. Reflexivity Statement

Dr Louise Wallace is a Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Leicester specialising in gender and violence. Her teaching and research centre on the multifaceted nature of domestic abuse, with particular emphasis on its varied forms and the ways in which individual differences shape experiences of both victimisation and perpetration. She is committed to raising awareness and educating others on the complexities of domestic abuse through both academic work and public engagement. Keeley Froggatt was a student at University of Derby at the time of data collection and who worked as an Assistant Psychologist with Forensic clients. [Researchers (x2) Dr Henry Lennon and Dr Dean Fido] are Forensic Psychology- focused academics who guided and supported this research project. It is important to acknowledge that our interpretations are shaped by our own experiences and perspectives. We have strived to be transparent about our positionality and present the findings in a way that is both informed by analysis and respectful of the participants' voices. We also recognise that other researchers, with different backgrounds and perspectives, may interpret the data differently.

3. Results and Discussion

The two superordinate themes highlighted in Table 1 were featured across most interviews and capture lived experiences of facilitating the CEASE programmes and associated barriers faced. The first superordinate theme of '*Understanding participants' lack of engagement*' was explored through the subordinate themes of '*Participants' personal experiences*', '*Current attitudes and beliefs*', and '*Feeling the impact of the school setting*', and the second superordinate theme of '*A desire to fill the gaps*' was explored through the subordinate themes of '*Image-based sexual abuse*' and '*Male victims*'.

Table 1. Superordinate and subordinate themes.

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Understanding participants' lack of engagement	Participants' personal experiences
	Current attitudes and beliefs
	Feeling the impact of the school setting
A desire to fill the gaps	Image-based sexual abuse
	Male victims

3.1. Theme 1: Understanding Participant's Lack of Engagement

Facilitators frequently expressed concern about a global lack of engagement by the UK public in initiatives aimed at increasing knowledge of DA, as well as active engagement within the hosted sessions.

Subtheme 1.1. Participants' Personal Experiences

All facilitators noted that participants' personal experiences of experiencing or witnessing DA might act as a barrier to their own engagement within sessions:

'I think personal experience can sometimes be a barrier because someone who might have experienced it [DA] in their home might think, oh I've lived through this, I don't want to have a session about this' ***(Facilitator 2)***

Facilitator 2, like several others, exhibits perspective-taking and empathy (skills associated with positive therapeutic effects) (Everall and Paulson 2002) towards young people undergoing the CEASE programme who are facing internal engagement barriers due to their previous experiences of DA within familial settings. Such avoidance has been observed within trauma-informed educational settings where clients may disengage as a strategy to manage emotional distress (Alisic 2012). Similarly, Facilitator 4 considers participants who might currently be experiencing DA and the impact this can have on their engagement during sessions and disclosures thereafter:

'A lot of the time if they were in an unhealthy relationship, they might feel too embarrassed to tell anybody they might have been told they can't tell anybody' ***(Facilitator 4)***

In doing so, facilitators note how feelings of embarrassment and shame can form a barrier to engagement (Heron et al. 2022), especially in the context of influential and coercively controlling perpetrators; wherein participants are '*told they can't tell anybody*'. This reflection on the role of personal experiences maps onto the literature regarding young people's personal motivation and readiness to engage in DA-related interventions when personally affected by it (Howarth et al. 2019), and how both are needed to absolve problematic engagement. In some instances, facilitators described the participant selection process as contributing to this in that young people did not necessarily volunteer themselves, but rather they were selected either as part of a whole-class experience or because teachers identified direct benefit for them. Thus, there is clear need for schools and DA education providers to work collaboratively to refine a more robust and nuanced selection process (including screening) to ensure optimum programme effect. Working towards attenuating disengagement has further practical importance:

'Sometimes it's important to kind of keep your eye out, […] because if they're sort of putting on a bit of a joke and showing off it might be that they're kind of masking what's happening for them' ***(Facilitator 3)***

Facilitator 3 notes how avoidance strategies and disruptive behaviour adopted by participants might be used to mask distress and discomfort when engaging in discussions around DA (Stafford and Smith 2009). Thus, facilitators face pressures in having to '*keep your eye out*' for safeguarding issues and instances of young people requiring further help and support. In the context of wanting to provide a high degree educational service, it might therefore be taxing to develop the necessary therapeutic relationships (which the facilitator's here demonstrate that they are capable of) with up to 15 young people at a time within the time constraints of a relatively short four-session programme.

