Lessons Learned from a Gender Specific Educational Programme Supporting Young Women with Experiences of Domestic Abuse

Louise Warwick-Booth and Susan Coan

The Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Beckett University, UK.

Abstract

Background*: Domestic abuse is a public health issue, and increasing evidence suggests that young women are more likely to suffer than older women, yet limited evidence exists in England about educational programmes and programmes for young women at risk.
Study's objectives*: To evaluate a gender specific (women-only) programme aimed at educating young women aged 13-25 about abuse and staying safe in one English city.
Setting*: A third sector (charitable) organisation, aiming to improve women's health across one English city delivered the programme over a three-year period, funded by the Big Lottery. Young women received both peer and one to one support, to educationally inform them, develop their skills and improve their capabilities in responding to abuse.
Method*: This qualitative evaluation captured the perspectives of young women accessing the programme (n=33), exploring the positive difference that it made to their lives. We also captured the views of internal stakeholders in 2018 (n=2), then followed up in 2020 (n=3), and external stakeholders referring young women to the programme (n=8).
Results: The programme met its aims. Self-reported changes in young women's lives included increased knowledge about staying safe and being happier. Some young women gained or retained custody of their children, and others exited harmful relationships. Young women identified a range of mechanisms of success including a non-judgemental approach from workers, peer support and a trusted space in which to meet and learn. The programme increased young women's skills to stay safe whilst improving their mental wellbeing.
Conclusion*: The programme worked well for young women who accessed it. However, it could not reach all of those in need, was only funded in the short-term, and tended to individualise the responsibility for staying safe. Further research is needed into other community-based educational programmes to provide evidence of their effectiveness as well as transferrable models for workers in other contexts.

Key words: gender (young women), health education, domestic abuse, evaluation

Corresponding Author:
Louise Warwick-Booth, Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Beckett University, Portland 519 Portland Way, Leeds, LS1 3HE, UK
Email: l.warwickbooth@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Introduction

This article reports on findings from a qualitative evaluation of a gender-specific educational programme that supported girls and young women (aged 13-25) in a city in England who were suffering domestic abuse or deemed to be at risk of abuse. The evaluation investigated how the programme made a difference to young women's lives, during a time period where domestic abuse is receiving increased policy action.

The UK government is increasingly paying attention to domestic abuse, has developed a strategy for tackling violence against women and girls (Home Office, 2021) and introduced the Domestic Abuse Act (gov.uk, 2022) as well as compulsory healthy relationship education in schools (gov.uk, 2021). However, its educational and system level focus fails to adequately address the need for wider community-based solutions. One low-cost approach favoured in the UK is social marketing, but campaigns such as "This is Abuse" have received criticism for being too "crude" and their effectiveness in reducing domestic abuse is questionable (Gadd et al 2014). A recent campaign "Don't Be That Guy" by Police Scotland was praised for challenging male attitudes underpinning violence against women (Rawlinson, 2021). Similarly, the 'Is This OK?' video from the Greater Manchester 10-year Gender-Based Violence Strategy, led by Mayor Andy Burnham, focuses on men as perpetrators of sexual harassment and aimed to encourage men to reflect on their behaviour (BBC, 2021). These educational campaigns attempt to challenge social norms, but they require men to have a high level of self-awareness and do not address deep rooted misogyny, or the structural causes of gender-based abuse (Montesanti & Thurston, 2015). The literature also shows that the context in which educational programmes take place is important (Kiani et al, 2021) but there is, again, little evidence outside of school contexts in England despite recommendations for specialist women's services to support education and care for girls within suitable environments (Taylor & Shrive, 2021).

The rationale for the programme focused on in this paper is clear in terms of the domestic abuse experiences of younger women. In 2019-20, prior to the impact of COVID-19, data from England and Wales showed women aged 16 to 19 years were significantly more likely to suffer domestic abuse than women aged 25 years and over (ONS, 2020). In many cases, young women and girls do not report incidents especially as many are unaware that they are experiencing abuse. In addition to national crime statistics, research with young people indicates coercive behaviour and aggression in adolescent intimate relationships is common and considered the norm by many (Davies, 2019). A recent Ofsted study in England found sexual harassment and online sexual abuse to be widespread and normalised in the schools and colleges that responded (gov.uk, 2021a). It is in these early experiences of relationships that young people establish patterns and relationship expectations, and now new technology has brought additional complexities to intimate relationships (Davies, 2019).

