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'They Class Me as a Child because I'm 15. But They Don't Want Me at the Kid's Club': Towards Rights Respecting Refuges for Teenagers

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Abstract

Teenagers participating in a series of interviews over the course of their stay in domestic violence refuges described difficulties associated with the constraints of refuge life. Twenty young people reported experiences that connect to and challenge UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provisions and provide guidance on how refuges might strengthen their response and meet obligations to respect, protect and promote teenagers' rights. Recognition of teenage refuge experience is needed, alongside the provision of space, independence and privacy; support to recover from domestic violence and abuse; involvement in leisure activities; educational support; access to computers and online information; and increased opportunities for individual and collective decision making. The findings contribute to growing evidence that policy makers and other duty bearers need to develop adequate resourcing, attitudinal change, practice guidance, dedicated support, active engagement and

participation, and collaborative work between agencies. Implementation strategies are also discussed.

Keywords

refuges – teenagers – adolescence – domestic violence – domestic abuse – Convention on the Rights of the Child – CRC – shelters

1 Introduction

Experiencing domestic violence and abuse (DVA) in the home, described as exposure to intimate partner violence, is recognised as a form of violence against children (UNCRC, 2011). Failure to protect children from this violence can be interpreted as a violation of children's rights (Obreja, 2019). To provide safety and to begin opportunities for recovery from this form of violence, some children and young people are moved to temporary accommodation, usually with their parent or carer who has also experienced DVA. These temporary shelters, known as refuges in the UK, have been central to DVA service provision since the 1970s. The 2011 General Comment No. 13 (GC13) on children's rights to protection from violence recommends provision of shelters for women and their children as part of violence prevention strategies. DVA refuges are also acknowledged as a vital part of global harm reduction strategies in the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Council of Europe, 2014). This Convention highlights the importance of short- and long-term specialist support services for 'all women victims of violence and their children' and the need for 'sufficient, appropriate, easily accessible shelters/refuges to ensure safe accommodation'. It also outlines that States should ensure victims have access to services to facilitate their recovery from violence, including psychological counselling, financial assistance, housing, education and adequately resourced health care and social services.

Early studies on DVA service provision focused on the needs of adult women (e.g. Binney *et al.*, 1981; Pahl, 1978; Clifton, 1983), but children have increasingly become the business of refuges. However, there is less DVA research which takes a children's rights perspective (Obreja, 2019), and limited research on children's perspectives of refuge life, with scant attention to teenagers in this respect. Historically, DVA services for children and young people have been seen as an "add on" or secondary to services for mothers (Humphreys and

Houghton, 2008) and teenagers' evolving capacities are largely ignored by services. This also appears to be the case in the phrasing of GC13, para. 46(c) where children feature as appendages to women:

(v) Providing shelters and crisis centres for parents (mostly women) who have experienced violence at home and their children;

National policies and spending priorities, in addition to attitudes towards childhood, also create barriers to adequate DVA provision for children and teenagers (Larkins *et al.*, 2021). However, the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) has recently recognised children and young people as victims of DVA in their own right in England and Wales. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased children and young people's exposure to DVA (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020; UN Women, 2020). In this context, this paper therefore explores teenagers'¹ experience of refuge life and highlights strategies for ensuring that refuge provision meet obligations to respect, protect and fulfil teenagers' rights.

The paper connects teenagers' experiences and wishes, captured through a participatory study, to relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and General Comments No. 12 (*the right of the child to be heard*); No. 13 (*protection from violence*); No. 19 (*public budgeting for the realization of children's rights*); No. 20 (*the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence*) and No. 25 (*on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*) to provide a provisional framework for rights-respecting refuge provision. The paper also considers how teenagers' recommendations extend beyond the existing provisions of the CRC and considers this lends weight to the growing evidence of the need for improved services.

1.1 *Teenagers in DVA Refuges*

Previous refuge studies have presented children and young people as an homogenous group, with limited exploration of differences related to age. Where studies have been undertaken, they typically focus on younger children (e.g. Mullender *et al.*, 2002; Stafford *et al.*, 2007). However, researchers (e.g. Øverlien, 2011) have highlighted the lack of recognition of children and young people as service users with rights to dedicated service provision akin to that of adults.

A focus on teenagers is important due to their potential for double victimisation. Teenagers can require refuge accommodation due to their mothers'

1 The term "teenager" has been adopted when referring to children aged 13 to 18 years as this is the term participants used to describe themselves.

experiences or, from the age of 16, due to experience of violence in their own relationships (Home Office, 2013). A focus on teenagers is also important because adolescence is a period of conflicting experiences and statuses, and a stay in a refuge brings unique challenges. Teenagers face numerous challenges and changes associated with these adjustments (Coleman and Hagell, 2007) and opportunities (UNICEF, 2011), which occur at varying stages within adolescence. These include an increasing need for independence, evolving sexuality, educational transitions and consolidating advanced cognitive abilities (Cameron and Karabanow, 2003), alongside negotiating greater separation from parents, reliance on peers, and development of autonomy and freedom of expression (Coleman, 2011; Hagell and Witherspoon, 2012). They are expected to fulfil additional responsibilities without being accorded greater status or rights (Raby, 2002). The complexity of teenage experience is not acknowledged by refuge services: teenagers continue to be treated like younger children in many ways and there seems to be little knowledge of their specific rights (Larkins *et al.*, 2021).

