

**'WE DON'T GET THIS AT SCHOOL': THE SAFE CHOICES
REACHING COMMUNITIES PROJECT
FINAL EVALUATION REPORT**



*Words used by young women to describe Safe Choices (Reaching Communities)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Safe Choices is a London-based programme developed and delivered by **nia** and funded by the Big Lottery. The programme 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.
 - A ‘gender informed approach’ is the underpinning framework, creating a space that enables young women to look at and question social constructions and their own understandings of gender norms.
- The Safe Choices (Reaching Communities) project ran from 2012 to 2015 in Hackney and Islington.
- The project involved three strands of work: groupwork and one-to-one support for young women, and training for local professionals.
- Project workers were located in statutory agency settings for two/three days a week. This enabled links to be built, consultations to take place, modelling of work with young women and generated referrals, but led to isolation among workers and tensions in maintaining the project ethos.
- Numbers of young women and professionals did not meet original targets, because of gaps in staffing, the length and intensity of individual support work, and difficulties accessing groups of young women through schools.
- Over two thirds (68%) of young women who received one-to-one support and four fifths (83%) who attended groupwork sessions were from minority communities.
- Gaps in data mean it is not possible to report on all project targets and outcomes.

OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG WOMEN

- 47 young women engaged with one-to-one support, 90 with a groupwork programme and 370 in a one-off session delivered to a whole year group in school.
- Young women who attended groupwork sessions or received one-to-one support valued ‘space to talk’ and hear others’ views.
- Those who engaged in the groupwork programme reported increased confidence in identifying abuse and sexual coercion.
- Information about relationships, gangs, violence/abuse and self-protection all stuck with young women.
- Young women and stakeholders understood the project in fairly individualist terms, whereas workers perceived relational support was its core.
- The gender-informed approach was valued by young women who enjoyed and specifically remembered sessions about social and sexualised sexism.
 - Workers and stakeholders reported that this feminist perspective was crucial.

OUTCOMES FOR PROFESSIONALS

- 529 professionals attended a training session.
- Limited resources meant it was not possible to gather independent evidence measuring the impact of the training on practice.
- Feedback from evaluation forms collated by **nia** is extremely positive. 94% would recommend the training to a colleague.
- Providing a reflective space for professionals to discuss sexual exploitation with knowledgeable trainers and with each other was the most valued aspect.
- The knowledge and experience of the trainers, and young women co-delivering the training with Safe Choices workers, were highlighted as hugely important.

INTRODUCTION

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 young women to look at and question social constructions and their own understandings of gender norms. Two Safe Choices projects are currently funded by the Big Lottery¹: the first from the *Youth in Focus* funding stream, targeted at young women leaving custody and leaving care in partnership with the Children’s Society; the second involving work with young women in two London boroughs – Hackney and Islington - under the *Reaching Communities* stream. Both projects offer three strands of support and intervention: group work; one-to-one sessions; and training for practitioners.

The *Reaching Communities* project began in May 2012 and ran until June 2015. In September 2013, the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) at London Metropolitan University were commissioned by **nia** to evaluate the project.² An interim report was published in October 2014.³

YOUNG WOMEN, GANG ASSOCIATION AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Awareness of young women’s experiences of sexual violence and exploitation in gang contexts has exploded into policy and practice agendas. Studies have documented the extent to which sexual abuse is used as a weapon between young men in gangs, with young women used as a currency through which to settle scores and enhance men’s status and authority⁴, deepening knowledge of sexual violence and exploitation in gang-associated contexts. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner Inquiry into sexual exploitation in the context of gangs and groups, and the University of Bedfordshire research exploring young people’s knowledge of gang-related sexual exploitation, have both identified that practitioners fail to recognise connections between young women’s offending behaviours and the range of abuses to which they are subject by gang-associated men and boys.⁵ A common theme is that young women are perceived by practitioners and their peers to be consenting to sexually exploitative and abusive relationships – indeed some young women also frame this as ‘choice’.⁶ In January 2016, a Home Office report on gang and youth

¹ A third and smaller project comprising group work in Islington was funded until March 2013 by the Home Office Communities Against Guns, Gangs, and Knives Fund.

² This developed from an evaluation of the Youth in Focus programme that CWASU had already been commissioned to undertake in 2012.

³ Coy, M. (2014) *The Safe Choices Reaching Communities project: Interim evaluation findings* London: CWASU. Available at: <http://www.niaendingviolence.org.uk/perch/resources/interim-evaluation-of-safe-choices-reaching-communities-key-findings.pdf>

⁴ See e.g. Firmin, C (2010) *Female Voice in Violence Project: A study into the impact of serious youth violence on women and girls*, London: ROTA; Firmin, C (2011) *This is it... this is my life: The Female Voice in Violence Project Final report* London: ROTA.

⁵ See <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk> and <http://www.beds.ac.uk/research/iasr/centres/intcent> for the full reports and executive summaries.

⁶ Pearce, J.J. (2013) ‘A Social Model of ‘Abused Consent’ in Melrose, M. and Pearce, J. (eds.) *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

violence highlighted increasing concerns by practitioners about sexual exploitation of young women in gang contexts.⁷

One consequence of this awareness is that interventions have mushroomed in London. Although the gender analysis underpinning the Safe Choices projects initially marked them out as unique, it brings a range of tensions, which are discussed later in this report: other agencies are recognising the significance of gender and claiming this approach. It is questionable how deeply this can be rooted in programmes that do not have **nia**'s decades of expertise and feminist perspective, but nevertheless makes for an increasingly competitive commissioning climate.

At the same time, a shift towards gender-neutrality in statutory agency approaches to sexual exploitation, guided by government strategies that refute a gender analysis⁸, meant that on occasion Safe Choices was labelled 'outdated' for only focussing on young women. This required workers to engage in discussions about how the evidence base shows clear disproportionality in gendered patterns of victimisation and perpetration. Views of stakeholders and young women on the relevance of the project's 'gender informed approach' are included throughout this report.

SAFE CHOICES (REACHING COMMUNITIES)

Young women aged 13-25 were eligible for support if they meet 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;
- at risk of exclusion from school and/or becoming NEET.

Project targets were for 60 young women to engage in one-to-one support, 192 in group work (64 per year) and for 540 professionals to attend training. There were four outcomes set out in the project plan.

1. 54 (90% of the target of 60) young women complete one-to-one or group support leading to increased protective factors.
2. 227 (90% of total one-to-one and group) young women report an improvement in their life, practical, work and attitudinal skills.
3. 54 (90% of the target of 60) young women report increased resilience, reduce association with violence, engagement in support services or positive activities.
4. 486 professionals (90% of the target of 540) report increased knowledge and confidence in identifying and responding to young women at risk of gang culture/sexual violence.

⁷ Disley, E. & Liddle, M. (2016) *Local perspectives in Ending Gang and Youth Violence Areas Perceptions of the nature of urban street gangs* London: Home Office

⁸ See for example Department for Education (2011) *Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation: Action Plan* London: DfE

The programme began in September 2012, when the two workers were recruited. Developing/adapting materials and publicising the project locally, particularly building referral routes, immediately occupied workers' time, and by late October the first referrals were received.

EVALUATION METHODS

This final evaluation report is based on a range of data (see Appendix 1 for more details).

- Focus groups (n=6) with a total of 24 young women who completed the groupwork programme in Hackney and Islington schools.
- 'Goodbye quiz' questionnaires, designed by **nia**, for young women who completed the groupwork programme (n=35) and brief quizzes for young women who attended one off sessions in schools (n=17).
- 'Goodbye quiz' questionnaires, designed by **nia**, for young women who received one-to-one support (n=20).
- Telephone interviews with young women who received one-to-one support (n=3).
 - Young women were asked by workers if they agreed to their contact numbers being passed to the evaluation team for a telephone interview about their experiences of Safe Choices. Often arrangements to speak fell through and despite re-arrangements, did not take place.
- Monitoring data collected by **nia** about the young women who engaged with the project.
- Phased interviews, at three points during the delivery of the project, with Safe Choices (Reaching Communities) workers in Hackney and Islington.
- Telephone interviews with 13 practitioners in Hackney and Islington who worked with the project, three of whom were interviewed twice (see Appendix 1 for details).
 - **nia** supplied contact details for key contacts. Those that responded to requests for an interview self-selected as interested in talking about the project and its value to their work with young women. Their experiences of working with the project varied from input into specific cases and groupwork sessions in schools.
 - Two youth workers had co-delivered these sessions, and shared their direct experiences of doing so alongside project workers.
 - Those in more senior positions were able to comment on how the project fitted into local multi-agency and/or strategic work.
- Evaluation forms, designed and distributed by **nia**, completed by professionals who attended Safe Choices (Reaching Communities) training sessions (n= 394).

