

# **Safer London Foundation: The Empower Programme**

**An independent report by ABIANDA  
Written by Abi Billinghamurst  
April 2013**



**ABI BILLINGHURST  
AND ASSOCIATES**

## **Contents**

<b>About Safer London Foundation</b>	<b>Page 1</b>
<b>Scope of the Report</b>	<b>Page 1</b>
<b>About the Empower Programme</b>	<b>Page 2</b>
<b>Research Context</b>	<b>Page 4</b>
<b>Partnership Working</b>	<b>Page 8</b>
<b>Intensive One-to-one Service</b>	<b>Page 14</b>
<b>Young Women’s Group Work Programme</b>	<b>Page 18</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>Page 22</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>Page 24</b>



## About Safer London Foundation

Safer London Foundation (Safer London) is a London-based charity that aims to work at all stages of a young person's potential progression into and out of crime or becoming a victim of crime.

Safer London runs prevention, diversion and targeted intervention projects to enable young people to make positive and safe choices away from crime, as well as projects that provide exit and progression routes out of crime. Its targeted interventions have a particular focus on tackling gang and serious youth violence and violence against young women and girls.

Its work is focused on London boroughs that have the highest crime problems. As the Metropolitan Police Service's (MPS) charity of choice, Safer London works closely with MPS and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) to deliver activities that support the key aims of the Mayors Policing and Crime Plan, which are to:

- enable young people to exit gangs & serious youth violence;
- create a safer London for young women and girls; and
- improve the relationship between young people and the police.

Over the last year Safer London has seen rapid growth in its services and its subsequent reach with young people, which was in excess of 1,600 young people.

## Scope of this Report

Safer London has asked ABIANDA<sup>1</sup> to produce an independent report on its Empower Programme. The Empower intensive one-to-one support and group-work programmes for young women and girls will be the focus of this report. The report will:

- briefly explore the research and policy context relevant to the work of the Empower Programme;
- understand the profile of the young women who are engaged with the Empower Programme;
- explore whether the Empower Programme's one-to-one and group work interventions are having a positive impact on young women;
- highlight the outcomes that the Empower Programme and its team are achieving with young women thus far; and
- illustrate Safer London's approach to partnership and multi-agency work in one host borough, and how the Empower Programme is embedded in local authority structures.

This is not a full evaluation of the Empower Programme, but rather an interim progress report attempting to understand the current picture in regard to emerging practice, its impact and the value it is bringing to young women and local partnerships. In completing the report, we have spoken to local partners, examined one-to-one and group work case files, reviewed project data and spoken with the Empower and wider Safer London team.

Safer London plans to carry out a full independent evaluation of the programme in due course.

---

ABIANDA ([www.abianda.com](http://www.abianda.com)) supports gang-affected young women and girls and other marginalised young people to enable them to have their voices heard and influence decisions that affect them. ABIANDA has developed models of work to address the issue of gang-affected young women and girls.

For the purpose of anonymity, all names of young women and professionals have been changed or removed.

## About the Empower Programme

The Empower Programme addresses the risks and vulnerabilities of young women and girls aged 11 to 18 to the sexual violence and exploitation gangs. It seeks to work with partners to increase local capacity and skills to identify this hidden group and to develop appropriate and robust referral processes and support for them.

To achieve this the Empower Programme delivers a range of services including, ten-week single sex group work programmes for young women and young men, one-day group work programmes (awareness raising ‘taster sessions’ delivered to large groups in high-priority schools and youth groups), intensive one-to-one support for young women and girls, professionals training and parenting workshops.

An emerging area of work is the Empower Specialist Advice for referring agencies and professionals. The table below suggests that the Empower team are doing a considerable amount of work in offering this specialist advice at point of identification of young women and referral into the Empower Programme. In cases where Empower support may not be appropriate for the young woman, the team are supporting referring agencies by signposting to more suitable services and offering specialist knowledge so that the referring agent better understands the needs and risk factors of the young women to inform their future support of her.

Empower’s one-to-one, specialist advice and group work programmes are delivered across six London boroughs. These are: Hackney, Haringey, Islington, Camden, Enfield and Croydon. The team has been contracted to deliver advice and consultancy work about sexual exploitation across an additional four boroughs.

The Empower programme was established in October 2011 in one host borough. Since June 2012 it has been operational in all six of the host boroughs mentioned. Over a period of 18 months they have engaged with a total of **995** young people. The following chart provides an overview of which services young people have engaged in across the Empower Programme.

### Number of young people engaged in the Empower Programme

Empower group work programmes	No. of programmes	No. of schools/Pupil Referral Units (PRU)	No. of young people
10-week group work programme for young women	16	12	156
10-week group work programme for young men	3	2	22
One day group work programme	9	8	673

One-to-one intensive support for young women & specialist advice			144
--	--	--	-----

Total	28	22	995

91 young women who were referred into intensive support did not progress into the one-to-one service for a variety of reasons including: other services were deemed as more appropriate following an assessment of presenting needs; the referral was not communicated with the young woman and she was unwilling to engage voluntarily; young women were moved out of borough; the referral did not meet the Empower referral criteria; a number of professionals and services were already in place for the young women and introducing another was deemed as overloading the young women and ineffective. In all 91 cases specialist advice has been given to inform those services already in place as to how they might better support the young woman’s complex needs.

Young women attend Empower Programme voluntarily. The referral criteria for young women’s one-to-one and ten-week group work programme is:

- One-to-one**
  - Young women aged 11-18 years old with known gang association
  - Young women aged 11-18 years old where there is a presence of significant risk indicators for sexual violence within gangs or groups
- Group work**
  - Young women aged 11-18 years old (predominantly school years 8-9) considered to be at risk of sexual violence within gangs or groups
  - Young women aged 11-18 years old (predominantly school years 8-9) with known gang association or those considered to be at risk

There are 11 female (including four Home Office funded Young People’s Advocates) and one male member of the Empower team, consisting of one-to-one Case Workers, Group Work Facilitators, two Project & Development Managers and a Senior Programmes Manager. The team comes from a range of specialist backgrounds including violence against women and girls, youth justice, Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), housing, education, campaigning, the police and advocacy. The Empower Programme spans the sectors of youth justice and violence against women and girls, and the team’s skills and experience are diverse enough to address the complex needs of young women who do not fit neatly into these silo service areas. There is a constant exchange of expertise and knowledge across the team in order to provide responsive support to young women.