1.2 *Rights-Based Approaches and DVA Research*

The need for specific attention to teenagers' rights was highlighted in the 2016 CRC General Comment No. 20 (para. 3) (hereafter GC20):

Generic policies designed for children or young people often fail to address adolescents in all their diversity and are inadequate to guarantee the realization of their rights. The costs of inaction and failure are high: the foundations laid down during adolescence in terms of emotional security, health, sexuality, education, skills, resilience and understanding of rights will have profound implications, not only for their individual optimum development, but also for present and future social and economic development.

The emergence of this General Comment provides potential for a children's rights-based approach to refuge provision which acknowledges teenagers' varied and developing competences and rights to increasing freedoms:

The Committee defines evolving capacities as an enabling principle that addresses the process of maturation and learning through which children progressively acquire competencies, understanding and increasing levels of agency to take responsibility and exercise their rights ... the more a child knows and understands, the more his or her parents will have to

transform direction and guidance into reminders and gradually to an exchange on an equal footing.

GC20, para. 18

Rights-based approaches offer a framework for grounding entitlement to State provision in international conventions and thereby assert that this provision should be prioritised (Lundy, 2014). This may be useful in contemporary contexts, where the resources required to protect the rights of teenagers experiencing refuge life are in scarce supply. In the context of teenagers' invisibility in refuge settings and assumptions of their vulnerability and excessive responsibilities, a rights-based approach may offer potential to challenge dominant practice. Lundy (2014) argues that evidence of adverse effects on wellbeing provide powerful arguments for change, but not as powerful as suggesting human rights have been breached.

Obreja (2019) has taken steps towards a Children's Rights Based Approach to understanding of DVA. Highlighting GC13 on Article 19, which describes States' obligations to protect children from all forms of violence, she argues that States have a two-fold duty to protect children from exposure to DVA and to ensure safety of any children who are exposed to DVA. This includes a systemic-level obligation to ensure that effective systems are put in place and that the root causes of violence are addressed. She also highlights the responsibility of States to provide effective measures to promote rehabilitation (Article 39). Obreja (2019) concludes that there is a pressing need for further research, particularly exploring the perspectives of children. Whilst Kelly and Mullender (2000) and Callaghan and Alexander (2015) have shown how DVA undermines children's rights and advocate for children to enjoy rights in practice, the rights of teenagers as a distinct group have not yet been addressed.

Rights-based approaches may not, however, be adequate to bring about the services that children or teenagers seek. There are historic, political and theoretical tensions within children's rights (Reynaert *et al.*, 2012). Much rights-based research has accepted the broad assumptions of a CRC framework rather than extending it (Larkins *et al.*, 2015). There is need to understand that Articles 2, 3, 6, and 12,² are neither "general" nor "principles" but cross-cutting standards (Hanson and Lundy, 2017). Implementation of the CRC may be limited by the remit and capacity of State parties (Lundy, 2014). Children and young people may call for rights that push beyond current rights provisions; these demands for living rights are deserving of serious attention (Hanson

2 Article 2: non-discrimination; Article 3: best interests of the child; Article 6: Right to life survival and development; and Article 12: Right to be heard.

and Nieuwenhuys, 2013). Critical reflection is therefore needed to both inform and secure the conceptualisation, interpretation and application of the CRC (Hanson and Lundy, 2017). In addition, there is need to engage with children's economic and social rights and recognise State parties' ongoing reluctance to acknowledge the impact of austerity on specific obligations (Nolan, 2013).

In a critical Children's Rights Based Approach to understanding teenagers' experiences of and wishes for DVA refuge provision, the necessary first step is to understand their priorities through the difficulties they face in their everyday lives (Hanson and Nieuwenhuys, 2013; Hanson and Poretti, 2010). A next step, in what has been called a "Children's Rights Based Approach from below", is to connect these to the provisions of the CRC, to explore how their requests for freedoms and services transcend established rights provisions, and to identify on-going challenges. A Children's Rights Based Approach from below therefore contextualises rights within lived experiences, rather than exploring universal claims, and aims to understand what respect, protection and fulfilment of rights might mean and what further rights may be needed (Larkins *et al.*, 2015). Children and young people in vulnerable situations, such as those living in refuges, can be active participants in this process as demonstrated by young people in other contexts (e.g. Larkins *et al.*, 2013).

2 Methodology

This research was a longitudinal study and data collection took place across a 12-month period in a diverse range of metropolitan and urban settings across the Midlands and North West of England. All DVA refugees in these areas were invited to participate, with teenagers recruited through refuge staff.

