

THE SAFE CHOICES REACHING COMMUNITIES PROJECT

INTERIM EVALUATION FINDINGS

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THE SAFE CHOICES PROJECTS

Safe Choices is a London-based programme that aims to prevent 'violent offending' by young women through intensive therapeutic work addressing sexual violence and exploitation in the context of gang association, including links to young women's own use of violence. The underpinning framework is a gendered analysis of young women's lived experience, creating a space that enables them to look at, and question the social constructions, and their own understandings, of gender norms.

Safe Choices: Reaching Communities runs from 2012-2015 and offers three strands of support and intervention: group work; one-to-one sessions; and training for practitioners. In September 2013, the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) at London Metropolitan University were commissioned to evaluate the project. This briefing presents key findings from the first interim evaluation report. It draws on: monitoring data from the first 18 months of project delivery; interviews with 12 local stakeholders; interviews with three young women who had engaged in one-to-one-support; evaluation forms completed by six young women.

SAFE CHOICES: REACHING COMMUNITIES

The project uses a therapeutic approach with young women. Sessions include: sexual violence and exploitation in gangs and groups; young women, gangs and risk; anger; identity and consequences. Group work with young women in schools is built around these topics, over approximately eight sessions. One-to-one work is less structured, and tailored to each young woman's needs and circumstances. The aim is to provide young women with a safe space to explore their everyday lives, including experiences of violence and abuse, and support them to engage in 'positive activities'.

Young women aged 13-25 are eligible for support if they fulfil any of the following criteria:

- association with individual or group violent offending;
- involvement with gangs or gang culture;
- experience of sexual violence in the context of gang culture, or;
- are at risk of exclusion from school and/or becoming NEET.

The two project workers are based in a statutory agency for three days a week in youth services in Hackney and Islington. This co-location enables workers to build relationships with other agencies, carry out consultations swiftly, and acts as an informal learning exchange between specialist services and statutory agencies. It can, however, be unsettling for workers to be disconnected from their base organisation.

KEY FINDINGS

- From October 2012 to March 2014, 89 young women engaged with the project.
 - Just over two thirds (n=62, 69%) participated in groupwork and almost a third (n=27, 30%) received one-to-one support.
- The average age was 14, ranging from 12-21 at the time of referral.
- Ethnicity was recorded for 59 young women. The largest single group were Black British, with a wide range of communities represented.
- Childhood sexual abuse and violence from partners were significant issues in the young women's lives.
- The majority of those who engaged in one-to-one support were exploited through the 'older boyfriend' model, but there were overlaps between forms of exploitation: young women might also have been exploited online through sharing of sexualised photographs.

WORKING WITH YOUNG WOMEN

- Project workers often have to think on their feet to respond to what young women bring to sessions, and constantly seek out new ways to engage them in discussion. Music videos have proved a fruitful way to open up discussion of gender stereotypes and representations of women.
- It can take weeks perhaps months, of investment in building a relationship so that there is sufficient trust to begin addressing issues of violence and exploitation.
- For young women, a strong and trusting relationship with the worker was the absolute foundation of their involvement with the project. This was founded on the experience of discussions unfolding at young women's pace.

I didn't want to engage, but as soon as I met her I got on with her straightaway. She was really nice, I liked her straightaway. We just get on so well... you're not pressured to do anything, not pressured to talk, so you do start talking... they do care, someone does care (Young woman, 21).

We get along really well, I trust her to tell me things (Young woman, 14).

- Stakeholders also identified ‘attachment’ with workers as a feature that differentiates the project from other sources of support.
- Building a trusting relationship with Safe Choices workers, who in turn had connections with statutory agencies, creates bridges. This echoes the findings of an evaluation of specialist foster placements for sexually exploited young people which noted that strong relationships can ‘unlock’ positive outcomes.¹

It enhances all the work of other agencies, if young women value themselves. So Safe Choices makes young women believe change is possible, for her, and makes it possible for other agencies to work with her (Youth Offending Service).

- Young women think that support should be available flexibly, for as long as they need it.

I think this is really important, there shouldn't be timelines, it should be down to each individual girl and what she's going through (Young woman, 23).

[Safe Choices is about] sharing problems and finding solutions, working together for as long as possible to change life around (Young woman, 13).

- The young women who gave feedback on the project report enhanced ability to recognise signs of potential abuse, a stronger sense of self and involvement in positive activities as a result of support from Safe Choices: Reaching Communities.
- The gender-informed approach is highly valued by stakeholders, who see it as an effective and necessary way to address young women’s experiences of sexual violence and exploitation.

**The final report on the evaluation of *Safe Choices: Reaching Communities* will be published in 2015. For more information about the project go to:
www.niaendingviolence.org.uk/young/index.php**

¹ Shuker, L. (2013) *Evaluation of Barnardo's Safe Accommodation Project for Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Young People* Essex: Barnardos. Available at:
https://www.beds.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/305314/Barnardo27s-SAProject-Evaluation-Full-Report.pdf