Safer London acknowledge that the programme is young, and due to the intensive and long-term nature of the one-to-one service, most young women initially referred are still engaged in the service and therefore many monitoring and evaluation data sets are not yet complete. There is a healthy sense of reflective practice amongst the team who are continually questioning and developing their work, the tools they use to measure outcomes, and how they define success with the young women they work with.

## Research context

The interim findings from the University of Bedfordshire's research *Gang-Associated Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Violence*<sup>2</sup> tells us that sexual violence and exploitation tends to be perpetrated by males against females and by people who are known to each other. Findings reflect that sexual violence, including exploitation, is used as a means of males exerting power and control over females. They suggest that these findings largely reflect what we already know about sexual violence more broadly in society. While this is the case, they have also found that there are "certain features of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation that are unique to, or exacerbated by, the gang environment"<sup>3</sup>. These include using sex for gang initiation processes and to seek protection in and from gangs, and young women using sex as a form of entrapment in order to 'set up' people from other gangs. There was evidence of young women being pressured into sexual activity through fear and intimidation, sexual activity being recorded and distributed using mobile technology, multiple perpetrator rape and sexual assault being used as a weapon in conflict.

One of the report's key findings is that "not all young women are viewed as having equal rights to assent to, or decline sexual activity"<sup>4</sup> in the context of gangs. Young women who were known or perceived as 'links' or 'groupies' and involved in casual sexual activity, or simply associated with another such young woman, were refused the right to say no. They were seen as "sexual objects, with little consideration given to their wishes, agency or protection"<sup>5</sup>. Subsequently their vulnerability to sexual advances, pressure and violence would increase. Furthermore, there seemed to be a "resignation to, or normalisation of, such experiences"<sup>6</sup> for young women who had been ascribed these roles.

Young women's "tenuous" position, which is more often than not determined by their relationship to a male gang member, means their vulnerability fluctuates and suggests that they are continuously navigating the risk of victimisation along with their constructed sexual reputation, which may exacerbate this risk. Girls with sexual or familial relationships with gang members may be seen as protected from sexual violence, however they may also be at an increased risk of being victimised as a means of retaliation from a rival gang towards the girl's male associate(s).

Also reflecting the patterns of sexual violence more broadly is the finding that gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation are rarely reported by young people. Arguably, this is compounded in the gang context. The research has found that the fear of retribution or retaliation and a "lack of confidence in the ability of police and other statutory services to offer adequate protection following a disclosure"<sup>7</sup> prevent young people from reporting their abuse.

It seems that this lack of faith in services is not unfounded. The study, *The Female Voice in Violence Project* carried out by Race on the Agenda (ROTA), revealed that:

"Without specific protocols or assessment tools for managing such situations, boroughs could not be assured that young women would be safer/make themselves safer by coming forward; in fact they could be putting themselves at increased risk."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Beckett, H. et al (2012) *Research into gang-associated sexual exploitation and sexual violence - Interim Report*. University of Bedfordshire: Luton.

<sup>3</sup> Beckett, H. et al (2012), p.3

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.4

<sup>5</sup> Beckett, H. et al (2012), p. 9

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.4

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Firmin, C. (2010) *Female Voice in Violence Project, A study into the impact of serious youth and gang violence on women and girls*. London: Race on the Agenda (ROTA).

This and the second report from ROTA entitled *This is it, this is my life*<sup>9</sup>, highlighted the complex needs and risks for gang-affected women and girls as well as highlighting the necessary safety considerations in providing support services for them. In addition to the University's findings, ROTA cited young women's criminal involvement as another barrier in preventing them from coming forward to access support. The various barriers experienced by young women and girls (whether perceived or real), as well as the normalisation of their abuse, "presents significant challenges in terms of prevention of, and appropriate responses to, gang-related sexual exploitation and sexual violence."<sup>10</sup>

In an attempt to understand the nature and scale of child sexual exploitation in groups and gangs, the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) has released interim figures from a two-year national inquiry currently being undertaken<sup>11</sup>. It suggests that during the first year of the inquiry there were 2,409 children confirmed as victims of sexual exploitation in gangs, however the data also cited significant under-reporting and lack of identification of children which would suggest this is not reflective of the true figure. The figures gave an estimate of at least 16,500 children at risk of sexual exploitation in England.

A recurring theme in the research cited is that young women and girls affected by gangs and youth violence are 'hidden victims'. As a result of the barriers identified above and of professionals being ill-equipped to identify young women and girls experiencing sexual violence and exploitation in gangs, there are young women and girls whose abuse is not coming to notice and who are not identified as in need of support services.

In an encouraging step, the Government's cross-party report on *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* (EGYV), and their second report including further evidence and good practice case studies, recognise that it can be easy to "lose sight of the role that young women and girls may have in gang-related activity, and the hidden impact of serious youth violence on them"<sup>12</sup>. The reports acknowledge that there is a need to provide support for "girls and young women caught up in gang-related rape and abuse"<sup>13</sup>, with a commitment to provide resources to improve services for young people who experience sexual violence in this context.