The research received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee. Signed informed consent to participate was obtained directly from participants and parents/carers of participating teenagers aged under 16 years. The lead author ensured that, in the institutional setting of refuges, consent was informed and fluid – paying attention to verbal and embodied signals about willingness to participate and repeating information the right to withdraw at any time (Larkins *et al.*, 2014). Privacy and confidentiality were assured within the limits of protection from harm (Graham *et al.*, 2013). Teenagers, who have been anonymised in all publications, chose their own pseudonyms.

In total, 20 teenagers took part in 64 face-to-face participatory interviews (an average of 3.4 interviews per teenager). The repeat interviews, undertaken across the period of their refuge stay, enabled collaborative evolving understanding of experiences over time. All 20 teenagers were aged between 13 and 18 years old. Ten were from a minority ethnic background and 15 were female.

The total length of current refuge stay for the participants varied from four to 15 months at the time of first interview, and ten participants had prior experience of a spell in refuge. One teenager was residing in the refuge independently (meaning she was on her own in the refuge, unaccompanied) and 19 were accompanying their families (mothers or carers and any siblings). Five of the teenagers were interviewed in their new homes once they had been rehoused.

2.1 *Cocreating Research Activities and Analysis*

The study was participatory in parts (Larkins *et al.*, 2014), enabling four teenagers to shape the research tools and themes and contribute to adjusting research themes, activities and tools, and three to participate in formal analysis of findings. Informal data analysis was ongoing throughout with the researcher returning to participants and checking interpretations of their experiences. Experiences of other teenagers were discussed to understand similarities and differences and their perceptions of these. Subjective understandings of experience were prioritised. An overview of this process is presented in figure 1.

The co-created activities strengthened through iterative redesign across the life of the study included walking tours, phrase cards, worksheets, collage, vignettes and rating scales (used at the beginning and end of the study to establish changes over time related to support needs, friendships, family relationships, education, space and privacy, and restrictions during a refuge stay). The iterative redesign involved asking participants about their experience of interviews and to critique the research to improve it for others. In addition to redesigned tools, improvements suggested included increasing the frequency of interviews and developing more ways of communicating issues back to refuge staff.

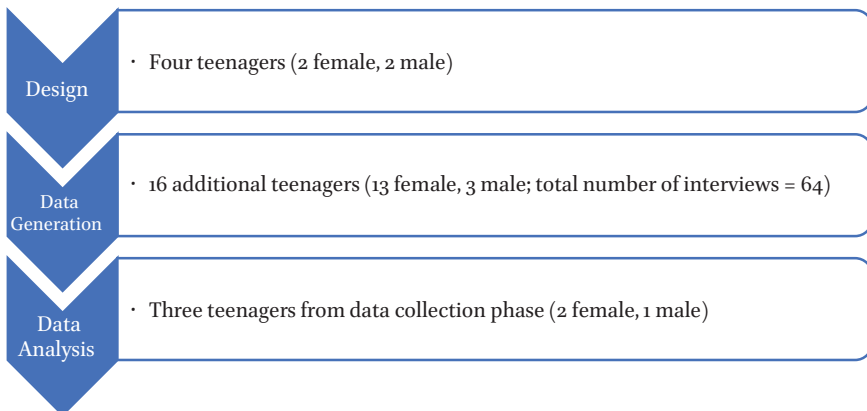


FIGURE 1 Research participation overview

Thematic analysis involved working outwards from children's experiences and priorities and then 'making links with specific rights provisions and principles to seek political and social change' (Larkins *et al.*, 2015: 359). Three teenagers who expressed an interest in the research continuing, analysed anonymised extracts from interviews with other participants, creating "in vivo" codes (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to identify themes that appeared in interviews with all participants and patterns of inequalities. They re-named codes and identified additional unlooked for themes. They explored relationships between codes and prioritised themes by comparing the experiences of different participants and discussing their own experiences. Through these data analysis sessions, five priority themes were identified.

In a second phase of analysis, the adult research team made connections between these prioritised themes and potentially relevant provisions of the CRC and associated General Comments. The potentially relevant rights identified in this analysis process are listed in Table 1 below.

The rights described in the CRC are often seen as 'more important for younger children than adolescents', meaning teenagers' experiences are often overlooked (Ruck *et al.*, 2014: 16). GC20 on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence was therefore particularly useful. It highlighted the absence of data available to inform policy for teenagers and

TABLE 1 Rights provisions identified during qualitative data analysis

Article 2	Non-discrimination
Article 3	Best interests
Article 5	Evolving capacities
Article 12	Respect for views of the child
Article 13	Freedom to seek, receive & impart information
Article 15	Freedom of association
Article 16	Privacy
Article 17	Access to information
Article 19	Protection from violence
Article 24	Health services
Article 27	Adequate standard of living
Article 28	Education
Article 29	Education
Article 31	Leisure & recreational activities
Article 39	Rehabilitation of child victims
Article 42	Knowledge of rights

calls for allocation of appropriate resources to ensure implementation of the rights of adolescents and to support their evolving capacities. However, there is no direct reference to refugees within this General Comment. Articles of the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) were also relevant in some instances, for example, under Article 11(1) of the ICESCR on the adequacy of housing.

