





Social norms relating to gender and dating and relationship violence in English secondary schools: Exploring student, staff and parent/carer accounts

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ABSTRACT

Dating and relationship violence (DRV) among young people is widespread. DRV is associated with subsequent mental ill health, substance use and sexual risk among girls and boys and is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality among girls globally. Harmful social norms are widely recognised for their role in sustaining DRV, and interventions often seek to change these. However, little evidence is available to suggest which specific norms are most salient and where protective norms might be strengthened. We conducted, audio-recorded and transcribed consultations and semi-structured interviews with students (years 9 and 10), school staff and parents/carers from ten secondary schools in England. We also audio-recorded discussions in staff DRV trainings in four of these schools. Data collection took place between April 2017 and July 2018. This research explored participant accounts of social norms relating to gender and to DRV in schools and their influence on DRV behaviours. Drawing on Giddens' structuration theory, our thematic analysis found that sexist social norms subjugating girls to boys facilitated gendered practices of harassment and abuse, including DRV; and that these practices, in turn, reproduced this gendered power structure. Our data suggest that while physical DRV is socially proscribed, norms supporting controlling behaviours and inhibiting disclosure of victimisation directly underpin DRV. They further suggest that indirectly, gender norms concerning cross-gender friendships; sexual harassment; the policing of girls' sexuality; homophobic abuse; and dominance, control and sexual activity as masculine ideals indirectly sustain DRV. Accounts demonstrated that students and staff challenge harmful norms, but that these efforts can be ineffective and socially punished. Our findings can inform DRV interventions, which should draw on evidence to foster protective norms and shift those that sustain DRV.

1. Introduction

Dating and relationship violence (DRV) is intimate partner violence (IPV) among young people (Young et al., 2017). Comprising psychological, physical and sexual violence by a current or former partner, DRV is widespread (Exner-Cortens et al., 2016; Wincentak et al., 2017) and harms young people's health and well-being (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Mokdad et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2003). Globally, 24% of girls aged 15–19 years have experienced physical and/or sexual DRV (Sardinha et al., 2018). A 2017 meta-analytic review of global DRV literature estimated 21% prevalence of physical DRV victimisation and 8% of sexual DRV victimisation among boys aged 13–18 years (Wincentak et al., 2017). Estimates for psychological DRV victimisation, which includes forms of abuse such as humiliation, stalking, coercion, control

and emotional aggression (Leen et al., 2013), vary widely but also tend to be high among girls and boys (Exner-Cortens et al., 2016; Leen et al., 2013). DRV is the fourth leading risk factor for mortality and the third for morbidity among girls aged 15–19 years globally (Mokdad et al., 2016). In addition to causing injuries (Foshee et al., 1996), DRV is associated with subsequent mental ill-health (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2003; Castellví et al., 2017), substance use (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2003) and sexual risk behaviour (Shorey et al., 2019) among girls and boys as well as with IPV victimisation and perpetration in adulthood (Manchikanti, 2011).

DRV-prevention interventions often seek to foster protective social norms (Offenhauer and Buchalter, 2011; Stanley et al., 2015; Wolfe and Jaffe, 1999). A topic of wide interest across the social sciences (Chung and Rimal, 2016), social norms are informal rules that determine

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acceptable behaviour in a group (Cislaghi and Heise, 2018a). A conceptualisation originating in social psychology has been especially influential among gender-based violence (GBV) and adolescent sexual and reproductive health researchers (Alexander-Scott et al., 2016; Ashburn et al., 2016; Cislaghi and Heise, 2018b, 2018c). Within this framework, social-norms theorists distinguish between descriptive norms (beliefs about what behaviour is typical in a valued reference group) and injunctive norms (beliefs about what others in the reference group think constitutes appropriate behaviour) (Alexander-Scott et al., 2016; Cislaghi and Heise, 2018c). They posit that social norms are primarily sustained by anticipation of social sanctioning by the reference group, including rewards for compliance and punishments for deviation (Cislaghi and Heise, 2018a; Alexander-Scott et al., 2016). Though theorists disagree about the relationship between descriptive and injunctive norms (Ashburn et al., 2016), each is thought to influence behaviour (Chung and Rimal, 2016; Ashburn et al., 2016).

DRV-prevention interventions often target DRV norms, seeking to reduce social acceptability of DRV (Stanley et al., 2015). They are also often 'gender-transformative' (Gupta, 2000), seeking to promote gender-equitable social norms (Stanley et al., 2015; Lowe et al., 2022; McNaughton Reyes et al., 2021; Whitaker et al., 2006). Gender-transformative approaches are supported by the broader global GBV literature, as evidenced Jewkes et al.'s work tracing how social expectations of dominant forms of masculinity contribute to male perpetration of violence against females (Jewkes et al., 2015). Directly, these expectations support male dominance and control over females as social ideals, alongside male attributes of physical strength and toughness (Jewkes et al., 2015). Indirectly, efforts to conform to patriarchal norms constitute risk factors for male GBV perpetration, such as displays of sexual prowess (having multiple partners, engaging in transactional sex) and participation in other forms of violence (Jewkes et al., 2015). Finally, male perpetrators are more likely than other males to report depression, substance use and social or economic marginalisation, suggesting that males who "struggle to live up to a masculine ideal in other respects" are more likely to perpetrate GBV (Jewkes et al., 2015, p1584).

