Violence Against Women, Women Against Violence: Exploring the Experience of Women Who Have Participated in the Diamonds in the Ring Boxing Event in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

The sport of boxing is often viewed negatively and associated with violence, aggression, and masculinity (Davies & Deckert, 2018; Mayeda, 2008). Yet, women's participation at a social and competitive level is increasing with research suggesting their experience may lead to a sense of personal development and empowerment (Hargreaves, 1997, Nash, 2019; Velija et al., 2013). Research has found that many women who have experienced domestic violence are not only choosing to participate in boxing and other combat sports but are also experiencing positive outcomes (Gammage et al., 2021; McCaughey, 1997; Velija et al., 2013), with some boxing-based programmes being implemented specifically for this social group (Van Ingen, 2011a, 2011b, 2016). However, no research to date has specifically explored this area within the New Zealand (NZ) context. In NZ, some survivors choose to participate in boxing, specifically *Diamonds in the Ring* (DITR). DITR is a boxing event that fundraises for the Women's Refuge while "empowering families through fitness and boxing" (DITR, 2017). The women complete a 15-week boxing training camp that culminates in a fight exhibition.

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the experience of these women, to gauge their motivations and the extent to which their experience may have facilitated any form of personal development and empowerment. The study is guided by the following three research questions: 1) What motivates women who have been victims of domestic violence to participate in DITR? 2) In what way has their experience facilitated a sense of personal development? 3) If any, what aspects of their experience facilitated a sense of empowerment?

A qualitative research design grounded in feminist criminological theory was utilised. One-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five DITR participants who had survived domestic violence. The data were thematically analysed. The overarching theme is transformation, which consists of six sub-themes: 1) pre-transformation self-assessment, 2) physical development, 3) mental change, 4) identity shift: from victim to fighter, 5) empowerment, and 6) healing and recovery. In brief, the research questions were answered as follows. 1) Women were motivated to participate in DITR for several reasons, including, to support a friend, for personal growth and development, and to support the Women's Refuge. 2) Participants experienced a strong sense of personal development characterised by physical and mental strength, self-confidence, self-esteem, change in mindset, and overall positive wellbeing. 3) There was a clear indication that participants experienced a

strong sense of empowerment which was facilitated by the development of strength, voice and agency, a shift in mindset, and a sense of healing and recovery from past trauma. Collectively, these developments represented a transformation that culminated into an identity shift in which the strong, empowered woman they felt they had become was very different to who they were when they entered DITR. The study concludes that boxing is a powerful facilitator of change, however, one of the key contributions to this change was the contact aspect of boxing training. As this raises questions around the vulnerability of survivors of violence and the need to potentially reframe our thinking about this demographic, further research is required to determine whether this finding extends more broadly to other women survivors of violence and other combat sports.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed_____ _____

Date_____28 June 2023_____

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and scope of research project

Domestic violence is a significant issue both globally (Alhabib et al., 2009; Goodman & Epstein, 2008; Stubbs & Wangmann, 2017) and in New Zealand (Fanslow & Robinson, 2004; Fanslow et al., 2021; Ministry of Justice, 2022; New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2017). In New Zealand, the term family violence is used in the legislation and is defined as "a pattern of behaviour that coerces, controls, or harms in the context of a close personal relationship [and can] involve sexual, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and economic abuse" (Ministry of Justice, 2022). Domestic violence covers a range of familial relationships, however, the most common, particularly in the New Zealand context is intimate partner violence (IPV) (Fanslow et al., 2021). IPV occurs within intimate partner relationships and although men and women can be victimized, it most commonly occurs among women, with an estimated one in three affected in their lifetime (Fanslow et al., 2021). However, due to issues with disclosure, attaining accurate and reliable data means that its prevalence may be higher (Fanslow et al., 2021; Simon-Kumar, 2019). With domestic violence leading to detrimental physical and mental health outcomes, providing effective responses that aim to improve the long-term outcomes of survivors and also, prevent future occurrence of victimization are in high demand and at the forefront of research in the area (Lambie, 2018).

One of the reasons domestic violence has such damaging short- and long-term impacts is that victims are stripped of their power and control at the hands of their abuser, resulting in deep-rooted disempowerment (Davies & Lyon, 2013; Goodman et al., 2016). The abuse often occurs over an extensive period, where gradually the abuser takes control of aspects of the victim's life such as financial decisions, relationships with family and friends, and day-to-day activities (Lambie, 2018). Consequently, intervention programmes for survivors often focus on empowerment as a means of regaining a sense of control and safety, as well as rebuilding their self-confidence and self-worth (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015; Lambie, 2018). The extent to which survivors feel a sense of empowerment and control has been associated with improved satisfaction with the legal system and an indication that they have the confidence to

report future incidents of abuse (Hotaling & Buzawa, 2003). Further, research suggests that empowerment-based approaches to responding to domestic violence have led to improved mental health and wellbeing (Goodman et al., 2016). Therefore, providing opportunities that enable survivors to feel empowered appears to be a crucial component in achieving positive short and long-term outcomes for survivors.

Research suggests that women can experience empowerment and personal development through engagement in boxing and other forms of combat, such as Muay Thai and mixed martial arts (MMA; Hargreaves, 1997; Smart, 2022; Velija et al., 2013). Despite negative connotations commonly associated with these sports due to their connection with masculinity, aggression, and violence, it is evident that women's interest and participation in the sport are on the rise (Channon & Matthews, 2015). Consequently, researchers have investigated women's motivation for participation evidencing a range of reasons including, social influences (Mathiesen, 2022; Mennesson, 2000), empowerment, and physical change (Davies & Deckert, 2018; Mierzwinski et al., 2014; Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015). The experience of women in combat sports has become a topic of growing scholarly interest, most of which originated from pioneering feminist scholars (Hargreaves, 1997, McCaughey, 1997). These scholars argued that women's empowerment through boxing and self-defence courses centres around the development of physical strength and power as a means of challenging feminine ideals pertaining to the conception of women as vulnerable, weak, and passive (Hargreaves, 1997; Mierzwisnki et al., 2019). Despite the gendered constraints inherent in the sport (McGannon et al., 2019), women often experience a deep sense of empowerment representative of physical and mental strength and power (Hargreaves, 1997; Velija et al., 2013). In addition to the empowering potential of boxing, women often describe their experience as 'transformative' leading to several benefits such as improved confidence, self-esteem, and overall wellbeing (Matthews & Channon, 2015; Mierszwinski et al., 2014; Smart, 2022; Velija et al., 2013; Zsheliaskova-Koynova, 2021). Boxing, therefore, has the potential to facilitate meaningful and positive change for women, a finding that has also been extended to survivors of violence (Cole & Ulrich-French, 2017; Gammage et al., 2021; Lyon et al., 2021; Van Ingen, 2011a, 2011b; 2019).

In discussing boxing within the context of the experience of women survivors of violence, the narrative of 'boxing saved my life' and its potential for empowerment and healing have been reported in the media (Lyon, 2022; Meier, 2018). Accordingly, scholarly exploration into the experience of women survivors of violence in boxing and other combat sports has started to increase, but the focus is limited to a few distinct intervention-based

studies (Cole & Ulrich-French, 2017; Gammage et al 2021; Lyon et al., 2021; Van Ingen, 2011a, 2011b, 2019). In the Shape Your Life (SYL) non-contact boxing programme, it was evidenced that boxing facilitated a sense of empowerment as an outlet for healthy aggression (Van Ingen, 2011a), and overall improvements in physical and mental health outcomes (Gammage et al., 2021). Similarly, Lyon et al's (2020) research which provided non-contact boxing in conjunction with creative writing workshops resulted in significant improvements in mental health symptoms and served as a contribution to their overall healing and recovery. It has been argued that boxing enables survivors to re-gain power and control of both their minds and bodies, which in turn leads to empowerment, and physical and mental development, and, can facilitate healing and recovery from trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014; Van Ingen, 2011b, 2019). The potential for empowerment and positive physical and mental health outcomes through engagement in sport and exercise is well evidenced (Armstrong & Hutchison, 2022; Miles, 2007), however, boxing's association with aggression and the incorporation of contact is what makes it unique, and warrants further exploration.

It is clear from the literature that boxing has the potential to facilitate a sense of empowerment and to promote positive physical and mental change for women survivors of violence. These findings are of significance because the positive outcomes evidenced through engagement in boxing are often the goals of interventions for survivors and indicative of survivor wellbeing and recovery (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015; Goodman & Epstein, 2005; Sullivan et al., 2018). Wider literature on the experience of women fighters has also inadvertently found that those who are survivors of violence indicated similar findings in that the sport enabled them to rebuild their strength and agency after trauma (Davies & Deckert, 2018; Velija et al., 2013). However, as this was not the primary research aim, the extent to which conclusions can be drawn is limited. Therefore, despite current research, there are several gaps in the literature to be addressed.

Firstly, although research has explored the motivations of women to participate in boxing (Mathiesen et al., 2022; Mennesson, 2000; Nash, 2017; Smart et al., 2022; Velija et al., 2013), no research has specifically set out to explore the motivations of women survivors of violence. While gaining insight into why women are choosing to place themselves in such a male-dominated arena is worth exploring alone, this question becomes particularly pertinent when these women have been victims of domestic violence. It is, therefore, worthwhile to investigate what motivates women who have been exposed to physical abuse through past relationship(s), to choose a physical contact sport like boxing. Secondly, the research indicates that boxing can be an empowering experience that leads to positive physical and mental

changes for women survivors of violence, however, the research to date primarily investigates their experience within a non-contact scenario and no research has been conducted within the New Zealand context. For the purposes of this research, the physical and mental development reflected in the boxing literature will be collectively defined as personal development. The literature defines personal development in reference to an individual's active contribution to developing oneself in various aspects of their lives (Irving & Williams, 1999). The current research adapts this understanding of personal development to refer to the personal growth in an individual's physical and mental abilities based on individual experiences. This adaption is required to ensure that all aspects of participants' physical and mental development can be captured under the umbrella term of personal development. To this end, the research aims to close a gap in the literature by exploring the experience of women survivors of domestic violence who have participated in the Diamonds in the Ring (DITR) charity boxing event in Aotearoa, NZ, with specific reference to their motivations, personal development, and empowerment. This thesis, therefore, aims to answer the following three research questions:

- What motivates women who have been victims of domestic violence to participate in *Diamonds in the Ring?*
- In what way has their experience facilitated a sense of personal development?
- If any, what aspects of their experience facilitated a sense of empowerment?

To answer these questions, a qualitative research design was utilised with one-on-one, in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with five DITR participants who had survived domestic violence. The data was thematically analysed to identify core themes pertaining to participants motivations, sense of personal development, and empowerment. In doing so, this will be the first study to explore the experience of women survivors of violence participating in a charity corporate boxing event in the NZ context, and therefore makes an important contribution to the literature on domestic violence and the potential benefits of boxing for this demographic.

1.2 Background

Diamonds in the Ring (DITR) is a charity organisation that was established in 2017 by former world boxing champion and survivor of domestic violence, Daniella Smith. The primary purpose of DITR is to fundraise for the New Zealand Women's Refuge, "whilst empowering families through fitness and boxing" (Diamonds in the Ring, 2017). DITR ran a total of six charity-based corporate boxing events since it was first established in 2017 with the final DITR event occurring in 2019. The associated Diamond's Boxing and Fitness gym has also since shut down.

DITR consists of a 15-week intensive training camp with the goal of competing in a corporate boxing fight as part of one of the DITR fight nights upon completion. The DITR event refers collectively to the training camp and the final fight night. DITR is open to both males and females at least 18 years or older and participants are given the option to have a boxing fight upon completion of the training camp or to solely complete the training camp. All participants interviewed in this study completed at least one boxing fight as part of DITR.

For the duration of the training camp, DITR members are randomly assigned to one of two teams, the blue or the red team. The blue team is coached by Daniella Smith out of Diamond's Boxing and Fitness Gym and the red team trained at a different location under a different head coach. Depending on the particular DITR event, the red team either trained at David Tua Health and Fitness or Mayhem Boxing Team at City Lee Gar. Participants are split into two teams and train at different locations because the final fight night consists of a matchup of boxing contests with blue versus red team members. The teams are blue and red as they represent the colours of the corner in the boxing ring and correspond to the colours of their uniform. This is standard practice in boxing.

Throughout the 15-week period, the research participants were put through intensive physical conditioning as well as boxing skills and sparring training sessions. All DITR members, regardless of whether they were aiming to complete a fight at the end of DITR were put through contact-based boxing training with regular sparring and boxing drills. It was compulsory for members to attend a minimum of three training sessions per week, however, in most cases, they would train anywhere between three and 10 times per week leading up to fight night. The final fight night incorporated modified boxing rules to enhance the safety of competitors. Each fight consisted of three, one-and-a-half-minute rounds and boxers were required to wear 16-ounce boxing gloves and protective headgear. Several fundraising events were also organised individually by each team and collectively across both teams throughout the fifteen weeks.

DITR was advertised through the Diamonds in the Ring Facebook page where anyone who was interested in participating and met the requirements of being 18 years or older could sign up through an online registration form. The registration form would remain open up until the training teams were at full capacity. Although the numbers in each DITR event varied, on average, there would be 20-30 participants in each team. Research participants were not approached to join the event but volunteered to participate through the information that was provided online on Facebook and in some cases through word of mouth from their friends. It was therefore an 'opt-in', voluntary process. At no point, were participants 'convinced' to participate by the organisers.

Although there is no requirement for DITR participants to be a survivor of domestic violence, or to have any connection or association with this aspect of DITR, it was continually found that a large proportion of participants had experienced domestic violence either prior to, or in a few cases, during the training camp. This was evidenced through my own experience as a DITR participant, gym member, and through the Facebook stories that the head coach, Daniella Smith posted through the Diamonds in the Ring Facebook page (Diamonds in the Ring, 2023) The women also came forward to share their stories with Daniella and other team members, including myself. Some were posted publicly with the individual's permission and can be viewed on the DITR Facebook page. This is essentially where my motivation to develop this research project began.

1.3 Researcher motivation and positionality

My motivation to develop this research project is drawn from my personal experience as a boxer, and participant of DITR. My journey with boxing began over five years ago when I started training with the DITR founder, Daniella Smith. My experience with boxing has been on both a social and competitive level and I have participated in three out of the six DITR events since it was first established in 2017. I was also a member of the associated Diamonds Boxing and Fitness gym and provided assistance to the coach by mentoring some of the DITR members who were new to the sport. Through my DITR experience, I noticed what appeared to be a drastic shift in participants from how they first entered DITR, until after completion of the fight night. This was particularly significant for me to witness in terms of the women in my team who had experienced domestic violence. It was through this experience that I became interested in and passionate about exploring the research questions posed in this thesis.

It is important to acknowledge that I am approaching this study from the perspective of someone who has experience with DITR and boxing as a sport, and the potential bias that comes with such experience (Berger, 2015). However, there are also unique benefits to my position as it contributes to the understanding of the experience of boxing and the associated challenges (Carlsson, 2015; García & Spencer, 2013). It is also important to highlight that, while I have direct experience with boxing and DITR, I do not have any personal experience with domestic violence, other than being exposed to the stories shared by many of the DITR participants and associated gym members.

Due to my experience as a women boxer directly connected to the Diamonds in the Ring events, associated gym, gym members, and head coach, consideration of my position as an insider or outsider is significant to the research study (Gary & Holmes, 2020). With respect to my position as a member of the DITR boxing community or 'group', I am approaching this research from the perspective of an insider (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, as I do not identify as a victim of domestic violence, I also consider my position to be that of an outsider (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) discuss the notion of 'the space between' in which researchers may simultaneously be positioned as both an insider and an outsider. The space between recognises that viewing researcher positionality as dichotomous is overly simplistic and does not take into account the similarities and differences held between members and non-members of a given particular group (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Gary & Holmes, 2020). Merton (1972) further argues that, positionality operates on "a continuum with multiple dimensions and that all researchers constantly move back and forth along several axes" (p. 28). Therefore, I view myself as both an insider and an outsider, occupying 'the space between' within the context of this research. At this point in the thesis, I am outlining my position as a researcher to ensure that the required context of the project and research questions are clear. However, any ethical issues and consideration of bias with respect to my position will be addressed in the research design section of my thesis.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

Chapter two provides an overview and discussion of key literature in the field of domestic violence, women's participation in boxing, and the potential benefits specifically for women survivors of violence. Chapter three outlines the chosen research design including the theoretical perspective and researcher worldview, research methods, ethical considerations, and limitations. Chapter four presents the research findings generated from participant

interviews. The findings are summarized under one overarching theme consisting of six sub-themes.

Chapter Five responds to the three research questions discussing the research findings within the context of wider literature on the topic.

Chapter six offers three conclusions drawn from the research with a discussion of its significance to the wider context of boxing and domestic violence. This chapter also includes suggestions and considerations for future research.

2. Literature Review

This literature review begins with a discussion of domestic violence in New Zealand to outline the definition of domestic violence from different theoretical perspectives and provides an overview of its prevalence. Secondly, the impact of domestic violence with specific reference to women as victims are discussed. The third section looks at various responses to domestic violence including a detailed review of literature on interventions for women victims of violence. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide an extensive review of the response literature and therefore focuses on responses relevant to promoting women's empowerment, wellbeing, and recovery of survivors, with specific reference to exercise-based interventions. The fourth section introduces the literature on boxing reviewing the specific literature on the experience of women in boxing and other combat sports to identify their potential for personal development and empowerment. Finally, a discussion of boxing-based interventions for women survivors of domestic violence is provided, demonstrating a dearth of overseas and domestic research in this area.

2.1 Domestic Violence in New Zealand

As indicated in the introduction chapter, domestic violence refers to abuse that may be physical, sexual, and/or psychological and includes behaviours that are characteristically controlling in nature. The terms domestic and family violence are often used interchangeably to refer to violence occurring within intimate or family relationships. Although family violence is the term used in NZ legislature, domestic violence is commonly used in everyday conversation in NZ. Therefore, on this basis and to ensure consistency the term 'domestic violence' will be used throughout this thesis.