In a third, critical step, the gaps between teenagers' recommendations and these existing provisions were identified to provide greater insight into what 'an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child' (Article 39) might mean for teenagers in DVA refugees.

A children's rights-based approach (CRBA) to research can be defined as having aims and processes which are informed by and comply with the CRC standards and should build the capacity of children and duty bearers to claim and fulfil obligations (Lundy and McEvoy 2012). A fuller implementation of a Children's Rights Based Approach from below (Larkins *et al.*, 2015) would have necessitated further engagement with the participating teenagers to feedback information on the suggested relevant provisions and support their activism. This was not possible within the confines of this doctoral study as many participants moved out of refuge and could not be contacted. We recognise this as a limitation to this study but argue that it builds on the work of Obreja (2019) to provide further steps in the development of a rights-based understanding of teenagers' experience of refuge, which should be further developed.

3 Findings

The teenage participants identified five priority themes as follows: (1) Space, Independence and Privacy; (2) Support; (3) Activities and Friendships; (4) Education and Homework; and (5) Participation. For each theme, the analysis below describes teenagers' experiences; related rights provisions; and how teenagers' requests or suggestions for services extend understanding of how their rights could be respected, protected or promoted in refuge settings.

3.1 *Space, Independence and Privacy*

All refugees where interviews took place had social spaces allocated to younger children. In contrast, designated communal space for teenagers was rare. Every teenage participant requested a dedicated space where teenagers could spend time away from family members in the refuge. They stipulated that facilities must be age-appropriate and available when needed. Physical space was also seen as a means of providing emotional space to cope with DVA:

... to get your mind off things ... when you're at that age and you see all that, it just ruins your life ... [I'd like] places where you can go and clear your head ...

REBECCA, female, 13 years

Teenagers were rarely able to access communal areas, such as the lounge or playroom, without supervision. Their access to space was regulated as they lacked adult status; refugees appeared to emphasise concerns for safety and protection over recognition of individual teenagers' capacities for responsibility and need for independence:

Can you imagine, [you're] just there doing your stuff and then the next minute just being told to get out [of a communal space] because you're not allowed, because apparently, you're a child?

MOHAMMED, female, 14 years

For at least 17 of the 20 teenagers, privacy had been restricted due to rules relating to safety, lack of age-appropriate facilities and surveillance by staff. Over half highlighted sharing a bedroom as reducing privacy, including sharing a bedroom with siblings ($n=11$) and their mothers ($n=5$). Not only did teenagers wish for privacy from their family, they were also uncomfortable with refuge staff intruding into their lives. Feeling 'imprisoned' or 'trapped' was mentioned by eight other teenagers, in connection with refuge rules and security measures:

I've got a curfew and all that. It's like I'm not having a life at all ...

GEORGIA, female, 15 years

... this makes me feel like it's a prison than a home. And that's why I say maybe it's not such a healthy environment for people who have been here for so long.

MOHAMMED, female, 14 years

The feeling of being trapped and lacking independence contrasted with prior experiences of freedom and responsibility. Eight teenagers compared not being allowed a key to the refuge unfavourably with the independence of having had their own house keys at home. They were also not permitted to be in the refuge if their mothers were not there. Older teenagers found the lack of opportunities for independence particularly restrictive:

I'm more independent, I can do something for myself now but not as in I'm [not] allowed ... My mum would let me, but the refuge won't.

EMMA, female, 15 years

The examples above reflect the trend for refuges to impose rules and protectionism which obstructed teenagers' rights to independence and failed to recognise their evolving capacities. In contrast, refuge keys were given to teenagers in some refuges, and this was regarded positively by the three teenagers who discussed this relative freedom.

Space and independence for teenagers is not a right provided by the CRC. But extending beyond existing definitions, it might be argued that full implementation of CRC Articles 27.2 and 27.3, which require State parties to assist parents to provide adequate housing, positions a private room in refuge as a living right and 'necessary' for teenagers' development. State parties have a duty progressively to realise children's economic, social and cultural rights, to the maximum extent of available resources, avoiding impermissible retrogressive measures (CRC Article 4). Therefore, teenagers' wish for private space may be a demand for an entitlement that is not yet provided for in existing rights frameworks. However, this demand can be supported by the implicit provisions of other aspects of domestic housing law and by ICESCR (1991; para. 8), General Comment No.4 on Article 11 (1) (Housing), which states that the right to housing, 'should not be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense ... [and] must be habitable, in terms of providing the inhabitants with adequate space'. Support for teenagers' requests for the right to space without surveillance in refuges might also be reinforced by reference to the concept of "evolving capacity" (CRC Article 5). Moreover, arbitrary or unlawful interference with children's privacy is raised by CRC Article 16 and GC20 (para. 46) which highlights that:

The Committee has repeatedly raised concerns about violations of privacy in respect of, for example ... space for and belongings of adolescents in *institutions* (authors' italics).