Interviews with UK adolescents mirror these themes, finding that gendered expectations relating to masculinity, sexual behaviour and heterosexual partnerships contribute to DRV (Barter, 2006; Barter et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2011). This evidence suggests that boys can lose social status if their girlfriend is unfaithful (Wood et al., 2011), and that jealousy can feed into controlling behaviours (Barter et al., 2009). Some boys use DRV as a tactic to assert control and dominance over their partner (Barter et al., 2009) and to advance a violent and powerful public image (Wood et al., 2011). In line with social expectations of girls' chastity, boys report that it is considered acceptable to sexually pressure girls who are seen as sexually experienced (Barter et al., 2009). In a context where boys face social pressure to have sex (Barter et al., 2009) and are celebrated for doing so (Wood et al., 2011), for girls resisting sex can precipitate physical DRV and coercive threats of abandonment (Barter et al., 2009). However, norms prescribing durable heterosexual relationships for girls can make it difficult to leave an abusive partner (Barter, 2006; Barter et al., 2009).

Social norms concerning both DRV and gendered expectations are also quantitatively associated with DRV. Most studies included in a global 2023 systematic review found that young people reporting descriptive or injunctive norms supportive of DRV (i.e., reporting that DRV was common or socially accepted among an influential reference group) were at increased risk for DRV victimisation or perpetration (Meiksin et al., 2023). Gender-inequitable norms, which primarily focused on other forms of GBV but also included household gender norms, were significantly associated with higher levels of boys' DRV perpetration and girls' DRV victimisation (Meiksin et al., 2023).

Despite the role of social norms in DRV interventions' theories of change, evaluations rarely measure impact on descriptive or injunctive norms and none has quantitatively assessed whether norms change mediated programme impacts (Melendez-Torres et al., 2024). Efforts to

do so are limited by gaps in existing literature. In addition to a lack of appropriate, established measures of social norms (Meiksin et al., 2023; Melendez-Torres et al., 2024), there is little evidence to suggest which norms are most important for DRV and which protective norms might be strengthened. Answers to these questions are likely to partly vary by context (Ashburn et al., 2016). UK research has not explored the range of social norms underpinning DRV, distinguished between descriptive and injunctive norms, or assessed which norms should be prioritised for DRV prevention. DRV interventions often take place in schools, a key site of gender socialisation (Connell, 1996), but we are aware of no studies exploring the social norms in school settings that contribute to DRV. We address these gaps by exploring student, school staff and parent/carer accounts of (1) social norms concerning gender and DRV in schools; and (2) how these appear to influence practices of abuse and harassment, including DRV.

Informed by Jamal et al.'s research on girls' bullying in London secondary schools (Jamal et al., 2015), our analysis draws on Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). According Giddens, social norms comprise an aspect of social structure that both enables and constrains social practices (Giddens, 1984). This structure is, in turn, maintained or modified by those practices (Giddens, 1984). Giddens' concept of the "duality of structure" characterises structure as "both medium and outcome" of the social practices it socially organises – both shaping these practices and constituted by them (Giddens, 1984, p25). Giddens suggests that people can seek to "keep things as they are" or transform the social structures in which they operate, including by taking action to maintain or modify prevailing norms (Giddens, 1984, p25). Giddens' attention to the role of agency and action in shaping social structures sensitises this research to the possibility of teachers and students acting to challenge pro-violence or anti-equity social norms, transforming social norms which then influence subsequent practices of DRV in a different way. We therefore use structuration theory to examine social norms concerning gender and DRV as a structural feature of secondary schools, the practices relating to gender and DRV which they enable and constrain and actions to modify social structures in schools.

2. Methods

2.1. The Project Respect study

Our data come from a study to optimise and pilot the Project Respect DRV intervention in English secondary schools using a pilot cluster RCT with process evaluation (Meiksin et al., 2019). Underpinned by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the Social Development Model (Hawkins and Weis, 1985), Project Respect was a whole-school intervention aiming to promote changes to the school environment and among the school community to reduce DRV. Informed by the Safe Dates (Foshee et al., 1996) and Shifting Boundaries (Taylor et al., 2011) interventions, both effective in reducing DRV in the United States (Taylor et al., 2015; Foshee et al., 2004), Project Respect comprised: training for key school staff led by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC); cascaded training to all school staff; school policy review; mapping of 'hotspots' for DRV and harassment and shifting of staff patrols to address these; written information for parents/carers; and a classroom curriculum for year-9 and year-10 students (aged 13–15 years). The curriculum included support for student-led campaigns and the opportunity to download an existing smartphone app (Circle of 6) to support help-seeking. Detailed information on the study is published elsewhere (Meiksin et al., 2020a, 2020b; Ponsford et al., 2021). We draw on qualitative data from two waves of intervention optimisation sessions and from the process evaluation.

2.2. Sampling and recruitment

We recruited RCT schools via emails and telephone calls to eligible, mainstream state secondary schools in southern England. We selected

six of those schools expressing interest, stratified by region (south-east/south-west England) and varying by deprivation and value-added attainment (indicating overall student progress) (Department for Education, 2016). One school withdrew before baseline assessments and was replaced. After baseline assessments, schools were stratified by region and randomised 2:1 to intervention/control arm. Across RCT schools, 18.3% of students were eligible for free school meals (Meiksin et al., 2020b). Across the five RCT schools providing student baseline data, 46.8% of students were White British (Meiksin et al., 2020b). We selected four optimisation schools from among schools expressing interest but not selected for the pilot RCT, stratified by region and varying by deprivation. Head teachers of participating schools signed a consent form.

For optimisation sessions, school contacts were asked to recruit at least three girls and three boys from each of years 9 and 10, and three or more staff, prioritising: a safeguarding lead; personal, social and health education staff; and senior leadership. Wave 1 participants also participated in wave-2 sessions where feasible. The observed NSPCC-led training sessions were for school staff delivering Project Respect and for school senior leadership. For individual interviews in intervention schools, we aimed to recruit four staff, purposively sampled by seniority and programme involvement, and two parents/carers, purposively sampled by their child's gender and year-group (years 9 and 10). We aimed to recruit eight students from intervention schools and four from control schools, purposively sampled by gender and year-group (years 9 and 10). In control schools we aimed to recruit two staff, purposively sampled by seniority. We asked that schools selecting students for optimisation sessions and interviews select participants broadly reflective of the school's diversity.

