ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Fathers' Experiences of Help-seeking and Support Needs for Themselves and their Children Following Domestic Violence and Abuse: A Qualitative Study

Bethan Pell[1] · Emma Howarth[4] · Loraine Bacchus[5] · Kelly Buckley[1,2] · Anne-Marie Burn[6] · Rhiannon Evans[1] · Graham Moore[1,3]

Abstract

Purpose A growing body of literature highlights multiple barriers for men seeking help following experiences of Domestic Abuse (DA). Men's intersectional identity as fathers may result in additional barriers to help-seeking, leading to unmet needs for themselves and their children. The current study explored fathers' experiences of help-seeking, access to support, and existing provision, to understand what type of intervention support could, in principle, be feasible, acceptable and effective in meeting their needs.

Methods This was a qualitative sub-study nested within a feasibility trial of a domestic abuse intervention targeting mothers and children. We recruited and undertook semi-structured interviews with fathers ($n = 5$) who self-identified as victims of DA through a men's service and social media adverts, and analyzed the data using Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Results We generated five themes: (1) Male identity and self-acceptance of victim status, (2) The intersection of fatherhood with men's identity as a victim of DA, (3) Recognition of DA against fathers by professionals, (4) Impacts of DA and subsequent separation from children and (5) Getting help for children. Men discussed challenges in accepting their own victim status alongside a masculine identity, as well as their intersectional identity as fathers. Additionally, they reported challenges in the recognition and acceptance of their identity as a victim by professionals, which impacted support provision for themselves and their children.

Conclusions This study provides an insight into the range of fathers' perceived barriers to help-seeking, which in turn, were perceived to influence subsequent support and intervention needs for themselves and their children. We make practical recommendations for future research into service response and intervention development aimed at supporting the recovery of fathers and their children following these experiences.

Keywords Domestic abuse (DA) · Fathers · Children · Help-seeking · Support

✉ Bethan Pell
pellb@cardiff.ac.uk

1 DECIPHer, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

2 Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

3 Wolfson Centre for Young People's Mental Health, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

4 School of Psychology, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

5 Department of Global Health and Development, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, UK

6 Department of Psychiatry, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

Introduction

Domestic abuse (DA) is increasingly recognized as an important social and public health issue that has detrimental consequences to the health and wellbeing of individuals (Gehring & Vaske, 2017), and substantial costs to society (Home Office, 2019). In the UK, DA is defined as "any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behavior, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. It encompasses various forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse." (Domestic Abuse

Act, 2021). An estimated 2.1 million individuals in the UK experienced DA in the year ending March 2023 (Office of National Statistics (ONS), 2023). Despite methodological issues with prevalence figures, DA is widely recognized as a gendered issue, with approximately 1.4 million women experiencing DA, in comparison to 0.8 million men in UK population data (ONS, 2023). In addition to prevalence being substantially higher for women, some studies suggest women's experiences are qualitatively different to men in relation to frequency, severity and impact, with women experiencing more frequent and severe forms of DA, often resulting in greater psychological fear and injury, and subsequently requiring different levels of support and intervention (Fanslow et al., 2022, 2023; Hester et al., 2017; Houry et al., 2008; Myhill, 2015, 2017; Nybergh et al., 2016; Walby & Towers, 2018;). However, other research challenges the 'gendered paradigm' which primarily describes DA as perpetrated by men towards women (Bates, 2019, 2020a; Hines & Douglas, 2016; Hine et al. 2022; Machado et al., 2023), highlighting the complexity and variability of DA experiences across genders.

Feminist scholarship explaining patterns of DA centralize gender at the core of its analysis in heterosexual relationships, with DA arising from socially constructed patriarchal structures emphasizing male privilege, power and dominance over women (Downes et al., 2019; Becker et al., 2022; Rose et al., 2024). Additionally, the concept of intersectionality is critical to feminist theorizations of power, suggesting different forms of inequality including ethnicity, disability and socio-economic status intersect with gender (Downes et al., 2019; Essue et al., 2025; Gunby et al., 2025). These intersecting forms of inequality shape DA experiences and perceptions of risk, which can increase barriers to disclosure, help-seeking and access to support (Dufour et al., 2023), as well as service response and provision (Humphries et al. 2022). These have been important and valuable contributions, shaping the legal, policy and practice landscape to manage and address DA in the context of male to female perpetrated DA (Downes et al., 2019; Gunby et al., 2025). Nevertheless, critical debate contends that dominant gendered perspectives have resulted in overlooking and disregarding male victims of DA (Bates et al., 2019). A growing body of literature signals interest in the experiences and needs of men who experience DA, highlighting the often-serious nature of male victimization (Wallace et al., 2019; Bates, 2020a) with wide ranging deleterious impacts on men's health and wellbeing (Hines & Douglas, 2015, 2016; Bates, 2020b; Macassa et al., 2025).

Despite negative impacts, men often do not get the support they need due to multiple barriers to help-seeking (Huntley et al., 2019). Socially constructed gender and masculine ideologies have been shown to significantly shape and influence barriers to help-seeking behavior (Hogan, 2016; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2023). Men's adherence to and maintenance of masculine norms can result in a distinct lack of recognition of DA amongst men themselves (Machado et al., 2016), resulting in them dismissing or normalizing the abuse they experience or only recognizing DA when reflecting on the relationship post-separation (Machado et al., 2023). This lack of recognition can be reinforced by professionals who may be reluctant to recognize and respond to male victimization, considered the 'antithesis of conventional masculinity' (Hogan et al., 2021 p. 936). Indeed, ideologies of masculinity appear to influence professionals' perceptions of risk and severity in male victimization (Hine, 2019), which drive men's fears of being disbelieved, their abuse being minimized, or being assumed and labelled 'perpetrators' and subsequently blamed for DA (Wallace et al., 2019; Hines at al. 2022). This issue is exacerbated by a 'female only' service system arising from a heteronormative framework of DA (Hester et al., 2012; AUTHOR), reinforcing the perception that services are not available or suitable for men (Huntley et al., 2019), preventing men from accessing the help they need. Men who do report DA, often have negative perceptions of provision due to these gendered responses. Some are shamed and blamed by services (Machado et al., 2023) and even experience punitive punishment such as being sent on perpetrator programs, rather than receiving the support as victims (Machado et al., 2022). Thus, the lack of societal recognition and tailored service provision for male victimization create barriers for men to access support provision (Wallace et al., 2018).