Defining domestic violence is a complex issue and definitions are often debated among researchers (Carlson & Jones, 2010; Nancarrow, 2019; Nixon, 2007). The debate on defining domestic violence typically centres around two main perspectives: feminist theory and domestic violence theory (Kurz, 1989). The traditional feminist approach assumes that domestic violence is gendered and "a matter of control, rooted in patriarchal traditions of male dominance in heterosexual relationships" (Carlson & Jones, 2010, p. 248). Feminists believe the defining characteristic of domestic violence to be the coercive control perpetrated by men through physical, psychological and/or economic means (Nixon, 2007). Examples of such

coercive behaviour include "social isolation, threats, emotional abuse, economic control, using children, and male privilege" (Nancarrow, 2019, p. 38). In contrast, domestic violence researchers argue that domestic violence is not a gendered phenomenon, affecting men and women equally, and recognises that not all domestic violence involves coercive behaviour (Carlson & Jones, 2010) The largely gendered debate on defining domestic violence has led researchers to explore different typologies of violence such as patriarchal terrorism, situational couple violence (Stark, 2007, 2010) domestic violence crime (Walby & Towers, 2018), intimate terrorism, mutual violent control, and violent resistance (Johnson, 2006). Different typologies have also emerged as a means to provide more accurate descriptions of the nature of violence in heterosexual relationships as well as more culturally appropriate definitions for indigenous relationships (Nancarrow, 2019). Irrespective of how domestic violence is defined, the extensive prevalence and detrimental implications are widely acknowledged.

Despite the recent increase in studies suggesting that rates of domestic violence victimisation are equal between men and women (Headey et al., 1999; Nancarrow, 2019) majority of the literature supports the view that perpetrators are typically an intimate male partner and victims are predominantly women and children (Health Quality and Safety Commission, 2014). For example, one in three women report experiencing domestic violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime (Fanslow et al., 2021; New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2017) and the NZ Family Violence Death Review Committee (2009-2015) found, in 75% of IPV related deaths, the victims were primarily female. Māori are overrepresented in all aspects of domestic violence statistics (Te Puni Kokiri, 2017) and are three times more likely to be killed due to IPV compared to other ethnic groups in NZ (Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2017, p. 12). Strikingly similar trends in domestic violence victimisation have been reported globally in various countries around the world (Alhabib et al., 2009; Goodman & Epstein, 2008; Stubbs & Wangmann, 2017). As research suggests that many cases of domestic violence are not reported, it is likely that the actual prevalence of family violence is much higher (Fanslow et al., 2021; Fanslow & Robinson, 2011). Based on these studies, domestic violence is clearly a significant and complex issue, particularly within the NZ context with the majority of victimisation occurring amongst women.

2.3 Impact of domestic violence

Several studies have demonstrated the detrimental impact of domestic violence on female victims (Fanslow & Robinson, 2004; Nancarrow, 2019). The impact is pervasive and

linked to a variety of psychological, physical, social, and economic implications. With respect to psychological and physical impacts, female victims are more likely to suffer from psychological disorders such as depression, Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD), substance abuse (Gorde et al., 2004), and a range of physical injuries, including traumatic brain injury and in severe cases, death (Goodman & Epstein, 2005). Women often turn to drugs and alcohol as a form of self-medication and to provide a 'mental escape' from their trauma (Fowler & Faulkner, 2011). Victims of domestic violence are also more susceptible to homelessness with multiple studies reporting high rates of domestic violence among homeless women (Bukowski, 2009; Mullins, 1994; Nancarrow, 2019; Williams, 1998). Homelessness often occurs when women separate from their abusive partners and struggle to adequately support themselves independently due to a range of commonly associated factors, such as financial insecurity, insufficient life skills and inadequate social support (Goodman & Epstein, 2008; Gorde et al., 2004). Substance abuse, mental illness and homelessness are examples of how many of the psychological and social impacts of domestic violence, can also be considered risk factors for domestic violence victimisation. These studies highlight the significant impact of domestic violence on women, however, the factors discussed are highly complex and often interrelated.

The interrelated impacts of domestic violence often lead to secondary implications for not only victims, but also extend to children, families, and the community (Nancarrow, 2019; Skaperdas et al., 2009). With victims often suffering from a variety of complex and co-existing issues, the cumulative and interrelated impact of domestic violence can indirectly lead to wider, often long-term implications. For example, the increased likelihood for victims to suffer from substance abuse and psychological disorders (Gorde et al., 2004) arguably increases their risk of incarceration in the long term. The association between domestic violence, incarceration and offending is supported by research reporting high rates of abuse histories among incarcerated women (Ball et al., 2013; Carlson & Schafer, 2010; Greene et al., 2000). The effects can extend to children of domestic violence victims who are more likely to suffer from behavioural and emotional issues, substance abuse and to be in abusive relationships in adulthood (Goodman & Epstein, 2008; Skaperdas, et al., 2009). These findings have led researchers to suggest that the effects of domestic violence can be intergenerational and transmitted across generations (Lambie, 2018; Wilson, 2016). The research discussed provides insight into the complexity of domestic violence related implications and emphasises the need for a range of strategies to reduce domestic violence as well as services to support victims,

which in turn could have positive implications for children, families, and other sectors of society.

2.3 Responses to domestic violence

As it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a detailed review of all responses to domestic violence, this section will begin with a brief overview of the response literature followed by a more detailed discussion of research relevant to the thesis aim: survivor recovery and wellbeing. In general, responses to domestic violence victimisation involve the coordination of services from the criminal justice, health, education, and social sectors of society (Chetwin, 2013). These responses largely focus on two main areas including providing immediate safety, support, and access to resources, and secondly, addressing the consequences of domestic violence including the physical and mental health impacts. The latter is of most relevance to this thesis.

The legal system, health care, shelters and safehouses such as the Women's Refuge (Women's Refuge, 2023) and Shine (Shine, 2023) in New Zealand are central to the front-line response. Refuges provide women with a place of safety and incorporate advocacy programmes including counselling, education, and access to resources to facilitate the process of leaving their abuser (Sullivan, et al., 2008). Further, with respect to the legal system, the use of 'protection orders' is one of the main approaches that aim to ensure the immediate safety of victims by enforcing legally bound 'no-contact' and 'no-violence' conditions for a specified period of time (Fanslow & Kelly, 2016). While protection orders serve a very crucial role in the overall response, several studies have questioned their effectiveness in reducing domestic violence (Crichton-Hill et al., 2010; Robertson, et al., 2007). Based on research into the effectiveness of victim-focused programmes in reducing domestic violence (Goodman & Epstein, 2005, 2008; Rolling & Brosi, 2010), Crichton-Hill and colleagues (2010) argue that "such programmes have the dual benefit of empowering victims whilst ensuring the women do not experience further abuse" (p. 9).

Mainstream victim-focused programmes refer to advocacy, counselling, support groups, and refuge shelters (Chetwin, 2013; Sullivan, 2018). Research exploring their effectiveness within the New Zealand context is limited, however, findings have indicated that safety, access to a range of resources (e.g., financial, education, psychological), fostering the development of self-esteem, personal wellbeing, strong social and community support networks, are key factors associated with improved outcomes for victims (Goodman & Epstein, 2005). Researchers often focus on these concepts in isolation from one another

however given the complexity and varied needs of domestic violence victims, many have argued for collaborative and flexible approaches to addressing the individual needs of victims (Goodman & Epstein, 2005; Rolling & Brosi, 2010; Sullivan, 2018).

Empowerment and advocacy

A significant portion of the literature on service provision argues for an empowerment-based approach to responding to and reducing domestic violence against women (Goodman & Epstein, 2008). Due to a lack of clarity and consistency in the use of the term empowerment in domestic violence literature, Cattaneo and Goodman (2015) developed the Empowerment Process Model aiming to establish a holistic and practical view of empowerment addressing all components of the concept, rather than each component in isolation. In this model, empowerment is defined as:

> *a meaningful shift in the experience of power attained through interaction in the social world […], in which a person takes action toward personally meaningful goals; draws on community supports, skill, knowledge, and self-efficacy to move toward those goals; and observes the extent to which those actions result in progress* (p. 84).

In accordance with this definition, the literature generally focuses on the development of empowerment through three key areas: personal, economic, and community. Personal empowerment refers to developing self-confidence, agency, self-efficacy, and self-care, all of which play a key role in mental health outcomes (Garcia et al., 2019). In addressing the financial abuse experienced by many women who ultimately lose control and access to financial resources, economic empowerment aims to enable women to have financial independence and security after leaving their abuser (Hahn & Postmus, 2014). Collective empowerment refers to building connections between survivors of violence with formal and informal supports in their community such as friends, family members, or neighbours. In essence, this aspect of empowerment is about rebuilding a victim's social network to facilitate access to community resources, providing support and a sense of belonging (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015). Although each of the three aspects of empowerment are of significance, research suggests that programmes which have a holistic view and incorporate personal, economic, and collective empowerment are likely to yield stronger and more effective outcomes (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015).

Although some suggest that empowerment-based rather than perpetrator-focused approaches to reducing domestic violence pose the risk of "resurrecting the regressive notion that victims are responsible for the violence inflicted on them" (Goodman & Epstein, 2005, p. 483), several studies have demonstrated not only the benefits of empowerment-based approaches for the wellbeing of the victims but also a reduction in domestic violence victimisation (Hotaling & Buzawa, 2003; Kiani et al., 2021). For example, Hotaling and Buzawa (2003) found victims were more likely to report repeat instances of family violence when they felt a sense of autonomy in previous prosecution cases. Another study reported a reduction in the severity of PTSD symptoms and repeat abuse in female domestic violence victims participating in an empowerment-based intervention (Johnson et al., 2011), which is consistent with research reflecting an association between empowerment and improved mental health outcomes (Goodman et al., 2016). Studies have also demonstrated the benefit of financial literacy programmes in promoting economic empowerment for victims in the overall response to domestic violence (Postmust et al., 2013).

One example of an empowerment-based intervention to domestic violence is advocacy programmes. In these programmes, a trained professional works as an advocate for the victim in providing support and access to a range of essential services including legal assistance, housing, financial and mental health support (Kim & Macy, 2021). Advocates, therefore, work collaboratively with the victim and relevant departments to not only provide support in the form of resourcing, but also, for their emotional wellbeing (Goodman et al., 2016). Because advocacy involves a holistic approach to addressing the needs of victims, it is often considered to be the most effective intervention (Lambie, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2008). Advocacy programmes have been associated with a range of positive outcomes including improved mental health symptoms (Ogbe et al., 2020) self-esteem and a sense of belonging (Constantino et al., 2005), and an overall reduction in violence experienced over time (Allen et al., 2004; Sullivan, 2018). However, as is the case for the majority of the research on victim interventions (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2005), collectively, the evidence is inconsistent in demonstrating its effectiveness in improving the consequences of domestic violence (Kim & Macy, 2021; Rivas et al., 2016). Further research is needed to address this issue, but it is however clear that advocacy and more specifically, empowerment, play an important role in addressing the needs of survivors of violence.

Counselling and trauma-informed responses

Traditional psychology-based interventions such as counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) are commonly used to treat the mental health impacts of trauma for survivors of violence (Lambie, 2018). CBT is based on the premise that emotions and behaviours are determined by cognitions, and altering a survivors thinking and thought process will translate into positive changes in emotions and behaviour (Kim & Macy, 2021). Several studies have demonstrated the short and long-term benefits of both individual and group-based CBT interventions in improving the mental health outcomes for survivors of violence (Crespo & Arinero, 2010; Diehle, et al., 2014), however, this type of intervention appears to hold particular promise in responding to trauma-related mental health symptoms and PTSD (Johnson et al., 2011; Warshaw et al., 2013**).** Further, as CBT places emphasis on the ability of the victim to facilitate change, research suggests that trauma-informed approaches to CBT are crucial in ensuring the therapy is strength-based and avoids re-traumatization (Johnson et al., 2011; Warshaw et al., 2013). A trauma-informed approach aims to "reframe complex behaviour in terms of its function in helping survival and as a response to situational or relational triggers" (Lambie, 2018, p. 41) and therefore brings awareness to the wider context of the impacts of trauma on the emotions and behaviours of survivors.

Although traditional talk-based interventions are of value to the overall response to domestic violence, recently, alternative trauma-informed approaches incorporating exercise as a form of therapy have been explored in research. The positive effects of physical activity on personal wellbeing and health are widely acknowledged (Miles, 2007), however more recently a few distinct studies have demonstrated the potential benefits specifically in promoting empowerment and contributing to the overall recovery of survivors of violence. Engagement in exercise has been associated with increased levels of empowerment among women survivors of violence (Garcia et al., 2019). Further, women survivors of violence provided with a three-month gym membership reported positive improvements to their emotional wellbeing as well as feeling accomplished through overcoming the physical challenges with exercise (Concepcion & Ebbeck, 2005). Engaging in physical activity contributed to feelings of "normality and humanization" which fostered a sense of personal contribution to their healing process and "enhanced their sense of freedom and served as a concrete and tangible display of personal autonomy" (Concepcion & Ebbeck, 2005, p. 208). With the exception of a small body of literature exploring the effects of trauma-informed yoga-based interventions

(Clark et al., 2014; Nolan, 2016), these appear to be the only studies that have explored the effects of physical activity specifically as an intervention for women survivors of violence. Further, although there is a paucity of research specifically investigating the benefits of physical activity for survivors of violence, literature has evidenced that physical activity leads to significant improvements in PTSD symptoms (Bjorkman & Ekblom, 2022) depression and anxiety (Singh et al., 2022), and substance abuse (Wang et al, 2014) in the wider population. Therefore, interventions that incorporate bodily movement appear to have the potential to make a positive impact on a wide range of mental and physical health outcomes that are of significance to survivor recovery and wellbeing. These findings are meaningful given that the mainstream services are primarily focused on traditional 'talk-based' therapeutic approaches which don't incorporate a physical activity component.

2.5 Boxing

Before discussing the literature on the experience of women in boxing, it is important to first outline the different forms of boxing that currently exist to provide context to the Diamonds in the Ring boxing event. These forms of boxing can be broken down into competitive and non-competitive/recreational boxing (Channon & Mathews, 2015). Competitive boxing involves intensive physical training and conditioning with the purpose of competing in amateur or professional fights. Recreational boxing, on the other hand, refers to combat workouts, such as 'box-fit', which involve little to no level of contact and feature "adaptive movements derived from fighting techniques, practiced principally for enhancing fitness, toning muscle, or losing weight" (Matthews & Channon, 2015, p. 9).

Corporate boxing – also referred to as white-collar boxing in the UK and USA (Wright, 2019) – can be understood as a middle ground between recreational and competitive boxing as participants prepare for a singular competitive full-contact exhibition fight (Trimbur, 2013). Hence, corporate boxers are not considered athletes, nor are they training to compete at the level that amateur and professional fighters do.

Corporate boxers typically train in a twelve-to-fifteen-week fight camp for the purpose of competing in an exhibition fight upon completion. Although there is a competitive element, the rules are amended as a safety measure to protect the boxers who are not classed as athletes but are individuals from the general public. Unlike in professional boxing, a corporate boxing fight consists of three, two-minute rounds with fighters required to wear protective headgear and 16-ounce gloves. Wright (2017) states that the term 'white-collar' was used to symbolise social class in distinguishing "its practitioners from professional and amateur boxers on class

lines" (pg. 28). This is also applicable to the term 'corporate' with many corporate boxing events targeted towards corporate professionals (FFAC, 2022; IT Heavy Hitters, 2023). In the New Zealand context, corporate boxing fights are commonly connected to charity fundraising events (see, for example, France, 2021; Tweed, 2023). Research conducted on corporate and white-collar boxing thus far focuses on the experience of men within the context of the construction of social class and masculine identities in boxing (Bell & Armstrong, 2021; Trimbur, 2011; Trimbur, 2013; Wright, 2017; Wright, 2019), and does not specifically address the experience of women participating in charity boxing events. Furthermore, to date, no such research has been conducted in the New Zealand context.

Women's motivations for boxing

With the recent increase in women's participation in boxing and combat sports (Mierzwinski et al., 2014), several studies have begun to explore their experiences (Matthews & Channon, 2015), however, there are limited studies available focusing on their motivations for participation (Kotarska et al., 2020). A key reason for the exploration of women's motivation is that combat sports are generally considered to be 'hyper-masculine', associated with violence, aggression, and masculinity (Davies & Deckert, 2018; Mayeda, 2008). In attempting to understand this development, research indicates a range of reasons contribute to women's involvement (Davies & Deckert; Mathiesen et al., 2022; Mierzwinski et al., 2014; Nash, 2017; Smart et al., 2022). As boxing is a form of intense physical exercise, participation leads to increased fitness, strength, and weight loss. Consequently, research suggests that fitness and self-defence are common motivations of women to pursue boxing and combat sports (Matthews & Channon, 2015; Smart et al., 2022; Velija et al., 2013). Women often enter recreational forms of boxing that are marketed for the purposes of health and fitness but inadvertently continue to participate because of other benefits such as improved self-confidence, strength, and overall enjoyment (Smart et al., 2022) Furthermore, the development of strength, confidence, and boxing skills may enhance their sense of safety and ability to defend themselves, which in turn leads to a sense of empowerment (Hollander, 2004).

In contrast, research conducted with MMA and Muay Thai fighters suggests that women are drawn to combat sports in what Mierswinski & Phipps (2015) describe as "the quest for excitement". For these women, their motivations centred around the excitement, thrill, and the intense mental and physical challenge associated with participating in combat sports. Further Hargreaves (1997) found that "the physicality, risks, challenge and fear

empowered women, increasing their self-confidence and giving them an unbelievable buzz" (Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015, p. 239). Therefore, boxing is often perceived as an opportunity for women to experience a thrill, but also a challenge that is rewarding and empowering (Mathiesen et al., 2022). This aligns with Mennesson's (2000) research in distinguishing the differences in motivations to participate in 'hard' vs 'soft' combat sports. Mennesson (2000) contends that women who choose to participate in harder forms of combat typically involving physical contact and competition, do so because they "developed a natural taste for combat". However, the 'natural taste' for hard combat sports was largely influenced by social experiences that created positive exposure to typically male-dominant sports and thus enabled women to consider entering these spaces. This is emphasised in research indicating that women chose to enter combat sports upon being introduced through friends (Mathiesen et al., 2022) or family members (Mennesson, 2000; Velija et al., 2013). Therefore, because boxing and other combat sports are considered to be male-dominant spaces, whether or not women choose to participate can be influenced by their social networks, a finding that is also evidenced in the wider literature on women's participation in sport (Armstrong & Hutchison, 2022).

Collectively, research suggests that women are motivated to participate in boxing and other combat sports for a variety of reasons, and these reasons may differ depending on the type of boxing they decide to pursue.