All research participants, and parents/carers of students invited to participate, received study information sheets before data collection which included information on how to opt out and local support resources. Participants could ask questions to a research team member before signing the consent form. Interview participants also received an information sheet at the start of their interview. Information and consent materials explained that participation was voluntary and confidential, and participants could stop participating at any time.

2.3. Data collection

Optimisation sessions involved consultation to inform intervention content and format (wave 1) and to gather feedback on intervention materials and inform delivery (wave 2). Led by the intervention and evaluation teams, these included introductory slide presentations followed by discussions using a semi-structured guide (Appendix 1). The first session included a plenary discussion followed by separate staff and student group discussions. In subsequent sessions, we led discussions in three groups: year-9 students, year-10 students and staff. Facilitators took notes and wave-2 sessions were also audio-recorded and transcribed. Trainings included discussion questions for staff about signs of DRV, and about concerning behaviours in school that they would like to address through Project Respect. These were audio-recorded for our process evaluation and researchers took notes on these recordings.

Process-evaluation interviews were conducted by experienced researchers using semi-structured guides (Appendix 2). Most interviews were with individuals but some featured pairs or small groups when schools requested this. All explored school context. Intervention school interviews also explored programme implementation, costs, receipt, mechanisms of change and impacts. Control school interviews also explored provision of violence prevention, relationship and sex education, and social/emotional learning. Our analysis draws on interview data about school context, social norms and gender-based harassment and abuse. Data were recorded in interview notes and, where participants consented, audio-recordings transcribed verbatim.

2.4. Data analysis

Notes and transcripts were loaded onto Nvivo 12 (Lumivero, 2017) and subjected to thematic analysis, complemented with techniques from grounded theory (Green and Thorogood, 2018). After reviewing and re-reviewing transcripts to gain familiarity, RM led initial coding, and CB and RM reviewed and interpreted the coded data. Informed by social-norms theory, and research on social norms and DRV, starting codes included: descriptive and injunctive gender norms, other descriptive and injunctive norms, reference groups and social sanctions. New codes were developed inductively as new themes emerged, with special attention to "deviant cases" challenging or providing deeper insight into emerging themes (Green and Thorogood, 2018, p294). Axial coding built on initial coding, exploring relationships between codes, combining those with significant overlap and separating codes that represented distinct constructs. Informed by Jamal et al.'s study (Jamal et al., 2015) and by structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), our analysis was sensitised to: how norms constrained or enabled actions that made DRV more likely; ways in which norms were reproduced by abusive practices; and where people exercised agency in reshaping norms to transform existing structures.

Where participant accounts directly or indirectly linked social norms to DRV, we drew this out in our analysis. We distinguished between norms linked to DRV in participant accounts and norms emerging from participant accounts for which other existing evidence supports a relationship with DRV.

2.5. Ethics

Information and consent materials informed participants that confidentiality would only be broken if safeguarding concerns arose during data collection. Data were stored in password-protected folders on the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine's (LSHTM's) secure servers and anonymised using study ID numbers. Further details on safeguarding and data management procedures are reported elsewhere (Meiksin et al., 2020b). Control schools received £500. The research was approved by LSHTM (reference: 11986) and NSPCC (reference: R/17/106) ethics committees.

3. Results

3.1. Participation

We analysed data from ten schools (four optimisation, four intervention and two control). Interview participants' ID numbers each begin with a code representing their school, as shown in Table 1. Optimisation session and training participants are identified by their schools' codes. Student ethnicity and gender broadly mirrored the diversity present in participating schools.

3.1.1. Optimisation sessions

Optimisation-session participants are described in Table 2. Four schools participated in the first wave (April 2017). Of these, one was unable to arrange a group optimisation session and instead a staff-member participated by telephone. Participants were 31 students,

Table 1
Participating schools.

| School participation | Region | School code |
|----------------------|------------|-------------|
| Optimisation (N = 2) | South-east | OA, OB |
| Optimisation (N = 2) | South-west | OC, OD |
| Intervention (N = 2) | South-east | IA, IB |
| Intervention (N = 2) | South-west | IC, ID |
| Control | South-east | CA |
| Control | South-west | CB |

Table 2
Optimisation session participants.

| Participants | Wave 1 | Wave 2 ^a |
|-----------------------|--------|---------------------|
| Year-9 students | | |
| Girls | 8 | 11 |
| Boys | 7 | 12 |
| Year-10 students | | |
| Girls | 9 | 6 |
| Boys | 7 | 6 |
| <i>Total students</i> | 31 | 35 |
| Staff | | |
| Female | 7 | 4 |
| Male | 0 | 1 |
| Not reported | 2 | 1 |
| <i>Total staff</i> | 9 | 6 |

^a Some Wave 2 participants had also taken part in Wave 1.

mixed by gender and year-group, and nine staff. Three schools participated in the second wave (July 2017), which included 35 students and six staff, some of whom had also participated in the first wave. Across waves, staff participants were a mix of teachers, support staff and senior leadership, including a safeguarding lead in most schools.

3.1.2. Process evaluation – trainings and interviews

NSPCC-led training sessions were audio-recorded in all intervention schools. Characteristics of interview participants are shown in Table 3. Forty students from six schools participated in interviews, which occurred primarily individually (N = 9) or in pairs (11 interviews). Two were conducted in groups of three and six. Individual interviews were conducted with 21 staff from six schools and with five parents/carers (all female) of a mix of year-9 and -10 students, predominantly girls, from three schools. Staff participants were a mix of those responsible for student well-being, teachers and senior leadership, and included a safeguarding lead from most schools.

