

‘Engaging the experts: The importance of working with young survivors of sexual violence in prevention efforts’

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Good afternoon everybody and thank you to the organisers for inviting me here to speak today on this important issue of preventing child sexual abuse.

My name is Claire Cody and I’m a Research Fellow based at the International Centre: researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking (<https://www.beds.ac.uk/ic>) at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK. This afternoon I’m going to share with you some of our experiences of ‘engaging with the experts’ on sexual violence - that is young people affected by sexual exploitation and abuse.

So to give you an outline of this presentation I’m going to begin by talking a little bit about why we should involve young people in prevention efforts. I’ll then move onto explore why involving those affected by sexual violence, in particular is so important in this work¹. I’ll illustrate some of the ways that young people can, and have, traditionally been involved in prevention work and I’ll share two recent examples from work undertaken at the International Centre with young people. I’ll then conclude by explaining some of our learning from undertaking this work and will finish by briefly sharing with you some details of a new project we’re developing called ‘Our Voices’ (www.beds.ac.uk/ourvoices) involving young people in efforts to prevent sexual violence in Europe.

So why should we engage with young people on preventing sexual violence? Well, because we know that sexual violence disproportionately affects young people - and that under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) - children have a right to express their views freely on issues affecting them (UNCRC article 12). We also know that if we want to prevent sexual violence it’s important to act early to educate young people and to also challenge harmful norms, attitudes and behaviors that may become engrained over time (Pearce and Melrose, 2013 & Pearce 2012²).

So why should we engage with those affected by sexual violence in these efforts? Because of their experiences, they understand the issues and the impact of sexual violence on young people. We also know that awareness raising campaigns are not successful unless they target and speak directly to the intended audience – and when it comes to speaking to young people, other young people know what messages and what language works. We also know that young

¹ Children and young people are affected by sexual violence in a number of different ways. They may have experienced or are experiencing different forms of sexual violence: they may know friends or family members who have suffered from sexual violence; they may have witnessed sexual violence; they may know friends or family members who have perpetrated sexual violence; they may be living in communities with high rates of sexual violence.

² Melrose, M and Pearce, J. (Eds) Critical perspectives on child sexual exploitation and related trafficking. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Pearce, J (2012) Challenging sexual violence in Europe: Using participatory methods with children. Council of Europe

people listen to other young people and seek out their support and advice (Warrington, 2013³) So in sum by involving young people affected by sexual violence we can ensure we get the messages right and that they are credible to other young people.

It also can have a positive impact on the young people involved. In many instances such prevention efforts involve the creative arts in some way. Research shows that participating in creative activities can improve confidence, esteem and knowledge (Bungay and Vella-Burrows, 2013⁴) Anecdotally, engagement in such activities can also help young people feel empowered and less likely to become re-victimised - as again from research we know that the strongest predictor of victimisation is previous victimisation and therefore such work can prevent further abuse.(Menard, 2000⁵).

So how can we engage with young people on these issues? There are of course different ways to facilitate this. In the past, organisations have included survivors in participatory research processes. They may facilitate and be guided by Youth Advisory Groups who inform policy and practice.

Organisations have also in recent years worked with young people affected by sexual violence in a range of different media such as art, photography, video and creative writing to assist young people in exploring issues, sharing stories or sharing important messages with other young people and professionals

So now I'm going to briefly share details of two projects the International Centre has been working on. These have involved engaging with young people affected by issues of sexual violence to develop tools and messages for others.

The first project explored gang associated sexual exploitation and violence in England. The Office of the Children's Commissioner for England commissioned a team at the International Centre to carry out a two-year piece of research into the issue of sexual violence and exploitation in gangs. The team at the International Centre were also successful at securing additional funding for a film project to run alongside the research. The film project was to give young people affected by these issues a chance to explore and express their views on 'what needs to be done'.