The term "institution" within CRC discourse tends to refer to alternative care settings rather than temporary accommodation in which children may be living alongside their primary care giver. Our findings therefore suggest a claim to rights that extend beyond existing provisions, to ensure that there is an explicit focus on privacy for teenagers in refuges.

In responding to teenagers' requests for access to privacy and independent space, there is clearly a requirement to protect and promote their best interests (CRC Article 3) and an argument may be made that the temporary confinement

of refuge is needed in order to promote safety. In line with General Comment No.12 (2009, GC12) however, children's views should be included in any assessment of their "best interests". Involving teenagers in discussions of how to balance needs for protection in a refuge, with their evolving capacities for independence and rights to privacy, is therefore necessary.

3.2 *Support*

Teenagers described stresses they were experiencing, particularly with respect to schoolwork and future choices. They requested more information, support and guidance. Over half (n=11) reported that they did not have anyone inside or outside of the refuge with whom they could talk if they had a problem. Confidentiality was lacking, particularly where a staff member also supported their mother and where staff members talked about residents between themselves:

'... I don't think anyone should know anyone's business unless it is necessary to tell someone.'

DAISY, female, 16 years

Most teenagers (n=16) felt it would be helpful to have support from a dedicated member of staff. Some, but not all, refuges had funding for children's workers but there were no specific workers for teenagers. Teenagers who had their own key worker within the refuge valued these. Effective support, where available, involved staff members recognising the seriousness of teenagers' concerns and helping to resolve problems, as one of them reported:

I feel like I'm listened to. If I want to speak to someone in here I could ... I had a serious problem and she helped me.

MOLLY, female, 17 years

Trust was key to facilitating communication and to building a relationship within which experiences of DVA might be addressed. Continuity of support worker was valued.

Emotional and mental health difficulties intensified for some participants during their refuge stays. Requests for one-to-one support extended to counselling:

... it would be better to have a counsellor in the refuge ... talk about how they feel ... what is making them depressed ... letting it out ... they've been physically hurt and they're hurting themselves ... talk about what's happened and why...

SCARLET, female, 16 years

Teenagers suggested locating counselling provision within refuge premises and cited difficulties accessing external counselling services, including the transition from child to adult mental health services and lengthy waiting lists. For some teenagers, support was also requested at the point of leaving the refuge:

I still want support ... when I get a house ... still want help because it's like settling in and everything ... the old refuge, they did groups on Mondays. They did it for me and I'm sort of one of the family ... they came back to support.

EMMA, female, 15 years

None of the teenagers had been directed to online support for DVA. Restrictions on internet access in refuges appeared to prioritise concerns about risk over opportunities to access support, overlooking teenagers' capacities to use personal online safety strategies and undermining their opportunities to develop these further.

Teenagers' requests for improved refuge support are consistent with CRC Article 19.2 (protection from violence, abuse and neglect) and Articles 24 and 39 which promote physical and psychological recovery for child victims of abuse. These are underpinned by requests for trusted and supportive adults who listen and take their concerns seriously and provide access to information, consistent with children's participation rights (CRC Articles 12–17). Again, GC20 (2016, para. 49) strengthens teenagers' requests for these rights as, in relation to Article 19: 'The Committee highlights the need to involve adolescents in the development of prevention strategies and protective responses to victims of violence.'

However, whilst there is explicit reference to rehabilitation from experiences of alternative care, trafficking, gang-involvement, youth justice and violence, there is no explicit reference to domestic violence, or reference to the need for involvement of teenagers in designing services in relation to Article 39, that might aid *rehabilitation* from experiences of violence.

The potential importance of internet provision is also significant, and again underlined in GC20 (2016, paras. 47 and 48) which notes that:

States should adopt measures to ensure that all adolescents have access, without discrimination, to different forms of media and support and promote equal access to digital citizenship.

General Comment No. 25 (GC25) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment provides both authority and guidance on how to support development of digital literacy skills and safety strategies alongside opportunities

to access health information, support, advice and counselling. Refuge policies might again be co-created with teenagers themselves.

3.3 *Activities and Friendships*

Teenage participants would have valued opportunities to meet others with similar experiences but frequently they were the only teenager in their refuge and they therefore felt isolated:

... I'm the only teenager ... This place is filled with little kids; it makes me uncomfortable ... I don't hardly socialise with other people ... it would be better to talk to somebody that's the same age ...

SCARLET, female, 16 years

Amy (female, 16 years) noted the value of speaking to another teenager who had similar experiences of refuge life, but she explained they only had time together when walking to school. Two girls in one refuge became particularly close but frustrations arose when they wanted to have sleepovers, which were not permitted. The majority (n=13) wanted more trips and activities, and this need was in part due to their relocation to an unfamiliar area, away from friends, or having limited financial resources to organise activities themselves.