Recent UK policy on DA has recognized the importance of responding to the needs of male victims (UK Government, 2022), in addition to female victims, as well as recognizing the needs of children exposed to DA (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021). Indeed, the gendered nature of DA, and of parenting, likely intersect to shape experiences and outcomes, especially within relationships where children are present. While research on male exposure to DA is increasing, little attention has been given to exploring the specific experiences and perceived needs of victimized men who are fathers, or indeed the needs of their children. Research acknowledging the intersecting identities of women as mothers has indicated specific barriers to their help-seeking behavior (Essue et al., 2025). These include fear of children being removed from their care (Stephens & Melton, 2017) and a desire to keep the family together (Sani & Pereira, 2020). By extension, men who are fathers may also experience specific barriers to help-seeking, resulting in unmet needs for themselves and their children. By example, a small number of qualitative studies have highlighted unique vulnerabilities fathers face for disclosing and seeking help

(Hines et al. 2022). These are often related to concerns over losing contact with their children (Hines et al., 2015; Bates, 2019; Taylor et al., 2022) and appear to arise in the context of gendered parenting norms, where mothers are traditionally viewed as primary attachments for children. This may create a view that mothers are sometimes favored by legal and judicial systems (Hines et al. 2022) and drive a perception that some mothers deliberately and intentionally utilize these systems to gain custody rights of the children (Hines et al., 2015) – a concept coined 'legal aggression' (Cook, 2009). Victimized fathers also frequently raise concerns of 'parental alienation', referring to attempts by mothers to intentionally disrupt, block or damage their relationship with a child (Bates, 2019; Bates & Hines, 2023). These systems often include family courts, which have been identified as spaces where abusive cycles can persist, for both men and women (Hines et al. 2022), as the abusing parent may seek to undermine the victimized parent and thus manipulate the system to gain custody over children.

However, these concepts are extremely contentious in the field of DA. 'Legal aggression' is also known as 'legal systems abuse' in feminist literature, referring to fathers' use of legal systems to force contact and thus continue to perpetrate DA against mothers (Douglas, 2017). The concept of 'parental alienation' is also critiqued due to concerns that fathers can apply this notion to undermine and refute victimized mothers' concerns of child safety and utilize children as tools to continue the abusive cycle towards mothers (Callaghan et al., 2018). However, many fathers raise experiences of 'parental alienation' as part of their DA victimization and are thought to be particularly vulnerable to this experience due to their tendency to be non-resident parents (Hines & Bates, 2024). Thus, DA in the context of gendered parenting roles and responsibilities, adds another layer of complexity for victimized parents help-seeking behaviors. Whilst mothers may feel a heightened sense of responsibility for protecting their children from harm (Sani & Pereira, 2020), fathers also tend to prioritize their relationships with children when deciding whether to stay or leave an abusive relationship, which impacts their decisions to seek help (Bates, 2019).

The presence of children in DA, and the centrality of children within post-separation child contact issues, raise concerns regarding the impact on children. There is a wealth of literature documenting the deleterious short- and long-term impacts of DA exposure on children (Bueso-Izquierdo et al., 2025; Adeyele & Makinde, 2023). As highlighted above, children are increasingly recognized in UK policy as victims of DA exposure, with increasing efforts to support children to navigate the complexity and trauma of their experiences following DA. Fathers who are victims of DA tend to communicate concerns about impacts of DA exposure on their children (Hine et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2020) and indicate wanting some support for themselves and their children. Additionally, issues relating to post-separation child contact are shown to be a point of vulnerability, where children may be used by either parental figure as tools in the abusive cycle, thereby exacerbating their distress and trauma (Harman & Lorandos, 2021). Hence, children sitting at the center of this potential pattern of post-separation abuse are at a greater risk of harm during this period (Stewart & Arnull, 2023).

However, it is unclear whether fathers are able to access support for their children in a sector often believed to be orientated to addressing DA towards women, and in which limited comparable services are available for men (Hines et al. 2022; Wallace et al., 2018). Despite the growing literature on male victimization, men who are fathers tend to form a small sub-sample of studies exploring male victimization and although they indicate unique vulnerabilities in relation to child contact issues, they do not explore fathers' experiences of accessing support to help their children recover from DA. The current study explored fathers' reported experiences of help-seeking to understand support and intervention needs for them and their children. Our research questions were:

1. What are fathers' reported experiences of help-seeking including disclosure and access to support services for them and their children following DA?
2. What are fathers' perceived intervention needs for them in their role as fathers, and for their children following DA?

Methodology

Research Design

This was a nested qualitative sub-study, conducted within a feasibility trial. The feasibility trial explored the potential to conduct a larger randomized controlled trial of a mother and child intervention National Institute of Health (Grant Number: NIHR127793). This mother and child intervention was a manualized, trauma informed psycho-educational program focused on their recovery following DA experience. It was delivered through a parallel groups model, which involves mothers and children attending separate but simultaneous group sessions over 12 weeks (Nolas et al., 2012). While the overarching feasibility trial focused on mothers and children, this sub-study was designed to explore if the intervention could be relevant to fathers who were victims of domestic abuse. This involved exploration of men's perceived experiences of help-seeking, access to support, and existing provision.

It adopted a qualitative methodological approach, due to its ability to elicit rich and in-depth insights from fathers about their experiences and views. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with fathers who self-identified as victims of DA. The study was granted ethical approval on 21 st July 2020 by Wales Research Ethics Committee 5 (REF: 20/WA/0199).

Recruitment and Participants

Two community based DA organizations involved in the feasibility trial as host sites were responsible for recruiting to the sub-study. Both host sites had an intervention coordinator, who was a member of staff within the organization responsible for contacting potential participants, undertaking the screening process, and confirming willingness for potential participants to be contacted by the study team. However, only one site was able to screen men for the sub-study.