Subtheme 1.2. Current Attitudes and Beliefs

In addition to the personal experiences of individuals, facilitators also spoke of the potential for young people's extant beliefs and attitudes to act as barriers for engagement. The facilitators spoke of the influences of culture on attitudes towards gender roles, as well as victim blaming attitudes and their potential to cause future harm to others.

'You can understand why someone might not want to talk, I mean it is an uncomfortable topic, so it's just one of those things' ***(Facilitator 2)***

Facilitator 2 illustrates the internal barriers people can face when discussing domestic abuse due to the '*uncomfortable*' nature of the topic and highlights issues with attempting to engage a group about a topic they may not deem socially acceptable to discuss so publicly in that it goes against social norms. Facilitator 2 presents their understanding and

sensitivity to this by empathising with the difficulties people may face in engaging in the CEASE programme. They appear to be accepting of this challenge being something they face within their role ('*it's just one of those things*') when thinking about people's beliefs about engaging in discussions around DA.

In contrast to this, when discussing more direct attitudes concerning DA, other facilitators describe these as creating conflict due to their nature and opposing their own moral values and beliefs:

> *'[They] had very very strong opinions on what girls can and can't wear. They had very strong cultural views as well on what a woman is to a man. Things like that, and I found that group very, very challenging, because how do you argue with what someone already knows? And what is okay, in their culture'* ***(Facilitator 3)***

Facilitator 3 describes their experience of dealing with views that oppose their own regarding gender roles. They illustrate uncertainty in knowing how to challenge young peoples' attitudes and belief systems, which are developed and long-lasting. Ultimately, this can present difficulty in challenging attitudes associated with endorsement of DA, and barriers to promoting prosocial thoughts. In discussing this, Facilitator 3 highlights the role of social learning (Bandura 1969) in attitudinal development, with Facilitator 3 asking the rhetorical question: '*how do you argue with what someone already knows?*' This suggests they themselves may not have discovered the answer to this yet, which might be acting as an internal conflict for them when facilitating CEASE.

> *'A young boy said that if his girlfriend went out and was wearing a short skirt and sort of like a skimpy outfit and she got raped, then it would be her fault because she was asking for it. So things like that can be really shocking.'* ***(Facilitator 6)***

Facilitator 6 further develops this theme by highlighting the role of victim blaming attitudes that are held by some programme participants that condone sexual violence perpetrated against women. Facilitator 6 goes on to discuss how hearing such beliefs can be '*really shocking*' for them; an experience which goes against their own belief system, and against the attitudes and beliefs they advocate for during the delivery of CEASE. Moreover, Facilitator 6 alludes to feelings of anxiety and worry concerning these pro-DA beliefs in young people:

> *'I know that young people don't know about domestic abuse, but there's also these other views that they have that are quite challenging and could cause someone harm in the future.'* ***(Facilitator 6)***

Facilitator 6 appears initially forgiving of the young people's lack of knowledge regarding DA but goes on to express concern for their '*challenging*' views during programme delivery. They describe experiencing internal conflict, particularly around the implications such beliefs may have for the safety of others, including potential future victims. This highlights facilitators' discomfort with attitudes that oppose those advocated by CEASE and their concern about how these views may shape young people's future behaviours.

In continuation from the perspective taking demonstrated by facilitators, this extended into the theme of 'Current Attitudes and Beliefs'. Facilitators acknowledged the difficulties individuals face in engaging with DA due to its sensitive nature. This was explored through DA being perceived as a more private matter, with social norms acting as a barrier to open discussion both inside and outside educational settings. This theme begins to demonstrate findings in accordance with the extant literature that grounds one's awareness of, and attitudes toward, DA in social learning theory (Bandura 1969; Copp et al. 2019). This has particular importance given that attitudes and beliefs can be a risk factor in the perpetration of DA (Stith et al. 2004; Temple et al. 2013), and can therefore feature as an important factor for intervention targets.