Some refuges did support teenagers' access to leisure activities. Four teenagers reported opportunities to go on day trips. Two of them attended a youth club at one refuge which also provided some trips. They reported increased confidence and reduced feelings of worry: '...built my confidence up really, took me on trips, and done what I've never done before...' (Bob Marley, male, 13 years). Only two teenagers were linked to external groups in the form of youth clubs, but nine others thought it would be useful if refuges offered external activities or connected them to external groups. This would provide exercise, emotional and physical space and participation opportunities, thereby improving confidence and alleviating stress and boredom.

Only three teenagers felt that they had sufficient access to computers and the internet. Almost all (n=19) wanted this access to be increased so that they could use the internet to communicate with friends and for educational and entertainment purposes. Access to social media was particularly important to teenagers who had moved to new areas for maintaining contact with friends and family:

... they try and make you get rid of Facebook, but I said to them I'm not getting rid of Facebook. No. Not a chance ... That's how I keep in touch with my friends ...

GEORGIA, female, 15 years

Teenagers' requests for support to access leisure activities and maintain friendships connect directly with CRC Articles 15 and 31 and in terms of the digital environment, GC25. However, GC20 (para. 75) fails to reinforce State parties' duties to fulfil these rights, as it simply regretfully notes the inadequacy of current provisions:

Leisure, recreation and the arts give adolescents a sense of uniqueness that is fundamental to the rights to human dignity, optimum development, freedom of expression, participation and privacy. The Committee notes with regret that those rights are widely neglected in adolescence.

Our findings therefore underline the need to prioritise the provision of these rights. The lack of appropriate recreational and leisure activities for children who have experienced DVA could also be experienced as discriminatory. In comparison to their friends, the teenagers interviewed felt that living in a refuge reduced their access to leisure and recreational activities. This was attributable to specific barriers linked to relocation to unfamiliar areas, refuge rules and limited financial resources.

3.4 *Education and Homework*

For most participants (n=12), moving to a refuge resulted in changes of schools with impacts on educational attainment, and friendships (Bracewell *et al.*, 2020). Moving meant being placed on waiting lists for new schools and 11 teenagers spent on average 13.8 weeks out of an educational establishment; one participant waited nine months for a school place. Missing school was academically and socially disadvantageous:

I don't want to move school again ... I've told everyone ... it's not fair on me that my education keeps getting messed up just because I'm in a refuge.

ZOE, female, 14 years

Teenagers wanted to be listened to and have their views considered with regards to the school they attended, and the courses studied.

When in education, practical difficulties continued for some teenagers. Completing homework was hampered by a lack of appropriate equipment in refuges such as books, as well as the lack of computers and internet access detailed earlier and limited funds to pay for equipment they used to have at home. None of the participants had their own educational support plan to identify chosen learning outcomes or additional support required. Nor did teenagers attend after school clubs to allow them to complete homework in a

more suitable environment and meet others. In two instances, some of these barriers had been overcome by provision of school bursaries or laptops. James also described the positive impact of support from his school tutor who spent time after school helping him with homework, playing games and teaching him magic tricks:

We've got students that are first priority, like me ... if you need equipment and stuff, they'll happily give it to me ... If ever I need extra help ... I can come after school and they'll give me the help.

JAMES, male, 14 years

Only one refuge organised homework activities for teenagers, although Emma explained that homework support was available in some other refuges:

I need someone to talk to ... I'm going to special school ... half my courses I can't even do ... I've got no-one to talk to ... all that on top of my head and to be honest, every other [refuge] I've been there's been someone to help.

The teenagers' requests for support with their education are in line with CRC Articles 28 and 29. Teenagers living in refuges, particularly those without school places or with inappropriate school placements or courses, are not supported to develop to their 'full potential': teenagers described obstacles to continuing with their examination curricula and choices. GC20 (e.g. paras. 68–70) underlines the importance of access to good quality and inclusive secondary education, supporting transitions experienced by adolescents and overcoming barriers that impede continued school attendance and achievements. GC20 (paras. 71–72.) also calls for education to be child-centred, child-friendly and empowering, emphasising collaboration and participation, stating that:

Efforts need to be made to consult adolescents on the barriers impeding their continued participation in school ... Consistent with article 28 (1) (e) of the Convention and Sustainable Development Goal 4, States should introduce comprehensive and proactive measures to address all these factors and improve enrolment and attendance.

One interpretation of our findings is that a focus on investing in education for adolescents in alternative care (GC20 para. 53) might equally be extended to teenagers in a refuge.

GC25 (paras. 99–105) highlights the importance of digital technology for education. This includes provisions for vulnerable groups and those working remotely. The requests for living rights and the barriers articulated by teenagers in this study might therefore be understood as issues which should be addressed proactively.

3.5 *Participation*

In addition to a lack of involvement in many day-to-day individual decisions, such as access to space and education, none of the teenagers reported involvement in any meetings or decision-making concerning refugee management or operations. Fifteen teenagers said this was something they would appreciate:

For kids that have their opinions, they should talk to them about what they think should happen ... have a teenagers' or children's own little coffee morning...