The experience of women participating in boxing

The literature suggests that women often experience several positive benefits from their participation in boxing and combat sports such as self-confidence, strength, empowerment, and overall enjoyment and positive wellbeing (Croom, 2023; Matthews & Channon, 2015; Mierszwinski et al., 2014; Velija et al., 2013; Zsheliaskova-Koynova, 2021). However, despite these benefits, boxing, and other combat sports such as mixed martial arts and kickboxing, are commonly viewed as masculinized and violent with the majority of participants being male (Matthews & Channon, 2015). In recent years, women's participation in combat sports has increased (Mierzwinski et al., 2014) as well as research into their experiences (Matthews & Channon, 2015). A range of concepts have been explored such as identity (Nash, 2017), expressions of femininity (Davies & Deckert, 2018) and physical feminism (McCaughey, 1997). Differing feminist perspectives are central to discussions around women in boxing with cultural feminists suggesting that engagement in contact sports

forces women to adopt male values which further reinforces women's inferiority (Jagger, 1983, as cited in McCaughey, 1997). However, others (McCaughey, 1997; Roth & Basow, 2004) have suggested that the physical strength acquired through sports such as boxing are "essential in women's liberation" (Velija et al., 2013, p. 526). In Velija and colleagues (2013) study, eleven women participating in a variety of martial arts such as karate, kickboxing, and boxing, discussed how martial arts allowed them to feel physically strong, acquire physical skills which also fostered a sense of mental strength, self-esteem, and confidence. Further, Hargreaves (1997) outlines how female competitive boxers believe boxing is "intellectually challenging, and enhances self-confidence, strength of character and courage" leading to a "sensation of empowerment, perceived to be inscribed both in the individual physical body, and in the inner self" (p. 42). Similarly, elite female boxers training alongside men in the Canadian national team described how the sport allowed them to feel socially accepted, confident and empowered, yet this was also perceived as 'constraining' with some women negotiating their gendered identities to conform to masculine ideals (McGannon et al., 2019). These findings highlight how boxing can facilitate a sense of personal development and empowerment however, it is important to understand how these changes are developed.

Boxing's traditional association with male dominant stereotypes of masculinity, physical strength, aggression, and violence is often perceived as being "incompatible with femininity" (Nash, 2017, p. 737). However, as women develop mental and physical strength through their involvement in boxing, traditional gendered stereotypes which position women as weak, vulnerable, and passive are directly challenged (Hargreaves, 1997; McGannon et al., 2019; Nash, 2017). The notion of 'physical feminism' proposed by McCaughey (1997) suggests that women can become empowered through boxing as "women often experience their bodies as sites of power and agency" (Nash, 2019, p. 737). Some have argued that although physical strength is a key component, the combination of both physical *and* mental empowerment is more likely to be fostered in an environment that is accompanied by a feminist consciousness. This argument is predominantly based on research on female-only self-defence and martial arts courses, some of which incorporate boxing. In these studies, participants were encouraged to challenge and question women's gendered embodiment as weak and helpless to reject the victim narrative (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998; DeWelde, 2003; McCaughey, 1997). The research discussed highlights the potential for boxing to be used as a powerful tool to physically and mentally empower women which could be of additional benefit for women who have been victimised by domestic violence. However, to

date, no research has explored the potential benefits of boxing for women survivors of domestic violence in the NZ context.

Boxing-based interventions for survivors of violence

Research exploring the effects of boxing-based programmes specifically for women survivors of violence is very limited with the exception of a few distinct international studies (Cole & Ulrich-French, 2017; Gammage et al., 2021; Lyon et al., Van Ingen, 2011a, 2011b, 2016). These studies refer to the Pink Gloves Boxing programme (Cole & Ulrich-French, 2017), the Left-Write Hook workshop (Lyon et al., 2020), and the Shape Your Life (SYL) programme (Gammage et al., 2021; Van Ingen, 2011a, 2011b, 2016). Pink Gloves Boxing delivers boxing classes to women victims of sexual violence in a group fitness format aiming to foster empowerment by providing a strong sense of community, the opportunity to gain a sense of achievement, and fun. It was reported that sexual violence victims experienced higher levels of empowerment, self-confidence, and self-efficacy in the PGB programme compared to a standard fitness-based programme (Cole & Ulrich-French, 2017). The strong community and shared goal-setting focus incorporated into the boxing programme appeared to be a crucial factor in contributing to the empowerment and development of self-efficacy among the women (Cole & Ulrich-French, 2017). Providing opportunities for women survivors of violence to experience being a part of, and supported by a strong community "while also gaining a sense of self-possession and control" (Cole & Ulrich-French, 2017, p. 102) are both central components to the recovery process (Frazier, et al., 2005; Kerr et al., 2019). Further, wider literature has evidenced that participation in sport within a women-only environment is associated with social connectedness (Liechty et al., 2016) and a sense of camaraderie which is considered essential in fostering empowerment for women survivors of violence (Armstrong & Hutchison, 2022; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). Therefore, although boxing can mistakenly be viewed as an individual sport, these findings highlight how boxing is able to build self-efficacy and foster a sense of community for women survivors of violence which in turn may have a positive impact on their wellbeing and recovery. Further, it is clear that there is value in participation in boxing within a women-only environment (Van Ingen, 2011), however, further research is needed to determine whether these findings are also evident in a mixed-sex scenario, as is the case for the current research.

The Left-Write Hook (LWH) programme (Lyon et al., 2020) incorporates non-contact trauma-informed boxing classes with creative writing workshops for women survivors of child

sexual assault (CSA). The principles of LWH are drawn from research evidencing the importance of incorporating bodily movement and creative expression in the healing and recovery process for trauma survivors (Creely, 2018; Ho, 2015; Mendez-Negrete, 2013; Van Ingen, 2011). The programme has reported promising findings with women experiencing a strong sense of empowerment and re-connection with themselves and the world around them (Lyon et al., 2020), a core component of trauma recovery (Alvantud et al., 2020). Further, there were significant improvements in overall wellbeing and mental health, including symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Therefore, utilizing creative writing as an emotional outlet with boxing as a tool to foster bodily control and expression where "each punch can serve to direct a survivor's power, anger and frustration in a targeted way" (Lyon et al., 2020, p. 67), appears to be a powerful combination in facilitating healing from trauma.

The Shape Your Life (SYL) (Gamage et al., 2021; van Ingen, 2011a, 2011b, 2016) recreational non-contact boxing-based programme for female and transgendered survivors of violence is based on very similar principles and works from the premise that trauma is located in the body and healing from trauma, therefore, requires bodily movement (Van der Kolk, 2014). Women participating in the programme reported how boxing is empowering and allowed their aggression to be expressed and channelled into a healthy and positive environment. The SYL project aims to reject the typically masculinized association with aggression, by reframing it as "healthy, as a constructive tool, as a means of undermining passivity, and as an important aspect of self-care" (Van Ingen, 2011, p. 71). The experience was often described as transformative in helping women to rebuild aspects of their identity they felt had been lost through their victimisation (Van Ingen, 2011, p. 72) and has been associated with improved physical and mental health outcomes (Gammage et al., 2021). On the basis of these three intervention programmes, it is clear that boxing has the potential to be a powerful facilitator of personal development, empowerment, and recovery.

In addition, although it was not the main focus, other research has inadvertently found similar outcomes for women survivors of violence participating in combat sports outside of the intervention setting. For example, Velija et al (2013) reported some victimised women describing their experience in martial arts as an opportunity to 'start over' and be 'reborn'. Similarly, McCaughey (1997) illustrates how overcoming the challenges of contact sparring enabled a female domestic violence victim to feel more confident in her ability to leave an abusive relationship. These findings are important because they extend on the intervention-based research to demonstrate that boxing may facilitate the same benefits outside of this context. Further, as Diamonds in the Ring is not an intervention programme, parallels will

need to be drawn from both areas of research in attempting to gain an understanding of the experience of participants in the wider context.

Therefore, although it is clear that participation in boxing holds promise in promoting change and empowerment for survivors of violence, no research to date has been conducted within the New Zealand context. Furthermore, the research discussed specifically explores the benefits of boxing for women survivors of violence within an intervention-based context and has not yet addressed the experience of women survivors of violence participating in the sport recreationally or professionally. The proposed study, therefore, aims to close a gap in the literature to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of women survivors of domestic violence who have participated in the Diamonds in the Ring corporate boxing event in NZ.

3. Research Design

The purpose of this research project is to explore the experience of female domestic violence victims who have participated in the *Diamonds in the Ring* boxing event in Aotearoa New Zealand. Specifically, this research aims to gain an understanding of their motivations for participation, and the extent to which the event and boxing as a sport may have contributed to any form of personal development and/or empowerment. The present study, therefore, aims to answer three primary research questions:

- What motivates women who have been victims of domestic violence to participate in *Diamonds in the Ring?*
- In what way has their experience facilitated a sense of personal development?
- If any, what aspects of their experience facilitated a sense of empowerment?

As exploring the subjective experience of participants is at the forefront of this study, a qualitative research design was chosen as the most appropriate approach (Fossey et al., 2002). The study is conducted from a social-constructivist/interpretivist perspective (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) which enables the exploration of the primary research aims through the interpretation and observation of the experience of participants, while also acknowledging the importance of bringing the beliefs, values, and perspectives of the researcher to the process (Creswell, 2007; Hiller, 2016). The emphasis of an interpretivist philosophical approach to research is not to find explanations, but to seek understanding of social phenomena (Hiller, 2016; Fossey et. al., 2002). Therefore as the proposed study is exploratory, and aims to understand and interpret the experience of women who have been victimized by domestic violence and have participated in the DITR boxing event, an interpretivist perspective is most suitable. Data is collected through one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) which is then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The following section, therefore, outlines my approach to the research study along with a discussion on the justification for how the research project is designed.

3.1 Researcher worldview

The researcher is taking on this research from a social constructivist/interpretivist perspective. The fundamental assumption of interpretivism is that "humans construct knowledge as they interpret their experiences of and in the world; rejecting the objectivist notion that knowledge is simply there to be identified and collected" (Hiller, 2016, p. 103). From this perspective, knowledge is socially constructed through the interpretation of, and meanings individuals attach to their own subjective experience (Schwandt, 2003). Therefore, within an interpretivist paradigm, reality cannot be objective, it is socially constructed through the perceptions, values, beliefs, and interactions of individuals within the world.

Schwandt (2003) argues that research exploring human experience is significant to the emphasis of understanding as "unlike the physical world, these are inherently and essentially meaningful" (Hiller, 2016, p. 111). The aim is to not only understand the meaning of participants' experiences but also the way in which meanings are constructed by participants. Therefore, an interpretivist perspective enables the researcher to understand how the participants in this study construct meaning and make sense of their experience in DITR, facilitating the development of a 'thick' descriptive response to the research questions. However, an interpretivist approach also acknowledges that the research process does not only involve participants, but also recognises that the researcher's beliefs, values and perspectives are embedded within the interpretive process (Hiller, 2016). Therefore, generating understanding and meaning is a process of co-construction between the researcher and participants (Willis, 2012). This process is subjective and it is important to understand that "no interpretation is privileged over another; no interpretation is a definitive one" (pg. 103). In other words, although interpretations can be subjective and changeable, all interpretations have value in their own right.

An essential component to the interpretivist philosophical approach to research is v*erstehen*, a German term for understanding, or more specifically, empathic understanding (Schwandt, 2003). *Verstehen* refers to the intentional action of researchers to "understand, perceive, know, and comprehend the nature and significance of a phenomenon" (Chowdhury, 2014, p. 435). *Verstehen* within an interpretivist paradigm does not mean 'to understand' in the traditional sense but requires a deeper level of understanding, or "empathic identification" (Schwandt, 2003, p. 192) with the participant. To attain *verstehen,* the researcher must, therefore, attempt to understand the lived experience of participants from their point of view (Willis, 2012). From this perspective, it is important to have an awareness of the background of participants and the context of the social phenomena the researcher is exploring (Duberly

et al., 2012). My personal experience with boxing and the DITR event is therefore beneficial to attaining *verstehen* as it means that I am able to empathise with participants' experience of what it feels like to train and participate in a boxing fight. I also acknowledge that each individual's viewpoint is unique and I must separate from my own experience to ensure that the interpretations are guided through the eyes of the participants. Therefore, my experience can aid my understanding of their lived experience, but it must not be assumed to be the same experience. In addition, I cannot claim to understand what it is like to experience being a victim of domestic violence. However, from an interpretivist perspective, it is not necessary to have the same lived experience as participants, rather it is important that the researcher has a base level of knowledge about the context of the social phenomena being explored (Duberly et al., 2012). I believe the combination of my knowledge attained through my personal experience as a boxer and participant of DITR, together with the research I have conducted about domestic violence for the purpose of this study ensures that I am able to understand the interpretations and meanings of participants' experiences from an emic standpoint.

3.2 Theoretical perspective

With women, victimisation, and empowerment being the primary focus of this study, feminist criminology naturally forms the basis of the theoretical perspective for this research. Prior to the 1970s, the field of criminology was male-dominated and largely ignored the perspective of female offenders and victims (Brown et al., 2015). In the few instances that perspectives of women were considered, they were discussed in relation to men, thus eliminating any opportunity to bring the true reality of women as victims or offenders into the literature (Chesney-Lind, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Morash, 2013). During this era, violence against women was also commonplace but considered a private matter and hidden from the public eye. With the emergence of the feminist movement of the 1970s, feminist scholars began to "challenge the privatised nature of violence against women" (Brown et al., 2015, p. 10). Feminist scholars drew attention to the importance of developing research into the victimization of women, particularly within the context of domestic violence (Lynch, 2018). The feminist movement made voices of female victims of violence heard and valued for the first time, as well as bringing victimology into the field of criminology (Henne, 2017).

While there are several different theoretical perspectives within the field of feminist criminology (Brown et al., 2015; Chesney-Lind & Morash, 2013; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Renzetti, 2013) it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a discussion of each of these

perspectives. Essential for this research study are, however, some core principles and concepts which are central to all schools of thought within feminist criminology, and in particular, are applicable to research conducted in the field of violence against women. As feminist criminology essentially emerged out of feminism, many of these principles and components are drawn from and applied to feminist research in general (Burgess-Proctor, 2006). One of the core components of feminism is based on the premise that most societies are patriarchal and characterised by sexism, whereby women are considered to be of lesser value in society than men. From this perspective, it is because of patriarchy and sexism that women have been excluded from criminology and other male-dominant aspects of society. This is also true for the sport of boxing, and combat sports in general, where women have had to fight for recognition due to its association with masculinity (Tjonndal, 2019). Feminist criminology, therefore, recognises that the inclusion of female voices and their experiences is crucial in overcoming the effects of patriarchy and sexism on women who have been and often still are "silenced or simply ignored" (Renzetti, 2013, p. 75).

In addition to the importance of inclusion, a feminist approach to research also emphasises "care, compassion, connectedness, and collaboration between researchers and participants" (Burgess-Proctor, 2015, p. 125). This is in direct contrast to positivist traditions which aim to attain objectivity and a level of detachment between research subjects and the researcher. From a feminist standpoint, complete objectivity is neither realistic nor beneficial rather the research process should be collaborative and the relationships with and contributions from research participants are highly valuable (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Thwaites, 2017). This perspective is particularly relevant to research conducted with women who have experienced violent victimization and are generally considered to be a vulnerable research group (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Campbell et al., 2010; Wahab, 2003). It is because of this vulnerability that a feminist approach to research emphasises care, compassion, and collaboration with women, as a detached approach is perceived as hierarchical and may only further reinforce feelings of powerlessness.

Identifying ways of empowering participants through the research process is therefore one of the primary aims in some forms of feminist criminological research (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Chesney-Lind & Morash, 2013; Renzetti, 2013). All research grounded in feminist criminology aims to protect participants, and this is further emphasised in research conducted with vulnerable groups. However, post-positivist feminists argue that research approached with *reciprocity,* and an *empathic stance,* are essential in mitigating power dynamics as well as promoting empowerment (Renzetti, 2013). Approaching research with *reciprocity*

facilitates the development of an equal partnership between researchers and participants. Further, an *empathic stance* focuses not only on care and compassion for participants' viewpoints but also aims to enable participants to occupy a more active role in the process and that they have the power to guide the research direction and interview process. This approach is supported by Burgess-Proctor (2015) who argues that traditional methods often required by researchers to protect participants "may actually serve to reinforce participants' disempowerment, thus replicating the very problems these safeguards seek to remedy" (p. 125). Therefore, conducting research based on these feminist principles provides the opportunity for participants who already represent a vulnerable research group characterised by disempowerment, to have a voice and ultimately, to feel empowered through the research process. The avoidance of harm and exploitation remains the utmost priority, however, the aim is to achieve this through empowerment-based approaches, rather than solely providing protection to participants.

A feminist approach to research also recognises that despite concerns that conducting research with trauma survivors may trigger distress and the potential for re-victimization, women often describe the research process to be beneficial and therapeutic. Specifically, research participants have reported experiencing catharsis, self-reflection, empowerment, and the opportunity to help others through the opportunity to disclose and discuss their trauma as part of the research process (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Wolgemuth, et al., 2014). It is important, to note that conducting research with vulnerable groups requires significant care and consideration to ensure that no harm is caused to participants. However, the significance and value of having an empowerment-based approach to conducting research with vulnerable groups ensures the protection of participants while also acknowledging "the human agency they possess as research participants" (Burgess-Proctor, 2015, p. 128), thus providing participants with the opportunity to feel a sense of empowerment and to potentially improve the overall quality of the data being collected (Campbell et al., 2010).

3.3 Research strategy

As the main purpose of this research is to explore and understand the lived experience of women who have participated in *Diamonds in the Ring*, a qualitative line of inquiry is the most suitable. Qualitative research "aims to give privilege to the perspectives of research participants and to illuminate the subjective meaning, actions, and context of those being researched" (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 723). In contrast, a quantitative approach perceives the

world to be objective and measurable. It, therefore, aims to produce data that is quantifiable and numerical. However, quantitative research fails to take into consideration the subjective experience of participants and how they construct meaning about the phenomena being explored (Merriam, 2009). The main benefit of a qualitative approach, therefore, is that it is an effective way to "build knowledge from understanding individuals' unique viewpoints and the meaning attached to those viewpoints" (Tomaszewski et al., 2020, p. 1). To this end, a qualitative research design ensures that the perspectives of research participants are the primary focus and provides the opportunity to build an in-depth understanding of their experience through the process of exploration and interpretation that is inherent in qualitative research. Further, as this research is exploratory, qualitative research provides the flexibility necessary to be able to explore the questions posed in this thesis, while also giving freedom to research participants to share their stories in great depth and detail. These features of qualitative research align with the feminist theoretical grounding of an interpretivist worldview of this study.