Importantly the EGYV reports say Government will explore how data can be improved to more effectively map and understand the impact on girls and young women, how services might better identify those who are at risk and support them to increase their reporting of gang violence and to develop good practice on programmes to "challenge the attitudes and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity to prevent violence against girls"<sup>14</sup>

While a shift in understanding at policy level is evident, a fragmentation and lack of joined-up protocols and procedures across multiple sectors seems to remain, having a direct impact on service provision and practitioner response to young women. As evidenced by ROTA, services and practitioners can be at a loss as to how to respond to women and girls when there is a dearth of tools, processes or appropriate guidance in order that they can provide responsible and safe support for them. Where procedures do not support them in this, there is a risk that the various sectors where young women and girls are coming to notice are operating in silo and not sharing information, intelligence and specialist knowledge to keep girls safe. This was

<sup>9</sup> Firmin, C. (2011) *This is it, This is my life...* London: Race on the Agenda (ROTA)

<sup>10</sup> Beckett, H. et al (2012), p. 11

<sup>11</sup> Berelowitz, s. et al (2012) *The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups. Interim Report*. London: OCC.

<sup>12</sup> Home Office (2011) *Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Cross-Government Report*. Norwich: The Stationary Office (TSO). p.18

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.6

<sup>14</sup> Home Office (2011) *Ending Gang and Youth Violence: Ending Gang and Youth Violence. A Cross-Government Report including further evidence and good practice case studies*. Norwich: The Stationary Office (TSO). p.36



illustrated by Pitts and Pearce in their scoping exercise on gangs, sexual violence and exploitation. They found that “detailed expert knowledge developing amongst practitioners working specifically with young people associated with gangs was not being shared with practitioners working on preventing sexual exploitation in the same area.”<sup>15</sup>

Safeguarding guidance<sup>16</sup> that addresses either sexual exploitation or gang and youth violence recognises that there may be a link between the two areas. Unfortunately the tools provided to identify and assess a young person’s risk in each of these safeguarding areas do not give adequate details of the indicators specific to young women’s gang associations or of those gang associations being an indicator of possible sexual exploitation. This has been picked up in Pitts and Pearce’s scoping work, in which they found that “‘Gangs’ and ‘sexual exploitation’ were rarely seen as linked”<sup>17</sup> and that there had been few examples of Local Safeguarding Children Boards responding to sexual exploitation specifically related to gangs, concluding that there “still seems some way to go before a truly ‘joined-up’ response ... emerges”<sup>18</sup>

ROTA asks central government, local authorities and voluntary and community sector organisation whether we “know how many women and girls are affected by gang-related and serious youth violence and whether we have sufficient and appropriate services to respond”<sup>19</sup>, and encourages us to develop specialist interventions that specifically address the needs of gang-affected young women and girls that span the sectors of gangs, youth justice and violence against women and girls. Consideration of ‘what works’ for young women and girls seems necessary.

Scoping work done by the Griffin Society<sup>20</sup> might help in providing some guiding principles to work with young women and girls who are in the youth justice system and/or affected by gangs and youth violence. Their suggestions include:

- Addressing the multiplicity of girls’ experiences and the various forms of discrimination they face, and acknowledging their high levels of trauma, victimisation and abuse;
- Creating an emotionally and physically safe and nurturing environment;
- Use of single-sex space;
- Fostering respectful and positive relationships and addressing the importance these play in girls’ lives;
- Developing personal respect and teaching girls new skills building on existing strengths to develop their goals and ambitions;
- Giving girls control and involving them through peer support, mentoring and delivery;
- Being holistic, informal and flexible, including addressing physical, sexual, emotional and mental health;
- Provide a range of support and positive opportunities beyond official penalties;
- Developing interventions that are stylistically different to those preferred by boys and which recognise their different offending patterns;
- Delivered by staff to whom young people can relate and who have excellent communication skills;
- Engaging parents and carers; being relevant to young people... and being sustainable.

<sup>15</sup> Pearce, J.J. & Pitts, JM (2011) *Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation. A Scoping Exercise for The Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England*. The University of Bedfordshire: Luton. p.30

<sup>16</sup> Department of Children Schools and Families (2009) *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation*. London: HMSO  
 Department of Children Schools and Families (2010) *Safeguarding Children and Young People who may be Affected by Gang Activity*. London: HMSO

<sup>17</sup> Pearce, J.J. & Pitts, JM (2011) p.30

<sup>18</sup> Pearce, J.J. & Pitts, JM (2011) p.26

<sup>19</sup> Firmin, C. (2011) p.77

<sup>20</sup> Southgate, J (2011) *Seeing differently: Working with girls affected by gangs*. The Griffin Society



In a similar vein Susan Batchelor suggests that if we “are to undo any of the damage done, workers must provide a context for young women to participate in positive relationships, characterized by consistency, continuity, respect and warmth”<sup>21</sup>

It is with these principles in mind that this review of the Empower programme has been conducted.



---

<sup>21</sup> Batchelor, S.A. (2005) *'Prove me the bam!': victimization and agency in the lives of young women who commit violent offences*. Probation Journal, 52 (4). pp. 358-375.

## Working in Partnership

### Angela

Angela was 13 and came to the attention of Safer London as a result of a poem she had texted to her Youth Support Worker.

The Youth Support Worker had some understanding of sexual exploitation, but did not have specialist knowledge about how this plays out in gangs. The team supported the Youth Support Worker in developing a nuanced understanding of the risks to Angela. They explained the local safeguarding protocol that responds specifically to sexually exploited children and young people, and supported the referral of Angela's case into the protocol and a subsequent referral to children's social care.

Empower and Youth Support Worker met with Angela to understand her experiences a little more and to express their concerns about the exploitative scenario that she had described in her poem. One-to-one, Angela shared more information with the Empower worker about revealing images of her being posted on line and passed around school when she was in year seven. Subsequently she experienced bullying based on her perceived sexual reputation as a 'sket'<sup>22</sup>. The Empower worker explained the programme and how they could support Angela based on her voluntary engagement. Angela did not sign up to Empower straight away and the Youth Support Worker continued with their efforts to get a social care response to the indicators of sexual exploitation, while the Empower team offered them support and expertise through this process.