JAMES, male, 14 years

This suggestion was based on the existence of an adult coffee morning. Teenagers were unable collectively to challenge refugee policies or practices and contrasted this to their life at home:

They don't try to understand ... I'm like, 'But I want to do this.' But no, you can't. It's just it's their way or no way ... they take the kids painting and that. They don't have none of that for older kids ... coffee morning ... it's meant for the adults ... me and [other teenager] are dead close ... But what if I wanted her to sleep here or what if I wanted to go and sleep at hers? Like any other home we'd be in ...

GEORGIA, female, 15 years

Often meetings were for adults only and held during school hours. One teenager contrasted her current refuge with a previous one where she was involved in decision-making. Two teenagers noted that a suggestion box did not equate to meaningful participation.

Teenagers wanted to contribute to collective and individual decisions. Requests for collective involvement in decision-making related to trips, activities, refugee rules and timetables, support within the refuge and the regulation of refuge provision. Requests for involvement in decision-making about their own lives included education, friendships, independence and privacy, movement within and outside of the refuge, the use of online spaces, rehousing,

health, religious or cultural needs, and their wider family. Barriers to involvement in decision-making appeared to relate to refuge staff's concerns about teenagers' capacity to protect themselves and other refuge residents from further abuse. Staff attitudes about teenagers' competence were also a barrier:

... you get treated like little kids if you do something wrong. They don't actually let you do anything. They think, 'he's too young'. But they don't expect ... to think you're mature or anything.

AAMIR, male, 15 years

The rights of teenagers individually and collectively to contribute to decision-making on all matters that affect them are clearly set out in CRC Article 12 and General Comments Nos.12 and 20. GC12 on interpretation of Article 12, CRC emphasises that these obligations apply in situations of violence (2009, para. 118) and 'encourages States parties to consult with children in the development and implementation of legislative, policy, educational and other measures to address all forms of violence'. GC13 (para. 3(e)) highlights that:

Children's rights to be heard and to have their views given due weight must be respected systematically in all decision-making processes, and their empowerment and participation should be central to child caregiving and protection strategies and programmes;

The practice of involving teenagers in individual and collective decision-making is not optional or simply good practice; it is a matter of compliance with international conventions. This obligation extends across all the areas in which teenagers expressed the wish to influence decisions.

In line with the nine basic requirements of child participation in GC12, teenagers' participation should be voluntary, as they have the choice to participate or not. When they choose to participate, mechanisms should be in place to ensure provision of adequate and accessible information and environments in which children can express their views without fear of discrimination or reprisals. As GC12 articulates, this requires that adults or children facilitating this process are trained and aware of risks, so that potential negative consequences of participating can be avoided. GC20 (para. 23) also emphasises that adolescents have the right to express their views on all matters of concern, whether they are individual decisions (for example, relating to their education, health or family life) or regarding the development, implementation and monitoring of all relevant policies, services and programmes affecting their lives, including rehabilitation from experiences of violence. The teenagers' requests

outlined in this study do not then extend beyond existing rights provisions; they do, however, provide a guide as to which participatory practices could be urgently prioritised.

4 Recognising Teenagers as Direct Refuge Users

Whilst this study was conducted only in England, rich data was generated through repeat interviews in an internationally unique study. In line with previous studies (for example, Humphreys and Houghton, 2008), our findings confirm that DVA refuge services for children and young people appear to be secondary to services for mothers, and services for teenagers have a lower priority than support for young children. When explored critically from below, working outwards from the themes that teenagers identified to a range of international instruments, their requests for living rights connected readily to the CRC and the associated General Comments we examined. But this process revealed a lack of explicit reference to the experience of refuge, particularly as a quasi-institutional setting and as a time of rehabilitation. Whilst General Comments refer to rights of children and young people in institutional settings and when they are unaccompanied, there is no explicit reference as to how rights might be implemented in refuge settings. This may be because teenagers are conceived of as still in care of a parent, so not in need of special protection, or because refuge is seen as a temporary experience, whereas institutional care may be long term. The insights from this study can provide a significant contribution to developing an approach to rights respecting refuges for teenagers.

First, there is the need to recognise teenagers as rights holders, as already noted by Obreja (2019). The lack of adequate provision for teenagers' rights in refuge (related to housing, education, rehabilitation support, leisure, participation, and teenagers feeling isolated, unheard, trapped and different to their peers) may be attributable to historic service design together with the changing nature and reduction of services, fluctuating financial investment and insufficient support from policymakers. However, our study also shows repeated examples of some refuges finding it was possible to respect, protect and fulfil children's rights. Understanding of the specific rights of teenagers in refuge is needed, and a willingness to prioritise these is key.

Secondly, in line with General Comments Nos. 12 and 25, a better balancing of safety with independence, empowerment and protection in both online and offline environments might be enabled if the balance of concerns about risks is considered on an individual basis to enable online communication and independent access to physical space wherever possible.

Thirdly, as repeatedly outlined in General Comments, collaboration between refuge staff and external services can be effective. This study provides insight into what this might mean specifically for refuge settings. Strategies included key workers who listen, provide counselling and facilitate access to community-based youth services, all of which can help reduce feelings of shame and stigma, build self-esteem and develop social networks. Collaborative working identified by this study also involved provision of resources and learning support within the refuge accompanied by training for teachers, social workers and other professionals to increase awareness of the impact of moving to a refuge and of effective strategies for promoting teenagers' rights in these contexts.