There were considerable challenges in gathering feedback from young women who engaged in one-to-one support. For small scale evaluations with limited resources, systematic data collection is essential, yet tricky to standardise when organisations also operating on limited resources must prioritise direct support for service users. **nia** were already using a range of tools to capture service user views – including the 'goodbye quiz' forms – when this evaluation was commissioned. Most of the feedback from young women and all of that from professionals is drawn from these forms designed by **nia** for completion at the end of

support/training sessions. These forms are designed for more immediate learning than an externally commissioned evaluation, and limit what it is possible to conclude about the impact of the project. Some forms were changed during the project, so little comparable data for some aspects of the project was available. There are gaps in data which are noted throughout the report.

Some form of feedback was gathered from two fifths of young women who engaged with one-to-one support (43%, n=20) and the groupwork programme (39%, n=35), a very small proportion of those who participated in a one-off session (5%, n=17), and three quarters (74%) of professionals who attended training (n=394 of 529).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

The programme initially used a therapeutic approach, drawing on the Safe Choices toolkit. Sessions included: sexual violence and exploitation in gangs and groups; young women, gangs and risk; anger; identity and consequences. Group work with young women in schools was built around these topics, over approximately eight sessions. One to one work was less structured, and tailored to each young woman's needs and circumstances.

Over the three years of the project, a number of adaptations to the original programme and its delivery proved necessary: adaptation being a sign of learning through delivery.

- Workers refreshed the content of the structured toolkit in their work with young women and constantly sought new resources and tools.
- In one-to-one sessions, the toolkit was used as a loose framework for discussion rather than a structured programme. Some exercises were used, but mostly this work was about talking, unpicking and reframing rather than creative activity-based.
- One to one sessions were led by young women, so if the young woman arrived with something else to explore, or having experienced a crisis, this took precedence over any planned activities: *'the activities often get put to one side since the sessions becomes a conversation'* (Worker).
- Workers had to be ready to think on their feet and have new topics to open up discussions - e.g. representation of women in music videos – as well carrying around resources and tools for planned sessions.
- In some group settings (e.g. in a Catholic school), certain subjects could not be discussed.
- With groups of younger women, content was adapted to focus on healthy relationships and friendships rather than exploitation and abuse.
- Violence from intimate partners emerged as a significant issue, but was not included in the original toolkit. Workers used the Power and Control wheel to explore young women's experiences of abusive relationships, and attended various training courses on domestic violence to be equipped for these discussions.
- Similarly, childhood sexual abuse featured strongly in young women's lives, and workers developed materials that made information about abuse and its aftermath 'understandable' to young women.

- Awareness of trauma as a consequence of surviving violence has been built in, so that workers can explore with young women their emotional and physiological responses.
- Workers reported that the toolkit was not appropriate for young women with learning difficulties.
- Group facilitation skills were essential. Some groups of young women were difficult to engage at first and could be disruptive.
- Similarly *'knowing how to ask questions'* in ways that enable young women to open up was considered a vital skill in one-to-one support.

The ultimate aim was to provide young women with a safe space to explore their everyday lives and lead to 'positive activities'.

Although the groupwork was intended as a structured programme over six or eight sessions, the majority of sessions were delivered as one-off discussions with whole year groups. Reaching young people in schools is beset with obstacles: some resist projects using a feminist perspective; others fear that accepting work on prevention of sexual exploitation advertises that abuse is happening in the school, and thus carries a reputational risk; workers reported that some schools could not identify who would have institutional responsibility for organising access for workers. Adapting the programme content for one-off sessions was perceived by **nia** as an opportunity to *'impact the culture of the whole school'*.

Delivery of the project was hindered by gaps in staffing at the inception before workers were recruited, and towards the end when the imminent closure meant that both original workers left for secure jobs elsewhere. These periods of several months without workers in post contributed to the project falling slightly short of the ambitious targets set for numbers of young women and professionals engaged.

At the closure of the project, young women who needed ongoing support were referred to other organisations, both specialist services (e.g. sexual exploitation services and Rape Crisis, including within **nia**) and generic youth support. Schools – some of which initially said they did not need the project, and towards the end were pleading with them not to leave – were signposted towards other organisations that might have been able to deliver groupwork.

MULTI-AGENCY POSITIONING

Over the three years of the project, national and local responses to sexual exploitation evolved considerably. Locally, multi-agency initiatives, particularly Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation (MASE) forums, were developed and formalised. Stakeholders described Safe Choices (Reaching Communities) workers as key members, able to feed into policies and procedures. For workers, locating young women's experiences of exploitation and abuse in gender unequal contexts was a key aim, in order to shape *'a culture change'* in how sexual exploitation was viewed by professionals.

One stakeholder reflected that the end of the project when the funding ran out, that this had happened *'just as the project was becoming integral to local responses'*. Another talked about how *'clearly impressed'* professionals in multi-agency forums were by the breadth of knowledge workers brought to the discussions. Others referred to their presence at MASE

meetings as bringing both intelligence *'and the voice of young women to the table'* and that the project was *'very young woman centred'*.

Towards the end of the project this took on urgency when local approaches shifted to 'mapping' young people deemed at risk/of concern, and sharing of intelligence as well as information. **nia** were alarmed at these breaches of young women's rights to privacy, and that information/intelligence-sharing was seen an intervention when *'we're not seeing things change when they have the information. What happens to the information when it's in someone's hands?'*. Maintaining a voice that challenged a statutory agency consensus, by prioritising the rights and voices of young women had become a core task, and made workers increasingly anxious that when the project ended this vital perspective would be lost. Women's organisations have long been concerned about how multi-agency approaches are often built on information-sharing with scant regard for victim-survivors' right to privacy.⁹ Trust and confidentiality are essential foundations for women to believe that both their safety and autonomy to make decisions are taken seriously. Information sharing between agencies, especially without young women's knowledge or consent, is in tension with the building of relationships as a route to support. Yet information-sharing is often viewed by professionals as an intervention in itself.¹⁰ Safe Choices workers from **nia** increasingly found themselves as the sole voice in multi-agency forums urging caution about the sharing of young women's personal information.

CO-LOCATION: THE VALUE AND OPPORTUNITIES OF SHARING SPACES

- Project workers were located in statutory agency settings for two/three days a week. This enabled links to be built, consultations to take place and modelling of work with young women, but led to isolation among workers and tensions in maintaining the project ethos.

A key feature of the project was that the two workers were each based in a statutory agency for two/three days a week in youth services in Hackney and Islington. The co-location of the two project workers with statutory agencies represented an innovative route to bringing joint and multi-agency working into everyday practice. In Hackney this approach had already been embedded, with specialist domestic violence perpetrator programmes (DVPPs) co-located with Children's Services. An evaluation¹¹ found this mode of working was viewed locally as 'highly productive', offering a way for specialist knowledge and skills to be circulated in mainstream agencies.

For services supporting sexually exploited young people, community-based or satellite provision from specialist organisations is currently being rolled out nationally as a 'Hub and

⁹ See e.g. Coy, M., & Kelly, L. (2011) *Islands in the Stream: An Evaluation of Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy Schemes* London: Trust for London; Coy, M. (2015) *Working Paper on Intervention Against Domestic Violence in England and Wales*, from the research project 'Cultural Encounters in Intervention Against Violence' (CEINAV), January 2015. Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/ceinavworkingpapers>

¹⁰ See e.g. Coy, M. (2015) *Working Paper on Intervention Against Domestic Violence in England and Wales*, from the research project 'Cultural Encounters in Intervention Against Violence' (CEINAV), January 2015. Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/ceinavworkingpapers>

¹¹ Phillips, R. (2013) *DVIP's Co-Location In Hackney Children's Services: a Process Evaluation* London: CWASU.

Spoke' programme, evaluated by the University of Bedfordshire.¹² nia's Reaching Communities project was thus prescient in anticipating the potential value of this approach.

Multiple advantages of having Safe Choices workers co-located in mainstream youth services were identified. One was the ease with which consultation about possible cases, and referrals, could take place; what were sometimes termed 'soft conversations'.

It puts pieces of the puzzle together – [the worker] offers consultation. She's a familiar face, people can have a chat, talk things through (Senior Social Worker 2).

It also enabled modelling of work with young women. This acted as an informal learning exchange; statutory agencies were able to observe how workers asked questions, which questions they asked, and their prioritisation of a relationship-based approach.