The Youth Support Worker returned to the Empower team some time later, to explain that Angela had gone missing overnight. School friends disclosed that she had gone to another borough, was riding around on buses all night and associating with known gang members who were forcing her to perform oral sex on them. The police Missing Persons Unit became involved and during a debrief with Angela following her return, they reminded her of the Empower programme and how useful it might be for her. Angela herself called the Empower worker and requested that they work together. Angela explained that she would like support to address:

1. Sex and the law
2. Girls in gangs
3. Being able to identify risks

As trust developed between Angela and her Empower worker, a greater understanding of her risk emerged. Empower learnt that Angela:

- Was mixing with other females with gang associations;
- Was sexually active and had been involved in a 'line up'<sup>23</sup> with a group of boys (as described in her poem);
- Currently had a boyfriend (with no known gang association and unknown to Youth Offending Service (YOS) or the Police), who she had been unfaithful to previously but with whom she was not sexually active;
- Had chlamydia and gonorrhoea;
- Had been involved in fighting in and outside of school, where she had been punched in the face and was struggling to manage her feelings of anger;
- Had taken a knife to school. The school opted for a 'managed move' into a new school rather than exclusion, due to her complex circumstances;
- Was in alternative education provision in an Assessment Centre, waiting for a new school placement. Here she had met her ex-boyfriend who was gang associated;
- Was receiving money from unknown sources, explaining that she got it from 'a job';
- Was going out of borough to gang hotspots because she 'needed to do something there';
- Had her most recent sexual encounter as a result of giving her Blackberry pin to a 17-year-old

<sup>22</sup> Slang derogatory term for prostitute or 'slag'

<sup>23</sup> Slang term to describe a young woman performing oral sex on a group (or line) of males

young man she 'met on road'. Following checks on his street name, Empower discovered that he was previously in custody for violence, robbery and holding weapons;

- Seemed to glamorise the risk of going missing. She did not recognise the risk that she faced from her gang associations.

### **What did Empower do?**

It appeared that since the incident in year seven, Angela's identity had been constructed by others on the basis of her perceived sexual reputation. This seemed to exacerbate her vulnerability in the context of gangs. Not only did she and others normalise her role as a sexual commodity, she was unable to identify the coercion that she was experiencing. Because her identity had been constructed this way, there was an expectation that she would be available to provide sexual favours and this designated role meant she no longer had the right to say no to sexual activity.

The Empower worker was deeply concerned that Angela was only 13, was sexually active and could not legally consent. Angela was unable to explain why she was involved sexually with multiple associates, yet explained that she 'didn't mind doing it'. The Empower worker was concerned that she may have been 'detaching' herself from her experiences and not able to think critically about the exploitation or able to recognise it as abuse. The Empower worker communicated her safeguarding concerns with social services to inform and strengthen the sexual exploitation protocol referral and Multi Agency Planning (MAP) process.

In their sessions the Empower worker used a variety of tools such as genograms (a relationship mapping tool), progressive-risk case studies and consent scenarios, to explore:

- Healthy and unhealthy relationships, including power and control and the influential nature of some relationships;
- Consent, sex and the law – especially addressing legal age and capacity to consent;
- Pressures on young people, specifically in the context of gangs;
- Consequences and strategy development to reduce risk or to prevent risk from escalating;
- Sexual health and safe condom use; and
- Criminal activity and how this links with personal values.

The Empower worker accompanied Angela to the sexual health clinic on numerous occasions. Here the worker supported Angela to get on-going support from a Sexual Health Nurse, who is now also building a consistent and supportive relationship with Angela.

Empower continuously liaised with school and education assessment centre staff. This allowed staff to share their concerns with Empower. They recognised that they did not have a strong relationship with Angela and that Empower may be better placed to respond to some of the behaviours that they felt might be holding Angela back and preventing her getting a permanent placement in a new school.

The Empower worker has been working with Angela's mother in order that she understands statutory processes as well as developments regarding Angela's education. Her mother has previously been wary of statutory services and suspicious of whether they can offer any helpful support.

### **Multi-agency work and advocacy**

From the Empower worker's contact records it is clear that she has been integral in supporting and in some cases instigating a multi-agency and joined-up response to Angela's situation. There were considerable challenges in getting the appropriate and timely support from statutory services and this, combined with poor communication, had led to confusion and inconsistency for Angela and her mother, sadly reinforcing the parent's negative perception of services. Following the eventual co-ordination of MAP meetings and an initial assessment, a core assessment was recommended but was refused by Angela's mother. In this complex situation the Empower worker is one of the few consistent professionals who is maintaining clear lines of communication with Angela and her mother, consulting them on their views and explaining processes that they may be distrustful of.

Other advocacy and multi-agency work has included:

- Ensuring the Sexual Health Nurse has information regarding MAP meetings and recognising them as a key member of the team around the child;
- Brokering the communication between social services and sexual health;
- Completing police and YOS checks on known associates and sharing intelligence with the Borough Intelligence Unit (BIU) and SEMPUP;
- Liaising with Angela and her mother continuously to keep them informed and to seek their consent to share specific details that might support a multi-agency response;
- Supporting Angela's mother to understand what was happening with her daughter's education and helping her to complete the relevant paperwork;
- Liaising with education, specifically Angela's old school and the Assessment Centre;
- Liaising with the Designated Safeguarding Officer in Angela's new school and encouraging them to attend MAP meetings;
- Sharing safeguarding concerns regarding Angela's sexual activity at the age of 13;
- Ensuring that the most recent MAP meeting had good attendance of IYSS, social services, education, sexual health and Safer London; and
- Working to engage SEMPUP in the MAP process as a key intelligence source and partner.