Fourthly, a focus on participation could challenge the invisibility of teenagers and respond to their demands for inclusion. Opportunities for children's participation and expression of agency is crucial in their ability to cope with DVA (Katz, 2015; Callaghan *et al.*, 2018); however, it is important not to impose inappropriate demands for participation (Lansdown, 2005). As participatory approaches take time to embed (Larkins *et al.*, 2014), this might be more readily achieved if resources are allocated over longer periods and with provision for teenagers shared between refuges. Recognition of refuges as a relatively long-term experience for some children is also required, in which teenagers' needs and wishes may diverge from those of their mothers or their younger siblings and may challenge professionals' protectionist reflexes.

Fifthly, once teenagers are recognised as service users, refuges may find it useful to support their arguments for funding with reference to General Comment No. 19 (2016, para. 3) on Public Budgeting for the Realization of Children's Rights. This notes State parties' obligation with regard to 'all persons of any gender under the age of 18', including teenagers, and that 'in all stages of their budget processes and administrative systems at the national and subnational levels' (General Comment No.19 para.13), children should be involved in decision making and audit of budgetary decisions.

Finally, whilst this paper has sought to define concerns and potential rights violations, Larkins *et al.* (2015) argue that a critical element of child rights research is protagonism, that is, enabling change to be led by children's perspectives and supporting their activism (Nuggehalli, 2014). In the context of DVA, Houghton's (2006, 2008) project involved Voice Against Violence, a group of eight young experts with experience of DVA working alongside the Scottish government to improve DVA service provision and policy. This led to improvements in service provision including access to a support worker, outreach support and group work opportunities as well as financial aid and educational support. In the present study, support for teenagers' protagonism was very limited; however, a research summary for teenagers, DVA organisations,

commissioners and charitable trusts has been disseminated nationally and internationally. This was supported by the lead author's personal activism in pursuit of the participating teenagers' goals but without their direct activism. At least one refuge used this summary to apply for funding to obtain equipment for teenagers and others have made practice changes.

The six-point agenda outlined here might usefully provide an initial framework for policy and practice development as well as for future rights-based research to monitor improvements in teenagers' experience in refuges within the UK and elsewhere. Legislative reform to ensure that these rights are embedded in domestic legislation may also be beneficial, as this might increase pressure for adequate funding and compliance. A rights-based approach on its own, however, is unlikely to be adequate as there are longstanding attitudes towards teenagers and resource allocation which are substantial barriers to overcome. A cost-benefit analysis, for example, as has been developed in relation to women's experience of DVA (e.g. Walby, 2009), may be a useful additional strategy, and this research provides an indication of the costs and benefits which might be explored. However, using the language of rights, where this helps tell compelling stories that convince policy audiences, may be effective at times where there is a spotlight on rights, for example, in relation to moments of monitoring and visits by special rapporteurs (Larkins et al., 2015).

5 Concluding Remarks

This research has taken place in the context of the adoption of a wider definition of DVA in the UK, increasing prevalence of digital technology globally and during the COVID-19 pandemic which has seen, internationally, a rise in reports of DVA (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020; UN Women, 2020).

Our research found that refuge policies and practices designed first for women and secondly for younger children tend to be insufficiently nuanced or sensitive to unpick dominant misconceptions about teenagerhood (Raby, 2002) and frequently fail to respect, protect and promote the full range of teenagers' rights. We are concerned that in the context of Covid-19, teenagers could be further misrecognised. Nevertheless, the pandemic and the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) both provide opportunities to implement identifiable solutions in the longer term. Refuges are not simply a crisis response but have potential to deliver positive current experiences and longer-term rehabilitation outcomes for teenagers. Provisions in the CRC and associated General Comments, and the interpretation of these from the perspective of teenagers, can contribute to a framework for assessing how to respect, protect and fulfil rights related

to independence, privacy, emotional health, leisure, friendships, education and participation of teenagers living in DVA refuges. There is a need to deepen explicit reference to and understanding of refuge experience in relation to these provisions.

Ongoing opportunities for communication and action between adults (including researchers) working with young people who have experience of DVA would provide an effective start to this deepening understanding, so that the examples of effective practice for teenagers in refuge can be shared and extended. Practice guidance with accompanying resources and appropriate training could be developed for staff working with teenagers in refuges, focused on empowering and non-stigmatising approaches to supporting teenagers. Rights-based action research could also extend existing knowledge of teenagers' experiences of DVA and focus policy attention on teenagers' position as a group marginalised within current provision.

Learning from our study, the next step towards a fuller Children's Rights Based Approach from below might involve asking teenagers who are entering DVA refuges about the services and resources they need to support the best possible respect, protection and fulfilment of their rights to information, independence, privacy, emotional health, leisure, friendships, education and involvement in individual and collective decision-making.

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