In addition, some young women are at higher risk than others, reflecting the relationship between the social determinants of health and interpersonal abuse (Montesanti & Thurston, 2015). US research shows that adverse childhood experiences, in particular childhood sexual abuse, interparental violence, and parental mental illness, significantly increase the risk of later intimate relationship abuse (Joppa, 2020). Young women experiencing depression are also at higher risk (Joppa, 2020) and women and girls who are disabled, live in poverty and/or who come from minority ethnic backgrounds experience higher rates of domestic abuse (Crooks et al, 2019). Research generally evaluates programmes responding to domestic abuse rather than prevention programmes (Ellsberg et al, 2015), although prevention programme evaluations exist in North America (Foshee et al, 1998; Crooks et al, 2019; Ellsberg et al, 2015; Levesque et al, 2017) where at least 21 states have legislation requiring education about intimate relationship abuse to be included in the school curriculum (Levesque et al, 2017). Such prevention programmes focus on supporting young women to manage their emotions and mental health, to learn about healthy relationships, to identify unhealthy relationships and to acquire skills to stay safe (Joppa, 2020). Whilst in most cases, boys and men are responsible for domestic abuse, few programmes or programmes target them (Joppa et al, 2020

although in the USA and Canada, there are some large-scale programmes engaging young men at high school and university, such as Coaching Boys into Men and WiseGuyz (Crooks et al, 2019).

Whilst the academic evidence base in the UK is less developed in relation to the effectiveness of community based educational support for young women experiencing or at risk of domestic abuse, specialist women's services located in the community and voluntary sector have been shown to work well in responding to domestic abuse, despite operating time-limited programmes linked to a lack of long-term funding (Warwick-Booth & Cross, 2020). Crooks et al (2019) also describe evidence for the effectiveness of programmes supporting young people in the child protection system and young women who have experienced intimate relationship abuse, but there are gaps in the literature about the use of more holistic approaches with broader aims around health and wellbeing. There are a number of potential reasons for this including low budgets in small community organisations preventing rigorous evaluation, especially given that multifaceted programmes require more complex evaluations (Crooks et al, 2019). The educational programme discussed in this paper was a small-scale local programme implemented in England where there is a lack of evidence about what works in this area.

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The Educational Programme

The programme we focused on received Big Lottery (charitable) funding from 2017-2020. It aimed to educationally support young women living in a city in England, who were experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, domestic abuse and unhealthy relationships. It was designed and developed by a voluntary sector organisation already working to improve women's health.

The programme was based on a youth work model of informal education in which young people learn from workers, their peers, and structured activities (de St Croix, 2018). Practitioners used a lens model in which gender-based work was undertaken in single-sex groups, using gender conscious practice to educationally support young women, linking information to the complexities of their lives and gendered experiences (Morgan & Harland, 2009). Youth work contexts have been described as safe spaces in which young people can achieve a sense of belonging, and gain access to the information which supports them in making positive choices. Peer support enables the development of skills, positive future goals and improved health (Sonneveld et al, 2020). Youth work models of informal education such as the one discussed here, can therefore lead to increased knowledge and improved wellbeing for participants.

Group work sessions delivered weekly themed educational content on topics such as recognising abuse, healthy relationships, safety, planning, consent, assertiveness, grooming, the impact of abuse, managing stress and low mood. The weekly meetings ran for 18 weeks in or close to the city centre in safe, neutral spaces, and attendees were provided with transport (taxis) and refreshments. Given the different needs of young women aged 13-25, groups were separated into those no longer in school and those who were still in full time compulsory education. Programme delivery encompassed:

- A weekly morning group for young women aged 18-25 (crèche facilities provided)
- A weekly evening group for girls and young women aged 13-18
- A moving on group for young women who had completed 18 weeks but requested additional support

Three programme workers took referrals, made assessments, delivered the group sessions, provided one-to-one support, and linked with other agencies for signposting and onwards referral.