Study fliers were disseminated to this host site, as an initial guide to help explain the sub-study to potential participants. Men interested in participating were referred to the intervention coordinator. The coordinator assessed their eligibility according to the sub-study's inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as using their own organization's risk assessment criteria. They then logged the outcome of this assessment as either eligible, ineligible or un-contactable. Reasons for ineligibility were recorded by intervention coordinators. Although, a large number of potential participants were considered ($n=194$) these were excluded for important reasons, highlighting the challenges in recruiting this group. Among the reasons, 42% there were concerns over perpetration of DA; 53% did not have parental responsibility; in 9% of cases intervention coordinators were unable to ascertain abuse or DA was between a parent and child; 5% were unreachable; 2% were eligible but not interested and 1% were not screened (some men had multiple reasons recorded, hence the total surpassing 100%).

Subsequently, we amended the recruitment process (approved by Wales NHS Research Ethics Committee 5) by approaching and recruiting through a specific men's service, as well as through social media. The study team adopted the RESPECT screening tool (RESPECT, 2019), to assess eligibility of potential participants who expressed an interest via social media. RESPECT is a recognised screening framework, grounded in evidence from professional experience, which helps practitioners to identify exposure to domestic abuse and where reports of violence may actually be an act of perpetration. Only those who met the criteria for abuse, as defined by the tool, were included in the study.

Among the 32 potential participants who expressed an interest, 8 were excluded due to concerns over perpetrating abuse, as indicated by the RESPECT tool, 13 were excluded for not having parental responsibility, 2 withdrew interest upon follow up, and finally, 4 were excluded due to DA being between parents and children. Five participants were deemed eligible and consented to participate in the study. The types of abuse reported by participants were predominantly non-physical, including emotional, psychological and financial. One participant reported low frequency and low severity physical violence. We did not specifically seek to determine any bi-directionality in abuse. Four out of five participants identified as White British, one identified as White South African. All fathers had 2 or 3 children.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with fathers' as self-identified victims of DA. A topic guide was developed to help ensure interviews covered key questions relating to intervention acceptability and feasibility, which was the overarching aim of the sub-study. Topic guide questions included open-ended questions covering (a) fathers' and children's experiences of DA, (b) the help-seeking process, (c) experiences of support (d) intervention needs of fathers and children (e) how the program could help fathers, and their children overcome DA experiences (f) barriers and facilitators to program attendance. However, fathers were given the opportunity to lead the interview and tell their story, enabling them to highlight experiences and raise issues of importance to them. All interviews took place online and were audio-recorded. Participants either provided written or verbal informed consent prior to commencing the interview. Verbal consent involved the interviewer reading out each consent statement and recording verbal agreement to each of the statements. Interviews ranged from 46 to 103 min, averaging 79 min. Participants were offered a £20 voucher to thank them for their contribution.

Analysis

Verbatim transcription was undertaken by an independent supplier, with quality checks of all transcripts undertaken by the lead analyst (BP) to ensure anonymization, confirm accuracy of the transcripts and help contextualize the written text (given that the lead author was not involved in interview conduct). We used reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). This form of analysis was deemed appropriate due to its exploratory approach, allowing themes to be reflexively constructed, whilst also grounded in the data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process and 'good practice' guidance (Braun &Clarke, 2022) was followed by the lead author, with regular input from the wider research

team, to systematically guide exploration, interpretation and reporting of the analysis. NVivo12 software was utilized to support the analytic process.

The first step was data familiarization; repeatedly reading transcripts and listening to the recordings whilst recording initial analytical observations and reflexive insights, both in relation to the individual interview and entire dataset - this was particularly important, given the lead author was not involved in collating the data. The lead author then conducted iterative rounds of systematic coding with the entire dataset, generating succinct codes that represented important features of the data, whilst keeping the aim and research questions in mind. Next, the codes were examined and grouped to actively construct broader patterns and themes within the data.

Weekly reflexive meetings took place between BP and GM, and occasional meetings of BP with EH, KB and RE. The research team was predominantly comprised of women with professional experience in the field of gender-based violence. Thus, reflexive meetings were integral to the analytical process, to continuously acknowledge the assumptions and values of the research team and ensure themes were both grounded in the data, and relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The team's experience in gender-based violence reflect an important balance in representing the nature of fathers' experiences, whilst situating these within the wider complexities and controversies of the DA field. The themes were reviewed, refined and defined with input from the entire research team, to clarify and determine the scope, focus and 'story' of each theme. Some themes were grouped together, resulting in a total of five themes.

Results

The five main themes are summarized in Table 1. The results describe these themes, drawing on participants' quotes to support the key aspects discussed. Throughout all themes, gender was a key concept that permeated fathers' accounts. Interviews illustrated how dominant understandings of DA, coupled with masculine ideologies, are perceived to culminate in male victimization as a hidden issue, which shapes all aspects of fathers' help-seeking experience, both for themselves and their children. Fathers highlight gender in the context of parenting roles and expectations, where mothers are perceived to be primary caregivers in children's lives, sometimes to the detriment of fathers. Subsequently, gendered parenting norms appeared to intersect with the gendered nature of DA and were perceived as perpetuating the invisible nature of male victimization, negatively impacting fathers' ability to seek help for or access support

Table 1 Main themes

Theme Number	Theme title	Connection to aims of RQs
Theme 1	Male identity and self-acceptance of victim status	This theme explores fathers' recognition of themselves as victims, which influences disclosure and help-seeking (RQ1)
Theme 2	The intersection of fatherhood with men's identity as a victim of DA	This theme explores how the intersecting identity of men as fathers can result in barriers to disclosure and help-seeking (RQ1)
Theme 3	Recognition of DA against fathers by professionals	This theme attends to fathers reported access to services and support provision, for them and their children (RQ1)
Theme 4	Impacts of DA and subsequent separation on children	This theme focuses on fathers' perceptions of DA impacts on their children, subsequently informing support needs of children (RQ2)
Theme 5	Getting help for children	This final theme highlights fathers' help-seeking, access to services and experiences of support provision in their role as fathers and on behalf of children (RQ2)

on behalf of their children. Hence, rather than discussed as a separate 6th theme, discussion of gender is interwoven throughout all 5 themes.