3.4 Research method

Interviews are one of the most commonly employed methods of collecting data within qualitative research (Alsaawi, 2014; Creswell, 2007; Tomaszewsk et al., 2020). For this research, one-on-one, in-depth semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method of data collection. In general, interviews are most beneficial when the researcher is aiming to gain insight into people's experiences, as well as their beliefs, opinions, and motivations (Busetto et al., 2020). However, when the purpose of the research is to attain a more detailed nuanced account of people's experiences, perspectives, and motivations, as is the case for this study, the use of in-depth interviews is needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

In-depth interviews adopt a conversational and open-ended approach which allows a level of flexibility for the interviewee to speak freely about their experience, as well as a level of responsiveness for the researcher who can initiate follow-up questions and rephrase questions where appropriate. Rubin and Rubin (2012) refer to this approach as responsive interviewing which emphasises the importance of accepting and adjusting "to the personalities of both conversational partners" (p. 7). Therefore, the process of conducting in-depth interviews can be seen as both collaborative and cooperative whereby both the researcher and interviewee are actively involved in the discussion through the formation of a conversational partnership. The perspective and knowledge held by participants are still privileged as experts

on the phenomena being explored, however, the active contribution of the researcher to the process is also acknowledged. Through this process, the researcher learns "to see the world from perspectives other than their own" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3) and is able to explore and potentially answer the *how* and the *why* questions (Guest et al., 2012).

A semi-structured approach to in-depth interviewing ensures that the researcher is able to establish a general area of focus for the conversation without the rigidity and inflexibility associated with structured interviews (Alasuutari et al., 2008). Brinkman (2020) argues that structured interviews "are passive recordings of people's opinions and attitudes" and therefore do not allow the researcher to gather information beyond what is in the standardised questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews are more beneficial to research that is exploratory, aiming to build knowledge on a topic that has limited research available, as the researcher is able to probe and ask follow-up questions when angles or topics emerge throughout the conversation. In addition, the researcher can have a more active role in the process, being "visible as a knowledge-producing participant" (Brinkman, 2020, p. 438), while also allowing the interviewee to have an influence over the direction of the conversation. Therefore, adopting this approach to interviewing ensured that I was able to ask participants questions that were focused on their experience throughout *Diamonds in the Ring* while also being open-ended to ensure that the discussion flowed in a conversational manner and encouraged participants to speak freely about their experience (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In doing so, I was able to gain an in-depth understanding of their experience in relation to the research questions posed in this thesis, as well as other avenues that arose throughout the discussion. The indicative interview questions focused broadly on their experience through *Diamonds in the Ring* with specific reference to their motivations for signing up, and how they felt their experience impacted upon them personally and physically. The indicative interview questions are attached in Appendix B.

In-depth semi-structured interviews are also one of the most commonly employed methods in both interpretivist/social-constructivist and feminist-based research (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; McHugh, 2020; Thwaites, 2017). Both of these approaches inform the interview process as interviews are based on the notion of co-construction and meaning that it gives voice and power to the participant, rather than being researcher lead (Oakley, 1981, 2016). Feminist scholars have argued against the possibility of objectivity (Agozino, 1999) and have highlighted that having 'insider' status or aspects of a shared identity, is beneficial to establishing rapport with research participants (Agozino, 1999; Deckert, 2017; Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; Oakley, 1981).

3.5 Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) on 14th April 2021 (see Appendix A). The ethics application number is 21/73 and the expiration date is 14th April 2024.

Foote and Bartell (2011) argue that the positionality and personal experience of researchers "may influence what researchers may bring to research encounters, their choice of processes, and their interpretation of outcomes" (p. 46). As stated in the background section of this thesis, my motivation to develop this research project is drawn from my personal experience as a previous participant of the Diamonds in the Ring boxing event, and as a member of the associated Diamonds Boxing and Fitness Gym. I also highlighted in the background section that given I do not identify as a victim of domestic violence but am considered a member of the DITR boxing community having trained alongside some of the participants in this study, I consider my position to be both as an insider and an outsider. This position is defined as 'the space between' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Therefore, while there are advantages to this position, there are also ethical questions to consider to protect potential interviewees from feeling pressured into partaking in the research or being triggered in the interview process.

Orb and colleagues (2000) state that "embedded in qualitative research are the concepts of relationships and power between researchers and participants" (p. 93). The potential for power imbalances are inherent within all qualitative research and this was also important for me to consider within the context of this research study. Specifically, my experience as a boxer where I have informally mentored and assisted with coaching DITR participants, which included some of the women who were interviewed for this study, was identified as a potential power imbalance that needed to be mitigated as part of the research design process. Burgess-Proctor (2015) argues that "researcher reflexivity, or the act of interrogating and examining how one's own social characteristics intercede in and inform the research process" (p. 15) is an essential component of mitigating power imbalances between researchers and participants. Therefore, careful consideration of how my background and experience may influence the research process was an important first step to ensure any imbalance of power was mitigated and managed.

There are two key aspects of the research design that are important to discuss in terms of how my background and experience may influence the research. These two aspects relate

to the recruitment phase and the interview process. With respect to recruitment, to ensure no harm was caused to participants (Edwards & Mauthner, 2012), I opted to not interview women who are currently in an abusive relationship. It was therefore specified in the information sheet that in order to be eligible, the women must have experienced domestic violence in the past. Further, due to my experience with boxing, DITR and the already established connections that I had to some of the participants, it was important to ensure that participants did not feel pressured to participate in the study. To mitigate any potential power imbalances that potential interviewees may perceive between myself and themselves, the lead coach recruited potential participants. Since the DITR gym has closed down, there was nothing to be gained from having the women participate in the study. Therefore, there was a very minimal possibility that participants will feel pressured to speak positively about boxing and the Diamonds in the Ring event. The risk of this pressure was further mitigated by stressing that the process is completely confidential and that no one will be identifiable. Furthermore, the primary researcher has trained alongside majority of participants at some stage throughout all previous DIR events. Due to the nature of the sport of boxing, through this process, the primary researcher had an already established connection and mutual respect with many participants and this was beneficial to building rapport (Berkovic et al., 2020; Chavez, 2008)**.** This in turn facilitated the interview process by making participants feel more comfortable to speak freely and further minimized the likelihood of feeling pressured to speak positively about their experience.

3.6 Participant recruitment

In general, gatekeepers "act as intermediaries between researchers and participants" (Clark, 2010, p. 486). Since DITR is not a private organisation, access to the required participants through a gatekeeper (Singh & Wassenaar, 2016) was not essential. However, it was, in this case, hugely beneficial to successful recruitment. The gatekeeper was the DITR founder and lead boxing coach, Daniella Smith. I chose to gain Daniella's consent and support for this study, out of respect for her as the founder of DITR, and to ensure a trusted and productive partnership is formed (Clark, 2010). Establishing this partnership was advantageous because Daniella assisted with the recruitment of participants. Due to the requirement for participants to have been victimized by domestic violence, it can be argued that they not only represent a vulnerable population but they can also be considered a hard-to-reach group (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Burgess-Proctor, 2015). Daniella Smith is well respected and hugely valued in both the boxing community and with the New Zealand Women's Refuge

through the significant amount of charity work she has led over the years. Cassell (1988) argues that a researcher needs to gain both physical access (the ability to contact participants) and social access, which refers to gaining social acceptance within a group to ensure there is a level of trust and rapport between the researcher and participants. Therefore, without the support of the founder and the already established connections she has with participants and the community, it would be difficult, and potentially, impossible to have gained the physical and social access needed to recruit a sufficient number of participants for this study. Further, as I already had a positive connection and relationship with the research setting and gatekeeper due to my prior experience with DITR, I was able to use this experience and my position as an insider to facilitate the recruitment process further (Bucerius, 2013; Clark, 2010).

Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive (Boeri & Lamonica, 2015) and snowball sampling (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Purposive sampling aims to recruit participants who are considered knowledgeable or experts on the phenomenon being explored. This means that participants are deliberately selected based on set recruitment criteria and "are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information" (Kelly, 2010, p. 317). Therefore, this type of sampling method is particularly beneficial for research aiming to gather in-depth information on a specific research topic. A combination of both purposive and snowball sampling was required because the number of participants that Daniella and I had access to that met the research criteria was limited, as well as needing to account for the possibility that some of those initial potential participants may not wish to participate in the study.

Atkinson and Flint (2001) define snowball sampling as "identifying respondents who are then used to refer researchers on to other respondents" (p. 1). One of the main reasons this method was employed is because the participants in this study are considered hard to reach and vulnerable. Therefore, adopting the combination of both a snowball and purposive sampling approach meant that I was able to target a few potential participants who could then take advantage of their social network and established bonds with other DITR members to approach potential research participants (Naderifar et al., 2016).

Participants were required to meet the following selection criteria to participate in this research study:

- At least 18 years of age.
- Have previously participated in at least one of the *Diamonds in the Ring* programmes/events
- Have experienced any form of domestic violence in the past.

3.7 Data collection

Prior to the interview, participants were sent the consent form via email. A hard copy was also provided to each participant at the beginning of the interview. Before the interview formally commenced, participants were acknowledged for their contribution, informed of their rights to withdraw, and provided with the opportunity to raise any questions or concerns they may have. It was also re-confirmed to participants that their identities would remain anonymous and confidential. As participants represent a vulnerable research group, I made a point of reiterating that the interview questions are not targeted towards their prior experience with domestic violence and that they do not have to discuss or disclose any information that they are not comfortable with. As a final step before commencing the interview, I ensured that the participants were clear on the process and that there weren't any further questions before formally signing the hard copy of the consent form.

On average, the length of each interview ranged from 60 to 120 minutes in total. Upon receiving consent from participants, each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Audio recording ensured that an accurate and detailed record of the interviews were captured which is not achievable through the recording of handwritten notes alone. This also meant that the interviews could be transcribed verbatim for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, and recurring ideas as part of the data analysis stage (Guest et al., 2017).

3.8 Thematic analysis

The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Thematic analysis "is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). This approach, therefore, enables the researcher to interpret large quantities of data to uncover key themes which can then be used to interpret and understand a particular phenomenon. One of the main benefits of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis is its flexibility in that it can be employed across multiple theoretical approaches, applied to a range of research questions, and, to both small and large data sets. In addition, Braun and Clarke (2015) argue that thematic analysis is not only effective at identifying "patterns within and *across* data" (p. 2) but also, to explore a variety of research areas such as human behaviour, perspectives, opinions, and lived experience. Therefore, thematic analysis is a useful method of gaining an in-depth understanding of the experience of women who have

participated in DITR in a way that is accessible and can be understood by a broader audience (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Before discussing the six phases of thematic analysis, it is important to first outline that the data was analysed predominantly using an inductive approach. This meant that rather than using theory to interpret or guide the data analysis, the interpretation was data-driven. With this approach, the researcher works from the bottom up to identify themes and patterns as they emerge from within the data (Terry et al., 2017). Of course, the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier in this thesis play a role in informing the interpretation and final conclusion drawn from the data, however, with an inductive approach, the interpretations begin with, and emerge from the data, rather than the theory itself, as with a deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As indicated earlier, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis were used to analyse the data. The first phase focuses on familiarizing yourself with the data. This is essentially a process of becoming immersed in the data through reviewing, reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, as well as listening to the audio recordings. Initial notes are taken based on the researcher's observations and are to be "casual rather than systematic and inclusive" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 61). These steps, therefore, help the researcher to become deeply familiar with the data set so that an initial understanding can begin to emerge and develop.

The second phase aims to generate preliminary codes which is where the researcher begins to be more systematic rather than observational (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2012) define coding as a method to "identify and provide a label for a feature of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question" (p. 71). Generating initial codes commonly involves the combination of coloured highlighting and handwritten notes on the interview transcripts. This enables the researcher to create labels or tags in the form of a few words or a short phrase that describes the meaning attached to a particular piece of data. Through this process, the data begins to be organised based on the researcher's initial interpretations allowing patterns to start to form (Terry et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke (2012) recommend using this phase as an opportunity to thoroughly review the complete data set to capture all preliminary codes that might be relevant to the research question and to then trim down, and re-organise as necessary.

The third phase involves searching for themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that "a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research questions, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). In this

phase, the researcher takes a step back to review the codes on a holistic and broader level to determine which codes should be grouped, combined, clustered or in some cases, collapsed into a larger theme. Consequently, relationships between themes and the construction of sub-themes can begin to be explored. Braun and Clarke (2012) recommend concluding this phase with a visual thematic map to highlight the themes that have been identified, their relationship to one another and the relevant segments of data.

The fourth phase focuses on reviewing potential themes identified in the previous phase. This is a recursive process that is essentially a "quality control exercise" (Terry et al., 2017, p. 21) to confirm that the themes are coherent and meaningful. There are two steps involved in this process; firstly, the themes need to be checked and reviewed in relation to the collated data set to determine whether they fit within that particular theme, or whether adjustments need to be made to ensure the theme fits and 'makes sense'. It is not uncommon for codes to be discarded or new codes to be added, themes to be collapsed or sub-themes to be generated at this stage in the review process. The second step involves re-reading the complete data set to check the validity of the themes to verify whether they "meaningfully capture the entire data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 65) and are able to answer the research questions (Terry et al., 2017).

Once the researcher has constructed a coherent thematic map of the data, phase five can commence. The purpose of this phase is to define, refine and name your themes. Braun and Clarke (2012) argue that the researcher must identify what makes that theme unique, or in other words, the "essence" (p. 66) of the theme in order to determine a suitable name. A detailed written analysis of each theme is carried out and as part of this process, the researcher must consider the broader picture to ensure that the 'story' told by each theme, relates to the research questions.

In the final phase, the researcher presents their finding in a written report. Braun and Clarke (2012) state that the researcher needs to produce a "compelling story", that should be "convincing and clear, yet complex and embedded in a scholarly field" (p. 69). It is therefore important to provide sufficient evidence from the data to not only provide an interesting, clear, and coherent narrative but also, to ensure a well-constructed, analytical argument is put forward in relation to the research questions.

4 Findings

The DITR founder, Daniella Smith initially made contact with seven participants whom she knew personally. Some of these women had also shared their stories of domestic violence publicly, either through the DITR Facebook page or during DITR training sessions. Five of these women expressed an interest in being a part of this research and were subsequently interviewed between April and August 2021. The location was agreed upon between each participant and me prior. Four interviews took place at a café chosen by the participant, with one interview being conducted in a public library. The five women were between 30 and 41 years old (mean = 35.8). No additional demographic information is included to ensure that the identities of participants remain anonymous. Pseudonyms are used in place of participants' real names to maintain their anonymity.

4.1 The Transformation

Throughout the interview process, it became clear that all five participants felt that they experienced drastic changes from their Diamonds in the Ring journey. The overarching theme is, therefore, 'The Transformation'. The transformation described by participants not only represents the outcome of their mental and physical development, but a significant life-changing transformation, that was described by some of the participants to be a '*life-saving*' experience that ultimately led to a shift in participants' narrative identity. In line with the overarching narrative, the following six sub-themes were identified: 1) pre-transformation self-assessment, 2) physical development, 3) mental change, 4) identity shift: from victim to fighter, 5) empowerment, and 6) healing and recovery.

Pre-transformation self-assessment

In order to understand how participants developed physically and mentally throughout the Diamonds in the Ring training camp, it is important to first outline their boxing background together with how they felt and perceived themselves within this context prior to and in the early stages of their experience. In regard to the physical component, except for one participant who had completed a corporate boxing fight through a different organisation prior, Diamonds in the Ring was their first exposure to boxing within a competitive environment. Specifically,

two of the five participants had exposure to boxing through box-fit classes[i] at their local gym, while the other two participants explained that they had no experience with boxing at all. The following comments summarise the response from participants when asked whether they had any experience with boxing prior to signing up for Diamonds in the Ring:

> ***Sam**: I didn't know combos. I didn't know any footwork. I didn't know anything like that. I wasn't conditioned. My fitness wasn't up to scratch. Like that's how I know I was starting from scratch.*
>
> ***Maria:** I had zil, so nothing at all.*
>
> ***Jessie:** I actually had no experience with boxing before I signed up for the Diamonds in the Ring, apart from a friend of mine said to me, you should come boxing with me one day… I had no idea what I was doing… Then, I went to Les Mills and did two of their boxing classes, which was nothing, [it] was just punching the bag. I had no idea how to even stand and [no one] ever corrected me. So, I was pretty like nothing.*
>
> ***Tina:** So, it, was one prior fight before signing up to Diamonds in the Ring. Yeah. It was really new to me, and the experience was a lot different to Diamonds in the Ring… Yeah so, I had one prior fight… I won that but other than that it was just box-fit classes.*
>
> ***Clare:** So, we just did box fit classes, so it wasn't really any technical stuff. It was just basic.*

These comments highlight how four out of five participants, regardless of their backgrounds, were essentially starting their Diamonds in the Ring journey with little to no experience with the physicality of boxing within a fight camp scenario. Therefore, given their minimal experience and the intense physicality associated with boxing, it is not surprising that all participants discussed how they expected to gain some form of physical benefit through things such as improvements in their fitness, weight loss, and of course, boxing ability. Jessie, notes that her primary expectation of what she would gain out of DITR were physical changes through weight loss, something she's *'always battled with'* and *'getting fitter',* but discovered that she 'gained much, much more than that'. While all participants made reference to having the expectation for physical gain, like Jessie, they all expressed feeling that the benefits exceeded their expectations.

In general, participants appeared to have more than one motivation for joining DITR, some of which were commonly shared amongst participants, with others being more specific

or personal. For example, when participants were asked what motivated them to sign up for DITR, four of the participants talked about wanting to feel challenged by *'doing something different',* gaining a *'sense of accomplishment',* putting themselves *'way out of [their] comfort zone',* and *'to prove to [themselves] that [they] could do it'.* Participants also talked about wanting to show their children and other women who had experienced domestic violence, that they are capable of overcoming challenges and accomplishing something for themselves:

> ***Maria:*** *I wanted to show them, especially the girls [Maria's children] because they are the ones that had seen that stuff. I wanted to show them you know, just because you get pushed down, you can always get back up… You know you work hard for something. That was my whole motivation for it really.*

> ***Sam:*** *I had to change the environment and go somewhere else where I felt like I was gonna focus on me properly… I knew I was doing it [DITR] for them [my children], and I wanted changes.*

In contrast to these women whose motivations were very specific and related to very personal circumstances, Tina explained that the main reason she signed up for DITR was to '*support her [friend] who was really big on Diamonds in the Ring'.* Tina was not the only participant to highlight that a friend had played a big role in her motivation to join DITR. Maria and Jessie also noted that part of the reason they decided to join DITR was because their friend who had signed up had encouraged them to do the same. However, unlike Tina, supporting their friend was not their primary motivation for joining as they also discussed other motivating factors, as noted above.