#### What is the impact for Angela?

- Angela has identified that she has not enjoyed previous sexual encounters and that these may have been coercive. Reflecting in this way is informing her behaviour and increasing her understanding of potentially exploitative situations, arguably increasing her protective factors for the future.
- Through exercises and discussions Angela has developed a good understanding of coercion, consent, the law and her rights. This is supporting her understanding of the dynamics of abusive relationships and will hopefully help her in thinking critically about her future relationships and how she wants to be treated.
- There is greater representation of professionals at MAP meetings, including sexual health.
- Angela is accessing sexual health services where she previously was not and is more aware of, and able to safeguard, her sexual health.
- Court proceedings are in process to authorise a core assessment.
- Angela has been assessed through local sexual exploitation protocol and assessed as Risk Category One<sup>24</sup>.
- Angela has started a new school placement in mainstream education.

To date the Empower worker has had 33 contacts with Angela over a four-month period, averaging 2 contacts a week and has had 20 contacts with other professionals, averaging one contact per week. Empower continues to support Angela. She recently fed back that the sessions:

*"...have helped me to understand more about sex and relationships. It is nice to have someone to talk to about things that I can't talk to anyone else about."*

and:

*"It makes you think more about things, and understand more about what is happening in your life. It is really good to have someone who is there for you and there's nothing you can't tell your worker".*

Angela's story highlights the degree to which Empower works to engage multiple partners on a day-to-day basis in supporting young women. This is not without its challenges. The degree to which services and professionals understand the effects of gangs and youth violence on girls and young women can be limited and inconsistent, and the research suggests that

<sup>24</sup> The London Safeguarding Children Boards guidance for *Safeguarding Children Abused through Sexual Exploitation* (2006) define a young person assessed as risk Category 1 as: "a vulnerable child who is at risk of being targeted and groomed for sexual exploitation" (p.6)

safeguarding procedures are not joined up enough to recognise and respond to the multiplicity of young women's gang associations, criminal involvement and their experiences of sexual exploitation.

We know that young women are a hidden group and we can see that Safer London works hard to support other services and professionals to recognise young women's risk profile in order to get an appropriate statutory and non-statutory response for them. As we see in Angela's story Safer London is also brokering communication between professionals within the current structures for a more joined-up response.

In one London borough, Safer London has been delivering its full portfolio of Empower services for young women since June 2012 and has put considerable efforts into embedding the programme in local authority structures. Safer London is co-located in the local Youth Offending Service (YOS) where it has "built trusting and positive working relationships with YOS colleagues" (YOS Operational Manager – Gangs), specifically the gangs team. It is evident that the YOS and young women are benefiting from this arrangement:

*"Safer London has worked in partnership to improve structures and processes in our borough, allowing better and earlier identification of girls/young women at risk and subsequent targeted intervention. They have managed to keep very 'hard to help' young people on board, and where this has not been possible, they've played an active part in cross-agency information-sharing. They receive consistently positive feedback from service users as well as from colleagues. They are bringing increasing numbers of vulnerable young women into contact with support services, thereby reducing risks posed to them."* (YOS Operational Manager – Gangs)

The Empower team has representation on a variety of operational and strategic groups across Community Safety and Children and Families services in the borough. These groups oversee the processes and structures that might support the young women that the Empower Programme targets. These include:

- The Sexual Exploitation Working group (strategic)
- Community Safety Partnership Pathways Meeting (strategic)
- Missing Persons Panel (operational)
- YOS Weekly Tasking Meeting (operational)
- Sexual Exploitation Meeting (operational/strategic)

In the operational groups different 'lists' of young people are discussed in terms of their risk, to themselves and to others. On some there are young women who the Empower team is working with or who would meet the Empower referral criteria. On others there are gang-involved young men linked with unknown young women who may be at risk. Where these structures are not joined up with formal information-sharing mechanisms, Safer London works hard to join up intelligence and information gained from each of these settings to get a more in-depth understanding of where young women are coming to notice (or not), and a clearer picture as to their risk profile.

As highlighted by the Operational Manager above, Safer London is working in partnership to improve such structures and processes in the borough, and in doing so there is an increased and earlier identification of young women and girls at risk.

## Mapping

The Empower team facilitates the mapping of young women in the YOS Weekly Tasking Meeting. Safer London now has a fixed item on its agendas to discuss and risk-assess known young women, as well as discussions about identifying unknown young women and girls who are associated with Police Matrix and YOS gang nominals.

In the absence of any formal data-capturing mechanism or analysis of young women (or those at risk) identified through any of these processes, Safer London has developed a 'Leads List' which captures all intelligence gathered concerning young women and girls. Although it does not have analytical resources the Empower team is constantly reviewing its data and identifying where and how often young women are coming to notice across the current structures.

This is a promising emerging approach to understanding how many young women and girls may be affected by gang and youth violence, whether they are coming to notice through current processes, and if so whether their gang associations and subsequent risks are being identified. Their efforts in improving data gathering and analysis is responding directly to Government's aim of using data to more 'affectively map' and identify gang affected young women and girls.

One member of the Empower team is located with the Police Missing Persons Unit for two days a week. To further develop the intelligence picture of gang-associated young women, the worker undertakes the painstaking task of analysing each Police Merlin report<sup>25</sup> that has been completed on a weekly basis. Safer London is sharing its specialist knowledge of the risk indicators of gang-affected young women with the police in order to make use of police data, which might otherwise go un-used.

### Training and referrals

The Empower team is continually delivering briefings and awareness-raising training across the borough in order to increase the capacity of other professionals to identify gang-associated young women and to increase referrals into the Empower programme. To date referrals have been received from a broad spectrum of sources, suggesting that the team's efforts here are paying dividends. These sources include:

- Health: CAMHS and Sexual Health
- Police Missing Person's Unit
- Social services
- Youth offending service
- NSPCC and other VCS
- Housing services
- Schools
- Pupil Referral Units
- Probation
- Youth Support Services

There is a sense from its partners that Safer London is 'filling a gap' in services in the borough. It is providing group work in schools which was not previously being delivered, and which has "*been received very well by teaching staff and students*" (YOS Operational Manager – Gangs).

