

Gangs: Don't you know it's different for girls?

Young Women, Their Violence and Sexual Victimization

Nicola Weller, nia, writing in Respect's newsletter January 2010

Violent youth crime generates significant media and public attention, particularly "gang", or group, related crime and gun and knife crime. When young women are involved in violence, as perpetrators or instigators, this receives disproportionate coverage, drawing on a discourse of girls being "just as bad as the boys" (Burman et al.:2003, Miller:2001). Alongside this interest in girls' participation in violent crime there is also a growing body of anecdotal evidence that young women involved in violent offending, and also those involved in or on the periphery of street based group offending, have an increased risk of experiencing sexual violence. However, there is currently a lack of UK based empirical research addressing this form of gendered violence¹. In response to these concerns **the nia project** has initiated the Safe Choices project, as well as supporting research into connections between young women using violence and their own sexual victimisation.

Research was carried out with twenty-four agencies from across London. Interviews were conducted with policy-makers and practitioners from services working with young women in the statutory and voluntary sectors. Agencies represented included youth offending services, violence against women organisations, education and services for vulnerable young women more broadly. The aim of the interviews was to explore professional's experience of working with young women using violence and their perceptions of the possible links between this offending and sexual victimisation.

Young Women and Offending

Professionals worked with young women who had disclosed a range of offences, most commonly holding illegal goods. Primarily this constituted weapons and drugs, but some

¹ London based research will be published by Race on the Agenda in February 2010 as a result of the Female Voice in Violence project.

girls were also known to be holding cash gained illegally. Girls were also known to be involved in assaulting other young people, boys and girls equally. Less frequently, girls had disclosed perpetrating violence towards their parents, carers or siblings. A minority of professionals were aware of instances where girls had been involved in “setting up” other young people to be attacked, this included both setting girls up to be raped or sexually assaulted and also setting boys up to be physically beaten. In some cases girls were also known to carry weapons for boys to use in these attacks.

The physical violence identified by practitioners fits with the understanding of young women’s violence being characterised by its relational context (Nacro:2008, CfBT:2008). Many fights with other young people were connected to defending reputations, and arose following gossip. Interviewees made it clear that whilst some young women are perpetrating violence without a male involvement, in many instances male influence or coercion is a key factor. A number of practitioners also discussed the role of young women’s anger in relation to their violence and aggression, some directly linked this anger with experiences of familial and peer perpetrated sexual violence.

Young Women and Sexual Violence

Over half of practitioners had worked with young women who had experience of non-consensual sexual acts that they had participated in being filmed on mobile phones, with footage being passed on to others. Almost 40% had worked with girls who the professionals identified as having been “passed around” for sexual purposes between males in groups. Accounts of multiple perpetrator rape, single perpetrator rape and rape used as a form of retaliation were all common (29-33% of interviewees). Professionals also recounted girl’s experiences of multiple perpetrator oral rape (colloquially known as “line ups”), sexual exploitation, adolescent domestic violence, familial sexual abuse, kidnap and rape as a form of gang initiation.

The Interplay between Violence and Sexual Victimization

Many of the forms of sexual victimisation known to be experienced by young women who are involved in violent offending are also experienced by non-offending girls (Kelly et al.:1991, Cawson et al:2000). However, practitioner accounts revealed that there were specific ways in which sexual violence was used which meant that girls using violence, or associating with violent peer groups, were at additional risk. This is represented in the diagram below:

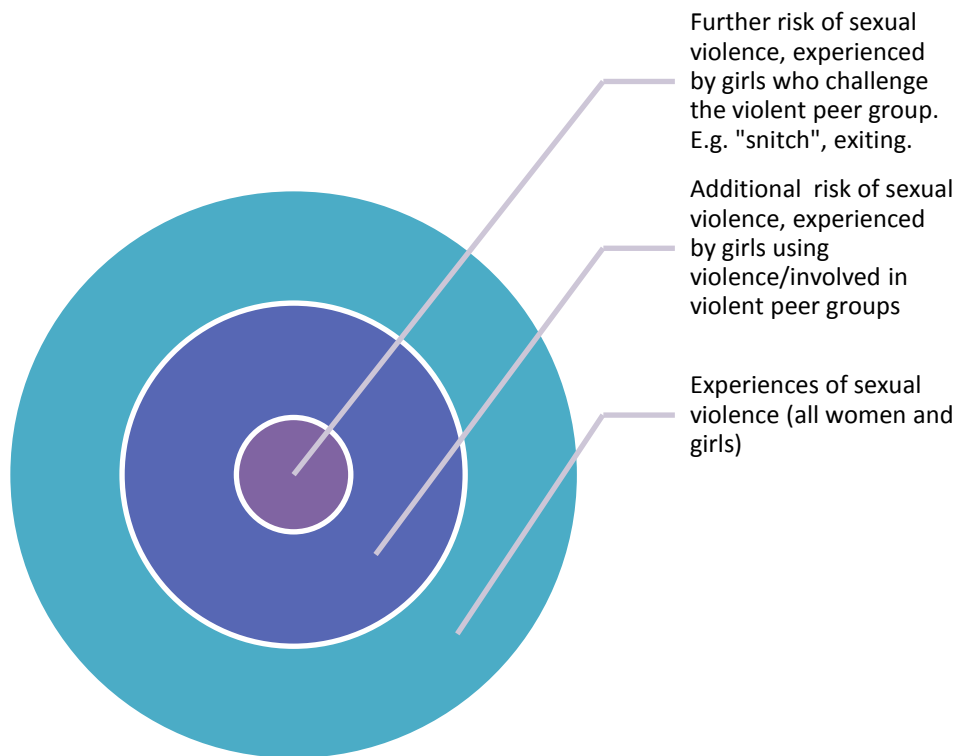


Figure 1: Risk of sexual violence in relation to girls using violence or associated with violent peer groups.

As Figure One illustrates, there are broad risks of sexual violence for all girls, this is represented by the outer circle. The middle circle represents the additional, specific risks for girls who use violence or associate with violent peer groups. This includes increased risk of rape as retaliation, multiple perpetrator rape and sexual coercion and exploitation. When girls challenge the gender regime (Connell:1987) or internal rules of the violent peer group there are further risks for girls as depicted by the inner circle. This may include girls who attempt to end relationships with offending boyfriends or with the group, or girls who “snitch”. These girls may be punished and controlled through the use of sexual violence and humiliation.

Women as Property

One of the key ways in which practitioners described the connections between young women’s experiences of sexual violence and their involvement in violent offending which took place alongside young men, was that women were viewed by men, and other young women, as property or objects for male use. The offending peer group was felt to operate within a gender regime (Connell:1987) based on a continuum of coercion and control which

resulted in young women being utilised to meet male demands. Two practitioners described this:

There is no other function; they are just sexual objects... There are three things that they will do. It will be sex, or they will be the ones they use as alibis, or they will hold their things. That's it.

Because they are property they can be used for anything, be it helping with offending or whatever sexual desires the gang have.

(Both professionals working with young offenders)

Even where girls were offending within female gangs and peer groups, practitioners recognised that in some cases girls still felt that they needed to comply with the demands of male groups when these arose. One contributor described the structural context in which women were being violated and manipulated.

They are all actually aware and articulate about the structures that they are in and their positioning within that structure. So when they are holding a gun, or leading females to a flat where "you know what" is going to happen, or any of this... they are not in their mind holding a gun, they are playing their part in the structure. They are doing what we are all doing with the structures that we are in. (Professional working with young offenders)

This structure is maintained by the use of violence, threat and the importance young people place on belonging and acceptance. One way of designating women as property was through the use of rape as retaliation.

Rape as Retaliation

Interviewees described the ways in which rape was used by male peer groups to respond to young women's violence, whereas young men using violence would commonly be met with physical violence. Further, all girls associated with gangs were felt to be at risk of rape, as it was additionally used as a tool to retaliate against male violence, for example a gang member's girlfriend or sister might be targeted with the aim of attacking the male gang member by association. Practitioners' reports reflected that a significant proportion of these rapes were carried out by multiple perpetrators as the need for retaliation was often defined by a group, rather than an individual. This use and victimisation of young women is based on the understanding that they are the property of the young men they associate with. It is a risk

which young women were believed to experience as having a powerful impact on their actions.

It's the fear of reprisals, the fear of rape. Knowing that it could happen to you if you make the wrong decision... However you are involved it is a risk to you.
(Policymaker)

Professionals reported that the fear of rape as retaliation was felt by all young women associated with gangs, both those offending and those with an association.