Referrals came from schools, safeguarding workers[1][i], social workers, and other voluntary sector organisations.

During the 3-year delivery period, 298 young women participated in the programme, 114 in ongoing groups. The participants were mainly White British (77%) and 14% were Black, Asian or of other minority ethnic status. The majority of participants did not identify with any religion (71%), 18% were Christian and 6% Muslim. The women mainly identified as heterosexual (79%), 3% as lesbian and 13% as bisexual. Young women who self-reported disabilities such as mental health issues made up 22% of participants of which. 10% reported having learning difficulties. In addition, 13% of the participants also reported having a long-term health conditions such as asthma or diabetes. The programme had a wide geographical reach across the city but over a quarter of participants came from two neighbourhoods that were ranked high on the index of multiple deprivation. Furthermore, 8% of the women were care leavers. Workers delivering this programme were concerned that it did not reach diverse groups, despite their efforts to recruit a broad range of young women. The data collected on ethnicity for the programme did, however, reflect the demographics of the city in which work took place, but staff remained aware of cultural barriers preventing access for some groups.

Methodology and methods

This evaluation investigated how the programme made a difference to t young women across three outcome areas, defined by programme workers to secure the funding, as well as exploring wider effects. Firstly, were the young women and girls involved better able to identify and respond appropriately to abusive relationships? Secondly, did they report improved mental wellbeing, including increased self-confidence and feeling less lonely? Finally, did the young women have an increased understanding of abuse and improved skills to keep themselves safe? The study also examined referrals and explored how to improve the programme.

The evaluation used qualitative feminist methodology, recognising power dynamics within the research process (Abell and Myers, 2008) therefore attempting to forefront the voices of those whose experiences were less visible (Cross and Warwick-Booth, 2015), in this instance young women experiencing and at risk of abuse. All data collection was led by female researchers, done by women, for women (Warwick-Booth et al, 2022 in press). Our qualitative approach also challenged the increasing trend towards evaluation as measurement in the UK voluntary sector, where programmes are expected to evidence impact via numerical data rather than in terms of the more holistic contributions that youth work models make (de St Croix, 2018). Our approach attempted to use a youth-centred methodology to explore young women's views about why they valued the programme and took part in it (Gormally & Coburn, 2014).

Sample

The programme workers advised on suitable young women to sample. Five focus groups were conducted between January 2018 and January 2019 (n=28). Five young women also participated in individual interviews in September 2019, in line with their personal preference. A total of 33 young women contributed.

Semi-structured interviews with programme workers (n=2) were carried out in 2018, and again in 2020 (n=3). In total 5 interviews were carried out with programme staff, (2 of which were repeat interviews). Eight external referrers to the service (family support workers, teachers, social workers, safeguarding workers) were also interviewed in 2018 (n=4) and 2019 (n=4).

Data collection

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[1] Safeguarding workers have a remit to guard against danger and harm, focusing upon the protection of those deemed vulnerable and at risk.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were selected to complement the group delivery of the programme, and to move the balance of power away from the researcher through increasing the number of participants and creating a more naturalistic environment as compared to one on one interviews (Wilkinson, 1999). Group discussions enabled women to contextualise their experiences through exploration and discussions (Orr, 1992). Creative outputs such as timelines were also produced during the conversations (Warwick-Booth and Coan 2020).

Interviews with young women

Some young women preferred a one-to-one interview (n=5). Interviews explored their experiences of the programme, encouraging reflection on feelings at the start of the programme compared to current feelings using a blob tree. [2]

Interviews with professionals

One-to-one face-to-face or telephone interviews were conducted with programme workers and service referrers. These focused on description(s) of the programme, delivery, referral processes, perceived impacts and effectiveness. Interviews provided in-depth information about programme delivery and learning, and allowed probing on issues of interest (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

Data analysis

Interview and focus group data were recorded and transcribed. NVivo 10 qualitative data management software was used to assist with coding. The analysis used a framework approach* (Ritchie et al., 2003), with the programme objectives being used to guide initial coding, and emergent themes agreed by both authors.[3]

Ethics

The evaluation received ethical approval through Leeds Beckett University. Informed consent in written form was obtained from all participants. Where young women were below the age of consent, parental consent was obtained, as well as personal assent. Given the vulnerability of the young women, we adhered to standard safeguarding practices, with risk assessment undertaken prior to data collection, and the use of a debrief sheet detailing further support provided upon completion of the data collection. The participants' right to withdraw was stressed before and during data collection. No personal identifying information is used in the reporting of data with anonymised quotations distinguishing participants using pseudonyms for young women and generic labels for other stakeholders. Secure information management was maintained through password-protected university systems.