Theme 1 - Identity and Self-Acceptance of Victim Status

Fathers drew upon their identity as men to convey the barriers to accepting and accommodating victimhood into their own identity, and the subsequent barriers for disclosure and help-seeking. All men raised their concerns about the perceived lack of societal recognition towards male victims of DA, which they attributed to prevailing gendered understandings, positioning men as powerful and dominant. For fathers, 'identity as victim' defied these traditional understandings of gender and power, which automatically rendered them improbable victims, resulting in their victimization being disregarded or overlooked by themselves and others. This is reflective of findings relating to men in general: "It seems the identity of the person decides whether they're a victim" (F1).

Thus, these men felt traditional gendered understandings led to several unique barriers to disclosure and help-seeking. The lack of societal recognition meant that some men themselves did not recognize the signs of an abusive relationship until they had reflected on their experiences post-separation. For them, societal conceptualizations of masculinity were incompatible with notions of victimhood, which men described as leading them to minimize, normalize, tolerate and/or accept the abuse, resulting in

non-disclosure: "I didn't know, I didn't appreciate what was happening because there's a whole thing that this can't happen to men." (F1).

"During the marriage I could, I would just tolerate it. It wouldn't be. It'd be something I could just put up with." (F4).

Men's accommodation of their own victim status into their identity appeared to be an important milestone in their help-seeking behavior, because it was the foundation upon which they could disclose and access pathways to support – for them and their children. However, accommodating their victim status involved resolving tensions between masculine identities and notions of what victims 'look like'. Some men specifically drew on non-conformist identities of masculinity to re-frame and align themselves away from images of masculinity. It was only via this process of re-framing that men appeared to feel legitimately able to occupy victim status and disclose the abuse they were experiencing: "I'm fairly open about emotions and I don't think that's necessarily, I think that's probably more uncommon in men. I don't often see myself as a very male, male, if that makes sense?" (F3).

This perceived incompatibility between victimhood and masculine identity suggests men may have needed to engage in a process which involves compromising or losing aspects of their masculine identity, to acknowledge and recognize their own victimhood and thereby disclose.

Theme 2 - The Intersection of Fatherhood with Men's Identity as a Victim of DA

The additional intersectional identity of these men as fathers shaped their experience of disclosure and help-seeking. Whilst fear about being disbelieved contributed to non-disclosure for men generally, most fathers cited fear of disclosing in relation to threats about child contact - specifically, threats by children's mothers to withdraw child contact, or threats of false allegations to impact child contact. Fathers felt their partners drew on gendered parenting norms favoring mothers as primary caregivers over fathers, which they feared would result in a loss of contact with their children: "She knows that the system is heavily weighted in favour of the mother... so yeah, I do think that women know that they're in a better position, and they're using that." (F5). These societal norms relating to parenting roles, coupled with threats to child contact, were interpreted as a distinct and unique part of the abusive cycle for fathers that tended to culminate in decisions to remain in the relationship and thus non-disclosure: "If I ever made any indication that I was actually going to go she'd say you won't see the children, so I was completely trapped" (F1). "I was worried because she'd threatened about taking the children away." (F5).

This, in turn, was described by fathers as prolonging their children's exposure to DA. This included verbal, emotional, psychological, financial and in a few cases physical abuse: "My ex used to either lock me in the garden or lock me out of the house, or sometimes in the house. That was one of the things that would form part of, I suppose, the emotional coercive control." (F5). "If I was going to do something that was in any way fun-related [Ex Partner Name]'s mood would drop." (F2). "She didn't want me to go and watch football one day so she smashed out the windows on the car." (F1). As a result, some father accounts tracked a discourse of self-blame for not disclosing or leaving sooner: "There is this sense of guilt that you, even if you get out, that you allowed your children, to any degree, to have to experience that. You're left with that question of, should I have done something earlier?" (F3).

Fathers' identities as victims of DA were also entangled with experiences of navigating child contact issues post-separation. Concepts of 'legal aggression' and 'parental alienation' were prevalent in fathers' accounts and were constructed as a distinct component of their abusive experience, particularly if threats made by the mother had been reportedly carried out. Legal systems were viewed as being utilized against some fathers due to counter-allegations made by the mother against the father, and father-child relationships were perceived to have been blocked or disrupted. Fathers felt this aspect of DA had the most severe impact on both them and their children. They believed that this impact, coupled with the invisible nature of male victimization, led to post-separation issues being more readily recognized and interpreted as abusive, than DA occurring within the relationship, thereby shaping help-seeking behavior: "The real domestic abuse, I guess, occurred after the separation with this campaign of harassment mainly targeted at alienating me from the children through the use of false allegations … looking back it was evident prior to separation that this stuff was happening, but yeah, the impact occurred after separation. The heaviest impact occurred after separation I'd say." (F4).

In our interviews, fathers perceived breakdowns in their relationships with their children as being caused by manipulation of the parent-child dynamic by mothers, which they considered to be a form of DA. In contrast, they perceived breakdowns in relationships between mothers and children as a direct consequence of DA, believing that children observed and recognized the abuse directed towards fathers, or noticed that they themselves were being used as tools in the abuse by mothers. Fathers described how their children had decided to no longer have contact with their mothers, although, for one father, this resulted in him facing allegations of alienating behavior from the mother. Thus, a tension lies in the agency of the child in these decisions, and whether relationship breakdown was a result of manipulation in the parent-child relationship, or reflective of genuine desires and wishes of the child: "She [mother] told her

[daughter] to go and speak to her teachers and say I want to live with mum, actually what she did was she went to her teachers and used all that information and said I don't want to see my mum again and she's never seen her again." (F1). "[After the assault] my daughter decided, straightaway effectively that she didn't want any contact with her mother and she's remained absolutely resolute in that, she does not want to see her, she doesn't want contact. There's various suggestions about what I might or might not be doing to encourage her to have that relationship." (F3).