Interestingly, when participants were asked whether they felt that their experience with domestic violence had influenced their decision to sign up for DITR, all five women stated that this had influenced their decision in some way. For some participants, there was a clear drive to support the NZ Women's Refuge and for others, it was about empowerment, either for themselves or by being a role model for other women. In Jessie's case, supporting the NZ Women's Refuge through DITR was described as her *'number one goal'* as she wanted to *'raise as much money as possible',* having known first-hand *'how hard it was',* for many women needing support from the organisation. Further, Clare felt that DITR would give her the opportunity to *'learn to protect yourself'.* In contrast, Tina's response to this question was described within the context of empowerment:

> *Yeah, I guess so in a way, because I wanted to feel empowered, more empowered. I mean I was already doing things to feel that way, but I think for me it almost happened*

by mistake, like I just did a box-fit class and it was after that.. it was the feeling I got afterwards that I realised this is something worth doing more of, looking into further.

Therefore, despite participants having a range of motivations for joining it appeared that DITR was perceived as an opportunity to experience empowerment.

One of the questions I asked to understand how they felt physically and mentally in the early stages of their training camp was, '*How did you feel before, during, and after your first training session?'*. While some participants (2 out of 5) experienced a 'lighter' training session to begin with which was due to the fact that the Red and the Blue team had different approaches to coaching, the other participants expressed the physical shock to their bodies in the early stages of the training camp. For example, Sam laughed as she stated that she *'just couldn't breathe'* during the earlier training sessions as she explained how she pretended to have asthma as a strategy to cover up her lack of fitness. In addition, when recalling the first training session, she described this to be *'one of the hardest moments'* as the blue team were forced to do extra burpees as a punishment for her failing to complete the exercises properly. Similarly, Tina expressed that one of the key challenges of her Diamonds in the Ring experience was *'the physicality of the training, the intensity of the training* and in reference to the very first training sessions, she notes:

'I remember at first, the training, it was so hard. I puked so many times running up that bloody diamond hill [a steep hill on Diamond Street outside Diamonds Boxing & Fitness gym]'.

Despite noting the differences between the two teams in terms of the level of physical intensity implemented into the training sessions, all five participants discussed how physically challenging the training was at various stages throughout their experience, and in most cases, this difficulty exceeded their expectations:

Jessie: '*I didn't expect it to be that hard. I found it really difficult because I thought I was fit, but I was nothing… I think the first six were really really tough because [we were] trying to get that fitness up'.*

Therefore, although all five participants came into Diamonds in the Ring with varying levels of fitness and boxing experience, it was clear that the training camp challenged their physical strength and fitness level, ultimately offering the opportunity for development to occur.

Similar to participants essentially providing a 'physical self-assessment', their responses also gave an indication as to how they felt mentally prior to their 'transformation'. As you would expect with coming into a new environment participants reported a range of emotions leading up to and during their first training session such as nervousness, excitement, and self-doubt. For example:

> ***Sam:*** *'I was still holding on to my bag while everyone was getting up and I was still standing in the same spot when everyone was lining up and I was like acting nervous, shy… I was doubting myself from the beginning because I would come in [to training] and I was still nervous. I was worried what I looked like, how I was boxing.'*

Here, Sam highlights how not only did she feel extremely nervous at the first training session but also, lacked confidence in herself and her abilities. Feelings of self-doubt and low levels of confidence, self-worth and self-esteem were commonly discussed by all five participants, however, for some this occurred at the very first training session, whereas for others, it became more apparent as the training camp progressed. For example, in contrast to Sam's description, Tina expressed feeling excited before the first training session which she partially attributed to thinking she *'knew a lot about boxing'* and was therefore excited to showcase her skillset while also further building upon on her knowledge and skills. However, after being confronted with the realisation that she *'didn't know shit about boxing'*, she noted that one of the major challenges was learning to change her mindset to overcome feelings of wanting to *'give up and not come back [to camp]'.* All five participants had similar stories to tell, allbeit in slightly different ways or occurring at different stages in the earlier weeks of the training sessions, however, what became clear as participants began to respond to questions more deeply throughout their interviews was the indicated impact of their prior experience with domestic violence on their mental wellbeing.

Although all participants had experienced domestic violence victimization in the past, for some this was very recent whereas for others, it occurred many years ago. Despite this difference, there were distinct commonalities in their 'mental self-assessment' regardless of whether they openly attributed this to their past experience with domestic violence. Specifically, two participants were much more open in freely providing information about traumatic and difficult aspects of their past compared to the other three participants, and these two participants appeared to have experienced these events very recently. Sam who explained in detail how she was in the midst of leaving an abusive relationship during Diamonds in the Ring, and Maria, who had become sober after having recently relapsed from drug addiction and disclosed being in both physically and mentally abusive relationships for almost ten years.

For Sam and Maria, their trauma and life difficulties were recent which appeared to allow them to be more open with how they felt this affected their mental wellbeing.

> **Sam:** *'When I first started, I looked unhappy… I was a real quiet person. I had no voice… She [Daniella] wanted to help me take back what was taken away from me and how people would just take advantage'.*

> **Maria:** *'I was fully broken down and not the person who I used to be. I was, you know, just a mess… Because of all the physical and mental abuse, not just from him [ex-partner] but then my son's father after that. It was very toxic, and my head was crap. I never used to stand up for myself. I would let people walk all over me'.*

Sam and Maria both highlight from the very outset of their Diamonds in the Ring journey, that they lacked confidence, self-worth, and a sense of voice which they appear to attribute to their past experiences. It is also important to note that both Sam and Maria expressed that one of their motivations for joining Diamonds in the Ring was because they believed the experience would benefit their mental wellbeing. In contrast, Jessie, Tina, and Clare's motivations were more centred around '*accomplishing something new*', learning to box, or because their friend had encouraged them to join. These three participants appeared to feel that their experience with domestic violence was very much in their past, however, in some instances, they seemed to express similar feelings to Sam and Maria as the camp developed, yet this was often voiced in different ways and at different stages.

One particular example of this was when participants discussed their very first spar or experience of making physical contact during training. For most people, the experience of first getting hit during boxing training can be confronting, yielding a range of reactions, and emotions. Yet, for participants, who all had experienced physical abuse in the past, the experience of sparring for the first time presents a unique scenario and may provide insight into their mindset in the early stages of their experience. Maria, for example, was very open and self-aware about how her experience impacted her mental wellbeing within this context:

> *'Coming into boxing, I was terrified of getting hit. You know, my mind was not in a good headspace. My partner that I'm with now, he would go to hug me, and I used to flinch.'*

Not all participants expressed similar fears, however with Maria's trauma being very recent, as one may expect, her experience of first getting hit during sparring was triggering. During this particular training session, Maria and her team participated in an exercise known as the 'sharknado' or 'sharktank' in combat sports which is considered to be challenging and

gruelling for athletes, let alone, for someone who is fresh in the sport. During the 'sharknado' team members form a circle around one person who remains in the centre and is required to spar all of the team members consecutively for one minute each. The person in the middle has no rest while they are confronted with a fresh opponent immediately after each minute. This means that, depending on how many people are involved in the drill, they are often sparring continuously for ten to fifteen minutes at one time and the person in the centre, therefore, becomes increasingly fatigued. It is commonly understood to be a tough and gruelling exercise in the world of combat sports which is designed to increase a fighter's fitness, durability, and mental toughness. When Maria described her experience of first getting hit during boxing training as part of the 'sharknado' drill, she notes:

> *'It threw me off and then I got out. I really had to, like remove myself. I sort of was upset. I was crying. I was just like, you know, because it was guys too. It was guys as well.'*

Clearly, Maria was triggered by this experience and found it particularly difficult to be in a situation where she was having to make contact with men. It was at this point in Maria's Diamonds in the Ring experience where she seriously doubted whether she could continue with the training camp and further emphasises how she felt mentally at the beginning of training:

> *'Yeah, that was one time where I sort of doubted where I thought I didn't know if I could do this. If I'm being upset like that then imagine being in a ring with people surrounding you, you know.'*

Similar to Maria, Sam noted that she *'had a lot of emotions'* during training, particularly during the first few sparring sessions.

> ***Sam:*** *'I started getting feelings when I got touched. It triggered me in some ways where I wanted to fight and just smack them'.*

However, in contrast to Maria, whose instinctive reaction was to 'remove herself' from the situation, Sam's emotions triggered her to want to *'fight back'*. Therefore, although both found their experience of first making contact during sparring to trigger an emotional reaction within the context of their prior history with domestic violence, their responses were considerably different.

The instinctive reaction to 'fight back' during the earlier experiences of sparring was also discussed by Jessie, Clare, and Tina but in their own unique ways. Clare reluctantly admitted

that *'It felt good to hit back and to be able to guard myself properly'* and Tina, who explained how she '*wasn't scared to get hit in the face'* because of her past abuse, and that when she got hit during boxing her instinct was *'to come back and hit you harder'.* It is important to acknowledge that this instinctive reaction may be common amongst anyone, regardless of whether they have a prior history of domestic violence. However, in this instance, participants described their reaction as a product of their past experience which suggests a level of disempowerment and perhaps anger within the context of the prior relationships. It can therefore be argued that giving these women the opportunity to defend themselves and 'fight' in a safe environment perhaps triggered these types of reactions given that they were likely unable to react in this way during their past relationships.

As outlined throughout this section, although there were differences, overall, all participants started the training camp with similar descriptions of their mental and physical self-assessments. Physically, participants didn't have the boxing skills and experience, felt their fitness and strength were relatively poor, with many having a goal to lose weight during camp. Mentally, participants referred to having a lack of confidence, self-worth, and voice, as well as experiencing feelings of self-doubt. As participants described their experience in more detail, particularly in relation to their first spar during training, in some cases, it became clear how their prior history with domestic violence had impacted their mental wellbeing. This experience, in particular, was a strong indicator of the 'before picture' in their journey. However, what will become clear when participants describe their later experiences of sparring and the final fight night, was just how drastic their development and ultimately, their transformation really was.

Physical development

When participants discussed their development, one of the first changes they noticed were often physical, which is very much in line with their expectations that DITR would provide physical benefits. However, despite this being identified as a core component of their development, majority of participants' answers focussed on mental aspects of their development and what this meant within the context of their transformation. For example, in response to the question, *how did you feel as you completed more training sessions across the 15 weeks,* Jessie explained:

> *'Massive changes in my body. I think I was the lightest that I'd ever been, you know, I kind of dropped down to 72kg or something and it was crazy. Yeah, I've never been*

that light. I think I was, just I was really fit. Yeah, I was fit. I was confident. I had energy for days.'

The discipline required to complete the Diamonds in the Ring training camp and step in the ring to fight enabled Jessie to reach a level of fitness and to achieve a weight loss goal that previously seemed unattainable:

'I always battled with weight, like I'm up and down like a yo-yo. Like with the camp, I really had to put my foot down and lose all this weight'.

Similarly, Maria stated that there were '*Definitely changes in my body. My strength. My mentality'*, and Jessie, who described feeling '*stronger physically and mentally'* and that this was noticeable to people around her. In addition, Clare, who found the first training to be extremely challenging, described feeling fitter, *'addicted'* to training, and that her *'mind felt so clear'* leaving her feeling *'strong again'.* These quotes highlight how their experience not only led to a development of physical strength, but also, mental strength and confidence. Although participants are discussing how they developed physically, what appears to be clear in their responses is that their physical development assisted with enabling them to experience an improvement in confidence and strength.

Mental change

All five participants discussed how the training was significantly more mentally and physically demanding than expected and as a result, they had many stories to share about some of the most difficult trainings they experienced throughout their Diamonds in the Ring training camp. Embedded in these stories were themes of 'strength' and 'confidence' and the strategies participants felt they developed in order to overcome the challenges they faced throughout training camp and indirectly, in 'real life'.

Sam, for example, described her DITR experience to be one of *'the hardest things she's ever had to go through'* and, like most of the participants, the first five weeks were particularly tough as she adapted to the demands of training. She recalled one training session approximately five weeks in where they were required to run and complete various exercises up and down the Diamonds Hill outside the gym:

'It was that time where we were outside on the hill and that was like the worst [training] I've ever been to. I cried through that day. I was gonna go home. I was actually gonna go home. I ran to the top and I didn't wanna come back down.

Despite wanting to give up and *'go home',* Sam found the strength within herself to continue, which she attested to the support of her teammates and not wanting *'to let them down'*. During this experience, Sam appeared to be pushed to her limits both mentally and physically, and, through the process of overcoming the desire to quit, Sam learnt that she was strong enough to continue. She described this moment to be a turning point in her Diamonds in the Ring journey which was explained within the context of the nickname she adopted throughout camp:

> *It helped me come back stronger. It changed my whole mindset after that. Remember when they were asking what animal were you? Do you remember my one? I said Turtle [because] I was the turtle in the shell… it's like hard on the outside but I'll still hide inside the shell. That's why I classed myself as the turtle. I liked how it embraced me during the journey. I started becoming the ninja turtle [laughs]'.*

This example is symbolic of the beginning of Sam's transformation throughout Diamonds in the Ring in which overcoming the challenges of the '*worst'* training she'd experienced, enabled her to break out of her '*shell'* and become stronger both physically and mentally.

There were numerous examples given by all participants, however, one common factor was, the experiences during DITR that challenged participants where they were pushed to their limits, both physically and mentally, which enabled them to learn about themselves and discover their strength. For example, Tina shared similar experiences where she *'just wanted to cry and not even come back'* and referred to one particular training which also appeared to be a turning point in her journey where she *'did walk out of the gym'* but as a result of going through this difficult experience, she explained:

> *'but I'm so grateful that I went through all of that... because it did, it showed me how strong I really was… It taught me a lot about myself. It helped me rediscover that strong, beautiful woman that I am.'*

Again, Tina highlights how the experience prompted a process of self-discovery which she explained was an unexpected outcome of her journey:

> *'I didn't expect to learn so much about myself as a person and to feel so much more confident and stronger coming out of this'.*

Participants often discussed how their mindset changed as part of the process of becoming stronger throughout their journey. As mentioned earlier, Sam noted how the challenges associated with her Diamonds in the Ring experience *'changed [her] whole mindset',*

however, what was also discussed by Sam and other participants was how the Blue Team coach, Daniella Smith, helped to facilitate this change:

> ***Tina:*** *'she [Daniella] showed me how to just think more positively or to have a stronger mind, you know. Once you have a stronger mind then everything else follows. Like I always thought I was a strong person and people would always tell me I was a strong person but after all the emotion, all the activities that Daniella gave us, I realised that there was still room to grow.*

Here, Tina highlights how the way in which Daniella facilitated the training sessions, taught her to not only think more positively, but how to build a stronger mindset. She suggests that Daniella pushing her and other participants through challenging activities which were often an emotional experience for Tina, she was able to identify areas for self-improvement and become stronger. Tina referred to one of the many times she had to complete runs on Diamond hill as an example:

> '*I wanted to give up and I'd be angry when I'd come back down. And coach would say, 'actually, you've got another five more' and I'd get so pissed off. I'd be so angry. But after a while, I realised that anger was only eating up at my energy levels and everything, so once I learned to change my mindset and think, if we've got five more to do now, I'd be like, fuck you, sweet, lets go then (laughs)'.*

Tina's mental limits were tested as she was asked to complete *'five more'* running sprints just as the team had been led into a false sense of security that the session was over. Initially, Tina explains how this caused her to feel angry but over time as she developed a change in mindset, she learnt to *'redirect that energy'* into completing the training sessions. Tina described this development in mindset to be *'empowering'* in that it enabled her to take control of her mind and emotions, not just in training sessions but also in a real-life context. This appeared to be a particularly significant development for Tina specifically, but it was also an insight shared amongst all participants in their own unique ways.

Similarly, Sam explained how she was *'shit scared'* of doing one-on-one training sessions with Daniella, *'knowing how [hard] she trains'* and that this was one of the key challenges of her entire experience:

> *'She [Daniella] helped me condition for where I was always coming up with excuses. I didn't get enough sleep, I worked late [laughs]. She wasn't hearing a bar of it'.*

Daniella's coaching style meant that Sam was unable to come up with any excuses for missing training sessions or not being able to complete certain exercises, an approach that Sam described to allow her to *'show up and get it done with no stress, no nervousness'.* This, in turn, assisted her to change her mindset to overcome the fear of challenging training sessions and to eliminate any excuses that were holding her back from performing to the best of her ability. Furthermore, Sam explains how she was *'a softy before'* Diamonds in the Ring and that Daniella saw that she *'was obviously vulnerable',* but through Daniella's approach to coaching, '*she helped [her] to grow a backbone'*.

Clare also discussed how Daniella's approach to challenging training sessions helped her to change her mindset to not only become stronger, but to believe in herself and her abilities, which was something that she struggled with throughout life and her training camp. When I asked Clare if there was anything she felt she did to overcome the challenges of self-doubt, she explained:

> *'She [Daniella] helped us, she prompted it you know. She said, lift yourself up, I can do it, I can do it, I'm gonna win. Even when she went through phases of 'pretend you're someone else'.*

Here, Clare is referring to a strategy Daniella implemented into the team training sessions in which she would encourage participants, especially those who struggled with confidence and self-doubt, to pretend they '*were someone else'*, such as a professional boxer or someone they looked up to. By pretending to be someone else, Clare and other participants were able to overcome their self-doubt and ultimately tap into their self-belief and perform to the best of their abilities. This strategy essentially provided the opportunity for participants to eliminate their own self-doubt by temporarily adopting someone else's identity until they reached the realization that they *can* and are capable. Therefore, it seems that this development in mindset not only enabled participants to regain a sense of self-control but also, lead to an overall transformation.

While the development in mindset was commonly discussed within the context of Daniella's coaching style for participants who were part of the blue team, Jessie and Maria who were part of the red team shared relatively similar experiences. However, although their experiences were similar in that their strength and mindset improved overall, this was described in a general sense within the context of their strength and confidence as opposed to the blue team members who had very specific examples of *how* and *why* they felt their mindset changed. This, therefore, suggests that while all participants experienced a transformation in their mindset through the training experience alone, the coaching strategy that explicitly

encouraged changes in mindset during training enabled participants to articulate their mental transformation more comprehensively. Whether this difference may have a long-term effect on participants may be subject to future research.