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[2] Blob trees are a youth work pictorial tool used in practice to support young people in articulating their feelings, through pointing out body language representations via blob figures (Wilson and Long 2009).

[3] Framework Analysis develops a hierarchical structure to classify and organise data according to key themes as well as emergent categories (Ritchie et al., 2003).

Findings

Ability to identify and respond to abuse

Women attending the groups reported that the programme helped them to recognise abuse (in its different forms e.g., physical, psychological and financial) and to talk about their experiences of abuse as well as broader vulnerabilities in terms of self-harm, depression and family breakdown. Many participants had complex needs requiring long-term support. In some instances, young women were able to break the cycle of returning to abusive partners. This was particularly significant for women who had experienced abuse since an early age and considered it to be the norm:

> "It really helps…I've realised obviously what an abusive relationship actually is and that I can just leave because before I came here, I was constantly leaving and going back and leaving and going back…" [Focus Group 2 , Sally]

As well as moving away from abusive relationships and obtaining non-molestation orders, a number of participants were able to retain or regain custody of their children, acknowledging the programme's role in this:

> "It's changed pretty much everything. My daughter's coming home in six weeks and that's due to obviously having support from this group." [Focus Group 2, Caitlyn]

In learning to recognise abuse, many women experienced the difficult process of identifying it. The word 'victim' is loaded with stigma, and misconceptions around domestic abuse mean that many reject the term:

> "I was just in denial for ages like I'm not a victim, don't call me that… I think it was just that word, it was that word that put me off for ages. I was like I didn't want to be a victim of domestic violence. You just tell yourself that you're not that. But in reality, you are." [Focus Group 5, Melanie]

Improved mental wellbeing and self-confidence as well as decreased social isolation

The programme aimed to build the confidence of young women as an enabling factor for increasing resilience and helping them make a positive change. Young women shared examples of how they were able to seek support or manage difficult situations by asserting themselves:

> "I think because I've come to [The Programme]…I would have the confidence now to leave a relationship if it wasn't healthy for me, no matter how it affects the other person you'd have to put yourself first." [Focus Group 1, Zoey]

Participants also reported significant improvements in their mental health resulting from attending the group sessions, including reductions in anxiety and self-harm, improved mood, and feeling more positive about the future:

> "I've got scars everywhere because I just hurt myself all the time and coming here it just slowly stopped, I don't really think about it anymore." [Focus Group 2, Sally]

The group meetings filled a need for social interaction and peer support that abusers often denied the women. One young woman described learning to rebuild relationships outside the group

after a long period of enforced social isolation and developing the language to communicate her experience:

> "[He] made me distance myself from not just friends, but family this time too [...] when I've come into group it helps you to learn how to reconnect with your family, reconnect with your friends [...] to know how to say it and how to put it across in a way that somebody that's never been in that position can understand." [Interview, Eleanor]

Learning from peers helped participants gain a different perspective on their own situation and they reported feeling understood and secure in a group of women who shared similar experiences. Some also spoke of learning who they were for the first time. Peer support was most appreciated when the young women were in the process of dealing with challenges that would permanently change their lives, such as the removal of their child by social services to reduce risk of significant harm:

> "No one understands and here you feel like everyone understands because you've all been through it and it's like a close little family." [Focus Group 5, Geri]

Improved skills and ability to stay safe

In addition to learning to recognise abuse and unhealthy behaviours, young women valued how much they learned about coping skills and well-being. However, it has to be noted that not all women were able to separate themselves from abuse, especially young women bound financially to abusive partners or family members, including parents. For some, the programme gave them the skills to manage challenging family relationships, and learning to stay safe:

> "It's helped me know my worth and it's helped me address situations like more maturely rather than actually arguing and shouting and getting aggressive." [Focus Group 5, Emelia]

Other participants reported being better able to manage their emotions because they were able to talk about their problems in the groups.