[We] get to know her as a person, are more aware of how she works with a young person. We see her delivery, and that gives us a greater understanding of how they deliver, so you have more confidence (Youth Service Senior).

For the young women, it was beneficial to have workers located in mainstream services that they can access without fear of identification, and in familiar environments. Similarly, delivering the project in schools offered an opportunity to cascade knowledge around sexual exploitation to teachers, and thus reach a wider range of young women. Clashes with lessons meant that sometimes young women who wanted to attend sessions could not; this is important to note when calculating completion rates against the project targets (discussed later).

It helps them to engage, they're not actually members of staff in the school community and certain aspects of support can't be done here. [The worker] gave talks to staff about what goes on outside school and that pulled the teachers outside of the classroom, towards supporting a child as a whole (Senior teacher).

We had access to more girls, not just the 'obvious girls'. But the sessions conflicted with some of their timetables... Not every girl we had concerns about could attend (Youth worker who co-delivered sessions).

For workers, however, spending a significant proportion of their week away from their team and separated from colleagues undertaking similar work was experienced as isolating. The emotional toll of the work was high, exacerbated by spending a considerable amount of time away from their teams/peers, working alone or floating amongst statutory agencies. Workers valued being able to talk to managers in between supervision sessions, and weekly

¹² Pearce, J. & Harris, J. (2014) *The Hub and Spoke Programme* Luton: University of Bedfordshire. Available at: <http://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/CSEFA-Uni-of-Bed-Hub-Spoke-leaflet-revised-June-2014.pdf>.

team meetings, as well as informal debriefing with colleagues. However, fluctuation in the availability of clinical supervision, including a gap of several months, meant workers felt they were holding a huge amount of turmoil: *'some of the stuff we hear, it breaks your heart'*. Some issues with lack of remote access to email and shared drives when based across two offices, leading to delays in communication, were noted with frustration by workers and stakeholders.

Maintaining a specific voluntary sector, flexible, and feminist ethos was also more challenging when surrounded by the different principles and practices of statutory agencies.¹³ There was a perception that *'statutory agencies wanted the workers to be their workers'*. Over time **nia** began to observe statutory sector perspectives, often framed in very different terms than a feminist organisation, crept into some workers' speech and notes. Juggling the different contexts in a co-located service is more than navigating variation in policy and procedure: it is a challenge for fundamental philosophy and ethos.¹⁴ Being anchored to the 'home' organisation is thus essential.

A GENDER INFORMED APPROACH

The gender-informed approach was perceived by workers as key to the work. One viewed it as a way to bond with young women, using shared experiences which resonate particularly when the spaces for conversation (youth services) are typically male-dominated. For another, a feminist analysis was a way to engage young women, as it is *'a starting block to talk about what is unfair between males and females'*; young women responded with examples from their own life and popular culture. However, she also noted that young women can identify framings of gendered victimisation as *'disempowering'*, steeped as they are in stereotypes about passivity and vulnerability which often do not fit how young women see themselves. Locating the project ethos, and young women's experiences, in wider social inequalities was the way in which these misgivings were addressed. The feminist analysis on which the project was based makes a distinction between biological sex at birth and gender as the set of rules, norms, behaviours into which women/girls and men/boys are socialised, usually according to biological sex. Core to the project was exploring with young women how these rules and norms were present in their everyday lives, including in networks, friendships and relationships and through messages from popular culture.

Workers reported that some professionals struggled to understand the gendered approach; they frequently had to explain why it formed the bedrock of the project. Previous evaluations of community-based programmes built on a feminist ethos have revealed pockets of resistance to a gender analysis.¹⁵ Practitioners that work with Safe Choices were largely supportive of the project's *'gender-informed approach'*, although few recognised this language.

¹³ See Phillips, R. (2013) *DVIP's Co-Location In Hackney Children's Services: a Process Evaluation* London: CWASU

¹⁴ See also Phillips, R. (2013) *DVIP's Co-Location In Hackney Children's Services: a Process Evaluation* London: CWASU

¹⁵ Coy, M., Thiara, R., & Kelly, L. (2011) *Boys think girls are toys? An evaluation of the nia project sexual exploitation prevention programme* London: CWASU

I don't know much about the gender-informed approach, but all the research coming out shows that it is quite difficult to do this work as gender neutral (Social worker).

Recent high profile reports on sexual exploitation have confirmed the stark gender disproportionality – young women are overwhelmingly the majority of those who are sexually exploited – that specialist women's service providers have long known.¹⁶ Support for a gender informed approach was, for some, based on this recent recognition, whilst for others it was a deeper endorsement of explicitly feminist work with young women.

It's vital. We need a systematic look at gender, a Macpherson-style report on gender. All schools should do gender as part of their Ofsted. So Safe Choices is trying to chip away at this massive iceberg (Senior Social Worker).

There were mixed views from youth workers on how the young women engaged with a gender analysis.

[nia has] very strong views on women's position and this was fed into workshops. It was appreciated, it was fresh... young women see it as important as Safe Choices is in line with their personal beliefs (Youth worker 1).

It's good to promote female targeted work, very positive. In some ways, the girls couldn't always wrap their heads around the feminist approach, what feminism meant to them, how it applied to their lives. So while it was positive and necessary, a brilliant education for girls, on the other hand, it sometimes got in the way (Youth worker 2).

One professional described the approach as the 'only thing that is different' from other projects working on sexual exploitation. Another was sceptical, as other organisations offering sexual exploitation support also claimed a gender informed approach.

Everyone says they have a gender specific approach, and now there is overload. There is now a huge amount of resources for young women, but a gap in work with young men about healthy relationships (Youth Service Senior).

Interestingly, the issue of working with young men was mainly raised in these terms: that there is a local gap in programmes that address young men's sense of entitlement to young women's bodies, and their attitudes towards relationships and sexual consent. It is both

¹⁶ See for example Berelowitz, S., Firmin, C., Edwards, G. & Gulyurtlu, S. (2012) "I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world": The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups London: OCC; CEOP (2013) *Out of Mind, Out of Sight: breaking down the barriers to understanding child sexual exploitation* London: CEOP.

evidence of a growing awareness around young men's non-consensual sexual practices, and suggests that most practitioners did reject victim-blaming myths.

In short, it is clear that the gender-informed approach was valued by stakeholders and viewed by workers as critical to the successes of the project. While other agencies are claiming to also use a gender analysis, what differentiated Safe Choices was political positioning and expertise; the project was built on a feminist, not simply a gender, analysis. The extent to which this can be publically claimed given the gender-neutrality of discourses on sexual exploitation driven by children's charities, will be an ongoing negotiation.

OUTCOME: YOUNG WOMEN COMPLETE ONE-TO-ONE OR GROUP SUPPORT

- 47 young women engaged with one-to-one support. This is slightly short of the project target of 60, because of gaps in staffing and that young women received intensive support for longer periods than originally anticipated.
- 90 young women engaged with a groupwork programme and 370 young women attended a one-off session delivered to a whole year group in schools.¹⁷ This considerably exceeds the overall target of 192 for groupwork, through different routes; fewer young women than planned engaged with a group programme but many more attended a one-off session delivered in school.
- Over two thirds (68%) of young women who received one-to-one support and four fifths (83%) who attended groupwork sessions were from minority communities.

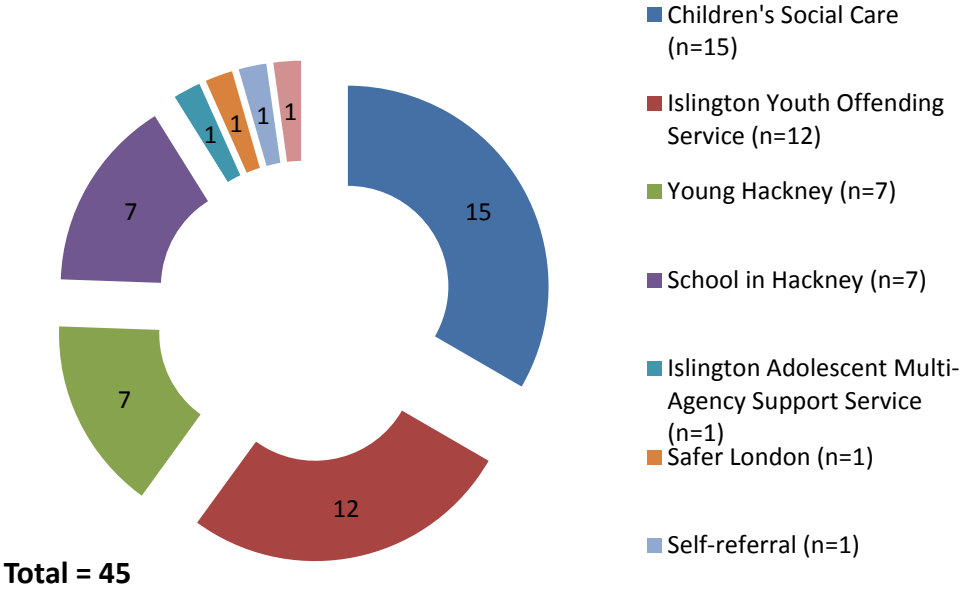
A PROFILE OF THE YOUNG WOMEN

Over the three years of the project, 47 young women received intensive one-to-one support, and for a further three who did not engage with workers, considerable advocacy (attending meetings and advising professionals) was carried out.