Perceived breakdowns in relationships between fathers and their children therefore coalesced with fathers' reported victimization post-separation, to influence disclosure and help-seeking:

"Because the men, like even in my case there was a little bit of violence and all that. You just shrug that off, that's not what kicks you. What really kicks you is when it starts affecting the kids and that's when you. That's when as a man you can suffer the slings and arrows against yourself, but when it's affect, when they're targeting your children that's when you really get impacted the most. And, so it comes out. I think a lot of these victims come out into parental alienation groups rather than domestic violence or domestic abuse groups because they don't see themselves. I wouldn't have seen myself as a victim of domestic abuse." (F4).

Theme 3: Recognition of DA against Fathers by Professionals

The perceptions of professionals, and their perceived recognition and acceptance of male victims of DA was ultimately viewed as impacting support provision for fathers and their children. All fathers reported negative experiences of accessing service support and were therefore highly critical of professional response and service provision.

Men felt professionals were reluctant to accept their victim status due to entrenched masculine ideologies. This led to men reporting being judged or treated with suspicion and disbelief by professionals, resulting in their victimization being minimized, disregarded or overlooked. This appeared to affect men's trust in professionals and thereby influenced and determined their decision to stay or leave the relationship and by extension, future disclosure, and help-seeking behavior: "Nothing was done, nobody picked it up, he [professional] made me feel like I should never have raised it, classic kind of, oh, you know, toughen up, man up. To my mind, unforgiveable, because that really put me off engaging with support." (F3).

System level responses were felt to be geared towards supporting women, resulting in a deficient service system for men, hindering their ability to ask for help. Absence of services meant professionals tended to signpost men to inappropriate or women's only services. Consequently, fathers struggled to access support and expressed feelings of desperation, which often resulted in approaching women's services, to no avail: "There was nothing, it's all for women, there's absolutely, it's impossible to find anything." (F1).

Even seemingly suitable services were described as resulting in negative experiences of help-seeking. Men described occasions where they felt services disguised themselves as professing help for men, but believed they were intended to undermine their accounts and re-frame them as perpetrators. Men described feeling as though they were being 'hunted' or treated like 'prey' by services, which resulted in feelings of deep mistrust and further isolated them in their experiences: "If you talk to anyone about it on the authority side you can tell that they're just trying to, you're treated with a great deal of suspicion and disbelief. And, they would much prefer that you were the perpetrator. And, so they'll try. They try and find a way that you're the perpetrator in all this - I think that's one of the big barriers is trust, it's trusting the institution." (F4).

Professional reluctance to acknowledge fathers' victimization appeared to be compounded by dual allegations of victimization, which often resulted in ascribing fathers with perpetrator labels, influenced by gender and masculine expectations. Fathers felt these binary victim-perpetrator labels informed subsequent decisions of support provision allocation, which they reported was assigned to the mother and withheld from fathers, exacerbating fathers perceived victimization: "Where's his IDVA, where is the provision here for him?" (F4).

A few fathers described pockets of good practice, experiencing a supportive and non-judgmental approach: "They gave me a little leaflet and said, "These are some agencies you should speak to, here, we recommend this one particularly, it's the local service… was assigned a Domestic Abuse Worker, who came out and worked with me, for a number of weeks and then referred me to counselling service, called, [Counselling Service Name], which I attended for a time" (F3). "He was very supportive; he passed me onto [Place Name] Domestic Abuse Support, and I met a lady there who, you know, was very sympathetic and gave me some good practical advice." (F5). However, some of this support was limited due to perceptions of safety and risk: "But I did definitely get the impression that, because I wasn't in any immediate danger, I wasn't going to be treated in any way with any sort of priority. And then I didn't see or hear from her again after that" (F5).

The lack of service provision was described as not only resulting in challenges accessing support for fathers, but for their children too: "I just would like the same treatment as anybody else would get and I don't feel I get it because of my gender and therefore my children don't get it, my children don't get helped." (F1).

Fathers felt that gendered parenting roles were central to the lack of service provision, with traditional views depicting fathers as physically or emotionally absent and mothers as providing safe and secure attachments. Parenting norms were perceived as positions of power for mothers, where the 'system' was felt to be weighted heavily in their favor. This, coupled with the belief that mothers' victimization was taken more seriously, was felt to influence the availability and accessibility of services for mother-child interventions and resulted in a lack of support provision for fathers and their children: "She said, 'It's run for groups, it's run for parents and children, affected by domestic abuse, and it's run as a twelve-week program … the only problem is, it's a program for mothers." (F3). One father did report eventually gaining access to an intervention of this kind, because the service itself was able to offer the program on a 1:1 basis, although this had to be adapted due to gendered pronouns and came with an additional financial cost. Accordingly, most fathers perceived a bias where support provision for children was tailored towards mothers.

However, court ordered child custody arrangements raised the complexity of addressing this service system. Ultimately, fathers reported a belief that attending a father-child intervention may depend on whether fathers were granted primary or legal custody of their children. Reflecting on gendered parenting roles, fathers felt that the service system may then only cater for a small proportion of victimized fathers granted primary caregiver status for their children: "The fathers who are primary carers, so that's 3%, in 3% of the cases, and then out of those 3% cases, how many of them are victims of domestic abuse as well? So the numbers are getting smaller and smaller." (F5).

This illustrates fathers' perceptions of how gendered understandings influence service provision and response, influencing help-seeking and access to support. It also highlights gender in the context of parenting roles and expectations, where mothers are perceived to be primary caregivers in children's lives influencing service provision - which was ultimately felt to negatively impact fathers' ability to access support on behalf of their children.