The use of threat and humiliation as a means of control

In addition to fearing rape, practitioners reported that young women were also affected by the knowledge that the young men they knew had the capacity for serious physical violence. Whilst girls were using violence, this was most commonly not at the same level as boys' violence, for example they were less likely to use guns or to perpetrate life-threatening violence. One practitioner recounted the difficult decisions that a girlfriend of a gang member was making about holding his weapons and drugs, balancing knowing that he had killed another person with her emotional commitment to him. Another discussed the level of "teasing" with weapons that occurred in relationships; she suggested that some young men were "play fighting" with young women using weapons, but that this "play" had the impact of demonstrating his strength and potential violence. Some young women are making decisions about their relationships and offending in the context of this ongoing threat and coercion.

A significant aspect of controlling young women's behaviour was the use of filming sexual acts; both those framed by professionals as consensual, as well as filming sexual violence. Film footage is routinely shared with others through social networking websites such as Bebo or on mobile phones through Bluetooth technology.² Practitioners observed:

We have noticed the use of technology; the recording of incidents on mobile phones and then there are threats to send out the images. That then traps the girl into further exploitative patterns. (Practitioner working with vulnerable young women)

Several practitioners noted that once girls had been filmed this then impacted on their sexual reputation and increased their risks of further victimisation. One noted that footage "then became what she *is*" (see also Lees:1993). In addition, when girls tried to escape this ongoing humiliation by moving schools, locality or care placement it was reported to be

² Also see The Guardian (2009) for a media report of widespread "sexting", or use of mobile phones to take and share sexual images, and coercion as an aspect of this.

common that the footage, or stories of the footage, would “catch up” with them and that the abuse and trauma would continue.

Exiting relationships and gangs/gang association

The understanding of women as property creates risk if girls choose to leave relationships with men associated with offending peer groups, or if they wish to exit gangs and offending peer groups. To some extent young men have similar difficulties in exiting gangs; however as has been demonstrated, the risks for girls include sexual violence and persistent abuse as a result of sexual humiliation. There are also risks if young women are excluded from the group, perhaps for challenging the sexual or offending roles demanded of them. This might occur if a young woman reports a criminal offence (“snitching”). Participants reported that this was more dangerous than being part of a gang. They also discussed young women feeling unable to move in particular localities where they felt at risk. This might impact on the ability to access services, or create the need to move the young woman and her family to a different area to protect her. Young women were reported to experience both threatened and actual sexual violence when exiting offending peer groups and relationships. The level of risk involved in exiting means that some girls do not view this as a realistic option; this then creates increased vulnerability:

It feels like they have got themselves stuck in to a place that they can't get out of and then more seems to happen to those girls; because they are vulnerable and they can't say no. (Practitioner working with vulnerable young women)

The dangers that young women identify result in a reduction of their agency and increased victimisation risks; this presents very specific challenges for services to address. This is a challenge which **the nia project** is attempting to meet.

Safe Choices

the nia project's Safe Choices project works to reduce and prevent young women's violence through the provision of both individual and groupwork. This is a unique service, delivered in partnership with The Children's Society and The Makeda Weaver Project (part of Shian Housing Association). This partnership offers expertise from the violence against women, gang exiting and vulnerable children fields- all of which are essential to this work.

Safe Choices works with young women using a contextual understanding of their violence as well as holistic advocacy to address their broad range of needs. Young women referred to the service have extremely complex needs, often requiring support with housing, mental and physical health, education and both historic and current abuse/trauma. The Safe Choices

team work towards the empowerment of young people: challenging offending behaviour, encouraging a critical consciousness of their circumstances and supporting the development of resources and resilience they need to make safe and healthy life choices.

To offer a truly holistic service we also offer groupwork provision for young men. This service is specifically targeted at young men (13-18 yrs) who are involved in offending or gang culture or are excluded. The groupwork addresses sexual violence and exploitation, challenging problematic attitudes and behaviours towards women.

Safe Choices is currently delivered in Hackney, Haringey, Lewisham and Greenwich, with plans to start delivering in Islington in 2010. Training is also available to professionals nationally on working with young women using violence, or on challenging sexual violence, as well as other related issues.

For further details Safe Choices please contact nia on Tel: 020 76831270 or info@niaproject.info

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