Referral source was added to the case tracker following a recommendation in the interim evaluation report, and was recorded for 45 of 47 young women engaged in one-to-one work. The majority of referrals were from Children's Social Care (across both boroughs), followed by Islington Youth Offending Service (YOS) and Young Hackney, the two agencies where the workers were co-located, and then schools in Hackney (see Figure 1). Where workers were present and actively engaging with YOS/youth workers, teachers and learning mentors, young women were identified as needing support. All referrals received by the project were appropriate, suggesting clear communication channels and a good local understanding about the project remit. Workers noted that many referrals '*started as conversations*', where '*red flags*' were raised by (e.g.) school staff who thought it would be good for young women to receive support from **nia**.

¹⁷ A further 20 young women were referred for some 'positive activity' work which included a trip to Paris to practise photography. No data was available about these young women.

Figure 1: Referral sources for one-to-one support



For young women referred only to groupwork,¹⁸ referral source was recorded for 84 per cent of young women (n=387) and all were from schools or colleges.

- Issues that led to referrals from local professionals for groupwork included: older boyfriends; young women staying out late; managing anger; and struggling at school.
- For one-one-one support, referrals were more likely to have been prompted by young women’s disclosures of sexual violence and/or exploitation.
- Some professionals observed changes in young women’s presentation of self – clothing, hair and makeup as well as less tangible perceptions of a sexualised embodiment – as indicators of exploitation.

Young women who received one to one support ranged from 12-21 years, stretching the original criteria of the project slightly. For those who attended the groupwork programme ages ranged from 11-17.¹⁹ The average of both sets of young women was 15.

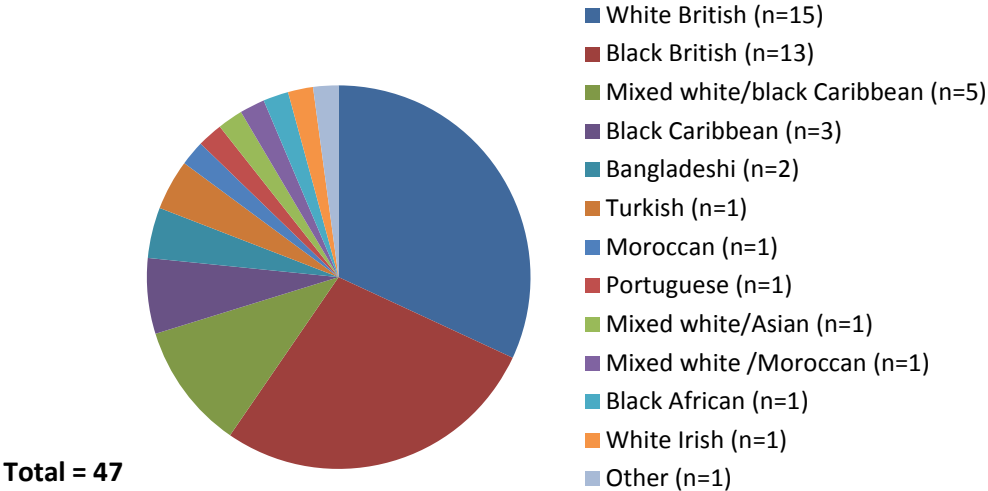
Of the young women who attended a one-off session delivered to whole year groups in schools, age was recorded for 85 percent (n=316), with a range from 14-18 and an average age of 16’. Over two fifths (42%, n=136) were aged 15. This indicates that schools recognise this age as a point where young women benefit from specialist input about exploitation and identifying abuse. Research on young people’s understandings of sexual consent has shown 15 to be a pivotal age where perceptions begin to reject victim blame²⁰, possibly because it is an age where many young people become sexually active or develop sexual relationships. Yet over a fifth (23%, n=72) were 18 and legally adults.

¹⁸ Two young women were referred to both groupwork and one-to-one support.
¹⁹ For eight young women who attended the groupwork programme it was not possible to calculate age as not enough information about date of birth was known/recorded.
²⁰ See Coy, M., Kelly, L., Elvines, F., Garner, M. & Kanyeredzi, A. (2013) *Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape: how young people in England understand sexual consent* London: Office of the Children’s Commissioner

At least two group programmes were run in schools with 12 year old girls. One stakeholder suggested this as the optimal age, that '13 was too old'. Workers reported having to adapt content to address these younger groups (reorienting discussions of relationships to friendships and relational communication, for example).

Ethnicity was recorded for all young women who received one-to-one support (n=47) and for almost all young women who attended groupwork (n=424, 92%).

Figure 2: Ethnicity of young women who received one-to-one-support



- Of young women who received individual support, over two thirds (68%, n=32) were from minority communities (see figure 2).
- Four fifths (83%, n=351) of young women who attended group sessions were from minority communities.
 - At least 29 different ethnicities were represented, including Turkish, Middle Eastern, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Eastern European, Portuguese, Indian, Irish and Chinese young women.²¹
 - A quarter of young women (27%, n=112) identified as Black British, Black African, Black Caribbean or Black other.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this:

- workers are required to understand, or least explore, a range of backgrounds, heritages and community/family norms;
- local practitioners have concerns about sexual exploitation of young women from minority communities.

Even allowing for London’s population diversity, this challenges the media construction of young white women as the typical victim-survivors of sexual exploitation. A recent report

²¹ There is a data recording lesson here: multiple abbreviations and inconsistency in how ethnicity was described made the data time-consuming to clean for analysis.

has drawn attention to the sexual exploitation of young women from South Asian backgrounds²², but little is documented about young Black women.

A range of specific support needs were recorded for young women who received one-to-one support:

- eleven young women had a mental health issue;
- four young women engaged in problematic substance use;
- three young women were pregnant at time of referral, and four had a child;
- three young women had a disability (unspecified), a further two young women a learning disability and another third Special Educational Needs (SEN).

This complexity of personal and social disadvantage demonstrates the challenges for workers in providing intensive relational support, often including advocating for the young women with multiple professionals and agencies.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION

The data for groupwork is too patchy to analyse; it appears workers often had little background information about the young women beyond ethnicity and date of birth. Information about young women's experiences emerged during the groupwork sessions. For those engaged in one-to-one support, it is possible to comment on the range of abuses and losses which young women had experienced.

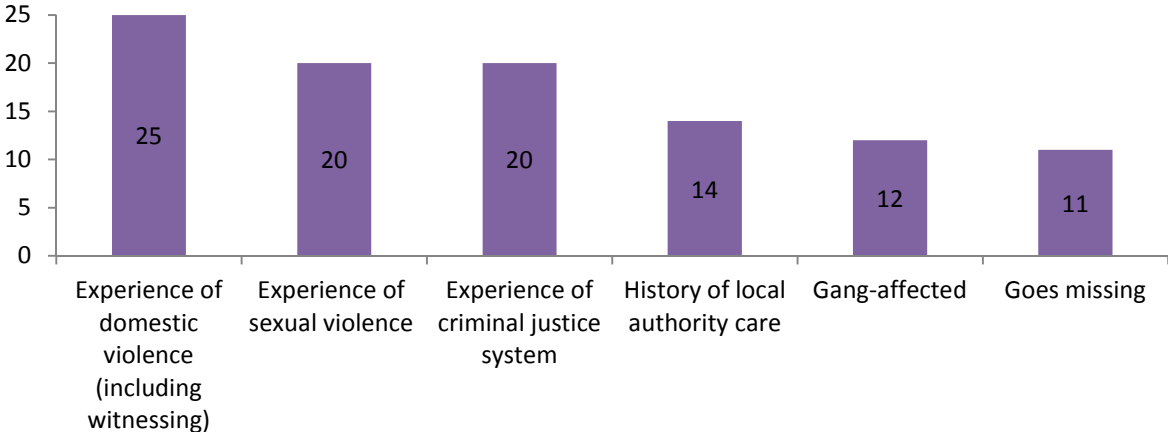
Over half (n=24)²³ had experience of domestic violence (including witnessing). This does not differentiate between witnessing domestic violence between caregiving adults and being subject to violence from intimate partners, which is an important distinction. Interviews with workers indicate that both emerge as issues in young women's lives, and it would be useful for developing interventions to know whether it is necessary to address the legacies of witnessing or being caught in domestic violence between parents/caregivers, and/or from intimate partners.