3.2. Thematic analysis

3.2.1. Norms about how girls and boys should behave

Participant accounts identified various gender norms operating in secondary schools to shape girls' and boys' behaviours. These appeared to support a sexist, gendered hierarchy placing girls in an inferior position to boys. References to normative expectations and sanctions mainly centred on peer influences, while some participants also referenced parental and broader cultural influences on gender socialisation.

Sexist norms about gendered attributes. Participant accounts revealed various social expectations in schools governing girls' and boys' physical and personality attributes, which were more pronounced in some settings and populations than others. These injunctive norms generally functioned to maintain girls' positions as inferior and subordinate to boys through systems of social rewards and punishments. As summed up by one girl, "Boys are in control and girls do what they say" (OA, wave 1).

Scrutiny and judgement of girls' looks was a common theme. Participants described social expectations of girls to wear make-up and attend to their physical appearance. At the same time, girls perceived to be too made-up could face social repercussions. As one year-9 girl described girls' confinement, "... if you're not styled up properly you're a tramp, if you're wearing too much make-up you're still a tramp" (year-9 girls, IBS1-IBS2). Injunctive norms governing boys' attributes, on the other hand, generally functioned to promote displays of emotional and physical strength and toughness. Accounts suggested that, while some gender norms were beginning to shift and not all young people supported them, boys nonetheless faced pressure to "prove their masculinity" (staff training, ID), act "tough" (staff, IBT3) and "act like a man" (staff training, ID). Boys were expected to hide emotional vulnerability and not to cry, and they could be teased for showing weakness, wearing make-up or displaying other ostensibly feminine characteristics.

Table 3
Interview participants.

| Participants | Intervention | Control | Total |
|-----------------------|--------------|----------------|-------|
| Year-9 students | | | |
| Girls | 11 | 2 | 13 |
| Boys | 10 | 2 | 12 |
| Year-10 students | | | |
| Girls | 5 | 2 | 7 |
| Boys | 6 | 2 | 8 |
| <i>Total students</i> | 32 | 8 | 40 |
| Staff | 17 | 4 | 21 |
| Female | 13 | 3 | 16 |
| Male | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Parents/carers | 5 | Not applicable | 5 |

Students also described gendered stereotypes endorsed by their peers, a form of descriptive norm. These included beliefs that girls dressed in feminine clothes, were physically weaker and less emotionally stable than boys and that they were not athletic or as smart as boys in specific subjects. Students reported that boys, on the other hand, were seen as "the stronger sex" (year-10 girl, CAS1), smarter than girls in some subjects, more athletic and less prone to sadness or agitation.

Sexist norms governing sexual behaviours. Scrutiny and judgement of girls' sexual behaviours were prevalent in participant accounts. Students and staff across several schools described injunctive norms supporting a sexual double-standard among students (Crawford and Popp, 2003) such that boys seen as sexually active were socially rewarded but girls seen this way were stigmatised. Participants described this in relation to both sexual/romantic activity and to the circulation of sexual images. In the case of sexual activity, boys were congratulated for what was seen as sexual/romantic success while girls were reprimanded or derided. As a year-9 girl explained: "Like when boys go, 'Oh we're dating five girls,' it's okay, and then if a girl could maybe be talking to two boys and a friend, they're automatically a slag¹ or something" (year-9 girls, IBS1-IBS2).

This policing of female behaviour could foster insecurity and limit girls' self-expression, as a year-9 girl described:

I think it lowers their self-esteem kind of, even if it doesn't make it visible or something, it does lower it. Like it is kind of sad because some girls will stop doing, like, stop being confident, maybe stop going to dance, just because they got called this or that, and then they just feel insecure and stuff. (Year-9 girls, IBS1-IBS2)

Accounts of students in a few schools suggested that cross-gender friendships were uncommon and that norms governing sexual behaviour could play a role in proscribing them: peers would assume cross-gender friendships were romantic or sexual and if a girl had many male friends, a year-9 student explained that some people might see her as a "slut", "ho" or "sket"¹ (wave 2, OB).

Resistance to sexist norms and gender stereotypes. Although social pressure could make it difficult, resistance to gendered expectations and stereotypes was common in student accounts across several schools. One manifestation was citing examples that challenged restrictive descriptive norms, as reported by this year-9 girl reflecting on a classroom discussion:

Boys have a stereotype of not being sad or not getting annoyed as easy as girls do. But then when we discuss that, the boys were like 'No, I've never cried in front of anyone, I've never cried' ... And then everyone will start saying 'But you probably have, you probably have been upset'. And, like, when it says girls are more agitated, we probably aren't, boys get annoyed when one of their football teams loses and like girls don't care about them things. And then they'll say about how we care about our makeup ... but then we all care about something and like we all get the same amount of

¹ This a derogatory term for a girl or woman who is seen as promiscuous.

agitated and we all like cry, we all cry, we all get upset. And it's just common and it's not something that should be stereotyped because boys do get upset and girls do get agitated and it's like common. (year-9 girl, IAS7)

In participant accounts resistance could also take the form of students disregarding gendered expectations, for example by boys wearing make-up or by students accepting a girl who does not meet traditional expectations of femininity.

Maintaining gender norms compliance through homophobic practices. Accounts suggest that enactments of homophobia were common in schools, perpetuated by both girls and boys, and fell into three main categories. First, accounts indicate that direct bullying of gay and bisexual young people operated as a social sanction supporting an injunctive norm of prescribed heterosexuality. Second, homophobic comments appeared to operate as a social sanction sustaining sexist norms. For example, interview students described the use of homophobic insults to shape masculinity among boys (year-9 girl and boy, CBS3-CBS4):

Participant: It's not as, because there's like the stereotype that girls used to be all fairies and pink and holding hands and that. But if you're a boy with fairies and pink and holding hands, it would be a lot more strange at that moment.

Participant: You'd be gay. Yeah, you'd just be named gay.