A colleague in youth support services suggested that "*people didn't know how big the need was*" (Youth Service Case Worker) and that within the borough there has "been a gap" in services

<sup>25</sup> A Merlin report should be completed by the Metropolitan Police for children who have become known to the police for any reason, i.e. being present when police attend an incident or witnessing a crime



for young women who didn't meet either social services or youth support service thresholds, yet who still required a service due to their gang association. Previously he and his colleagues were aware of a lot of young women going missing and there was a concern that the existing team did not have the skills, capacity or specialist knowledge to respond to gang-affected young women, especially when facilitation and discussion around sexual health was required. He suggested that as a result of the Empower Programme operating in the borough there is now a *"reduced chance of young women falling through the gap"* between services. He sees the programme as providing young women with the right professionals to speak to *"with the right knowledge... who are more aware of the actual risks young women are presenting and how they could avoid the risk"*. The Empower team has "guided" them in their interventions, sharing expert knowledge and making them aware of other interventions and processes that could support their work with young women.

This reflects Angela's feedback about 'having someone who is there for you', and is reiterated by the YOS Operational Manager, who said that the *"value added by Safer London to a local partnership largely stems from their knowledge-base & expertise. They have contributed significantly to [the boroughs] work with vulnerable girls and young women"*.



## Intensive One-to-one Service

The process of engagement for the Empower intensive one-to-one support involves an initial meeting with the young woman, and an in-depth needs assessment based on information from her; the referring agent and police, and other checks.

The needs assessment allows the Empower worker and the young woman to identify significant risks which may need immediate attention, and to understand current protective factors. Both the young woman and the Empower worker will complete the Empower Outcomes Framework, providing a snapshot of both their perspectives against the project outcomes. Using a five-scale measure they assess the young woman against the following outcomes:

- Family and home
- Education, employment and training
- Health and wellbeing
- Personal relationships
- Personal safety
- Offending behaviour/gang related activity
- Attitude and behaviour
- Community engagement and support

The outcomes framework is completed three times throughout the process, providing baseline and distance-travelled data. The worker and the young woman will make joint decisions about where they will prioritise their work based on this process, and at the outset the young woman will identify three specific issues that she would like to focus on.

### Profile of young women

From the data gathered through the engagement and assessment process it is evident that young women with highly complex circumstances and needs are being referred to the Empower programme. Of the 53 young women who have started the one-to-one work, 44% were either looked-after children (LAC), had a child protection plan, or had been assessed as a Child in Need (CIN). 44% had experienced domestic violence in the home and 46% had been reported as missing young people.

In regard to factors specific to the Empower referral criteria, 80% of the young women were known to be gang associated and 100% were perceived to be at risk of gang involvement by the referring agent. 49% had been victims of sexual exploitation with the remaining 51% seen as being at risk of it. It is also evident that a large percentage of the cohort were involved with crime or were at risk of it, with 73% being known to the police and 17% of families with a known involvement in crime. School was a key site of difficulty for many of the young women, with referring agents reporting that 78% of young women had a negative experience of school with 42% having been excluded on a fixed-term or permanent basis.

A detailed examination of nine case files from the one-to-one work has highlighted that it is not always clear from the initial referral and assessment process as to the range of issues and complexities that the young women are facing. As we saw in Angela's story, it appears that as the relationship and trust between the young woman and her Empower worker develops, more information is revealed about her circumstances, often suggesting her risk levels to be higher than initially thought.

Other issues that have emerged through young women's engagement with Empower, which were not previously known by the referring agent or other services working with her, have included:

- Experiences of sexual violence including rape
- Sexual images of young women being distributed via digital technology
- Fighting in and out of school
- Perpetrating violence towards mothers
- Trauma including witnessing violence, e.g. stabbings
- Bereavement of significant family members
- Significant issues regarding angry feelings and behaviour
- Family mental health issues
- Carrying weapons and drugs
- Drug use
- Housing issues
- Turbulent family lives, including absent fathers, overly controlling parents, a rejection of parental boundary setting or inconsistent parenting
- Sexual health issues

What emerges then, is a group of young women whose lives often seem to be defined by crisis and chaos. Sadly there seems to be a lack of trust in services by the young women, a sense of being let down in the past by adults and services, and a subsequent lack of significant adults available to form a healthy and supportive relationship with the young women.

Michelle's story is an example of how the Empower team might work with young women in this context and illustrates the diversity of the Empower worker's role.

### **Michelle's story**

Michelle is 17 and was referred into Empower by a Family Project because of concerns regarding her links with incarcerated and gang-affiliated men, one with a conviction for rape. The men were contacting her from different prisons. It was unclear as to how her details were being passed between the men. When Safer London met Michelle, her mother had thrown her out of home due to anxieties about the risk these links posed to their family, particularly Michelle's younger brother. There were historic and on-going complexities in her family life including conflict, aggression, and rejecting of her mother's boundary setting. She had received a police caution for stealing from her mother. Michelle's father was absent and she seemed to be uninterested in having a relationship with him.

Michelle had multiple risk factors that exacerbated her vulnerability. At 12 she was raped by a boy in her school. A separate incident involved sexually revealing pictures of her being posted online by a gang-involved ex-boyfriend. Having once been a high-achieving student, Michelle had disengaged from school as a result of these experiences and subsequent bullying. When Michelle joined Empower she was not in education, employment or training, and had a social worker as a result of being assessed under Section 17 as a Child in Need (CIN).

At their first meeting Michelle and the Empower worker used the Empower outcomes framework to assess Michelle's current risk and protective factors. This stimulated a wealth of conversation and rich insights into Michelle's circumstances, values and feelings.

Michelle was struggling with the immediate issue of housing having just been placed in supported housing out of borough. She was sofa surfing at different friends' houses and struggling with the boundaries and rules in place at the hostel – she was regularly being reported to the police as missing. Using the outcomes tool to discuss her relationships and environmental factors, it was evident that she had little appropriate adult support and was largely navigating her chaotic life alone. The death of her grandmother a few years previously meant that Michelle had lost her closest relationship with an adult

which was significant for her.