Half of young women (n=20) had experienced sexual violence and the criminal justice system as offenders (n=20). Other contexts linked to sexual exploitation were also common: episodes of going missing, histories of local authority care, and gang-association (see Figure 3).

²² Gohir, S. (2013) *Unheard Voices: Sexual Exploitation of Asian Girls and Young Women* Birmingham: Muslim Women's Network.

²³ Proportions are calculated on the basis of recorded data, excluding blanks and 'unknown' from base numbers.

Figure 3: Young women’s experiences of violence and contexts associated with sexual exploitation



N=47 young women (multiple responses)

- Workers reported that the majority of the young women they worked with in one-to-one sessions were sexually exploited, or at risk, through the ‘older boyfriend’ model. This was typically associated with grooming into prostitution, but also involved young women being offered to friends and acquaintances in ways not linked to the formal sex industry.
 - Workers also noted the importance of identifying links between forms of exploitation: a young woman experiencing coercion from peers might also be exploited online through sharing of photos and involvement with predatory men.
- Online exploitation in particular has emerged as an issue with which professionals were unfamiliar, yet which featured in young women’s lives. Workers invested time in learning which social networking sites young people locally used, and built this into their conversations and training sessions with professionals.
- Initial information included concerns that young women were associated with older men, or areas known to be ‘gang areas’. Involvement in ‘unhealthy relationships’ was how these concerns were often described.
- Few young women appeared to be gang-associated, but this may be because professionals were not confident at identifying gangs, and/or that another specialist organisation picked up these referrals.

COMPLETION OF ONE-TO-ONE OR GROUP SUPPORT

One of the targets for the project was that 90 per cent of young women that engaged in groupwork and one to one sessions ‘completed support’, in order to lead to increased protective factors.

Data on how long young women received one-to-one support was only available for two thirds of cases, and is itself not a measure of ‘completion’ of intensive, relational support. It did, however, indicate that the six month cut off date for support did not meet the needs of a significant proportion of young women. One young woman that we interviewed was

explicit about the importance of providing support for as long as each young woman needs 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).

This posed a challenge for the original Safe Choices vision, in which workers engaged with young women for intensive and targeted work around the gendered self, embodiment and violence, with an aim to link with community agencies for longer term support. Young women wanted the support from the project to be open for as long as they needed it emotionally, yet the model was devised to be specialised and short term, as a bridge into mainstream services. The young women that were referred to, and engaged with, the project were not those originally envisioned – they were experiencing sexual exploitation and in dangerous forms and contexts rather than identified as 'at risk'. Holding to an original vision which the young women did not fit into created a disjunction between their needs and the model. The interim evaluation report recommended that a review was built in before the six months cut off rather than automatic closure of a case. Where work continued past six months, there was an inevitable reduction in how many new referrals could be accepted, contributing to the slight shortfall in meeting project targets.

It was possible to calculate from the tracker how many sessions, and thus what proportion of the groupwork programme young women completed, in 68 cases (76%). This showed that almost a third (29%, n=20) attended all sessions and over two thirds (68%, n=46) completed over half of the programme. Full attendance for all may have been unrealistic if timetabling clashes in schools kept young women from some sessions. It is not possible to conclude if the target of 90% completing the groupwork programme was met, as data was only available for three quarters of young women.

OUTCOME: SUPPORT LEADS TO INCREASED PROTECTIVE FACTORS

OUTCOME: YOUNG WOMEN REPORT INCREASED RESILIENCE, REDUCE ASSOCIATION WITH VIOLENCE, ENGAGE IN SUPPORT SERVICES OR POSITIVE ACTIVITIES

- Responses indicate a self-reported increase in 'protective factors' among young women who took part in groupwork.
- The relational one-to-one support provided by workers was identified by young women and stakeholders as crucial, enabling young women to engage with support services and enhancing self-worth.

GROUP WORK: 'THE WHOLE POINT OF IT IS TO TALK ABOUT YOUR PROBLEMS'

A number of themes emerged from focus groups with young women in schools.

- Most young women did not know why they had been referred, but were told they had to go to the first session.

- Young women enjoyed the first session so much they wanted to come back.
- ‘Space to talk’, even with other young women they did not know, was most valued. Young women reported that workers created this space: *‘they are not going to judge you’*.

We start off with something very small but then we talk about lots in the hour. Sometimes we go off topic but have a lot to say about them sorts of things. There is always a lot to talk about (Young woman, focus group).

- Hearing multiple views and discussing differing opinions in the group was also a highlight for many young women.
- For young women in faith schools, honest information about sex was important: *‘we don’t get this at school’*.

The ‘goodbye quiz’ completed by young women at the end of one to one support asks a number of yes/no questions about understandings linked to the issues the project addressed. Of the 35 young women for whom we have full ‘goodbye quizzes’, 31 (89%) completed these questions (see Table 1). Each question begins, ‘After Safe Choices do you think you...’:

Table 1: Young women’s shifts in behaviours and actions

‘After Safe Choices do you think you...’:	No	Maybe	Would have not before
will be involved in violence towards other people?	17	3	11
will be pressured by others to be violent to other people?	19	2	10
might be involved in gangs at all?	14	3	14
	Yes	Maybe	
might be able to notice when someone is trying to do sexual things without your consent?	25	-	-
might be able to say ‘no’ to things you are not comfortable with?	27	-	
might be able to know if a relationship was violent or unhealthy?	27	-	

Young women reported being confident about identifying abuse and sexual pressure/coercion. The focus on consent is about saying ‘no’, and while important to equip young women with confidence about drawing boundaries around their body, and skills to negotiate pressure, it may also reinforce that they are responsible for any abuse that happens because they did not resist clearly. Workers reported this as one of the thorniest topics of discussion, often struggling to reframe young women’s *‘fixed views on victim-blame’*.

In the goodbye quizzes and in focus groups, young women were also asked to name ‘two things that stuck in my mind from Safe Choices’. Young women who completed brief

goodbye quizzes were asked ‘what they will take away’. Table 2 shows the range of responses.

Table 2: What stuck with young women about Safe Choices?

Things that stuck in my mind	Goodbye quiz responses	Focus group responses	Brief goodbye quiz responses
	N	N	N
Relationships	13	1	5
Gangs	10	4	-
Self-protection	11	1	4
Sexual violence	4	2	-
Women in media	3	1	-
Sexual exploitation	3	1	4
Self-esteem	3	-	-
Consent	3	-	-
Gender and sexism	2	2	-
Domestic violence	2	2	-
Helpseeking	2	3	-
Food	2	-	-
Identifying abuse	2	-	1
Sexual health	2	-	-
Think before I act	-	3	-
Thinking about others	1	3	-
Be myself and make my own decisions	-	3	-
Stress/anger	-	2	-

‘Relationships’ and ‘gangs’ are the most common responses, followed by ‘how to keep myself safe’ or ‘avoid getting into trouble’. Some young women elaborated on how they learned to keep themselves safe: ‘not to go to parties without knowing who is there’ or ‘never trust boys’.

These are the types of things we should be learning about and they are really important. How to protect yourself - this is more important [than maths] (Young woman, focus group).

Information about violence – sexual abuse and exploitation and domestic violence – also resonated. While consent had stuck with few young women, their understandings were framed in terms of giving it or resist pressure, again suggesting more scope to have discussed the getting of sexual consent.²⁴

How to say no to stuff you’re pressured to do (Young woman, goodbye quiz).

²⁴ For more discussions of shifting from a focus on giving to getting consent, see Coy, M., Kelly, L., Elvines, F., Garner, M. & Kanyeredzi, A. (2013) *Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape: how young people in England understand sexual consent* London: Office of the Children’s Commissioner.

'Looking at women in the media' stuck with four young women; a further four specifically remembered discussions about sexism and expectations of women that they see reflected in their everyday lives. Two young women mentioned inequality between women and men in their brief goodbye quizzes.

What is expected of women and how we are treated (Young woman, goodbye quiz).

Freedom for women (Young woman, focus group).