Identity shift: from victim to fighter

As has been discussed throughout this section, participants experienced drastic changes, both physical and mental throughout their DITR training camp. However, when participants were sharing numerous stories which highlighted the various aspects of their mental and physical development, evidence of how the synthesis of these different aspects led to their transformation representative of an identity shift, began to emerge. For some participants, this was described within the context of a particular moment during DITR, or a 'turning point', and in other cases, it appeared to occur gradually over time, or even sometime after completion of DITR.

For example, Maria discussed one particularly memorable training session which to her, was *'one of the best trainings that [she] did'*. At this training, Maria *'had to spar everyone in the team and David's boys [1]as well',* similar to the sharknado example mentioned earlier. She explained how during this training session, she was paired with one of the girls who had gone quite hard on her a couple of weeks earlier:

> *I just went so hard that I actually threw my gloves off straight after it finished because she was about the 10th person I'd been sparring… And I ran outside and I was just vomiting. I knew I'd pushed myself to that limit and I hate spewing… but it felt good. Man, like I really put my all into that one… I've never forgotten that training.'*

Maria initially struggled with sparring which was discussed earlier in the 'pre-transformation' stage of this section. She found it to be triggering in that it *'brought back a lot of bad things'* as she described experiencing flash backs to the abuse from her ex-partner where at least once, she had to remove herself from sparring. In contrast, when describing the example above, Maria explained that she *'wasn't flinching as much. Not turning away, not apologising'*. Sparring, therefore, enabled Maria to not only overcome the challenges of sparring in itself but to also overcome the instinct to flinch, turn away and apologise, which were some of the lasting effects associated with her past abuse. Maria also highlighted how this carried over into her personal life as she would no longer flinch when her partner approached her for a hug.

[1] The boys that train under David Tua at David Tua Gym, where the red team were based for their camp.

Similarly, Sam described feeling *'triggered'* during sparring in that it *'tested [her] because it played with [her] emotions'.* However, over time it started to become a positive experience where she was able to *'release everything out'* and was no longer feeling *'angry during the sparring'.* As Maria noted, *'from being the person getting hit, to hitting',* it seems that sparring was extremely confronting, yet beneficial in that it provided an opportunity for the participants to gain a sense of control over their mind and emotions, and, to overcome triggers associated with their past. While only two examples have been provided, all participants discussed similar benefits. It is therefore important to note that this is particularly significant given that women who have experienced physical abuse are not normally encouraged to be involved in the contact aspects of a sport such as boxing given the risk of triggering their trauma. However, based on the examples provided by participants in this study, there appear to be inherent benefits that may be worth exploring in future research.

All participants provided many examples of how they found their experience to be significantly life-changing and transformative, which appeared to go beyond their time in the DITR camp to be beneficial to other areas of their life and post-DITR. The following quote from Sam highlights just how significant and meaningful this transformation was:

> *'It's like some transformation that just happened. I'd say boxing saved me… I won having to change myself overall. That's what I was so happy about. This changed me so much even though I didn't win the fight, the fight was still happening outside of training. I was just happy that I was winning outside of the ring as well. It was the highlight of the year for me because I was fighting for the kids as well.'*

The completion of the boxing fight was undoubtedly a significant part of the journey, but rather than being the most important aspect, for Sam, it seems to be more symbolic of the fight within herself and outside of the ring. Sam clearly experienced a drastic overall transformation, but she also felt that her experience *saved* her from the difficulties she was facing and gave her the strength to fight the battle *still happening outside of training* within the context of her domestic violence. In contrast to the other four participants who had experienced domestic violence in the past and had already left their abusive partners, Sam was experiencing abuse from her partner and family members during the DITR training camp. As such, she was in the midst of fighting to leave her abusive partner and working through family court battles. Therefore, it can be argued that, while all participants clearly experienced their own transformation, Sam's transformation is representative of an overall shift in her identity from someone who was living the reality of a domestic violence victim, to someone who identifies as not only a survivor of domestic violence, but a fighter.

Furthermore, there appeared to be commonly shared characteristics that participants felt they had adopted as a result of their journey. In particular, they expressed feeling that they had learnt how to stand up for themselves which was often described within the context of empowerment and gaining a sense of voice. For example:

> ***Sam**: 'It's helped me stand up for myself more. I can speak for myself'*

Sam further notes how this development of voice helped her to *fight for the kids* and to instil the same values in her children as she also *'taught them to learn how to stand up for themselves'.* Similarly, Jessie explains:

> *'I have a voice now. So, I know that I'm worth much more than, you know, my past relationship. I can stand up for myself not physically, but you know, as a woman, I can stand up for myself and say, actually, this is not okay.'*

These quotes suggest that this development of voice empowered participants to not only take their own *'power back'* by standing up for themselves, but also for their children and in particular, other women who had experienced domestic violence:

> ***Maria:** 'I used to see people fighting, like domestic violence on the road and I used to avoid it but now I'd say something.'*

Therefore, the transformation of participants was representative of gaining voice and agency. Participants appeared to evolve into someone that identified as strong, independent, and who isn't afraid to stand up for themselves and others. This is also indicative of re-gaining their sense of self-worth and believing that they are worth fighting for.

Empowerment

Empowerment was a concept consistently discussed by all participants in a variety of different ways. As stated earlier, empowerment was a common theme in reference to the motivations of participants. Furthermore, it was clear based on the examples provided earlier that participants felt empowered through the mental and physical development experienced, however, what was also discussed in great depth was, how this sense of empowerment transferred into their personal and professional lives, post-DITR. For example, Tina discussed how, unlike some of the other participants, she didn't join DITR primarily because of her experience with domestic violence:

> ***Tina:*** *'it was afterwards I realised, wow this is such a powerful experience and that has helped me in ways that I could not have even asked for. If I went into DITR thinking, I've been in a violent relationship before so I'm going to join this so I can feel empowered, I'd be happy with that… So, the fact that I felt that without even wanting to feel that is so powerful I think.*

Tina highlights how one of the reasons she found her experience to be so empowering was because they *'did a lot of things that [she] didn't expect'.* She further explained how she was able to take control of challenging aspects of her life by not *'thinking about the things you can't do and just taking the challenge as it comes',* which was described as *'redirecting energy into doing something productive'.* This development appeared to assist Tina significantly both *'emotionally and even professionally'* as she learnt to take control of her life through thinking more positively, practicing discipline and improving her time management. This mirrors stories shared by other participants and in particular, Sam who found that *'after training with the boxers, [she] was disciplining [herself] as well'* which enabled her to take control of her overall *'mood and attitude'* and implement positive changes into her personal life as well as leading her to pursue the career of a personal trainer. Therefore, DITR appeared to empower participants to take control and have agency of their personal and professional lives.

In contrast, Clare explained how her experience empowered her to maintain a healthy lifestyle post-DITR:

> *'It's guided me to keep going, like, make it a lifestyle change, not just go through a boxing camp and leave it at that… The training I do helps with everything I do every day, like the stress, you know like, it's for me. It's something for me'.*

All participants discussed how DITR helped them to make positive, changes to their lives that were long-lasting and benefited both their personal and professional life. In addition to this, there was a strong sense that participants felt empowered to empower others to make changes to their lives in the ways that they had. Clare stated that her *'experience is helping [her] help others now'* as she is involved with a group in which she runs free boxing-based fitness classes for members of the community. Therefore, DITR not only empowered the women on an individual level, but also collectively in facilitating the drive to empower members of their community.

Healing and recovery

Maria further expressed the significance of DITR providing the opportunity for other women who have experienced domestic violence to see DITR members such as herself overcome the challenges of their past through the completion of DITR:

> *'you [women who are experiencing domestic violence] don't have to be stuck in that forever. That was one of the main things. I definitely think it's empowering because like you know, look how many women have come out of that situation now... Most of us have got new families and are like actually living healthy lives, you know. There were a few people in our team that were heavy drug users… involved in gangs and like had near-death experiences with domestic violence and all that and so for them to come out on top... and now they're living, they work, have children, you know. That, that's empowering in itself I reckon.'*

Not only does Maria highlight how DITR is empowering for both members and other potential victims of domestic violence who haven't participated in the programme, but she also suggests how the event enabled many members, including herself, to move forward and recover from significant life trauma. This insight was expressed by all participants in a variety of different ways. For example, Jessie explained how although her domestic violence occurred many years ago, she struggled to trust men and to have the confidence to enter new romantic relationships. After completing DITR she stated:

> *'What if I find someone who's going to do exactly the same to me, but now I'm open to relationships… If someone comes [into my life] that's similar to him, I'll stop it, the first red flag that comes up'*

For Jessie, her transformation enabled her to overcome the difficulties of entering a new relationship after the domestic violence she experienced. This not only gave her the confidence to be *open to relationships*, but also enabled her to feel that she could avoid ending up in an abusive relationship in the future. This is a particularly significant insight as it suggests that DITR and boxing as a sport may have the potential to provide women with the strength and tools required to help them to bypass the possibility of entering abusive relationships in the future. It can therefore be argued that DITR helped Jessie to recover from her past abuse through the development in her confidence and trust to enter new romantic relationships.

One of the questions I asked participants was, *'how would you describe your experience overall?'*. For Maria, her answer centred around the concept of 'healing' and 'recovery':

'Healing. Definitely healing… It definitely fulfilled something I didn't have before… It was just like a recovery thing for me. Like for everything you know, drugs, abuse mental health… And it wasn't what I expected… I expected my mental health to be a lot better but not all the other things that came with it… I actually gained heaps from it'

Maria noted earlier that one of the reasons she joined DITR was because she had recently become clean after a relapse from her drug addiction. She thought the experience would help to *'tie her over'* and distract her mind. However, like the other participants Maria appeared to gain significantly more than expected and found the strength to continue to be clean from drugs and to also feel *fulfilled* and to heal from her past. She notes *'I was already living the good life, but this just topped it for me'* which is reflective of the expressions from all participants except for Sam who was experiencing domestic violence during DITR. This highlights how the unexpected benefits of DITR made participants aware of various aspects of themselves and their lives that they didn't realise needed to or could be improved. This is also similar to Clare who didn't necessarily join DITR because of her history with domestic violence, but more so because she wanted to learn to box and train with her friend. However, like most participants, she felt that she *'came out with so much, with learning so much',* which far exceeded her expectations where she stated:

'Things happened years ago with domestic violence, and this came later. It just proved I can do it…It made me 100% move on from the past. Like legit, I'm so free now'.

This highlights how given that her domestic violence occurred some time ago, Clare was perhaps unaware of how it may have been affecting her in her current life. Her DITR experience therefore enabled her to overcome some of the lasting effects of her abuse, to move on from her past, be *free* and ultimately recover which is not something she expected to experience.

As I have outlined, all of the stories shared by participants suggested their experience was so transformative that they were able to heal and recover from significant life trauma. Sam also expressed a strong sense that DITR enabled her to heal and recover:

It helped me fight through all the struggles I was going through with my health, wellbeing and just being able to discipline myself… I love this new person. It changed me…. It's something that I overcame on my own without having to rely on other people to tell me how to do it their way.

However, what was particularly interesting and significant was how Sam compared her experience in DITR to counselling sessions she had completed:

> *I felt like, when I was doing my counselling, I was coming out more depressed, crying more… but I was forced to do it because of the Ministry but I didn't feel right doing that because I was being forced… So, I started doing something physically... Because I know me, just sitting there, I'm not going to be motivated or determined to change like that'.*

Therefore, Sam found that participating in something physical, that she had autonomously chosen to do, as opposed to the traditional therapy method of counselling sessions, to be more beneficial to her overall wellbeing. When I asked Sam *'why do you think for you, it works better versus a sit-down talking therapy?'*, she stated:

> *I think it's because my whole body is feeling the same way…It doesn't help me if they're gonna tell me that I need to go and see a counsellor and just sit there. I'm actually doing no action. I'm just listening and taking what they told me back home with me doing nothing. Where I can physically go and do something where it's going to help my mood, my body reads how I'm feeling. If I know I'm unhappy, my body feels it too. I know if I feel like crap, so does my body.*

Sam highlights how for something to be therapeutic for her, it needs to involve both the mind and body. Furthermore, DITR appeared to provide a more practical way of taking action and moving forward in her life which helped her to overcome the depression and unhappiness she was experiencing as a result of her past. Although the other participants didn't provide direct comparisons to counselling as Sam did, given it was clear that all expressed similar benefits as part of their overall transformation, it can be argued that DITR and boxing as a sport has the potential to be therapeutic for women who have experienced domestic violence and may be worth exploring in future research.

4.2 Limitations

There are several limitations to this research that are important to highlight. One, in particular, relates to the sample size and the method of sampling used in this research. As the sample size was small, being limited to five participants in total, it is therefore not representative and the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population of women who have participated in DITR. Hence, this study is exploratory in nature. Future research consisting of a larger, more representative sample of women who have participated in DITR

is needed to determine whether the findings of this study can be confirmed on a larger scale. Further, as a non-probability sampling approach was used means that there is an element of selection bias (Naderifar et al., 2016). Therefore the findings of this study may not be applicable to women survivors of domestic violence for whom boxing would be a compulsory exercise. However, as the purpose of qualitative research is to produce data that is both rich and contextually laden (Fossey et al., 2002), using a non-probability sampling method was in fact beneficial to the research purpose as it ensured that the participants selected were experts on the phenomena being explored.

In all qualitative research, there is always an element of subjectivity to consider in how the researcher's views may project onto the interpretations and themes within the data (Dowling, 2005). According to Deckert (2017), there is value in including longer interview excerpts in allowing the reader to directly engage with the interviewee narrative and the researcher narrative. This in turn creates the opportunity for the reader to critically analyse both narratives and to view multiple perspectives. In accordance with this viewpoint, longer interview excerpts have been included in the findings section and this is consistent with an empowerment framework for conducting research. Furthermore, the subjectivity was also mitigated through the researcher already having an established rapport with participants which is beneficial to creating a setting that is open and non-judgemental to ensure participants feel comfortable to speak freely about their experience (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Thwaites, 2017). In addition, as this research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's experiences and is limited to DITR in Auckland, New Zealand, studies of other boxing events in other social contexts may yield different results. Further research may hence be required. For example, public health research may work towards developing a best practice model for survivors of domestic violence.

In addition, there are a few key areas that would be worthwhile to explore in future research. The participants interviewed for this research were spread across both the blue and red team and weren't involved in the same DITR event in all cases. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to conduct comparative interviews with women survivors of violence from the blue and red team who have participated in a particular DITR event. This may help to gauge an understanding of the potential influence of coaching on the experience of women that was alluded to in the findings of this thesis, as well as any other potential team-specific factors that may have an influence on their experience. Finally, interviews were conducted with participants within 24 months after completion of their DITR journey. Although there was a strong sense that their experience had significantly impacted on their lives post-DITR, follow-

up interviews with these women are needed to gauge whether the impacts described are long-lasting or are no longer evident.

5 Discussion

The purpose of this research project was to explore the experience of women survivors of domestic violence victims who have participated in the Diamonds in the Ring boxing event in New Zealand. Specifically, the project set out to answer three primary research questions which centred around participants' motivations, sense of personal development, and empowerment:

> **RQ1:** What motivates women who have been victims of domestic violence to participate in *Diamonds in the Ring?*
>
> **RQ2:** In what way has their experience facilitated a sense of personal development?
>
> **RQ3:** If any, what aspects of their experience facilitated a sense of empowerment?

5.1 Responding to research question 1

The objective of research question one was to explore participants' motivations for participating in the *Diamonds in the Ring (DITR)* boxing event. The question refers to both participants' motivations for joining DITR specifically and choosing boxing as a sport generally. The existing literature fails to speak to women's motivations to participate in charity boxing events but refers to women's motivations to participate in boxing training, sparring, and competitive fighting. The majority of this literature looks at women's motivations for participation in combat sports in general, meaning motivations to train and compete and does not distinguish motivations to start (Why did you join boxing) from ongoing training motivations (Why are you boxing now?) (Alsarve & Tjonndal, 2020; Kotarska, 2020; Phipps, 2013; Zsheliaskova-Koynova, 2021). Why did you start is the question pertinent to this thesis.

A few studies have answered this question and have found that generally, women are motivated to participate in boxing for a variety of reasons, which is also confirmed by this study as participants did not mention any *one* motivation, but multiple (cf. Mathiesen et al., 2022; Nash, 2017). Further, the wider literature has identified that women's motivations can be grouped into three core areas. Firstly, women are motivated to pursue boxing for the purpose of seeking physical changes in terms of aesthetics, self-defence, weight loss, and

strength (Davies & Deckert; Nash, 2017; Smart et al., 2022; Velija et al., 2013). Secondly, social connections where women have been introduced to the sport through family or friends (Mathiesen et al., 2022; Mennesson, 2000). Thirdly, for mental reasons, including to feel empowered, for a challenge, or in other words, the "quest for excitement" (Mierzwinski et al., 2014; Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015). While these studies provide insights into women's motivations for starting boxing and other combat sports, they did not specifically focus on survivors of domestic violence. While statistical probability suggests that one in three women in the aforementioned studies was also a domestic violence survivor (Fanslow et al., 2021), their motivations were not differentiated from the motivations of boxing women who had not experienced domestic violence. Therefore, these studies provide no insight into the specific motivations of women domestic violence survivors to start boxing. Hence, their findings serve as a comparative measure to find out what may set domestic violence survivors' motivations apart from other women who start boxing. This comparison is undertaken in the following three sections: physical change, mental challenges and excitement, and social motivations.

Physical change

The current literature suggests that one of the reasons women are motivated to join boxing and other martial arts is for physical reasons in the form of fitness, weight loss, or to achieve a particular body image (Nash, 2017; Smart et al., 2022; Velija et al., 2013). Velija and Fortune (2013) state that the "female body can be a motivation for women to be involved in martial arts" (p. 536). The findings of the current study do not support this notion. While participants expected to experience physical changes as a result of participating in DITR, it was not described as a motive for their decision to participate.