It was clear that Michelle had angry feelings that she struggled with; towards her mother, towards men and towards statutory services. While Michelle has attended an Empower session every week for four months, she was initially resistant and held negative perceptions of services and professionals. She was also unable to identify the risks that she faced.

As part of the young person's agreement, Michelle decided that she would like to work towards:

1. Stopping smoking cannabis;
2. Building a better relationship with her mother; and
3. Getting a job.

### **What did Empower do?**

The weekly Empower sessions took place wherever Michelle happened to be that week to ensure her easy access to support – out of borough, in cafes, at the family project offices. The sessions have been largely discussion-based and laced with exercises that have encouraged Michelle to reflect on her circumstances, her attitude and behaviour, and her strategies to achieve her aims. Sessions have covered issues including:

- Violence and power and control in relationships using real-life case studies
- Challenging the normalisations and myths of violence in intimate relationships
- Strengths-based work to explore self-esteem and healthy and unhealthy relationships
- Risks for young women associated with gangs
- Keeping safe
- Young men and their attitudes and behaviour towards young women
- Strategies to deal with the conflict and anger in family relationships

From the outset the Empower worker has advocated on behalf of Michelle. This has included:

- Liaising with Michelle's social worker and the FIP: sharing information regarding risk, housing, missing incidents, financial issues and Education, Employment and Training (EET) opportunities for Michelle;
- Brokering the relationship between social services and Michelle and her mother;
- Attending Multi Agency Planning (MAP) meetings; and
- Liaising and sharing intelligence with the Borough Intelligence Unit (BIU) and the Gang Action Group in order to map the male gang nominals and manage the risk they posed to Michelle.

It is clear that Empower was not only advocating and sharing information externally but also was the conduit between Michelle and her mother and external services. Often Empower had to take on the responsibility of explaining statutory procedures, for example housing and MAP meetings, which had the potential to create frustrations and fuel negative perceptions of services. The Empower worker was continuously ensuring a transparent and two-way flow of information, seeking Michelle's endorsement to share information about her and act on her behalf and consulting Michelle on how she wanted to be represented at MAP meetings and telling her what multi-agency discussions were taking place about her.

### **What's the impact for Michelle?**

Michelle remains in supported housing, and with the support of her Empower worker has been able to articulate her views and reasons for not returning home. As a result housing will start to explore more long-term arrangements for Michelle on the basis that she sustains training or education programmes. Michelle is beginning to understand why the hostel staff impose strict boundaries and rules in order to keep her safe and as a result she is beginning to be more open about where she stays when she stays out over-night and as a result reducing risk in relation to 'missing' episodes.

Michelle and the Empower worker have attended a training and employment fair together and practised interview techniques. Subsequently Michelle has started a training course that will prepare her for an apprenticeship.

While her relationship with her mother is not without friction, Michelle has been able to identify some of her mother's strengths. She seems to have a new understanding of her mother's anxieties and how these, and wanting to keep her family safe, underpin her boundary setting.

Michelle has come to the conclusion that she wants to leave her lifestyle behind, and that she no longer wants to associate with older males who treat her badly and potentially pose a risk to her.

Completing the outcomes framework for a second time at a mid-stage review illustrated how much Michelle's critical thinking has developed. She was able to identify where she may have over-scored herself at the outset due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the risks she faces. She says she is feeling safer than she did.

During the review Michelle identified how the Empower Programme was working for her where other services were not. Her perception of other services attempts to conduct multi-agency work was that they were "gossiping" about her. As a result she was "fed up" of talking about things with them. In contrast she viewed the Empower programme as being "on her side" and trusting that her worker had her best interests at heart. She described her Empower worker as "being the link" between all the services and helped her understand what was going on.

Considering how alone Michelle had been in navigating the chaotic nature of her life, the role of Empower has been vital in offering adult support that places Michelle's needs at the centre of the work.

Over four months Michelle has attended 19 one-to-one sessions and has had 45 other contacts with her Empower worker (via phone, text or BlackBerry (BB) Messaging. The fact that young women attend Empower voluntarily suggests that it is meeting Michelle's needs and is providing a service that works for her.

## Young Women's Group Work Programme

The Empower group work programme is a ten-week course delivered in schools, largely for young women in years eight and nine. The programme is a targeted intervention for young women at risk of gang association and/or sexual exploitation in gangs. The programme addresses:

- Media and society and its impact on young women
- Self-esteem
- Relationships
- Sexual relationships
- Girls and gangs
- Risk and consequences of gang association
- Making changes
- Aspirations and ambitions

### Profile of the young women

Of the young women who have participated in the group work to date:

- 90% were involved with gangs or at risk of gang involvement
- 13% were known to the police
- 12% were involved in anti-social activity
- 14% had been a victim of crime

These statistics suggest that the right young women are being referred into the group work programme, but they also reinforce the issue of the hidden nature of gang-affected young women. A large percentage of these young women were gang-involved or at risk, whereas relatively small numbers were coming to notice elsewhere either as victims or as involved in crime or anti-social behaviour. This suggests that if the Empower programme had not been available, the young women who weren't coming to notice elsewhere may have been left without a specialist service response to address their gang associations and subsequent risks.

### Empower group work outcomes

Young women and the group facilitators complete a joint assessment which measures each young woman's current status against four outcome areas on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being 'everything is good and going well', and 10 being 'everything is bad and not going well'. The four outcome areas are: school; my safety; my attitude and behaviour; and my relationships.

This takes place at the beginning and the end of the group work, providing base-line and end data, and evidences distance travelled.

Seventy young women have completed the monitoring and evaluation process. The data below reflects the outcomes for these 70 young women. There is often a disparity between the young woman and the facilitator's assessment against the outcome criteria. This is expected as the facilitator is likely to have a greater understanding of the concepts and ability to identify risk factors. This disparity, however, is accepted and discussed with young women and will often provide a springboard from which more in-depth conversations around the concepts and outcomes can take place.