[I will take away that] that men shouldn't control women (Young woman, brief goodbye quiz).

One group of young women singled out discussions about 'how society works' and 'how boys might treat them' as those that they gained most from. What stuck with several young women about gangs also referenced gender, and included 'the risk to girls' or 'how vulnerable' girls can be.

The gender-informed approach was valued by young women who enjoyed and specifically remembered sessions about social and sexualised sexism.²⁵

A further question on the 'goodbye quiz' asked young women to complete the sentence 'Safe Choices has helped me to...' (see Table 3).

Table 3: Young women's views on what Safe Choices has helped them with

Safe Choices helped me to...	N
Stay safe	8
Recognise sexism	5
Think before I act	5
Manage my emotions	3
Seek help	3
Understand friendships	3
Make the right choices	2
Be aware of risk in gangs	2
Identify abusive behaviours	2
Talk	2
Be more confident	1
Say no	1

²⁵ Coy, M. (2014) *Sexualised Sexism: Popular Culture, Sexualisation and Violence Against Women and Girls* London: End Violence Against Women.

These responses echo the same themes as above, as what stuck with young women is clearly what helped them. Most responses centre on managing selves: staying safe; coping with emotions such as anger; thinking before acting; and '*making the right choices*'.

Help[ed] me to realise things do happen and how to avoid it (Young woman, goodbye quiz).

Be careful with who I am chilling with (Young woman, goodbye quiz).

Helped me to really think about something before I do it (Young woman, goodbye quiz).

Young women in the focus groups also reported being '*able to better control emotions*'.

I get in trouble less. I don't answer back and keep my cool (Young woman, focus group).

I think this group has made me calm down. I used to get upset at little things. Now I am trying to communicate with people, trying to find out why rather than have a fight (Young woman, focus group).

Being able to regulate and modify emotional responses to situations is, at one level, a sign of developmental maturity, a positive outcome in itself. A gender-informed or feminist approach adds to this a recognition of how emotions are profoundly gendered. Anger, for example, is often perceived as contravening coded expectations of how young women should behave. That Safe Choices addresses anger from an analysis of gendered inequalities offers a way to say to young women that anger is a reasonable, even justified, emotional response to abuse, injustice, feeling under threat, as well as explore how others respond to their expressions of anger. Enabling young women to feel in control of their emotional reactions subverts the notion of women and girls as at the mercy of emotionality in contrast to stereotypes of rational masculinity. At the same time it recognises that emotions are not to be disparaged but to be reflected on and explored as responses to difficult and distressing events. For the young women, being able to reflect on, manage and restrain emotional reactions was clearly a significant gain from being supported by the project, and contributed to the ambition to enable them not to use violence.

Contexts mattered too: risk associated with gangs, friendships and most of all recognising sexism. Discussions about representations of women's bodies in music videos and advertising were highlighted.

Learn what's happened in the world and how badly girls bodies have been exposed (Young woman, goodbye quiz).

Observe the portrayal of women in music videos (Young woman, goodbye quiz).

One young woman interviewed about the project, when asked if anything had changed for her, said:

Since Safe Choices I've changed everything in my life that I wasn't happy with. Well, things that could be changed (Young woman, 22).

She identifies one of the main challenges also recognised by workers: while the project aimed to equip young women with knowledge and enable reflection on their experiences, it is contexts of inequality that make exploitation and violence possible, and the choices of perpetrators, not those of young women. One worker expressed this as 'our successes stop because we can't pass her into a better world'.

What does it mean to keep young women safe? We end up measuring the impact of sexual exploitation, and vulnerability to being targeted, but the bit in the middle – the actual sexual exploitation - is missing (Co-ordinator).

While stakeholders were extremely positive about the impact of the project, a minority wondered about the potential of short term groupwork to facilitate long term shifts.

They can have open and frank conversations, but are they opening a can of worms? They hold them for eight weeks, but six months later a longer issue has developed. How much have young women taken the advice on or not? It works here and now, but long term? (Senior teacher).

These two observations expose the conundrum at the heart of projects like Safe Choices. Specialist support underpinned by a feminist perspective can equip young women to navigate sexism and discrimination, but cannot end it in their lives.

YOUNG WOMEN AND ONE-TO-ONE SUPPORT

'Goodbye quizzes' for young women who engaged with one-to-one support were changed over the course of the project, meaning the numbers of responses for what stuck with young women and what about Safe Choices helped them are too small to analyse. One set of questions, completed by 11 young women, indicates some positive shifts in the issues addressed by Safe Choices.

Table 4: Young women's self-reported changes following one-to-one support

	All of the time (n)	Most of the time (n)	Some of the time (n)	Not often (n)	Never (n)
Able to make my own decisions	10	1	-	-	-
Knowing where to seek help/support if needed	8	2	1	-	-
Feel in control of my life	7	3	1	-	-
Having the right to say 'NO' to sexual activity regardless of the	6	4	-	-	-

situation*					
Able to recognise controlling behaviours in intimate relationships	5	2	4	-	-
Having enough good friends	5	3	3	-	-
Feeling comfortable in my own body	4	2	2	3	-
Confidence to meet new people	3	5	2	1	-
Confidence to do new things	1	7	3	-	-
Feeling included and belonging	1	7	2	1	-

* one missing response

These responses, albeit from a very small sample, suggest that at the point cases are closed young women felt they had some control over, and autonomy in, their lives. Equipping young women with practical information appears to have been more fruitful than achieving changes in sense of self. Knowing where to seek support, knowledge of a right to say 'no' and recognising controlling behaviours were scored more highly than confidence and embodiment. The latter are more far-reaching and deeper changes which take intensive therapeutic support to unpick and address. Activities that workers supported young women to access included those aimed at transforming their sense of embodiment, to a body that 'can do' and is strong, capable and active: boxing; dance; drama; and football.

Of the 'goodbye quizzes' received by workers from 20 young women, all completed the question 'at the beginning I thought Safe Choices was about' and 'now I think it is about'. Asking young women what they thought the Safe Choices programme offered was important to understand their initial motivations to engage with workers, as well as a means to assess their views on what they gained from it. Those young women who were interviewed wanted to make sense of their own actions and emotions.

A bit more understanding of myself, what I'm putting myself through, help to make things better (Young woman, 21, interview).

[She] has helped me a lot to realise the good and bad things that I shouldn't be doing (Young woman, 14, interview).

'Goodbye quiz' forms completed by young women when their cases were closed show the same initial perceptions. In response to the question, 'at the beginning I thought Safe Choices was about...', eight young women said it was about 'good' or 'safe' choices.

Helping you get on track, teach you right from wrong, raising awareness (Young woman, 15)

What choices I make in life (Young woman, 14)

Teaching young women how to be safe in life (Young woman, 13)

Making the right decisions and always taking responsibility (Young woman, 12)

Stakeholders understood the project in similar terms, referring to young women learning how to *'make good choices', 'be in charge of themselves, that they do not need to be compelled'*.

[Safe Choices] tells young women how to keep themselves safe in the context of their own lives. It's an intrinsic thing they're trying to develop, about self-worth and self-confidence (Youth service senior).

It's staying safe for young women, looking at themselves to explore issues, making choices about their behaviour, future planning, promoting independence and consequences, exploring young women's self-esteem and aspirations (Senior Social Worker).

The issues that practitioners identified that young women needed to 'stay safe' from and make 'choices' about included: consent; sexual violence and exploitation; domestic violence; gang connections. Safe Choices was thus framed by young women and stakeholders in a fairly individualist way: raising young women's awareness of the risk they exposed themselves to in certain contexts and thinking about possible consequences. The name of the project may have inadvertently reinforced the notion that young women's own behaviours lie behind their experiences of violence and exploitation. **nia** were keenly aware of this and over the course of the project became increasingly uncomfortable with how the framing might have influenced what referring professionals expected: as if *'we have a magic wand that we can wave and she will be able to protect herself'* (Co-ordinator).

Workers, in contrast, understood the project as being about the 'quality of the relationship' through which young women's sense of self was to be bolstered. Key points for them were that:

- it often took weeks, perhaps months, of time invested in building a relationship with a young woman so that there was sufficient trust to begin addressing issues of violence and exploitation;
- workers were often the first people who listen to young women's experiences and *'say "that's not ok". Everyone else blames them'*;
- enabling young women to be *'empowered, know their rights, love themselves and value themselves'* was best achieved through relating to young women, demonstrating care and giving praise.

Stakeholders that were interviewed twice were more likely to reflect these understandings too, demonstrating that their knowledge about the project had deepened over time.