These insults also appeared to play a role in regulating the boundaries of same-gender friendships, particularly among boys, e.g.:

Or if, let's say, two girls, say, like, really close friends, and they're always hugging, they'll like call them lesbian or 'You're a queer' or something like that. Like if you're holding hands with a girl ... But I think boys, if they hold the hands of a boy, it would be more weirder than two girls holding hands. (year-9 girl and boy, CBS3-CBS4)

Third, some students framed the use of homophobic language as an insult with, as one student put it, "no tag to sexuality at all" (year-9, mixed-gender group, ICS3-ICS8). Minimising this type of behaviour, these participants framed homophobic comments as "jokes" (year-9 boy, IBS3-IBS4) or "banter" (year-9 girl and boy, IDS4 and IDS8). As one student explained, "It's an insult but it's not like a horrible insult in their mind, it's just saying it because it's just what comes to mind" (year-9 girl and boy, IDS4 and IDS8). Other students, however, expressed frustration or disapproval, for example describing homophobic practices as "disgusting" (year-9 girls, IBS1-IBS2) or suggesting that more should be done to address them:

Once, in one class, someone said, "That's so gay", and the teacher just went, "What exactly do you mean by that?", or something, and they had their little say about that and it was, but that was it, it was like nothing else. (year-10 girls, IBS7-IBS8)

We found little evidence of significant negative sanctioning of homophobic comments. Accounts suggest that, where staff or students did intervene, this tended to be ineffective. Staff reactions, discussed primarily by students in one school but also by a staff-member in a second, were characterised as inadequate in that they failed to engage students in a meaningful or transformative way, e.g.: "That's how it feels. Like it's, like, they've been pulled over, 'You shouldn't say this, it's bad'. But like they don't actually care too much about it so they don't explain why" (year-9 girls, IBS1-IBS2).

A girl who had challenged classmates' homophobic behaviour recounted being made a target herself, which functioned as an effective sanction: "Actually in year 7, this is a personal experience, I tried to step in and they accused me, and then they tried to push me down the stairs ... from now on I just don't step in" (year-9 girls, IBS1-IBS2).

Gendered expectations and abuse involving sexual images. Students and staff discussed the often-persistent pressure on girls to send sexual images of themselves to boys and the often-severe social

consequences of doing so. In these accounts, expectations of girls' sexual availability and obedience were coupled with acute stigmatisation of girls whose images were subsequently posted publicly or circulated among classmates without their consent. Pressure on girls could come from partners and from other, sometimes older, boys. This could be overtly forceful or more subtle and protracted involving what one teacher described as "... a kind of gentle kind of tapping on the window type of effect over a period of time, where that young person has just felt 'I need to do this ...'" (staff, CBT2). A staff-member from one optimisation school demonstrated the significant influence that social norms with regard to sending sexual imagery could have:

Although we've done a lot of work in school on the legal implications of sending and asking for images and sharing images and all that kind of thing, they do it anyway. Just because everybody does it ... It is predominantly the boys who are asking the girls for the images and the girls who are sending them because that's what they're supposed to do and that's what the boys like ... (wave 2, OB).

A year-9 student's account illustrated how pressure to send sexual images could operate both as an abusive practice in itself and as a social sanction reinforcing an expectation of girls' sexual availability: "Yeah, the boys just call you frigid and stuff, and they call you boring, 'Blah blah blah'. And then the girls just give in to it." (wave 2, OA)

Referring to the circulation of girls' images, one student commented that "People in our school think it's okay to expose a sket" (year-9 girls, IBS1-IBS2). This frames the circulation of these images itself as a form of social punishment for violating injunctive norms of sexual modesty. Participants reported that sexual images of both girls and boys were posted publicly or circulated among students without their permission, with frequency varying between schools. Where accounts described gendered impacts, these were manifestly much more severe for girls. Reflecting a sexual double-standard, participants reported that boys tended to be "more blasé", or bragged about their bodies, while girls were "absolutely affronted" (Staff, CAT1) and typically ridiculed. As a year-9 girl explained, "If a boy's one gets spreaded, I guess it's just like, 'Oh, well done, mate'. But if a girl's one gets sent, like you're a slag or summat" (year-9 girl and boy, CBS3-CBS4).

3.2.2. Other abusive practices were facilitated by and reproduced sexist norms

Gendered environments in participating schools were characterised in part by interrelated and overlapping sexual harassment practices, and by use of language that objectified, degraded or subordinated girls. Our interpretation is that these practices were both enabled by, and reproduced, sexist norms.

Sexual harassment. Perceptions of the prevalence of sexual harassment varied across individuals, settings and groups of students. Some participants expressed uncertainty about how common it was generally or among students outside their social group. Two participants commented that sexual harassment was perpetrated by a minority of students, though descriptive norms within and outside of school were seen as contributing to both its perpetration and social acceptance. In the words of one staff-member, "They do it because everybody does ..." (wave 2, OB).

While participants acknowledged that sexual harassment could be perpetrated by, and target, both girls and boys, they focused primarily on boys' sexual harassment of girls. Accounts of physical sexual harassment included uninvited or unwelcome sexual touching: e.g., boys slapping girls' buttocks was frequently cited. Verbal sexual harassment reportedly often took the form of comments about girls' appearance and our data suggest that girls could face social repercussions for not accepting these comments as compliments. Through a social norms lens, this comprises a form of social sanctioning that reinforces expectations of girls to submit to male judgement.

Accounts portrayed sexual harassment as often minimised (e.g., framed as a joke or compliment), and tolerated or accepted among

students. Accounts suggested that perpetration could be socially approved, reflecting supportive injunctive norms. Two year-10 girls explained that boys who sexually harassed girls in their school drew confidence from their “friends as back up” and “[did] it to get laughs from their friends,” who encouraged them rather than intervening (year-10 girls, IBS7-IBS8). According to participants, striving for acceptance among a dominant social group and generally preferring to avoid conflict could both prevent students from challenging or reporting sexual harassment.