Theme 4: Impacts of DA and Subsequent Separation on Children

Fathers' reflections on their child's experiences of DA influenced their view of its impacts on the child, which ultimately shaped their understanding of the child's support needs. Some fathers reported that their children witnessed aggression, assaults, frequent conflict and arguments during the relationship, raising concerns about how this impacted their children: "I think my biggest concern, was always what they were exposed to, so, aggressive language, shouting, seeing me kicked and punched and then seeing things being thrown at me, appalling swearing and just vile language and a lot of attempts to demean me and you know, dangerous behaviors. (F3) Some fathers felt their victimization was shaped by gender, with mothers reverting to emotional rather than physical abuse, which they believed impacted their child's victimization differently: "The abuse is different and its sort of mental abuse. So, I think that has to be taken into account that if the male parent and the children have had that then it's going to be different …so may need a different approach to it." (F1).

However, one father was reluctant to consider the potential impacts of DA on their children. Instead he referred to child developmental constructs at the time of exposure, indicating that the children were still young when he left the relationship, to demonstrate a feeling of protecting and shielding their children from DA exposure. Subsequently, the nature and extent of DA exposure, mediators of child development such as age and stage, and fathers' acknowledgement of potential impacts, informed some fathers' views on how DA had impacted their children: "I don't know whether it's wishful thinking, but I don't think that it's affected them. They were nearly 3, yes, but I just think that I've protected them from any difficulties there might be." (F5).

Most fathers predominantly focused on the impact of post-separation child contact issues on their children. Because fathers conceptualized post-separation child contact issues as part of their own DA experience, they also conceptualized these issues as part of their child's exposure to DA and as directly contributing to their children's distress and trauma. Whilst the relationship had ended, fathers described children being used "as a bargaining chip" (F1) and being exposed to "a lot of hate in the aftermath" (F2). These post-separation child contact issues were believed to create confusion, disruption, and turmoil for families, resulting in multiple co-occurring stressors that accumulated for children. Fathers referred to contact issues and perceived alienating tactics as a form of emotional abuse experienced by their children, with wide-ranging deleterious impacts: "My son's behaviour in that period, when he was experiencing that emotional abuse, his behaviour became very unsettled and aggressive and violent" (F3). "My eldest son was having suicidal thoughts. And, for both the eldest children, my daughter and my son I was warned of a suicide risk to the extent that I'd have to put the knives away, hide sharpened tools. All of them have a history now of self-harm. My youngest boy I found out was self-harming." (F4). Other significant impacts for children identified by fathers included relationship breakdown between a parent or sibling, mental health, emotional dysregulation, identity crises, educational attainment and difficulties making friends. Overall, fathers felt their post-separation issues caused the most significant harm to their children: "They've all been deeply, deeply

affected by it (F4)". "It's just incredibly painful to watch and see their mental health completely destroyed (F1)".

Theme 5: Getting Help for Children

Fathers described perceived support and intervention needs for their children and their experiences of acquiring help for their children. Due to the deleterious impacts of DA identified for their children, fathers described wanting direct and indirect support for their children, to aid their recovery following experiences of DA, and the subsequent family break up: "The first thing that I did, as I say, was to get help for the kids … my absolute priority was getting them, I was so acutely conscious of what they'd gone through" (F3).

Some fathers wanted indirect support to help navigate difficult conversations about parental contact. These usually arose in situations where there were dual allegations, resulting in children offering allegiance to one parent, which often differed between siblings. Whilst the processes that led to these situations appear to draw on the concept of parental alienation – the resulting issues undoubtedly evoked distressing situations and conversations amongst children, which fathers found extremely difficult to navigate. They advised wanting to support their children and help them make sense of and process these family ruptures but were not equipped with the tools they needed to be able to sensitively steer and manage these conversations. They described being desperate for professional input, to help support them with this:

"So, really, really a complicated situation, where I've got one child who goes and spends time, has a relationship with their mother and another child, who is absolutely opposed to having that relationship. So, quite a, at times, incredibly challenging dynamic to navigate with the two of them… I asked repeatedly 'can you please help me navigate this? What is the best way to deal with it?' No interest, didn't even reply to emails?" (F3).

Not only did fathers describe a need for support for them to help their children, but most fathers also described wanting independent, direct professional support for their children, and some children had directly requested this. Having an objective and neutral person to talk to was felt to be crucial, to ensure a safe space in which children could discuss their views, experiences and feelings openly, without worrying or upsetting either parent: "She [daughter] articulated that she would like somebody outside of the family to talk to." (F3). "I think they need to have somebody that they can, it would be best if they had somebody, a kind of safe space like with the therapist isn't it, nobody else is involved and you don't have a fear of saying something or upsetting someone" (F1).

Multiple and varied pathways to professional support were harnessed – fathers approached their children's school, social workers, primary care, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), therapists and DA services. Responses from these professionals varied and depended on their acceptance of fathers' victimization, recognition of child support needs and availability of service provision in their location. A few fathers were able to secure pockets of support for their children but expressed various challenges in gaining access to this. One father reported that they could only access support for their children through family courts, another father gained support once school had observed behavioral issues – initiating CAMHS and educational psychologist referrals, and another accessed several points of support and intervention, although some of this came at a financial cost. One father described a situation where he approached the school nurse, assuming they would have knowledge of suitable services for his children, but a lack of awareness in service availability resulted in his identifying and sharing details of a service back to the nurse:

"I went to the school nurse, and the school nurse was casting around for options. At the same point, I randomly had that conversation at [Service Name], that was the organization, where they, and I'd gone for a completely different purpose and they mentioned that they had the [Program Name], started doing the [Program Name]. I went back to the school nurse and said, "Oh, I've been offered this thing, what do you think?" "That is far better than anything I can offer or that I've heard of, so, yes, you should do it." I had to send her the details of the program [chuckling], I thought this is awful, she was very grateful, but I thought well, the school nurse, should surely know" (F3).

Experiences of direct, independent support for their children varied. Some fathers reported positive provision from third sector charity organizations focused on child recovery, or from independent therapy or counselling services: "But we did get counselling support for the children … some family assistance therapy and I think that was helpful." (F4). "My son, had a Support Worker, at that point, with [Third Sector Charity Programme Name], and that was great" (F3). However, some fathers felt professional reluctance to accept male victimization led to dismissal of their child's victimization, minimizing children's experiences of distress and trauma: "[Professional] made recommendations around, oh, well, she should have got over all of this and she shouldn't be seeing her father as having been a victim and actually, the assault wasn't that bad, there were no, I think she described it as, a weapon to use, so, it was okay." (F3).