While young women report initially thinking the project was about their own choices, when asked in goodbye quizzes, *'If a friend asked me now I would say Safe Choices is about...'*, their responses reflected a more relational understanding.

Sharing problems and finding solutions, working together for as long as possible to change life around (Young woman, goodbye quiz).

Taking care of yourself and people around you, what healthy relationships are (Young woman, goodbye quiz).

This indicated that once young women engaged with the project, what they initially understood to be an individualist focus on their own behaviours was replaced with a sense of connection that enabled greater reflection and building of self.

Finally, one young woman highlighted the gender-informed approach throughout her feedback, reporting that her initial understanding of Safe Choices as about 'school' was replaced with 'women's rights', that what she had achieved was knowing 'there's more to life than boys' and that the most important thing she had learned was that 'being a woman is amazing!'

THE IMPORTANT OF RELATIONSHIPS

A relationship-based approach to working with sexually exploited young women, long understood by specialist service providers, is increasingly documented as important and effective. Lack of secure relationships, especially with supportive adults, can make young women into targets for predatory men, and lead to them seeking a relational sense of self through exploitative networks.²⁶ Specialist support for sexually exploited young people achieves optimum outcomes when a relational framework is used to develop trust and build confidence.²⁷

For young women, a strong and trusting relationship with the worker was the absolute foundation of their involvement with Safe Choices (Reaching Communities). This was built on trust and discussions that unfolded at each young woman'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).

I wasn't made to tell things I did not want to, and I could choose not to discuss things (Young woman, 22 years).

²⁶ Coy, M. (2009) 'Moved around like bags of rubbish nobody wants': how multiple placement moves make young women vulnerable to sexual exploitation *Child Abuse Review* 18 (4), 254-266.

²⁷ 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-SAPProject-Evaluation-Full-Report.pdf.

As noted above, workers emphasised the development of trust and connection as core to enabling young women to reveal, and reflect on, their experiences. Stakeholders also identified the 'attachment' with workers as a feature that differentiates the project from other sources of support.

It's all about the quality of the relationship – the relationship is what has been really effective. It is where the work is done... there is a gap in attachment for these young women, and problems with emotional containment... [young women] learn how to manage their feelings and be more contained... I know of real successes in helping young people put the brakes on, re-evaluate where they're going (Youth Offending Service).

It is about having a key worker who will work with the young person around a difficult area – sexual exploitation is one of these... Having that person [Safe Choices worker] there is really good, particularly if other workers lack the confidence to have those discussions and may find it difficult to respond (Youth Support).

Building a trusting relationship with Safe Choices workers, who in turn had connections with statutory agencies, served to bridge the seemingly insurmountable gaps between the two. This was achieved in two steps: first, workers facilitated young women engaging with other agencies through demonstrating their own connections with them. Second, by enhancing young women's sense of self, positive, transformative relationships with other workers become possible.

[Safe Choices] has helped build up the relationship between me and the students. It builds up the necessary relationship for any future disclosures to be made (Youth worker).

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 for other agencies makes it possible to work with her (Youth Offending Service).

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.²⁸

One stakeholder observed how the relational aspect of the project, and the opportunity to explore how young women identify their place in the world, was different to her own statutory, process-driven role.

²⁸ 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-SAPProject-Evaluation-Full-Report.pdf

It's an opportunity to do the work I want to do but don't have time, like one-to-one work, looking at music videos, issues around consent, a great opportunity to have these discussions in more depth. It has an impact on what decisions they [young women] make. One young woman is definitely more sensible with decision making. She found issues around consent, what constitutes rape surprising. I have to be much more heavy handed (Social Worker).

It is clear that Safe Choices (Reaching Communities) provides valued and valuable support for young women that other agencies are not able to match. The consistency and warmth of this relationship, framed by a gender-informed, woman-centred approach, created a stable anchor. This was particularly valuable for young women whose everyday lives were marked by conflicting messages about desirable behaviours from peers, sexualised sexism and professionals. The project's feminist analysis was central to topics covered with young women, but also about how support was delivered: relational and prioritising young women's voices.

OUTCOME: PROFESSIONALS REPORT INCREASED KNOWLEDGE AND CONFIDENCE IN IDENTIFYING AND RESPONDING TO YOUNG WOMEN AT RISK GANG CULTURE/SEXUAL VIOLENCE

- 529 professionals attended a training session delivered by Safe Choices (Reaching Communities) workers. This is slightly short of the project target of 540.
- Limited resources meant it was not possible to gather independent evidence measuring the impact of the training on practice.
- Feedback from evaluation forms collated by **nia** is extremely positive. 94% (n=309)²⁹ would recommend the training to a colleague.
- Providing a reflective space for professionals to discuss sexual exploitation with knowledgeable trainers and with each other was the most valued aspect.

The third strand of the Safe Choices (Reaching Communities) project was training for professionals in Hackney (n=292) and Islington (n=218), sessions ranging from a workshop or presentation at a larger event, to a full day bespoke programme. A third (36%, n=188) attended a full day, just over a quarter (28%, n=143) a two hour session and a fifth (21%, n=106) a half day.³⁰ A further 66 (13%) attended a presentation or workshop, five a 1.5 hour session and two **nia** sessional workers a two day programme. Engaging busy, pressured practitioners with heavy caseloads to attend training sessions is difficult, yet comments show an appetite for more specialist training on sexual exploitation (see below).

The training package was compiled by project workers, who were initially anxious about not having sufficient knowledge or facilitation skills. Mediocre feedback from attendees led to the package being adapted to include interactive learning tools and case studies. Young women were also involved as peer educators, an approach commended in previous

²⁹ Of the 329 respondents who completed this question.

³⁰ Data on length of session is available for 510 of those who attended training.

evaluations.³¹ One of the young women interviewed talked about how co-delivering the training had boosted her sense of self.

They had to listen to me for once; they had to take time out to understand it's not as black and white it looks on the page. I felt like I had achieved something, like one of my mini-goals (Young woman, 21 years).

In the later stages of the project, targeted youth support workers in Islington were trained by Safe Choices (Reaching Communities) workers to co-deliver sessions.

The importance of equipping professionals with information about sexual exploitation, and challenging myths and stereotypes is clear: recent reports on exploitation of young women in English towns echo many previous reports in flagging attitudes that perceive young women as 'promiscuous' and 'prostituting themselves'.³² These perceptions act as a barrier to intervention and support. Safe Choices workers report that one of the most demanding aspects of the work can be reframing professionals' problematic attitudes and perceptions. This makes workers – and some stakeholders – anxious when they refer young women to local agencies that professionals might be '*heavy-handed*' or fail to '*understand how complicated and sensitive they need to be*'.

There were some local tensions about the training, with other organisations providing similar programmes for no charge. Reaching agreement to cover different content resolved this. Future projects would benefit from meetings with lead agencies and strategic oversight about how the training fits with other programmes/courses/packs. This is particularly important to consider when funding is time limited, since offering training creates demand and expectation which cannot be met when funding ends.

VIEWS ON THE TRAINING

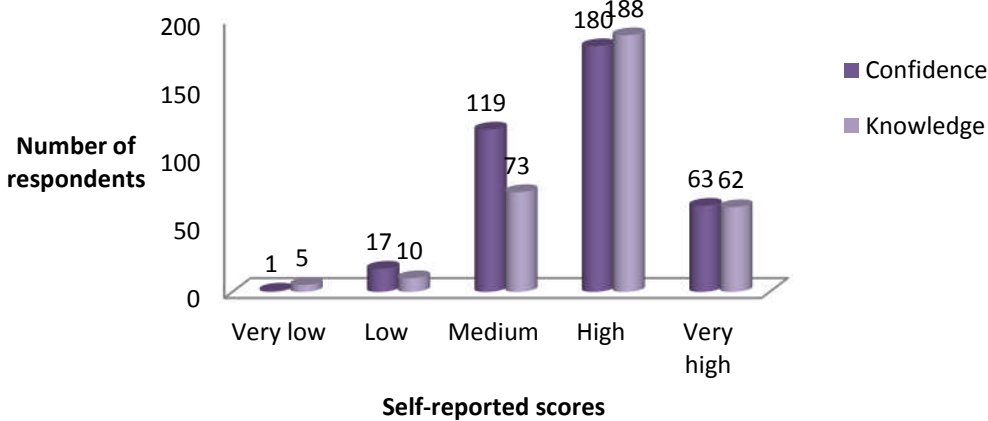
It proved to be difficult to capture independent feedback from professionals who attended training delivered by Safe Choices Reaching Communities workers. An online survey was designed to explore how their practice had changed as a result of attending the training, but resulted in just one response. The evaluation forms which Safe Choices asked attendees to complete at the end of training session served a different purpose: to evaluate immediate improvements in confidence and knowledge, and the most/least useful aspects. As the limited resources available for the evaluation ruled out other means of gathering feedback, we have analysed these feedback forms. A total of 394 responses were entered by **nia** into Excel, and this spreadsheet was imported into SPSS for analysis.