However, there were also instances of protective social norms in some groups and settings. For example, a year-10 girl’s account of her year-group portrayed an alignment of protective descriptive and injunctive norms:

We get along so well with the boys, but the boys are ... not the sort of boys that would just go over to you and touch your bum. Like our girls, if like my group, would be like, ‘What are you doing? Don’t do that’. (year-10 girl, CAS1)

Participants gave accounts of both victims and bystanders confronting perpetrators and reporting sexual harassment to school staff. While teacher and parent interviews suggested that schools do generally respond to sexual harassment, data from students suggest that these efforts could be hampered by lack of visibility, with sexual harassment often occurring out of their sight or outside of school. Comments by some staff indicated that they viewed girls as partly responsible for their own victimisation. This raises the possibility that sexist norms among staff might sometimes weaken institutional responses to sexual harassment. These staff expressed concern that girls “normalise” (staff, CAT2) sexual harassment or “think that’s a compliment” (staff, IAT1), and expressed the need to work with both victims and perpetrators to address the issue. For example,

Around sexual harassment, I would say there have been cases where girls have sometimes complained that boys have been looking at them inappropriately, making inappropriate comments to them. And within a mainstream school, clearly where there are some young people for whom don’t wear the right skirt and so on, or will roll the skirt up and comments and so on are made, clearly, there is work to do for both the victim but also the perpetrator in those areas in terms of highlighting where the concerns are. (staff, CBT2)

On the other hand, staff in an intervention school training discussed their concern that the presence of a high level of sexual harassment could contribute to an erosion of physical boundaries among students, normalising “inappropriate” and non-consensual touching, which they suggested might indirectly contribute to DRV (staff training, IB).

Objectification of girls and degrading language. Participants expressed concern about the prevalence in their schools of objectification of girls and of sexist and degrading language used in reference to girls. Staff concerns in some settings included girls adopting and casually using degrading, gendered terms like “bitches” to refer to each other (staff training, IA). However, accounts primarily centred on boys’ behaviour towards girls, for example in using “very sexualised language” (staff, IBT3) and executing public judgements of girls’ bodies. As one boy described:

I know this kind of may sound petty in some ways, but I feel like quite a few boys take it into their own hands to make comments about girls, body composition. And, like, like take it into their own hands to like start staring and like at girls as such. And like looking them up and down as if they’re sort of like objects or trophies. And I feel like sometimes boys will hang around in groups and stereotypically talk about how good-looking girls are ... (year-10 girl and boy, CBS1-CBS2)

In our analysis, these behaviours were enabled, in part, by the gender hierarchy formed by prevailing sexist norms. Our data suggest that practices objectifying and degrading girls can also play a role in reproducing that hierarchy, as described by this student: “Some girls would

just be called a ‘sket’ for like doing nothing, because they got on boy’s nerves ... Like it’s just girls are always classified as something so below ...” (year-9 girls, IBS1-IBS2).

In an intervention school that had also taken other initiatives to improve relationships between students, participants reported recent shifts towards fewer incidents, less social acceptability of sexist behaviours and increasing confidence among students to challenge them (although the last of these could still trigger social repercussions). One teacher described emerging protective injunctive norms among boys in a year-group with which she worked (staff, IBT3):

Participant: ... like boys, particularly in year 11, do not want to be identified as sexist, that’s for sure.

Interviewer: Now?

Participant: Yeah, which is amazing. Which is, like, huge. I’m not saying that maybe they aren’t sexist sometimes but if somebody [peers or school staff] calls them up on it then they really do not want to be considered sexist.

In line with social norms theory, this account suggested that young people were influenced by social norms among student and staff reference groups even where their personal attitudes had not yet changed.

3.3. Dating and relationship violence norms

Participants tended to see DRV as largely unobservable, acknowledging that it could take place outside of school, online or otherwise in private. They were often unsure of how common it was in their school. Our data suggest that embarrassment or fear of losing friends’ respect could pose barriers to disclosing victimisation, and some suggested that disclosure could be particularly difficult for boys. In the words of one student, “I don’t think that if anyone in this school is in an abusive relationship or has trouble with sexual harassment then they wouldn’t be spreading [it] across the whole school ...” (year-10 girl, CAS1). Concerns about privacy and about how friends would react were seen as potential deterrents to breaking up with an abusive partner.

Teachers, parents/carers, family, friends and other peers emerged as influential reference groups. Staff saw themselves as playing a protective role and suggested that young people would be embarrassed for a teacher to hear them brag about abusive behaviours. Participants, primarily staff, suggested that young people’s expectations about abuse in intimate relationships could be influenced by exposure to abusive relationships at home. They emphasised the school’s critical role in teaching students about DRV and providing a space to explore their views, as described by this teacher:

Because I think that they quite often don’t have any awareness of any, you know, rules, legislation, anything. Quite often they will have experienced domestic violence and things like that, and don’t actually know that it’s not normal. Because it’s just a normal, you know, it happens to lots of people, unfortunately, around here. And it’s something that is not really discussed openly with adults at home. And so I think it’s important to inform at school so that they know what is right and what is wrong. (staff, IDT3)

Participants tended to view physical DRV as rare. They described protective social sanctions such that a young person experiencing DRV would, as a year-10 student said, “just break up with” the abusive partner (wave 2, OB); and said that friends of someone experiencing or perpetrating DRV would intervene. One teacher shared an example of peer intervention with a boy who had been “quite heavy handed” with his girlfriend, which the teacher viewed as particularly impactful:

... about 12 boys came to see the Head of Year and said, this is, you know ‘This is totally out of order ... he shouldn’t have done this. It’s really disrespectful. Please can you speak to him?’ And in the end the Head of Year actually said, ‘Well, why don’t you all speak to him?’ So they all sat

down and told him how they felt about it and that he shouldn't be doing that. And he was pretty embarrassed and he completely understood. And, actually, the fact that that was coming from the students was really nice ... (staff, IDT3)

On the other hand, accounts suggested that peer injunctive norms could also contribute to DRV. This was particularly the case for controlling behaviours, which when discussed by gender were described primarily in terms of boys' behaviours towards girls. Controlling behaviours were viewed as more common and visible than physical DRV, especially when they involved control over how a partner presented themselves or interacted with others. In a year-10 optimisation session, a boy contrasted social intolerance of physical DRV in his school with what he saw as the more typical practice of controlling behaviours, and others agreed:

... There's probably more emotional, like, [a girl agreeing] ... an example is, like, they might isolate you, so, like, not let you speak to anyone. That'll be, cos that's kind of more subtle, like you don't really realise, but your friends might realise. But if they just, like, full-out, like, slap you or something, then everyone would just like stop you [another girl and boy agreeing]. And then you go on a break or whatever. (wave 2, OB)

Often framed as rooted in jealousy, this type of abuse was reported to manifest as control over a partner's makeup and clothing, whether they went out and with whom they spent time or talked. Reflecting gender norms restricting cross-gender friendships, our data also suggest there was an expectation among students that young people in a relationship wouldn't spend time with cross-gender peers other than their partner.

Staff accounts indicated pro-DRV descriptive norms and reported that, as one participant said, "It seems to be very normal for a lot of the pupils to think that whoever you're dating, should know where you are at all times pretty much ..." (staff, IBT3). Contrasting pro-DRV norms in her year-group with protective norms among her friends, one student described injunctive norms condoning controlling behaviours this way:

I think it's like small things. Like a lot of small things are acceptable, like, for example ... people in my year, like their boyfriend would say, they'd be like, 'Oh, yeah, my boyfriend let me wear shorts for PE [Physical Education] today'. And you're like, 'Why would he not let you wear shorts for PE today?' Like that's just normal ... it's like that's just what's expected, but then so no one like says anything. (year-10 girls, IBS7-IBS8)

Considering sexual DRV, participants described two forms involving sexual images. First, accounts suggest that while young people sometimes shared sexual images of themselves with a partner as a consensual part of their relationship, some did so under pressure from their partner. The second involved threatening to or actually sharing sexual images of a partner or former partner without their permission, abuse which we suggest draws power from sexist norms engendering ridicule of girls whose images are circulated.

4. Discussion

4.1. Summary and interpretation

Identifying specific norms underpinning DRV in UK schools is critical to informing DRV prevention interventions and the evaluations of intervention mechanisms in this setting. Based on qualitative research with students, staff and parents/carers across ten secondary schools in England, this study describes social norms governing gendered attributes as well as DRV and other forms of abuse among young people. Some DRV norms were discussed in general terms, while others were strongly gendered. Like social practices of sexual harassment, and the objectification and degradation of girls, DRV involving controlling behaviours or sexual images was portrayed as focused largely on dominating girls.

We found Giddens's structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) to be a useful framework for examining relationships between the social norms and practices emerging from participant accounts. Drawing on Giddens "duality of structure", (Giddens, 1984, p.19) we theorise from the accounts presented that sexist norms comprise a hierarchical gender structure that enables a host of gendered abusive practices among young people, and that enactment of these practices, in turn, reproduce that structure. Integrating a social norms framework, our data suggest that sexist descriptive and injunctive norms governing how girls and boys behave foster social expectations that subjugate girls to boys. Our data also suggest that homophobic language, pressure to share sexual images and the vilification of girls whose images are then circulated operate not only as abusive practices but also as social sanctions promoting compliance with sexist norms. We theorise that the resulting recursive gender structure, characterised by the subjugation of girls including policing of their bodies and sexuality, enables other practices that are abusive of girls and were prevalent in participant accounts (sexual harassment, objectification, use of degrading language, and some forms of DRV). Our data indicate that injunctive norms tended to support these abusive practices, manifesting as social tolerance and in some cases encouragement from peers. We also theorise that enactments of these abusive practices subjugate girls to boys' judgement and control, reproducing the prevailing gender structure.

According to this model, engaging in abusive behaviours and enacting social sanctions to uphold prevailing gender norms represent expressions of agency that are both enabled and constrained by a male-dominated gender structure. But Giddens's work suggests that people can take deliberate action to transform prevailing structures (Giddens, 1984) and choose between competing norms, particularly where they can draw on different social networks and sources of knowledge. We found evidence of this in the schools in our study. Participants gave accounts of staff and students adopting practices that challenged established norms, from accepting peer transgressions to actively challenging abusive practices and (among staff) pursuing new, coordinated interventions. While doing so could result in social repercussions, structuration theory suggests that these social practices of rebellion nonetheless recursively impact the "conditions of action" (Giddens, 1984, p.5) in schools. For example, acts of resistance to existing gender structures might increase the social cost of abusive practices against girls and expand opportunities for others to resist them too. These acts of resistance represent protective practices on which normative DRV interventions can build.

Our findings on the role of social norms subjugating girls to boys and casting dominance, control and sexual activity as masculine ideals reflect similar findings in the global GBV literature (Jewkes et al., 2015). This research also build on past studies that report on the influential role of schools in the construction and support of gender expectations and hierarchies and in the reproduction (and challenging) of gender inequalities (Connell, 1996). Others have also reported on the use of sexualised language, including anti-gay and misogynist insults used against girls and boys, as a key feature of the construction of masculinity and of the subjugation of girls in school (Connell, 1996; Pascoe, 2005). Our findings also resonate, as we would expect, with Jamal et al.'s research which drew on structuration theory to explore girls' bullying in secondary schools in England (Jamal et al., 2015). While that research focused mainly on girl-only settings, the "policing of [girls] bodies and sexuality" it documented also emerged in our mixed-sex settings (Jamal et al., 2015, p.741). In both studies, students recounted the prevalence of sexual harassment and objectification of girls by boys (Jamal et al., 2015). These qualitative findings echo the results of a 2017 survey in mixed-sex primary and secondary schools in England and Wales, which found high rates among girls of experiencing sexual harassment (37%), experiencing gender discrimination (36%) and being described using sexist language (30%) ("It's Just Everywhere, 2017).