Programme features valued by young women

Non-judgemental approach

Young women identified successful components which underpinned the delivery of the programme. The approach adopted by the programme facilitators was non-judgemental with an emphasis on harm reduction, and this was viewed positively:

> ""...you can, you can say what you want to say, and you're not forced into anything..." [Focus Group 5, Emma]

However, young women did not recognise that harm reduction fails to prevent abuse, instead only informing them about staying safe.

Trust and rapport

Trust was built by creating a safe space for young women to meet and learn in. The gender-specific focus of the programme (women-only) was important in this respect. Everything discussed in the group was to be treated confidentially unless a young woman was deemed to be at risk, which

promoted trust. Additionally, the programme was run by a charity independent from statutory services, so participants felt they could trust workers and did not fear losing their children when disclosing:

> "I didn't open up about anything…there was stuff I didn't tell anyone about and then I came here, and I've told pretty much everything that I went through since I was about thirteen." [Focus Group 2, Caitlyn]

Longer-term support

Referrers cited the positive aspect of the longer period of support allowed for by the programme which helped counter the abandonment that young women had often experienced. Workers reported that those who attended the programme rarely had the chance to tell their story elsewhere, but the programme gave them the opportunity to express themselves and be heard/listened to over time. Despite the 18-week programme being longer than other provision, young women reported not being ready to leave the group at that point. To manage young women's anxiety about exiting, workers established a Moving on Group which met every two weeks, following completion of the 18 week programme. Workers found some young women needed longer periods of support than they had anticipated at their programme planning phase, as well as advance notice about when their time in the group was due to end. A gradual introduction to the Moving On group was also needed:

> "I was like I'm not ready for this, I was telling them I'm not ready to move on. It's called the moving on group…I'm ready to get to that place of starting to move on but I'm just not fully there yet." [Focus Group 6, Nadia]

Professional perspectives

Together, the programme workers, service referrers and programme participants stressed the importance of having transport and creche facilities available to enable attendance, with such provision usually not available.

Workers and referrers confirmed the positive outcomes reported by the young women such as improved communication skills enabling them to keep themselves and their children safe from abusive ex-partners, leave abusive relationships whilst managing risk, reduce or stop self-harm (including drugs/alcohol misuse, unprotected sex) and keep their children in their care:

> "They were learning to open up more to their parents, they're seeing things from a different perspective, they're listening to others as well and what their opinion is so they're developing all types of skills just from taking part" [Referrer 1]

External stakeholders felt the programme filled a gap in services because there were no comparable models of provision locally:

> "The [programme] works with young women who have got fairly serious issues and I know that it's unique in the city. I know there's not much group work provision just for young women and not around the issues that they work with. In fact, there's nothing else." [Referrer 6]

Many service referrers felt peer support within groups was more impactful for the women compared to a professional speaking to them via one-to-one support. However, one referrer expressed concern about the group work model linked to the extreme vulnerability of the young women, despite staff safeguarding.   The programme workers reported changing the support they

provided to some young women (one to one work, rather than group involvement) when specific issues arose such as conflict and aggression.

Discussion

There is limited evidence about the success (or otherwise) of gender specific educational programmes and programmes developed by England's voluntary sector (Lloyd, 2018), though their broader success has been noted in US contexts (Joppa, 2020). The limited academic literature however provides evidence that voluntary sector organisations offering women-centred approaches to service provision can be successful in meeting women's needs, supporting them to make positive changes to their lives (Warwick-Booth & Cross, 2020). Outcomes from this evaluation further support this.