Channon and Matthews (2015) contend that there are different types of combat sports that women choose to participate in such as competitive fighting, self-defence, combat workouts or what is also known as recreational boxing or 'boxfit'. One of the main points of difference between each of these is the purpose (e.g., To fight, self-defence, fitness/weight loss) and the level of contact involved. Women are often drawn to different types of boxing for different reasons in that some women box because they want to fight, and for others, it is about weight loss and fitness (Hargreaves, 1997). Recreational boxing or 'box fit' typically involves little to no physical contact between practitioners and are often advertised "as a means of shaping the body in ways intended to enhance heterosexual attractiveness" (Channon & Matthews, p. 10). In contrast, DITR is in the category of white-collar or corporate boxing in

which participants are trained like fighters with enhanced safety measures, for the purpose of a fight, but only for a fifteen-week period. It is not the same as traditional competitive fighting, but it arguably exposes participants to a 'snapshot' of what it is like to train and compete as a fighter. Most importantly, however, is that DITR is not marketed for the purposes of achieving a particular body image, but for empowerment, charity, and the opportunity to complete a boxing fight. The findings, therefore, suggest that participants may not have been motivated by the desire for physical changes because their motivations were not just about boxing but were connected to the purpose of what DITR set out to achieve. A possible confirmation of this argument is the fact that all five participants were motivated by at least one of the components (empowerment, charity, a challenge) of DITR's purpose statement/advertising. Future research may want to explore the extent to which marketing strategies for boxing influence the demographic of participants who choose to sign up.

Mental challenge and excitement

Women are not only motivated to participate in boxing for physical reasons, but also for mental reasons such as the desire to build a strong mind (Davies & Deckert, 2018), or in other words, for mental empowerment (Velija et al., 2013). Participation in boxing is therefore viewed as an activity that is particularly challenging, offering the opportunity for women to develop mentally (Hargreaves, 1997). Overall, the existing literature agrees, that boxing is a facilitator of mental change, a notion that is echoed by the findings of this study. Four participants talked about how their motivation to start boxing was to change and develop mentally. They articulated this motivation in terms of putting themselves out of their comfort zone and ultimately gaining a sense of accomplishment.

Participants described the motive to gain a sense of accomplishment within the context of being able to prove to themselves that they are capable of completing the challenge associated with DITR. For two participants in particular this extended further whereby DITR was viewed as an opportunity to overcome challenges they were facing in their personal lives. These motivations point towards the process of working towards meaningful goals, which ultimately lead to the development of power and autonomy, or in other words, empowerment (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015). Empowerment is a concept commonly associated with women in boxing and other combat sports, not only as a motive for participation (Mathiesen et al., 2022; Nash, 2017) but also as an outcome of their participation (Hargreaves, 1997; Velija et al., 2013). Participants did not explicitly state that they were motivated to build a strong mind

and body in the same way as the women in Davies and Deckert's (2018) study. However, as indicated by Velija et al (2013), mental strength is often described as a form of mental empowerment for women. Participants were motivated by the challenge, for self-defence and the opportunity to take control of their lives in ways that were personally meaningful to each of them. Although there are differences in the ways in which this particular motivation was articulated, the essence of the motivation was for empowerment which is consistent with wider literature on women's participation in boxing (Channon & Matthews, 2015; Hargreaves, 1997; Velija et al., 2013).

Mierzwinski et al (2014) and Mierzwinski and Phipps (2015) found that female MMA and Muay Thai fighters were drawn to the sport in pursuit of the 'quest for excitement'. Like boxing, competing in these sports is considered to be particularly, challenging, dangerous, male-dominated, and violent, and these are often the very reasons the women were motivated to participate (Mierzwinski et al., 2014; Mierzwinski & Phipps 2015). Four participants' motivations centred around DITR being an opportunity to be challenged, either in the form of being put outside of their comfort zone or to gain a sense of accomplishment. Thing (2001) argues that boxing and other combat sports are considered to be 'risky' as they "present a culture of danger, risk and intense physical contact" (Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015, p. 240). As corporate boxing provides 'everyday people' with exposure to what it is like to train and fight as a professional boxer would, in a safe environment for a set period of time, DITR represents that sense of risk, danger and intensity as described in the literature. Like the women in Mierzwinski et al (2013) and Mierzwinski and Phipps (2015), study participants were motivated by the challenge, however, this motivation was not narrated in connection to danger, risk, and physical contact associated with boxing but only in connection to the intensity of the programme. The danger and risk that draws women to combat sports in the quest for excitement is often reported by women who actively fight in the sport (Mierzwinski et al., 2013; Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015). Therefore, this research only confirms the current literature to a limited extent indicating that women are choosing boxing and other combat sports because it is perceived to be intensely challenging. These findings also suggest that women may have different motivations for different types of boxing (e.g., Professional vs corporate boxing).

Social motivations

Mennesson (2000) found that French women entered boxing for two different reasons; either out of their own personal interest, or because their friends or family had introduced them to the sport. On this basis, Menessen (2000) argues that involvement in boxing and other male-dominant sports is often "facilitated by early parental and community experiences" (p. 31). The influence of friends on participants' motivation to sign up for Diamonds in the Ring was identified in three instances. One participant clearly stated that the main reason she decided to join DITR was to support her friend who had also signed up and was a big supporter of the event. The other two participants were also introduced to DITR by a friend. However, in addition, they narrated other equally strong motivations for joining related to the motivations highlighted in the previous section. Consistent with Mathiesen et al (2022), their friends played a role in their motivations but there were also other reasons that contributed to their decision to participate in DITR. Scholars have argued that because combat sports are male-dominated, whether women choose to participate largely depends on the social conditioning they have been exposed to throughout their lives (Armstrong & Hutchison, 2022; Mennesson, 2000). As such, women generally have multiple motivations, but their social connections and experiences may serve as a catalyst in their decision to participate in boxing. Therefore, ultimately, participants' friends provided a pathway to DITR and boxing within a fight-based format that may not have occurred otherwise (Mennesson, 2000). These findings further indicate that the motives for both survivors and non-survivors of violence to participate in boxing are connected to their social connections.

Participants also had an additional social motivation related to their experience with domestic violence and the connection to the NZ Women's Refuge. Four participants articulated this motivation as either directly wanting to support the Refuge, or by supporting other victims of domestic violence through demonstrating that they can overcome domestic violence and live a normal life. Furthermore, all five participants clearly stated that they felt that their experience with domestic violence influenced their decision to sign up for DITR. It can therefore be argued that DITR's connection to the NZ Women's Refuge and its association with the domestic violence narrative was a key motivation for women to join DITR. Supporting the social institution of the Women's Refuge has not been identified in the previous literature as a motivation of women to join boxing. One explanation may be found in the cultural context in which this study was undertaken. Helping others and volunteering for charity appears to be embedded within New Zealand culture. A recent report recognises New Zealand as being in the top ten most charitable countries in the world in terms of helping

others, monetary donations, and volunteering time from 2010 – 2019 (Charity Aids Foundation, 2019). One possible interpretation of the aforementioned finding then is that participants' motivations to support the NZ Women's Refuge may not necessarily be ascribed to their experience with domestic violence, but rather as a product of New Zealand's culture.

However, the existing literature finds that the extent to which individuals feel a sense of belonging and closeness to a particular social group is predictive of helping behaviours such as volunteering for charity organisations (Wakefield et al., 2022). When individuals have experienced hardship or difficulties, such as domestic violence, they are more likely to identify with that particular social group and empathise with their experiences. Bowe et al (2019) suggest that people are often motivated to volunteer when they empathise with and feel a sense of closeness to the social group that specifically benefits from the charity work. Therefore, participants prior experience with domestic violence meant that they felt a deep sense of connection and identification with the NZ Women's Refuge and the women it serves to support (Bowe et al., 2019; Wakefield et al., 2022). This, in turn, may have contributed to their decision to sign up for DITR to ultimately be able to support the Refuge and other women who have experienced domestic violence. Perhaps, participants' motives were more connected to the charity goal, rather than the boxing aspect, as without this connection, participants may not have actively pursued boxing as a sport. Additional questions arise that could be addressed in future research, such as: What if the fundraiser was for a different organisation? How much of the motivation is influenced by the end goal of supporting a charity compared to the motivation of doing boxing? Do the demographics of charity boxing event participants disproportionately represent people who have been directly affected by the cause the charity serves to support?

5.2 Responding to research question 2

Research question two sought to answer the question whether research participants' experience of DITR facilitated a sense of personal development?

The positive physical and mental outcomes of sports participation are well evidenced in the literature (Bozdarov et al., 2022; Miles, 2007). Participation in boxing and other combat sports, in particular, has been found to foster the development of mental strength, wellbeing, and improved mental health for both women survivors (Cole & Ulrich-French, 2017; Gammage et al., 2021) and non-survivors of violence (Armstrong & Hutchison, 2022; Hargreaves, 1997; Velija et al., 2013).

The findings of the current study were consistent with the literature as all five participants reported drastic improvements in their fitness, weight loss, and physical strength, as well as numerous improvements to their mental development including, self-confidence, self-esteem, mental strength, overall wellbeing, and change in mindset. Aside from experiencing the expected physical changes, the mental development was described as an unexpected outcome of their participation. Most importantly participants described the latter as more significant in how they felt it impacted their lives. Although the literature suggests that both domestic violence survivors and non-survivors experience a sense of personal development from boxing, the findings from the current study suggest that this sense may be more significant for survivors in enabling personal challenges to be overcome. The following section will discuss how DITR and boxing as a sport may facilitate this sense of personal development in domestic violence survivors in particular.

Strength

Training in boxing and other combat sports requires a high level of fitness, strength, speed, endurance, and mental toughness, all of which are typically, socially acceptable for men, and undesirable for women (Hargreaves, 1997; Mierzwinski & Phipps 2015). The literature suggests that when women participate in boxing, traditional gender norms that position women as weak are directly challenged which enables the development of physical and mental strength (Hargreaves, 1997; McGannon et al., 2019; Nash, 2017). Much of this research focuses on women's experience in boxing within a gendered context, and the potential constraints associated with training alongside men (Davies & Deckert, 2018; McGannon et al., 2019). Although the participants in this study did not specifically discuss constraints associated with being a woman participating in boxing, they embraced and enjoyed the process of becoming physically stronger. Similar to Gammage et al's (2021) research with women survivors of violence, participating in the non-contact Shape Your Life (SYL) boxing programme, by realising that their bodies were strong, they became more confident in themselves and their capabilities. Therefore, the physical strength developed through participation in a male-dominated sport can enable women to perceive themselves as strong leading to increased self-confidence and self-efficacy (Smart et al., 2022).

Intensity

The physical and mental intensity involved in both training and competing in boxing is arguably what makes it unique, and distinguishable from other sports that do not involve combat. Women boxers often report this to be one of the aspects of the sport that they enjoy and, where they feel that they develop a sense of physical and mental strength (Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015; Smart et al., 2022; Velija et al., 2013). Consistent with the literature, the physical and mental intensity incorporated into the DITR boxing training camp appeared to enable participants to feel both physically and mentally stronger. Participants reported that one of the most challenging and unexpected components of their DITR journey was the physicality and mental challenges associated with the training camp. The training sessions pushed the women to their limits and by overcoming these challenges, they were able to feel stronger and more confident. This suggests that the physical and mental intensity incorporated into boxing training can facilitate a process of self-discovery, a concept that has also been discussed in reference to endurance athletes (Boudreau & Giorgi, 2010; Johnson et al., 2021). Similar to female endurance athletes, overcoming the challenges and adversity presented by the intensity of boxing training, the women learnt that they were strong, both mentally and physically.

Sparring

Boxing and endurance sports may be similar in terms of the level of fitness and intensity involved, but there is one key difference in that boxing is a contact sport, and therefore involves an element of danger and predictable pain when being punched. Sparring is an essential component of boxing training, particularly for individuals who wish to fight (Andersen, 2021). The purpose of sparring is to practice boxing skills and technique in a controlled mock combat setting. Despite the controlled aspect of sparring, it can occur at varying levels of intensity which is often more complicated for beginners and women, particularly in a mixed-sex scenario (Smart et al., 2022). The literature suggests that despite gender-specific challenges which commonly occur when women spar with men (McNaughton, 2012; Smart et al., 2022), women fighters generally enjoy the experience and the challenge of testing their skills with a ‘stronger’ male partner (Davies & Deckert, 2018; Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015; Velija et al., 2013). In contrast, participants in this study described sparring as an aspect of their DITR experience that was initially very difficult, but over time, became enjoyable, and a challenge that was embraced rather than feared. However, for many participants, sparring created exposure to associations with their experience of domestic

violence, but also, facilitated their ability to overcome this association. As a result, sparring was often narrated as a turning point in their journey.

Although some of the women fighters in the literature to date have indicated that they are survivors of violence, none of these studies has specifically set out to explore the contact aspect of boxing for this demographic. For all five participants, sparring at the beginning of their DITR journey was described as a very emotional experience, but there were variances in how this was articulated. Responses ranged from feeling desensitised to the pain of being punched, to anger and the desire to hit back, and the direct opposite experienced by one participant who needed to remove herself from an intense sparring session involving the 'sharknado' drill. These responses appear to be characteristic of an instinctive 'fight, flight, or freeze' response commonly discussed in the trauma literature (Krupnik, 2020). This suggests that sparring presents unique challenges for domestic violence survivors. However, sparring seems to have played the most significant role in participants' sense of personal development and overall transformation.

Andersen (2021) contends that sparring "is an emotional learning process" where fighters are confronted with fear, pain, and emotion (p. 10). Sparring can, therefore, evoke emotional responses for both survivors and non-survivors of violence, but to be successful in sparring, fighters must learn to master the art of controlling their emotions (Andersen, 2021; Wacquant, 1992). It can, therefore, be argued that through sparring participants learnt to recognize their emotions and develop not only emotional control but to feel confident within themselves participating in a mock combat scenario – a feat that perhaps holds particular significance for domestic violence survivors. Further, similar to the women in Mierzwinski and Phipp's (2015) study, sparring was reported as intensely challenging on a physical, mental, psychological, and social level, and pushing through and overcoming these challenges may have acted as an 'emotional outlet' for participants. Research conducted on the SYL boxing programme (Gammage et al., 2021; Van Ingen, 2011a, 2011b, 2016, 2019) for survivors of violence has evidenced similar findings, for the women involved. However, the SYL programme utilises boxing in a strictly non-contact-based format. Although DITR is not designed as a programme to benefit survivors of violence, this presents an interesting comparison with the experience of female domestic violence survivors participating in contact vs non-contact forms of boxing.

Van Ingen (2011a) argues that boxing is beneficial for survivors of violence because women can engage in 'healthy aggression'. Through non-contact boxing, women learnt to channel their anger, into healthy aggression with emotions being "expressed with motions, not

words" (Van Ingen, 2011b, p. 183). Women engaged in a mock sparring scenario upon completion of the programme with an experienced boxer who was not permitted to throw any punches, thus removing this element of fear. There is significant overlap between Van Ingen's research and the findings of this study as both the contact and non-contact sparring scenarios provided survivors of violence with a platform to express, channel, and control their emotions, there was, however, an additional benefit described by DITR participants. Sparring also helped the women to overcome emotional triggers such as the desire to flinch, apologise, and turn away. It is important to note that flinching, apologising, and turning away are common instinctive reactions for beginners in sparring, particularly for women. However, as the participants in this study described these instinctive reactions as associated with their previous abuse, it is important to acknowledge how boxing and DITR reportedly facilitated their ability to overcome these triggers. Therefore, despite the legitimacy of implementing safety measures for women survivors of violence in boxing-based programmes through the elimination of the contact component (Van Ingen, 2011), these findings suggest that sparring can be a deeply powerful experience of personal growth. There may be additional factors at play, such as the influence of coaching and peers and raises additional questions such as: Are the impacts of boxing more powerful when women are trained like fighters? Are survivors of violence more resilient and strong than they are given credit for? Hence, the potential benefits of sparring specifically for women survivors of violence may be worth exploring in future research.

Coaching

As indicated in the literature (Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015; Mierzwinski et al., 2014) and the findings of this study, the mental component of boxing appears to hold particular significance for women's personal development. It is clear that participation in boxing as an intensely challenging activity, enabled a transformation in mindset reflective of improved mental strength and control for all participants. Another component of mindset development evidenced in both literature on boxing and sports more generally is the role of coaches in influencing this development (Becker, 2009; Weinberg & Butt, 2011). Gammage et al (2021) found that the positive support of coaches fostered the development of supportive relationships for women survivors of violence however, the connection between coaching and mindset was not explored. Participants in this study also spoke about the positive support of their coaches. Three participants explicitly articulated how they felt Daniella's coaching style facilitated a change in mindset. Specifically, it was indicated that the coaching style supported their development of emotional control, self-belief, the ability to push through challenges, and

discipline, all of which are characteristic of the concept of 'mental toughness' discussed in sport psychology (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011; Lin et al., 2017).

Mental toughness is a concept that has been evidenced as key to athlete success and performance, as well as being an important life skill for the general population (Gucciardi & Gordon, 2011). Further, the literature suggests that coaches are one of the strongest influences on the development of mental toughness in athletes (Weinberg & Butt, 2011; Weinberg et al., 2018). To this end, Daniella appeared to foster an environment that was both supportive and challenging, where high expectations were demanded of the women in meeting the challenges of training. There were also learning opportunities in which participants were taught to maintain a positive attitude in spite of adversity, and self-belief through visualisation strategies. Daniella, therefore, seems to have adopted an approach to coaching in DITR that was characteristic of coaching strategies for sports athletes (Gucciardi & Gordon, 2011). This suggests that, although the women participating in DITR are not considered athletes, nor is the purpose of DITR to train members to become athletes, this particular approach to coaching women survivors of violence, may have a significant impact on how boxing may influence the development of mental toughness. As research suggests that mental toughness is not only beneficial within the sports domain but also transferrable to many areas of life (Gucciardi & Gordon, 2011)., the potential long-term benefits for survivors of violence may be subject of future research. In addition, all participants experienced a change in mindset through the DITR training camp, but for three participants, their change in mindset was also facilitated through specific coaching strategies. Therefore, future research is needed to determine whether this difference may have a long-term effect on the mindset of participants.

5.3 Responding to research question 3

If any, what aspects of their experience facilitated a sense of empowerment?

Research question three can be broken down into two parts: firstly, to confirm whether participants' DITR experience facilitated a sense of empowerment, and secondly, if confirmed, to identify what aspects of their experience facilitated this sense of empowerment.