In line with our findings on recursive interactions between abusive practices and the structural conditions that enable them, Jamal et al.

demonstrated how school-based sexual bullying of girls reinforced gendered social categories and traced the role of institutional response in reproducing harmful norms “by sometimes ignoring” these practices (Jamal et al., 2015, p.736). Data from staff in our study indicate that some subscribed to beliefs holding girls accountable for their own victimisation, which could undermine a protective response. However, student complaints about institutional tolerance in this study centred on staff responses to homophobic comments, which were characterised as surface-level and ineffective. These findings suggest that transformation of sexist structures in schools might usefully involve work with secondary school teachers, 27% of whom in England and Wales report not feeling confident in responding to sexist incidents in their school (“It’s Just Everywhere, 2017).

Our analysis is novel in using a social norms framework to examine gendered expectations and abusive practices, including DRV, in UK schools. Delineating between (1) norms that govern DRV directly, (2) norms that participant accounts link explicitly or indirectly to DRV and (3) norms that broader empirical literature link to DRV, we can suggest some specific areas of focus for normative components of DRV interventions. First, descriptive and injunctive norms in schools in this study were described as mainly protective against physical DRV but supportive of boys’ controlling behaviours towards female partners. We also found that fear of others’ response could be a barrier to DRV help-seeking, results which are supported by other research finding that young people fear being blamed (Barter et al., 2009; Barter, 2009) and often tell no one about the DRV they experience (Barter et al., 2009). Second, staff explicitly linked sexual harassment to DRV via a breakdown of appropriate physical boundaries between students. Participant accounts also indirectly suggest that norms proscribing cross-gender friendships and supporting the policing of girls’ sexuality could contribute to DRV. For the former, this is by underpinning jealousy, which was identified as a key driver of boys’ controlling behaviours in relationships. For the latter, we suggest that this policing underpins sanctions that disparage girls whose sexual images are circulated (while not reportedly of the boys who circulate them), lending power to the form of DRV involving threatening to circulate a female partner’s sexual images underpins. Third, drawing on other empirical research, we identify pathways through which norms identified in our study might underpin DRV. Norms prescribing male dominance and control are implicated directly in young people’s accounts of boys’ DRV perpetration in Great Britain (Barter et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2011), while the sexual double-standard prescribing conflicting sexual behaviours for girls and boys appears to play a role in undermining clear communication about sexual consent (Marston and King, 2006). Further considering the latter, in interviews with girls in the UK “male sexual coercion was perceived as standard” for many (Barter et al., 2009, p108) and refusing sex could precipitate severe physical DRV (Barter et al., 2009). Reports of peer pressure on boys to be sexually active (Barter et al., 2009) suggest that gendered expectations might play a role in underpinning these types of abuse.

Drawing on a social norms framework also enabled us to conceptualise enactments of homophobia, tactics to pressure girls to share sexual images and the vilification of girls whose images are circulated as manifestations of social sanctions promoting sexist norms. This suggests that interventions to weaken these sanctions, even where personal attitudes have not yet shifted, could theoretically disrupt cycles whereby they reproduce gender-inequitable structures that facilitate gendered abusive practices, including some forms of DRV.

4.2. Limitations

This study collected qualitative data from ten schools in south-east and south-west England. While this type of research can provide valuable theoretical insights and identify areas for further research (Jamal et al., 2015), its findings cannot automatically be generalised to other schools or settings. However, many of our findings resonated with other

UK school-based research, contributing to a broader understanding of gendered expectations and abuse in UK schools. This study focused on perceptions of social patterns, expectations and sanctions but did not ask about other factors underpinning personal experiences of DRV victimisation or perpetration. The latter have emerged from previous UK-based DRV research (e.g., Barter et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2011) (Barter et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2011), suggesting that although individuals are not always conscious of the factors driving their behaviour (Giddens, 1984), targeted research in this area could usefully augment our findings.

5. Conclusions

Drawing on data from ten schools in England, we theorise that sexist norms subjugating girls to boys interact with social practices that are abusive of girls, including DRV against girls, to reproduce gender-inequitable structures in schools. Our findings suggest that school staff and students can, and do, take action to interrupt these cycles, and that physical DRV was seen as uncommon and socially proscribed. Normative DRV interventions might usefully build on the protective factors. We also found that boys’ controlling behaviours towards female partners were considered common and were typically socially accepted. Our findings suggest that shifting these norms supporting DRV directly, and weakening the social sanctions used to promote compliance with inequitable gender norms, might both be useful targets of DRV interventions. When considered alongside other empirical UK evidence, our findings identify several important candidates for the targeting of normative DRV interventions: norms governing sexual harassment, cross-gender friendships, the sexual double-standard and control and dominance as masculine ideals.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Rebecca Meiksin: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ruth Ponsford:** Writing – review & editing, Validation. **Nambusi Kyegombe:** Writing – review & editing, Validation. **Chris Bonell:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Ethics statement

Project Respect received ethical approval from the LSHTM Ethics Committee (reference: 11986) and the NSPCC Research Ethics Committee (R/17/106). The secondary analyses of data collected for Project Respect presented in this paper was approved by the LSHTM Ethics Committee (ref: 28163).

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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[org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2024.117621](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2024.117621).

Data availability

Data will be made available on reasonable request.

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