Our paper signals a range of positive outcomes as the result of regular peer and community worker support in a neutral, welcoming community setting using an evidence-based youth work approach (Crooks et al, 2019).What matters most to women who have experienced abuse is being listened to and feeling able to trust others (Warwick-Booth & Cross, 2020 & 2018) all components of the programme evaluated here. More generally, trust in professionals underpins domestic abuse disclosure (Lloyd, 2018), enabling women to apply often contentious labels to themselves whilst recognising their position as 'victims', which is not easy, despite increased public awareness of this issue (Paulino, 2017). More broadly, Kiani et al (2021) report that community-based programmes using empowerment approaches can be effective in reducing the risk of domestic abuse for women who access them. The programme focused on here offered an empowerment approach through education which sought to build the confidence of young women, increase resilience and enable positive change, whilst increasing the ability to stay safe. The relational approach used by workers and peer support worked well to support young women with often complex needs. This was viewed positively from participants' point of view, yet this model places emphasis upon them as individuals to stay safe, rather than tackling perpetrators, or attempting to prevent abuse. Many programmes similarly reduce risk rather than prevent abuse (Kiani et al, 2021) treating abuse as a privatised individualised problem, rather than a major public health issue linked to wider structural and gendered inequalities (Lloyd, 2018). A lack of prevention

Furthermore, Baldridge (2020) critiques the social and political spaces in which educational youth work takes place, with young people blamed for social circumstances beyond their control. Indeed, youth work spaces may also be sites for containment (Cross and Warwick-Booth, 2018) with limited reach, excluding those most in need.. Existing literature predominantly focuses on heterosexual, white young people (Crooks et al, 2019) rather than multiple marginalisation. In addition, many similar programmes remain funded in the short-term leaving long-term support for those in need unavailable. This programme no longer runs as workers were unable to secure sustainable funding. Funding also serves to constrain traditional youth work practices by introducing target numbers, and shortening the length of support given, to ensure that programmes reach more participants. In this instance, many young women who accessed this programme reported that they did not feel ready to move on and leave their peer group when they had completed the sessions, illustrating their need for longer-term support, perhaps because abuse had removed their social support system, or they did not have one prior to that. The creation of a moving on group by workers to bridge the gap between formal sessions, and programme exit was a unique approach developed here to manage these tensions.

Strengths and limitations

Like all studies, this one was not without its limitations. The programme aims were not easy to evaluate as they had been defined by programme workers prior to our involvement as researchers without service user involvement. However, workers attempted to respond flexibly to young women's educational needs by mapping session content to need and including young women's

requests for specific topics. Crooks et al (2019:43) recommend combatting the knowledge gap around the effectiveness of domestic abuse programmes by choosing "evaluation outcomes with (and not for) partners" as well as working flexibly when designing such research. We closely collaborated with programme workers once the evaluation had been commissioned. The evaluation did not reach and include young women who chose not to engage with the programme when they were referred to it, or include the views of those who left the programme at any point in time, perhaps because of negative experiences within the groups, or the programme not being appropriate for them. This raises the question of how to reach the disengaged. Limited stakeholder interviews also proved to be an issue, with some professionals declining to participate due to time restrictions within their roles.

Implications for future policy and practice

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The evaluation identified three areas for further development of educational provision, these were focused education for: the young women's wider support networks about domestic abuse; boys/men on healthy relationships and school aged girls in general due to concerns about the impact of social media. Questions were also raised within the evaluation by professionals about where non-binary or transgender young people fitted into this women-only model. This lack of diversity in general caused concern about reach in terms of programme delivery. Further development of the evidence base is also needed to illustrate what works educationally for young people with protected characteristics. Future research also needs to capture the views of young people who chose not to participate to provide evidence about non-engagement. Given short-term funding models in the context of continually high rates of domestic abuse and unhealthy relationships for young people (ONS, 2020), policy makers need to invest in longer-term programmes in this area,

Conclusion

This qualitative evaluation of an programme for young women who were at risk of or had experienced domestic abuse found a successful model meeting its intended aims of increasing knowledge about staying safe from abuse, making a positive difference to their lives and enabling them to exit harmful relationships. The non-judgemental approach, peer support and trusted community-based safe space were important components of the educational approach adopted and its success. However, such small-scale 'pilot' programmes are not able to reach all in need, since they tend are underpinned by short-term funding and tend to individualise responsibility for staying safe rather than tackling the historical and structural determinants of domestic abuse. Further research is needed into other community-based educational programmes to provide evidence of efficacy and effectiveness as well as transferrable models for use in these and other contexts.

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