However, some fathers reported becoming so disenfranchised by the process of attempting to access and secure support for their children, that they described relying solely on their own abilities and capacities as parents to help their children recover from their experiences. They described concepts of security, stability and consistency as key for forming an environment in which their children could feel

safe and supported following exposure to violence and abuse, and the period of disruption, abandonment and loss following separation. Father 4 advised "The best you can do is just give them a stable environment and be around".

Most fathers described liking the idea of the in-principle intervention being explored in the sub-study – where parallel groups could be run with fathers and children, to support their own and their child's recovery post-DA, as well as helping to strengthen their relationship. However, some fathers considered the challenges of utilizing this model for father-child relationships post-DA, due to the additional complexity of child contact and parental alienation. Some felt that mothers would be more likely to receive support than fathers, due to judicial systems that were seen to favor mothers, preventing opportunities to access the program: "They're probably more likely to have the mum sitting next door, not the dad. Whether or not the Mum was the perpetrator, not the victim… I think that would definitely be an issue." (F5). Others warned of the potential risks of being seen to alienate mothers, creating further tension in parental relationships and thereby causing more harm: "You run the risk of swapping one alienation for another. what you don't want to do is add a new adverse childhood event to a situation." (F4).

Additionally, although most fathers we interviewed had primary custody of their children, they acknowledged this as a rarity, and felt most fathers would lack contact with their children, thereby limiting their access to this program: "I think the challenge, for a program, for men, is that, I'm acutely aware of how rare it is to be in the situation, that I found myself, but actually a lot of what would tend to happen is that men will find themselves on the outside of child contact, regardless of perhaps the victimhood, and I think that brings with it a set of other challenges, in terms of fathers who may not have the level of contact with their children, that I had." (F3). "Definitely, I think would be really, really helpful. But then you've got the problem that a lot of the fathers don't even have the children to bring them." (F5).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore fathers' reported experiences of seeking help and obtaining support for themselves and their children following DA. Additionally, the study aimed to understand fathers perceived intervention needs, for them in their role as fathers and for their children, to inform intervention development. Overall, the findings highlighted unique barriers to help-seeking reported by fathers, which in turn, were perceived to influence access to support provision for their children. Whilst our findings highlight some commonality between mothers and fathers in relation to post-separation abuse, there were differences in the fathers' experiences of help-seeking and access to services, highlighting important considerations for developing and implementing father-child interventions.

The concept of gender permeated all fathers' accounts and was described as shaping all aspects of their help-seeking, including disclosure, access to services and support provision, for them and their children, following DA. Previous research highlights the significant influence of socially accepted gender norms, and their complex interplay, in enabling men to recognize and accept male victimization (Hines et al., 2022). In some cases, fathers only recognized DA when reflecting on the relationship once it had ended (Machado et al., 2023). Akin to other studies, fathers perceived the dominant gendered understandings of DA, which emphasize male privilege, power and dominance, as impacting their ability to recognize their own victimhood and thus hindered disclosure (Bates, 2020b; Hine, 2019). For them, societal messages of DA as a 'women only' domain, along with broader constructions of masculinity, resulted in male victimization as an 'untenable' identity, and as further preventing them from seeking help (Machado et al., 2016; Huntley et al., 2019) – ultimately resulting in them delaying leaving the relationship. Thus, some fathers described needing to distance themselves from constructions of masculinity, in order to construct and accept their identity victimization and seek help.

Additionally, men's intersectional identity as fathers and the gendered nature of parenting were described as a key influence in disclosure and help-seeking behavior. Threats by mothers relating to child contact were frequently highlighted by fathers and thus, fear over losing contact with children was often cited as the main reason for fathers' decisions to not have left the relationship sooner (Bates, 2019, 2020b; Hines et al., 2022). Fathers centralized this experience in the context of gendered parenting roles, arguing that mothers tended to be assumed to have main caregiver status, sometimes to the detriment of fathers who sought to adopt the role of primary caregiver, often describing a desire to protect their child from a partner they described as abusive. The gendered nature of parenting was described as intentionally harnessed by mothers, to instill fear among fathers and prevent them from leaving (Huntley et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2020).

Linked to this were concepts of 'legal aggression' and 'parental alienation', which were also common in fathers reported experiences. Here, most fathers argued that their partners used judicial systems in their favor to assume custody and contact rights of the child, and subsequently attempted to disrupt, block or damage fathers' relationships with their children (Cook, 2009). Whilst fathers described experiencing types of DA also experienced by mothers including verbal, emotional, psychological, financial and even physical abuse, concepts of 'legal aggression' and

'parental alienation' were described by fathers as more impactful and harmful. Additionally, they felt the lack of recognition of men as victims resulted in these concepts being easier to recognize as abusive in the post-separation period, influencing barriers to disclosure and help-seeking.

However, as mentioned previously, concepts of 'legal aggression' and 'parental alienation' are contentious in the field of DA, with feminist literature asserting these notions as ways for fathers to counter mothers' allegations of DA and continue perpetrating abuse against them post-separation (Birchall & Choudry, 2022). Our findings therefore indicate that victimized mothers and fathers both contend with 'parental alienation' and 'legal aggression' in post-separation abuse, with these concepts becoming part of an ongoing effort to maintain control over the non-abusive parent (Douglas, 2017; Hines et al. 2022), particularly in family court. Thus, post-separation appears to be a time of heightened risk for both mothers and fathers, highlighting some commonality in experience.

Despite this, fathers felt they were particularly vulnerable to these forms of post-separation abuse due to perceived gendered parenting roles in systems that place more power with mothers (Hines & Bates, 2024). Thus, 'parental alienation' was conceptualized as part of the continued abusive cycle by these fathers and a distinct form of DA for them. Whereas mothers are at higher risk of severe violence during post-separation (Spearman et al., 2023), fathers cited less fear for their own safety, placing more emphasis on abuse in the form of these concepts post-separation, indicating some qualitative differences in the nature of DA for men and women (Hester et al., 2017).