In contrast to the empathic approach previously described, some facilitators reported feeling shocked and disheartened when confronted with victim-blaming and misogynistic beliefs. These experiences highlight the emotional toll of the work and the internal conflict that arises when facilitators' own values are challenged. They also underscore a strong commitment to promoting prosocial views capable of disrupting the normalisation of domestic abuse. Similar findings have been reported by facilitators working with males who have committed DA-related offences, where challenges often arise in addressing negative attitudes towards women and the minimisation of offending behaviours (Morran 2008). While interventions such as the CEASE Educational Programme aim to challenge these harmful views, such attitudes can still present significant barriers to engagement, particularly when young people strongly identify with them. Moreover, research by Fox et al. (2014) suggests that the very act of challenging these beliefs can further hinder engagement, as it creates tension between encouraging open discussion and confronting prejudiced or sexist opinions. These findings highlight the ongoing need for carefully delivered domestic abuse education for young people, particularly in school settings, where sensitive yet thought-provoking approaches are required to address and disrupt these harmful beliefs and reduce the risk of future perpetration.

Subtheme 1.3. Feeling the Impact of the School Setting

In addition to participants' lack of engagement due to personal experiences of DA and attitudes and beliefs, facilitators also discussed the specific challenges of delivering CEASE within school settings. Facilitator 1 spoke of their difficulty in receiving challenging comments from a teacher when delivering CEASE, who shared their expectations of what women '*should not*' wear:

> *'One of the teachers was umm kind of making comments and saying things disagreeing with, well, I don't think girls should be wearing short skirts and it obviously put one of the CEASE practitioners on edge thinking I don't wanna argue with a teacher, but you've kind of got to, you don't want the teacher impacting what the kids are thinking. And because you know they look up to the teachers, don't they?'* ***(Facilitator 1)***

This experience made Facilitator 1 anxious about confronting the teacher and challenging them as a figure of authority and '*role model*'. Facilitator 1 further illustrates the internal conflict they face between conforming to social norms by not arguing with authority figures and fulfilling their duty to promote positive attitudes surrounding equality of gender roles and women's right to wear what they choose without being blamed for the behaviours exhibited by others. Further, they explore their personal experience of disengagement due to poor behaviour management in a group, expressing their feelings of embarrassment and low confidence in their delivery of the programme in this instance:

> *'It wasn't just the students, it was the teachers. […] There was about 10 teachers in the room and the students were messing about a lot. […] You're not really their teacher. You don't really wanna tell them off, but their teachers wasn't telling them off or saying anything. They were just kind of laughing. So I just felt like I was a bit of a circus clown.'* ***(Facilitator 1)***

One facilitator described feeling like a '*circus clown*' due to a lack of support from teachers, who allowed young people to behave disrespectfully during sessions. Rather than being seen as someone delivering valuable knowledge, the facilitator felt like a performer for the benefit of both students and staff, which diminished their confidence and left them feeling embarrassed and unfulfilled in their role. They noted that it was '*not just the students*' contributing to this dynamic, as some teachers reportedly laughed during the sessions, reinforcing poor behaviour and undermining the seriousness of the subject. The facilitator also expressed an internal conflict about managing behaviour, feeling unable to challenge students due to not being their teacher, further emphasising the lack of support

from school staff. This raises concerns about teachers' understanding of domestic abuse and their recognition of the importance of such educational interventions. This lack of support from teaching staff also resonates with Facilitator 6 who further highlights feeling unsupported by teaching staff during CEASE delivery:

> *'I think you can get issues with staff. Um, they're supposed to be there to help manage behaviour and do all that kind of thing, but a lot of the time they don't. They just sit there and it's all down to us. So that's really difficult.'* ***(Facilitator 6)***

Facilitator 6 describes the challenge that this poses for them and explores their feelings pertaining to the teacher's behaviour being unjust by disengaging from their own role and '*just sit[ting] there*'. This created additional pressure for the facilitator who felt it was '*all down to*' them to both manage behaviour and deliver programme content of a sensitive nature, leaving them feeling overwhelmed. Facilitators also shared experiences of feeling unsupported by teaching staff in regard to teachers sharing views detrimental to those advocated for by CEASE and displayed concern for young people '*look[ing] up to*' teachers who were sharing gendered stereotypes. As previously noted, often attitudes and beliefs are developed from learning through their social world, in this respect from the teachers and school setting (Bryant and Spencer 2003; Jin et al. 2007; Truong et al. 2022) which raises concern for the level of understanding the teachers themselves have in their awareness of DA and its associated impact on young people's social learning.