The film project involved 35 young people connected to a number of different youth work projects in England. The young people engaged in a number of workshops and decided the focus and script for their films which they themselves helped to make. In so doing they developed skills in project management, lighting, camera and sound work. The young people edited and made four short films with key messages around the problems of sexual violence

³ Warrington, C (2013) Partners in care? Sexually exploited young people's inclusion and exclusion from decision making about safeguarding in Melrose, M and Pearce, J. (Eds) Critical perspectives on child sexual exploitation and related trafficking. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

⁴ Bungay, H. & Vella-Burrows, T. (2013) The effects of participating in creative activities on the health and well-being of children and young people: a rapid review of the literature. *Perspectives in Public Health*, 2013, 133:44

⁵ Menard, S. (2000). The 'normality' of repeat victimization from adolescence through early adulthood. *Justice Quarterly*, 17(3), 543-574.

in gang affected neighbourhoods. These films are available on our website (<http://www.beds.ac.uk/research/iasr/gasev>).

The second example I'm going to share with you is a project that trained young people affected by sexual exploitation to become health advocates. This project aimed to highlight and address the barriers to health services experienced by young people affected by sexual exploitation. The project was a partnership with the Association for Young People's Health (<http://www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk/>) and The International Centre. It involved ten young people across three specialist youth services. They were involved in a series of workshops exploring health issues related to sexual exploitation. Following these workshops young people developed a number of resources to share messages including short animated films and a booklet written with them to explain how the films could and should be used in schools and other settings (AYPH Be Healthy, 2013⁶).

The health advocates received accreditation for their work and have presented at a number of different events to different groups. They are now working with the Department of Health in the UK to ensure their messages are heard. I think this quote from one of the young people involved highlights how such engagement can make a difference.

"I've gone from the person who is coming here to ask for help for me, to someone who's coming to help other young people" (Hagell, 2013:20⁷).

So what are we learning about what's important when engaging with young people affected by sexual violence to develop youth-led work around sexual violence? I explore four points below and then move on to looking at our new project 'Our Voices'

Firstly, we know that with this type of work it is important to have a lot of time to plan and prepare with the young people. The selection and recruitment of young people needs to be supported through a thorough risk assessment so that young people are fully aware of the work that they are about to undertake. This might mean ensuring that youth workers and other support workers are involved throughout and that there are structures in place to offer follow up support to the young people. The safety of young people and their workers needs to be reviewed on a continual basis: assessing and reassessing - how safe are the young people involved? Is it safe for them to be involved in dissemination activities and presentations? Is it safe for them to be interviewed by journalists or others? With these safeguards in place, young people affected by sexual violence can engage in creating imaginative, informed and important messages about how to prevent sexual violence.

Secondly, it is important that everyone is clear about 'confidentiality': in terms of what is disclosed, discussed and shared in a group setting. Young people need to be part of setting the boundaries around confidentiality and need to be aware that in some instances, workers may have to act on information that might put them or others at risk of significant harm. Negotiating the boundaries of confidentiality with young people includes looking at the young person's expectation of what might come from their involvement as participants and exit plans need to be organised for young people so that they have some follow up if needed when the project ends.

⁶ AYPH Be Healthy (2013) Booklet by young people for young people and professionals. AYPH.

⁷ Hagell, A. (2013) AYPH Be Healthy Evaluation. AYPH

Thirdly, while some changes may occur for them and for their peers, larger societal change takes a long time and it is important for young people to realise that when professionals come and watch their films or talk to them about their work, small rather than large scale change may result. We have found it's important to help young people to understand the value of small scale changes and in understanding the longer term processes involved in creating significant policy and practice improvements.

Finally, we have learnt that preventative work is important as it can help those who may not be directly affected by sexual violence to manage to stay safe in the future. In the work on sexual violence in gang affected neighbourhoods young people noted that their peers who had not directly experienced sexual violence also have messages and experiences to contribute. Because they were not 'victims' did not mean that they had nothing to add to the debate. This means that it is important not only to target those who have been directly affected by sexual violence for work on prevention. All young people have important things to say and issues to explore with each other.

So finally I want to quickly share with you some details of a new project we have just started called 'Our Voices' – it's a three year pan-European project that will promote the involvement of young people in efforts to prevent sexual violence in Europe (www.beds.ac.uk/ourvoices). It will involve working with projects and young people to develop youth-led outputs.

If you're interested in getting involved or learning more you can email me (claire.cody@beds.ac.uk) or talk to me afterwards and I also have leaflets about 'Our Voices' and the other projects discussed that will be available during the circuit session tomorrow.

Thank you and enjoy the rest of the conference.