Issues relating to child contact, such as parental alienation, are extremely harmful for children (Harman et al., 2022). Thus, the concept had implications for fathers perceived intervention needs, both for themselves and their children. However, the presence of dual allegations of DA (i.e., disclosures of DA from both mother and father), clearly create challenges for service providers when assessing risk and establishing safety in child contact arrangements and identifying intervention needs. While 'parental alienation' can occur, courts and support systems are challenged with distinguishing between genuine claims of alienation and those intended to maintain the abusive cycle (Nicholson-Pallett, 2024; CAFCASS, 2025). Drawing on concepts of parental alienation results in deeming the child's voice invalid in contact decisions, due to perceived manipulation of the child, and a refusal of one or both parties to recognize the child's agency in their own decision-making regarding contact (Berman & Weisinger., 2022). This may result in overlooking their wishes and desires (Hunter et al., 2020), even though children are recognized as having a right to be involved in decisions that impact their own lives (United Nations Convention on Rights of a Child (UNCRC), 1992). Our findings highlight the tension these concepts may create for establishing a child's genuine wishes relating to child contact, particularly in the presence of dual allegations, and the implications this has for father-child focused interventions and support. However, they also show the triangulation of children in abuse and the aftermath, as parents negotiate life outside of the relationship perceived by one or both parties as abusive, highlighting the importance of giving serious consideration to child's views in these decisions (Mercer, 2022).

Fathers reported a range of experiences securing support provision for themselves and their children. Some described positive experiences of support, with pockets of good practice where male victimization was felt to be understood, resulting in a non-judgmental and inclusive approach for fathers and their children. This approach has been shown to be important in other studies focusing on suitable support for men (McCarrick et al., 2016), although these findings highlight the equal importance of this approach for supporting children of victimized fathers. However, most fathers reported several barriers to accessing either indirect or direct support for their children, which was often dependent on awareness and recognition, service availability, financial capital and perceived behavior changes in school. This highlights the disparity in support experience for fathers and their children and emphasizes the role that gendered understandings have on the service system (Huntley et al., 2019). The recent recommendations from UK Government (2022) appear to recognize and acknowledge the implications of a 'female only' domain on male victims. This attention from policy makers highlights the importance of increasing visibility and service provision for fathers, to not only ensure they receive the support and intervention they need, but their children are able to access this too.

Implications for Future Intervention Work and Research

Our findings highlight the importance of considering the complexity of and challenges to developing and implementing father-child interventions, which may need to look different to mother-child interventions currently being delivered. Some fathers felt their experiences of DA were qualitatively different to mothers, with a higher prevalence of emotional rather than physical abuse, resulting in different experiences for them and their children which should be acknowledged in interventions. Fathers tended to focus on post-separation concepts of parental alienation and legal aggression as an aspect of both their own and their children's DA experience. Subsequently, perceived impacts for their children such as mental health, self-harm and suicide ideation and emotional

dysregulation were attributed by fathers to these issues. Thus, fathers expressed views that interventions should be sensitive to this. Furthermore, practical challenges of implementing interventions were raised, with a low number of children suggested to be residing with fathers in comparison to mothers, impacting the design and implementation of interventions for fathers and their children.

Recruitment challenges in this study also underscore the potential difficulties of engaging this group in research, which is likely mirrored by services current limited ability to engage them with interventions. In this study, only one out of two host sites was able to screen men for recruitment, and out of 194 potential participants, *all* were deemed ineligible for study participation, hence the decision to recruit via a specific men's service and social media. Thus, interventions offered through services may struggle to recruit fathers and their children to intervention programs. Additionally, the small minority of fathers with parental responsibility of their children, as well as the complexity of navigating child contact issues when implementing these interventions, were raised by fathers in this study as potential barriers to a group-based parent and child intervention and would need to be explored further in intervention development.

Future research should continue to explore the perceived barriers to disclosure, help-seeking and support provision for fathers following DA, and how this impacts support provision for their children. The evidence-base would also benefit from privileging children's voices, to ensure that intervention development and implementation meets their support needs for post-DA recovery.

Limitations

There are important limitations that need to be considered when interpreting these results. We experienced substantial challenges in identifying and recruiting male victims with parental responsibility to our study, perhaps reflecting the hidden nature of this population, and more work is needed to explore methods for engaging with this group in research. While our sample is small, interviews were lengthy and in-depth and hence provided rich data for analysis. However, our resultantly small sample size limited our ability to explore areas of consensus and difference in these accounts among a larger and more diverse group. Additionally, given the aforementioned challenges identifying male victims via services, these fathers are self-identified victims of DA recruited via responding to adverts for the research either through social media or via a male-specific service. This means fathers were self-selecting in responding and taking part in the research, so their experiences of disclosure, help-seeking and access to support may be different to fathers approached and recruited via professional service pathways.

However, a risk assessment tool designed by Respect was utilized to screen potential participants. Four out of five fathers identified as White British, highlighting lack of representation from black and ethnic minorities in the study. We did not collect demographic data for the fathers participating in this study beyond ethnicity and so are unable to comment on additional intersectionality beyond fatherhood. Finally, given this sub-study was part of a feasibility trial which focused on an intervention for mothers and their children recovering from DA, we acknowledge our focus on heterosexual relationships, and that gay and bisexual fathers' experiences may also be different.

Conclusion

This study provides insights into fathers' intersectional perceptions of disclosure, help-seeking and access to support provision for both fathers and their children, and their subsequent support and intervention needs. It underscores the qualitative similarities and differences in fathers' experiences and their conceptualization of DA, shaping and informing perceived barriers for help-seeking for them and their children. Challenges of implementing interventions for fathers and their children, like those currently delivered with mothers and their children were raised, suggesting the need to tailor interventions for fathers. Future research should focus on furthering our understanding of fathers' intersectional experiences of help-seeking following DA, as well as the experiences of their children, to inform intervention development and implementation that meets the needs of both fathers and their children.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of Wales NHS Research Ethics Committee 5 (REC 20/WA/0199).

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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