This evidence derived from the current study supports other empirical findings within the literature which petition for the need for teacher training in respect of issues such as domestic abuse so to best prepare teachers to support young people (Davies and Berger 2019). Furthermore, such training may be useful in allowing teachers to develop a greater understanding of the seriousness of domestic abuse and therefore, the importance of the role of external facilitators in delivering such sensitive content.

Considering these findings, there is concern over the Department for Education (2019) allowing flexibility for schools to deliver RSE on sensitive topics such as DA, wherein not all teachers have the essential understanding to successfully educate young people. This evidence demonstrates the importance of external specially trained facilitators in the delivery of programmes such as CEASE and the identified need for the inclusion of domestic abuse awareness education in teacher training.

3.2. Theme 2: A Desire to Fill the Gaps

The superordinate theme of 'A Desire to Fill the Gaps' represents the passion the facilitators have for their role, the CEASE Programme, and their dedication to educating young people on DA. This theme was composed of the subordinate themes of 'Image-Based Sexual Abuse' and 'Male Victims', which were experienced by the facilitators to varying degrees, whether that being their desire to increase their own knowledge, or whether that be to improve the content of the programme itself. These knowledge gaps often acted as barriers for the facilitators and left them feeling that they may not be fulfilling their role dutifully.

Subtheme 2.1. Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Some facilitators, identified a need to gain more knowledge on image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), and perceived this lack of knowledge on this emerging phenomenon as a barrier for their comprehensive delivery of CEASE:

> *'It's common for young people to do that so they don't seem to understand how it could be sexual abuse and because I don't understand as much it's hard for me to kind of explain it.'* ***(Facilitator 1)***

Facilitator 1 discussed the prevalence of IBSA and how it is often a normalised and accepted behaviour amongst young people. They highlight their own challenges in

engaging in conversations about IBSA due to not holding enough knowledge on the matter, which highlights a broad need for specialised training on this emerging type of abuse and young people's deficits in not understanding IBSA as being abusive as it represents something of a social norm for them.

> *'I just think it's just so prevalent in schools and kids do it because they don't think of the consequences and then when it happens then normally the person that sent it is the one that's made out to be the bad one […] So I just think more awareness of, it is wrong and you shouldn't be doing it, but also the person who has had the image of themselves sent round is a victim and they shouldn't be punished and villainised because they've done something like that.'* ***(Facilitator 4)***

Facilitator 4 explores the need for greater knowledge sharing with young people in the context of IBSA and also goes on to highlight the victim blaming attitudes within these situations for the person who sent an image initially being considered and '*made out to be the bad one*'. Facilitator 4 discusses victims of IBSA in an empathetic manner labelling them as the '*victim*' but also sharing that they are often '*punished and villainised*', which calls for increases in knowledge and victim empathy in these situations. Facilitator 4 highlights this as a misjustice demonstrating their experiences of witnessing such disclosures whereby the victim is often put to blame, and their desire to raise awareness of this to decrease such victim blaming attitudes.

Subtheme 2.2. Male Victims

Facilitators also highlighted barriers they face in supporting victims which may be deemed as not being the stereotypical case of DA, where the victim is female and the perpetrator is male in a heterosexual relationship (D'Costa and Saklofske 2023). Specifically, they spoke of assumptions underpinning the stereotypical male perpetrator and how this can affect engagement with young males within training groups.

> *'I think because people see domestic abuse is just happening to women. […] But I think maybe sometimes men feel like they can't report it because it's not spoken about as them as victims and it's only spoken about as women as victims.'* ***(Facilitator 5)***

Facilitator 5 explores the impression they gained during delivery and highlights the challenges male victims can face in reporting crimes of domestic abuse when they themselves are the victim. They explore the issue being that the occurrence of males as victims of DA is not often discussed in open conversation ,which deters openness in male victims coming forward in reporting crimes of DA against them.

> *'It feels like we are accusing, you know, men of being the perpetrators and women have been the victims all the time and that's just not the case. But just because we're not talking about it, that's how they feel. So I think talking about it so they know that we do understand that men can be victims would be really beneficial.'* ***(Facilitator 6)***

Facilitator 6 explores how the lack of conversation and education about males as victims of DA can form barriers to male victims and their perceived ability to report. These findings are of particular importance in the context of the extant literature evidencing the dis-engaging effects that gender-based programmes can have on young males (Fox et al. 2014). It is important to communicate the possibility of both males and females in the role as victim and not segregate any gender into stereotypical roles. This is of particular significance when the lack of recognition of males as victims often results in the lack of accessibility of male victims to support services due to their marginalisation and their challenges in seeking help because of this (Wright 2016).