³¹ For example: Coy, M., Thiara, R., & Kelly, L. (2011) *Boys think girls are toys? An evaluation of the nia project sexual exploitation prevention programme* London: CWASU

³² See e.g. Berelowitz, S., Firmin, C., Edwards, G. & Gulyurtlu, S. (2012) *"I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world": The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups* London: OCC; Jay, A. (2014) *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997 – 2013*. Available online http://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/1407/independent_inquiry_cse_in_rotherham

At the end of the training sessions, the majority of professionals report their levels of confidence and knowledge as 'high', as figure 4 shows.

Figure 4: Professionals' self-reported levels of confidence and knowledge



Almost two thirds (64%) rated their confidence as 'high' or 'very high' and three quarters (74%) knowledge at this level. While more completed the scale on confidence (n=380) than knowledge (n=338), a third (31%) rated their confidence as 'medium' compared to a quarter (22%) who reported their knowledge at this level. As with the young women who received support, transmitting knowledge and 'facts' is easier than the more personal and intrinsic process of building confidence. Learning what young women say they need in terms of support is more straightforward than feeling able to provide that support. However, without baseline data on how they rated these levels before the training, it is not possible to gauge the impact of the material itself, and thus whether the target of 90% reporting *increased* knowledge and confidence was met.

The range of content that professionals found useful, as shown in table 5, demonstrates that specific issues such as gangs, young women's needs, definitions and signs of sexual exploitation and risk and assessment were all valued information.

A great mix of presentation and discussion. Great delivery
(Professional 66, school).

A lot of knowledge from the facilitators about the subject and what risks to identify in young women (Professional 112, local authority).

Delivered by professionals that live and breathe this work
(Professional 127, local authority).

The most useful aspect reported was space to talk and group discussions, which suggests that busy professionals particularly value training that enables reflection and dialogue (see table 5).

Table 5: Most useful aspects of the training according to professionals

Most useful	N
Space to talk/discuss in groups	48
Everything	38
Case studies	34
Gangs	30
Information/enhanced awareness	26
Identifying young women at risk	25
Young women's needs/impact of exploitation	21
Support agencies	19
Interactive sessions	17
Different forms of exploitation	16
Risk and assessment	14
Tools to work with young women	12
Power and control wheel	11
Delivery mode (e.g. visual)	10
Routes into exploitation	10

Delivery was also identified as helpful, including the interactive style, use of case studies and videos. Both the expertise of the trainers and how they trained were praised. The involvement of young women was suggested by several professionals as a way to make the training more engaging. Among those who had attended a session where a young woman had co-delivered it, she was singled out for commendation: '*[her] input was very valuable*'.

Practical application was highlighted as useful too, with information about support agencies (including the Safe Choices projects) and tools to work with young women singled out. However, 49 attendees (24% of those who completed this question) suggested that the training could be improved by more guidance on how to apply the knowledge in their practice. This may in turn increase confidence about how to act on newly-acquired knowledge. A further 51 made suggestions about delivery style which included more interaction, having young women as trainers and mixed views on more or less groupwork. Almost a fifth (17%, n=35) suggested making the training longer; the majority of these (n=24) attended a session that was two hours or half a day.

The 'gender informed' approach was barely mentioned in feedback. One respondent mentioned it as the most useful aspect, another as the least.

[Most useful was] how important language is in defining exploitation, about how power imbalance/gender is so important = how/why to intervene (Professional 101, local authority).

[Least useful was] just about young women/girls (Professional 179, A&E department).

Additional comments reflected the same mixed views: one respondent valued the *'feminist perspective'* while two suggested the content should be *'gender equal'* and left out *'female on female sexual abuse and bullying'*.

Either professionals found a gender analysis resonated with their caseloads, or the approach was not explicit enough to register with them. Future evaluations of training delivered from a feminist perspective could usefully explore this specifically.

KEY LESSONS

The challenges in gathering sufficient data to report on project outcomes and targets limit what it is possible to conclude in terms of impact. Yet all young women who gave feedback – through multiple modes – and stakeholders were extremely positive about the need for the project, the topics covered and most of all, the skills and knowledge of the workers. A feminist analysis of young women's lived experience and sexual exploitation, referred to as the *'gender-informed approach'* by the project, was singled out by many who had the closest connections as particularly valuable.

Professionals who attended training strongly endorsed the need for tailored training on sexual exploitation which is delivered in an interactive style and with application for practice.

A number of lessons for addressing sexual exploitation and young women's involvement in gangs and/or offending have emerged.

- How projects are badged has a significant impact on how they work they do is understood by referrers and potential service users. Language of choices and safety may inadvertently reinforce a sense that young women are responsible for avoiding exploitation and violence through their own behaviour.
- Co-location of workers from specialist organisations in statutory agencies creates opportunities for knowledge transfer and informal consultations as well as generating referrals. Clear processes for line management and administration are important for maintaining connections between workers and the specialist organisation, and a mechanism for anchoring them in their own organisation needed.
- For evaluations, baseline data gathered from all service users is essential to assess the extent of change.
- Young women and local professionals value a space to talk about sexual exploitation, their perceptions and those of others, facilitated by specialists who understand the dynamics and impact of exploitation and abuse.
- Projects based on a feminist perspective make an important contribution to strategic and practice approaches to sexual exploitation.

- Prioritising young women's rights to privacy and autonomy to make decisions, especially over reporting, offers a counterpoint to statutory perspectives that are increasingly focussed on non-consensual information and intelligence sharing.
- Enabling young women to make connections between representations of women's sexualised bodies and how their own bodies are viewed by others as commodities is a way to open up space to talk and address core issues of exploitation, consent and violence.
- Work with young women on managing emotional responses requires recognising how emotions are deeply imbued with gendered expectations and stereotypes.
- How young women's experiences of sexism are shaped by race, ethnicity and minority community norms is under-explored and requires a specific focus.
- Strong, consistent relationships and a relational sense of self are key to supporting young women to believe in their own worth and begin to build relationships with peers and adults.
 - Information-sharing in multi-agency forums, especially without young women's knowledge or consent, sits in tension with this relational approach. Relationships are the interventions through which young women seek support.
- Increasing confidence among professionals about their responses to sexually exploited young women is not straightforward. Whether confidence has changed in a practice context is best gauged with follow-up surveys when there has been time for knowledge to be applied to direct work with young women.

Appendix 1: Evaluation data sources

<p>Young women</p>	<p>'Goodbye quizzes' from young women who completed the groupwork programme, exploring their thoughts about Safe Choices, knowledge and confidence (n=35)</p> <p>'Goodbye quizzes' from young women who attended a one-off group session in a school, exploring their thoughts about Safe Choices, knowledge and confidence (n=17)</p> <p>Forms were entered into SPSS for analysis</p>	<p>'Goodbye quizzes' from young women who received one-to-one support, exploring their thoughts about Safe Choices, knowledge and confidence (n=20).</p> <p>Forms were entered into SPSS for analysis</p>	<p>Focus groups with young women in Hackney and Islington schools (n=6, total 24 young women).</p>	<p>Telephone interviews with young women who received one-to-one support (n=4).</p>	<p>Monitoring data collected by nia about young women engaged in individual support and the groupwork programme. An Excel spreadsheet was used to record core demographic information about young women, referral dates and the number of sessions each young woman attended, as well as personal histories of violence, mental health, problematic substance use, experiences of care, custody and gangs.</p>
<p>Stakeholders</p>	<p>Telephone interviews with practitioners who worked with Safe Choices in Hackney (n=7): two senior teachers; two youth workers; two senior social workers; one youth offending worker.</p>	<p>Telephone interviews with practitioners who worked with Safe Choices in Islington (n=6): two senior social workers; one social worker; one youth offending worker; two youth support managers (both interviewed twice); one learning mentor (interviewed twice).</p>			
<p>nia staff</p>	<p>Three sets of interviews with Safe Choices workers (November 2013, September 2014, May 2015)</p>	<p>Interviews with strategic (x2) and operational managers at nia (x2)</p>			
<p>Professionals</p>	<p>Evaluation forms distributed and collected by nia, exploring their perspectives on the training. An Excel spreadsheet of responses was sent to the evaluator.</p>				