Participation in boxing and other combat sports can lead to empowerment for both women survivors and non-survivors of violence (Channon & Phipps, 2017; Hargreaves, 1997; McCaughey, 1997; McNaughton, 2012; Van Ingen, 2011a, 2011b; Velija et al., 2013). The empowering potential of boxing was also evidenced in the current findings with all five

participants experiencing a sense of empowerment through their DITR experience. Given differing understandings and interpretations of the concept (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015), it is important to first revisit the definition applicable to this study. Empowerment refers to "a meaningful shift in the experience of power attained through interaction in the social world" (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015, p. 84). Empowerment is therefore grounded in conceptions of power and consequently, often discussed through a gendered lens (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015. From this perspective, women's participation in boxing as a hypermasculine space challenges traditional conventions of femininity which in turn reduces power imbalances and facilitates women's liberation and empowerment (Hamilton, 2022; Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015). Through boxing, women can experience power and control of their bodies leading to a "sensation of empowerment perceived to be inscribed both in the individual body and in the inner self (Hargreaves, 1997, p. 42). In accordance with this viewpoint, and consistent with wider literature (Hargreaves, 1997; Velija et al., 2013) participants indicated that they felt empowered through the development of physical and mental strength. There was a strong sense that through becoming physically strong, participants realised their strength and self-worth.

Voice and Agency

In discussing women's empowerment, it is worth acknowledging that feminist scholars (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998; DeWelde, 2003; McCaughey, 1997) argue that for 'true' empowerment to occur, encompassing both physical and mental empowerment, the development of strength and power must be accompanied by a feminist consciousness that directly criticises and questions "gendered embodiment that positions women as weak" (Velija et al., 2013, p. 525). Although a feminist perspective of women's empowerment is of value to this discussion, as the purpose of this research was to determine whether participants experienced a *sense* of empowerment, understanding what empowerment meant to participants on a personal level is particularly pertinent. To this end, when participants were asked whether their DITR experience was empowering, all discussed the concept of voice and agency, a core component of empowerment in the literature (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015; Hotaling & Buzawa, 2003). The development of physical and mental strength enabled participants to experience voice and agency resulting in self-confidence to not only stand up for themselves but also for others with specific reference to victims of violence. According to Van der Kolk (2014), "our sense of agency, how much we feel in control, is defined by our

relationship with our bodies […] in order to find voice, we have to be *in* our bodies" (p. 33). It can be argued that boxing enabled participants to become connected to and in control of their bodies, a finding echoed by other research with women survivors of violence (Lyon et al., 2020; Van Ingen, 2011a, 2011b). These findings suggest that boxing has the potential to empower survivors of violence by fostering a sense of voice and agency. Given research evidencing the importance of voice and agency in improving a range of outcomes for survivors of violence (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015), it may be worth incorporating physical activities such as boxing into intervention programmes.

Empowered mindset

In Van Ingen's (2011a) research on the SYL non-contact-based boxing programme, empowerment centred around reframing understandings of anger and aggression allowing it to be formulated and expressed "as a constructive tool, as a means of undermining passivity, and as an important aspect of self-care". This not only provided women survivors of violence with permission to express anger, an emotion that is typically suppressed or deemed socially unacceptable for women (Hollander, 2015) but afforded women with the power and autonomy to be in control of their emotions. Although there is evidence to suggest that women can also experience empowerment through other forms of physical activity (Armstrong & Hutchison, 2022; Garcia et al., 2019), what distinguishes boxing from other sports is that "people can elicit controlled aggression in a socially accepted manner" (Channon & Phipps, 2015, p. 248). DITR did not have the same philosophy on building healthy aggression attached to the training camp, however, this shift in power bears resemblance to the experience of participants in DITR as they learnt to adopt a different mindset. Their transformation in mindset was representative of regaining control and agency in how they approached various aspects of their lives. Several examples were provided, each of personal meaning to participants, such as having the discipline to maintain a healthy lifestyle through continuing with boxing and exercise, attaining newfound success in one's professional life, and a general sense that they had the mental tools and strength to handle day-to-day challenges. As Van Ingen's (2011) research has not yet investigated the continued impact of the programme, it cannot be determined whether the women experienced similar impacts as the participants in this study did. However, collectively, it can be argued that the transformation in mindset provided participants with strength, discipline, and resilience which served as a catalyst for making meaningful changes in their lives. This is consistent with Cattaneo and Goodman's (2015) view of empowerment

where the women gained power and agency through working towards personally meaningful goals.

In drawing parallels from self-defence research Hollander (2015) argues that such experiences lead to a transformation in women's emotions. From a gendered perspective, women are more inclined to embody emotions of vulnerability, shame, and anxiety and through self-defence training, these emotions transformed into power, pride, and self-confidence (Hollander, 2015). DITR is not delivered as a self-defence course however, these findings are similar to the current study in demonstrating how participation in self-defence, as well as boxing and other forms of combat sports, can "transform how women see the world around them, as well as how they see themselves" (Hollander, 2004, p. 231).

Healing and recovery through boxing

Research conducted with women survivors of violence participating in non-contact trauma-informed boxing programmes suggests that the empowering and transformative potential of boxing can facilitate healing and recovery from trauma (Cole & Ulrich-French, 2017, Lyon et al., 2020; Van Ingen 2011a, 2011b). Although DITR is not designed for this purpose and involves contact-based training, the current findings provide strong support for this argument. Despite being at different stages in their recovery, four participants indicated that their experience provided healing and recovery from their past trauma, which was noted as an unexpected outcome of their journey. Although one participant did not articulate the same connection to her past trauma, it was evident that boxing and DITR helped her to overcome personal challenges within herself and ultimately, to grow and evolve. Participants' recovery was characterised by a sense of freedom and agency, having the confidence to enter new relationships, improved mental health and wellbeing, and the belief that they were living a 'normal' life, all of which are indicative of the concept of 'moving on' and recovery in the literature (Allen & Wozniak, 2010; Carman et al., 2022; Mengo et al., 2022).

There appears to be a shift in thinking around trauma in recognising the importance of the mind-body connection (Van Der Kolk, 2014). Drawing from Van Der Kolk (2014), Van Ingen (2019) argues that trauma "is locatable in the body – and thus responses to trauma must focus on assisting survivors to reconnect with their bodies" (p. 117). Similar to the participants in the SYL programme, engaging in boxing as a deeply visceral activity may have enabled the women to become re-connected to and in control of their bodies (Van Ingen, 2019). Boxing can provide the opportunity for women to express their emotions in a non-verbal manner,

which was described to be therapeutic and cathartic, a finding echoed with creative art and movement therapy research (Ho, 2015; Lyon et al., 2020). One participant explicitly stated that she found boxing more beneficial than talking therapy as it allowed her to feel connected to her body as well as gaining a sense of autonomy and agency over her wellbeing and recovery. It is often argued that when a person goes through significant trauma, they are "deprived of the power over [their] own body", leading to a loss of sense of self and, identity (Anders, 2021, p. 131). Regaining a sense of control and sense of self are central to the recovery narratives of participants in this study and wider literature (Czerny & Lassiter, 2016; Kerr et al., 2019; McAdams & McLean, 2013). These findings not only provide support for the empowering potential of boxing but also as a powerful facilitator of healing and recovery.

The findings are consistent with key literature in the field (Cole & Ulrich-French, 2017; Lyon et al., 2020; Van Ingen, 2011a, 2011b, 2016, 2019), however, as DITR did not incorporate a trauma-informed approach and involved contact, it is worth discussing the distinction in this context. As indicated in response to research question two, sparring provided participants with the opportunity for personal growth. This also appeared to be evident with respect to one component of healing and recovery. For many participants, overcoming an intensely challenging sparring session was often narrated as a turning point in their journey and was symbolic of their overall transformation. In two instances, being confronted with physical contact in a sparring scenario allowed trauma-related triggers such as flinching and turning away in response to movement to be overcome in their personal lives. In demonstrating the significance of how this development transferred to their personal relationships, one participant stated that she felt her experience enabled her to stop flinching when her partner approached her for a hug. It is clear that boxing enabled the women to regain control of the mind and body, but perhaps, the level of control required to partake in a sparring scenario safely and successfully has an enhanced effect.

Lewandowski (2015, p. 12) describes boxers' control of their "responses to pain, fear and threat of harm as an exertion of autonomy". On this basis, successfully partaking in a sparring scenario, in spite of past trauma, may have fostered a strong sense of autonomy and agency, and also increased their self-confidence and self-worth (Channon & Phipps, 2015). Further, although often perceived to be violent, sparring is built on a foundation of trust and respect and ultimately can "result in regimes of self-care and trust in oneself and others" (Andersen, 2021, p. 143). Therefore, sparring can provide a platform for the development of the self and trusting relationships with others and what Andersen (2021) refers to as a form of self-love. As women survivors of violence often experience a loss of identity and sense of self

(Kerr et al., 2019), these findings therefore highlight how contact boxing may have played a significant role in the reversal of this process leading to a sense of healing and recovery for women survivors of violence. This is not to suggest that all women survivors of violence should be put through contact forms of boxing, but rather, providing access to both contact and non-contact forms of boxing may be of value to this demographic. Further, research is needed to fully understand why sparring can facilitate these changes, as well as, under what circumstances. For example, the benefits may be connected to the way in which the DITR coaches facilitated the sparring sessions. However, most importantly, these findings highlight the potential need to reframe our thinking around the vulnerability of women survivors of violence.

Overall, participants experienced a strong sense of empowerment which was evidenced by the development of strength, voice and agency, a shift in mindset, and a sense of healing and recovery from their past trauma. These developments were representative of a transformation that provided participants with the power, agency, and life skills to make meaningful and valued changes in their personal and professional lives. This aspect is what represents the very essence of participants' empowerment.

Identity shift

It is important to highlight that this transformed self reflects a direct contrast to how participants narrated their identity at the beginning of DITR, consisting of themes of vulnerability, a lack of voice, self-confidence and in some cases, the sense that they were still living with the lasting effects of their abuse. Hence, it can be argued that the transformation of participants culminated in a shift in identity from a survivor of domestic violence to a fighter. Previous research has indicated that boxing can be transformative for women survivors of violence in providing the opportunity to be 'reborn' (Velija et al., 2013) and to rebuild one's sense of self (Van Ingen, 2011). The findings of this research further extend on these studies by confirming a shift in identity.

Owton (2015) argues that an identity shift can be "characterised by individual transformation, self-reinvention and metaphorical rebirth normally following a trauma" (p. 223). Further, boxing is recognised as an activity that is deeply physical and mental and often necessitates the reinvention of the self as a boxer or fighter (Wacquant, 1995). Consistent with these viewpoints, boxing facilitated a transformation in which participants evolved into a woman that identified as strong, empowered, is capable and no longer defined by their past experience with domestic violence. Narrative identity theory discusses the significance of the

redemption sequence in understanding how identity is constructed following a negative or in this case, traumatic event (McAdams & McLean, 2013). McAdams and McLean, (2013) state that a "redemption sequence marks a transition in a life narrative account from an emotionally negative scene to a positive outcome or attribution about the self" (p. 233). Therefore, in drawing from narrative identity research, all participants narrated turning points in their journey which were characteristic of strength and agency. These findings are significant as research suggests that narrative identities that reflect strength and agency are associated with positive wellbeing and recovery and indicates that individual feels a sense of control in their life (Kerr et al., 2019; McAdams, 1985; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Therefore, although the identity of participants was not the focus of this thesis, these findings highlight how boxing not only can facilitate a strong sense of empowerment, but also lead to a transformation that was life-changing, and in the words of some participants, 'life-saving'.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the experience of women survivors of violence who have participated in the Diamonds in the Ring charity boxing event in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The research specifically set out to answer the following research questions: "What motivates women who have been victims of domestic violence to participate in Diamonds in the Ring?"; "In what way has their experience facilitated a sense of personal development?"; and "If any, what aspects of their experience facilitated a sense of empowerment?".

The findings of this thesis have made significant contributions to the field in three key areas. This is the first study to investigate the experience of women survivors of violence participating in a corporate charity boxing event in the New Zealand context. Secondly, one of the main conclusions drawn from this study is that the contact aspect of boxing is what facilitated a sense of personal development and empowerment for participants as it meaningfully related to their prior experience with domestic violence. This is an important contribution to the relevant body of literature because it draws into question the emphasis on eliminating the contact aspect of boxing for this demographic (Lyon et al., 2020; Van Ingen, 2011a, 2011b). In extending beyond DITR, future research that investigates and compares the experience of women survivors of violence participating in contact vs non-contact aspects of boxing may therefore provide further insights. Furthermore, there was a clear indication that participants experienced a transformation that culminated into an identity shift and empowered the women to make meaningful and valued changes in their personal and professional lives. Their shift in identity was representative of an empowered women who had regained voice and agency over their lives and, ultimately, enabled freedom and healing from their past trauma. This finding makes an important contribution to the literature in not only demonstrating the transformative potential of boxing, but also, by highlighting the significance of the impact of participants shift in identity. Perhaps it is necessary for women survivors of violence to experience this type of identity shift to overcome their past and to consequently, break the cycle of violence. Boxing may therefore provide the platform to necessitate this change, however, further research is needed to explore the identity shift of women survivors of violence participating in boxing and other combat sports in more depth.

These findings also have practical implications in demonstrating the potential for boxing to be utilised within the social sector. The findings indicated that boxing, and more

specifically, contact boxing, acted as a therapeutic outlet for women survivors of violence. It would therefore be worthwhile for social services to consider providing this demographic with the option to incorporate contact boxing into their recovery journey. This also presents a potential opportunity for social services to collaborate with boxing gyms and/or key boxing personnel to not only offer the necessary access and expertise, but also, to facilitate the development of targeted programmes that are tailored to the needs of women survivors of violence and may have a genuine impact on their recovery.

Appendix A: Ethics approval

14 April 2021
Antje Deckert
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Antje

Re Ethics Application: **21/73 Violence against women, women against violence:**

Exploring domestic abuse survivors' experience of personal development and empowerment through participation in the Diamond's in the Ring boxing event in Aotearoa New Zealand

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 14 April 2024.

Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. Please ensure that post-analysis data will not be stored on the researcher's One Drive.

Non-standard conditions must be completed before commencing your study. Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTEC before commencing your study.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of the project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Appendix B: Indicative interview guide

Boxing background and motivations for joining DIR:

Firstly, I'd just like to ask some very general questions about you, about your age and background.

1. How old are you?
2. Where did you grow up?
3. Do you have brothers and sisters?
4. Do you have kids?
5. What do you do for a living?
6. If any, what other hobbies do you have aside from boxing?

Now I would like to ask some questions around boxing and the DIR event, if that's okay?

7. What was your experience with boxing prior to signing up for DIR?
    a. *Prompt:* Did you watch boxing in your spare time?
    b. *Prompt:* Had you participated in any form of boxing before?
    c. *Prompt:* Are any of your close friends or relatives involved in boxing?
8. What are your perceptions of boxing in general?
    a. *Prompt:* Do you think boxing is violent?
9. How did you find out about Diamonds in the Ring?
10. What motivated you to sign up for Diamonds in the Ring?

As you know, my research looks specifically into women's experience of DIR, who are also survivors of domestic violence. I am therefore interested to find out about your motivations for joining DIR and whether your feel that your experience with domestic violence is connected or has influenced your decision to join in any way.

11. Do you think your exposure to domestic violence influenced your decision to sign up for Diamonds in the Ring?
    a. *Prompt:* If so, in what way?
12. Did you have anyone close to you – family or friends – who was opposed to your participation in DIR?
    a. *Prompt:* How did you overcome that resistance? Did they end up supporting you?
13. What were your expectations for the Diamonds in the Ring training camp?
    a. *Prompt:* What were you hoping to achieve?
    b. *Prompt:* What did you anticipate would happen during training?
14. What were your expectations for the final fight night?
15. What did you expect to gain out of your experience through Diamonds in the Ring?

Participants experience in relation to personal development and empowerment:

Now, I would like to ask you some questions more specific to your experience during the DIR camp and the fight night.

1. How would you describe your experience throughout the training camp?

2. What was the highlight of your diamonds in the ring experience?
    a. *Prompt:* Why was this a highlight?
3. Can you tell me about any challenges you faced throughout DIR?
    a. *Prompt:* Why would you describe this as a challenge?
    b. *Prompt:* How did you overcome these challenges?
4. It is very common for DIR members to be given a nickname by the head coach. Can you tell me whether you were given a nickname?
    a. If so, what was it, how did the name come about and does it have any particular meaning to you?
5. How would you describe your first training session?
    a. *Prompt:* How did you feel before, during, and after?
6. How did you feel as you completed more training sessions across the 15 weeks?
    a. *Prompt:* Did you notice any differences in how you felt physically and mentally?
7. Can you tell me about your first spar?
    a. *Prompt:* What was it like to first get hit during training? What was your instinctive reaction? Why?
    b. *Prompt:* How did you feel during this experience?
    c. *Prompt:* Did your experience change as you completed more sparring sessions?
    d. *Prompt:* If so, in what way did this change?
8. How would you describe the team environment?
9. How did Daniella's approach to coaching influence your experience?
10. Was there ever a point where you considered withdrawing from DIR?
    a. *Prompt:* If so, why? What made you decide to continue?
11. Were there any times during the training camp that you were unable to participate?
    a. *Prompt:* If so, why? How did this make you feel?
12. Can you talk me through the night of the fight?
    a. *Prompt:* How did you feel before, during, and after the fight?
13. Do you think that your perceptions of boxing have changed since completing Diamonds in the Ring?
    a. *Prompt:* in what way? Why?
    b. *Prompt:* Will you continue to box in the future?
14. Has the DIR experience shaped how you see yourself in anyway?
    a. *Prompt:* How, why, in what way? What personal qualities do you feel you have gained (psychologically, physically, financially, spiritually)?
    b. *Prompt:* Do you feel physically and mentally stronger since completing DIR?
    c. *Prompt:* Would you describe your experience to be 'empowering'
15. Do you think that you approach any situations in your everyday life differently having undertaken this training programme?
    a. *Prompt:* If so, how, why, and what type of situations?
    b. *Prompt:* Have you noticed any changes with your ability to cope with challenges in your everyday life?
16. Do you think your experience with DIR has impacted upon your perception of domestic violence?
    a. *Prompt*: If so, in what way?

17. Would you recommend Diamonds in the Ring to other women who have experienced domestic violence?
    a. *Prompt:* why? Why not?
18. What advice would you give to other women like you who are considering registering for DIR?
19. Was your experience during Diamonds in the Ring what you expected?
    a. *Prompt*: What do you think you have gained from participating in boxing as a sport, and more specifically, your DIR experience?
20. Is there anything, you would like to add? Or is there any question I should have asked but didn't?

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[i] Box-fit classes typically include cardio exercises based on boxing (e.g. Skipping, bag work, pad drills) but are within a social setting for people looking to improve their fitness and do not involve any form of contact or competitive boxing.