4. Implications

Facilitators highlighted that participants' personal experiences of witnessing or experiencing domestic abuse, alongside entrenched beliefs shaped by cultural norms around gender roles and victim blaming, can hinder engagement and perpetuate harmful attitudes. This points to the importance of embedding trauma-informed approaches within programme delivery, alongside clear safeguarding protocols and access to pastoral support. Additionally, facilitators described challenges arising from unsupportive school environments, including staff expressing gender-stereotypical views during sessions, which risk undermining key messages. This highlights the need for clearer guidance for schools on their role in supporting external programme delivery, and for the inclusion of domestic abuse awareness within teacher training to ensure alignment between facilitator and staff messaging. Addressing these barriers is essential to maximising the impact of CEASE and similar initiatives, ensuring young people receive consistent, informed, and supportive education on domestic abuse.

Some facilitators also identified gaps in their knowledge of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), which they viewed as limiting their ability to deliver comprehensive CEASE content. This underscores the need for facilitator training to incorporate emerging forms of abuse so that facilitators can address them with confidence and accuracy. Facilitators further reported difficulties supporting victims who do not fit the stereotypical domestic abuse narrative of a female victim and male perpetrator in a heterosexual relationship. Such assumptions risk disengaging young men and obscuring the experiences of male victims and those in same-sex relationships. Programme design should therefore adopt more inclusive case studies and materials to reflect the full diversity of abuse dynamics and to challenge prevailing stereotypes. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to have materials on these less stereotypical types of domestic abuse shared with facilitators ahead of running sessions to ensure familiarity with the content.

5. Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, this research is idiographic and focused on the lived experiences of our small sample of six facilitators, meaning the data is not representative of the broader population of facilitators within and beyond the DA sector, and the focus on a single organisation may limit the transferability of the findings. Second, some initial conclusions have been drawn regarding the level of teacher DA knowledge and experience. These are informed by the existing literature and facilitators' personal accounts of staff behaviour during sessions. However, further research is needed to more accurately assess teachers' levels of DA knowledge and training to enable more robust conclusions and to explore how they themselves perceive external organisations, particularly in this case facilitators of a younger age (20–25), who may be perceived as lacking life experience, and their roles in delivering knowledge transfer. Furthermore, it is important to note that despite steps being taken to ensure employers were uninvolved in participating in this study, potential power dynamics of them acting as the gatekeeper to taking part in the research should be acknowledged. In addition, it is essential to position work such as this within a wider programme of research that not only evaluates implementation and facilitation but also examines the impact of DA education on its participants, including young people's lived experiences and responses to such programmes. This broader perspective is vital for ensuring the long-term effectiveness and relevance of DA education initiatives.

6. Conclusions

Overall, this study highlights the need for future research and resources to address barriers to engagement with CEASE-aligned educational programmes. Key areas include understanding personal experiences, challenging pre-existing attitudes and beliefs, enhancing staff training and awareness, and integrating lesser-addressed forms of abuse, such as image-based sexual abuse and male victimisation. Further quantitative and qualitative evaluations of DA programmes are essential to inform best practices and enhance delivery. This study provides a foundation for understanding the barriers faced by facilitators delivering DA awareness to young people, particularly in schools. It highlights challenges such as participants' personal experiences, cultural norms, and entrenched beliefs that hinder engagement and reinforce victim-blaming attitudes. Facilitators often struggle to address views that clash with their own values or are deeply embedded in the cultural contexts of young people. Additionally, concerns were raised about inconsistent school support and a lack of teacher training, with some facilitators feeling undermined or unsupported during sessions. These findings point to the direct impact of these barriers on programme delivery, barriers which have direct implications for policy and programme design, highlighting the need for clearer guidance in RSE provision and the prioritisation of trained external facilitators to ensure effective delivery. If unaddressed, these challenges may compromise victim outcomes by reducing the likelihood that young people receive consistent, informed support, and risk undermining recent legislative advances in safeguarding and domestic abuse education. Overall, the findings offer insight into how DA awareness education for young people can be improved within educational contexts.

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