### School



This outcome area addresses how young women feel they are getting on at school, including whether they are enjoying it or whether it is a negative experience for them. 62% of the young women recorded a positive progression, suggesting things were better for them in their school life. The facilitators observed that 54% of the young women had shown an improvement in school over the course of the programme.

### **My safety**

This outcomes area explores how young women feel about their own safety. 60% of the young women recorded a positive improvement in their safety. Facilitators observed 73% of the young women had improved safety.

### **My attitude and behaviour**

This explores how young women view their attitude and behaviour and how they facilitators experience their behaviour in the group setting. 63% of the young women recorded that there had been a positive change in their attitude and behaviour. The facilitators experienced positive changes in 66% of the young women's behaviour and attitudes.

### **My relationships**

This outcome area explores a young person's relationships such as friendships, family and intimate relationships and whether things are going well or not. The facilitators' initial assessment is based on information gathered from the referring agent and the referral form at the beginning of the programme. 46% of young women felt that their relationships had improved. Facilitators observed that 72% of young women had improved relationships in their lives during the course of the programme.

### **Empower group work case study**

Eight young women aged 14 and 15 engaged in the 10-week programme. The sessions were delivered in their school. There was an 85% attendance throughout the programme, with six of the young women completing final evaluation forms.

As in the one-to-one work, the complexity of the issues faced by young women is not always fully known at the outset of the project. The facilitators soon learnt more about the young women as the group dynamics and trust developed. Other issues and risk indicators included:

- Violent, angry behaviour and disruptive in school and towards peers;
- Some young women had a history of fixed-term exclusion and there were issues amongst the group regarding poor attendance and persistent lateness;
- Complex and transient peer relationships;
- Some complexities in family life that created conflict and difficulties for the young women including: absent fathers, sibling involvement in crime, controlling parental discipline and some family intervention through other support services;
- Sexual activity, some with numerous or older sexual partners. Concerns around unsafe sexual activity; and
- A range of associations, including mixing with older young men with gang connections..

The content of the group work programme included young women having group discussions and doing a variety of exercises to explore the themes of the programme. The facilitators place great emphasis on creating a safe and uniquely female space. The room is 'decorated' with drapes and materials, lighting is changed, affirmations are placed around the room and incense is burned. The space is transformed from a school classroom to a special space that is created solely for the young women.

Laquisha was one member who seemed to benefit hugely from the group work. She was a vocal participant, becoming very animated and engaged with the exercises and discussions. During an exercise on gender expectations, she seemed to feel a sense of injustice at the inequality between young

men and women and the expectations placed on them in relationships.

During a self-esteem exercise Laquisha became very upset. She found strengths exercises very difficult and was unable to identify anything that she felt she was good at. The facilitators picked up on her distress and were able to engineer the exercise in order that friends were allowed to identify strengths on behalf of the young women. They reminded the group that they were available after the sessions for one-to-one conversations, should the young women need this.

In a later session Laquisha was more animated and involved in a small group exercise exploring consent, while discussing a past experience with her group partner. The facilitator overheard this and encouraged Laquisha to take advantage of the one-to-one support after the session. Laquisha took this opportunity and disclosed that she had experienced sexual violence in school when she was younger and had been threatened with rape by a fellow pupil which left her terrified. She had not spoken of the incident since, but it was having a lasting and significant effect on her and her relationships as well as her feelings of anger and occasional emotional distress.

Following her discussion with the facilitator, Laquisha said that she felt relieved to finally have talked about her experience as she had not been able to speak to anyone else about it until now. She said that she was grateful that the group was a female-only space where she felt safe to talk, and the consent exercise had helped her to understand what she had experienced was not right.

Further discussion revealed further complexities in Laquisha's life, all of which seemed to be increasing her vulnerability to unhealthy relationships with people who were gang-associated.

The group facilitator encouraged Laquisha to have a conversation with her form tutor about the difficulties she was facing, which established a channel of communication and support that she could make use of if needed. Laquisha also agreed that she would benefit from longer-term support. As a result she was referred into the Empower one-to-one service. The referral was seamless as one of the group facilitators was the Empower one-to-one worker and was able to pick up with Laquisha where the group work had finished.

It is clear that, had this female-only and specialist space not been available, Laquisha may have continued to have no support for her experiences of sexual violence, and her subsequent vulnerabilities.

Session records for the group show that young women were becoming more and more 'politicised' throughout the process. There was a sense that through sharing their experiences and perspectives around inequality and oppression of young women and girls that they recognised these issues as being greater than individual issues. They were keen to share their new learning with a wider audience, in school assemblies for example, in order that others could understand the pressures on young women and issues around consent, sex and the law.

### **Young women's feedback**

When asked how much the Empower programme had had a positive effect on the young women, all but one of the group who completed evaluations said a 'huge amount' and that it had helped them in the way they wanted.

Things the young women really enjoyed about the programme were:

- Getting to know people;
- Being more open and honest with each other, being able to talk about their feelings and generally being able to express themselves;
- The things that they learnt about on the programme, including learning how to control anger;

- Being able to talk about girls, understanding the pressures on young women and how they are judged;
- Talking about relationships;
- The work on girls and gangs – one particularly identified being able to talk to her brother about the risks of carrying weapons;
- Being able to talk to the facilitators.

When asked what the most important thing was that the young women learnt from the programme, responses included:

- *“That I can trust people and don’t have to keep things bottled up.”*
- *“About girls and rape.”*
- *“Knowing my rights.”*
- *“Not to get into gangs and not to have sex at this age – wait a bit longer.”*
- *“Self-respect and about peer pressure and how to say no.”*
- *“It helps you get over fears – to speak in groups.”*
- *“You get to talk about your feelings more freely.”*
- *“Make yourself calm.”*
- *“It helped me and it would help others solve their problems.”*



## Conclusion

The Empower one-to-one and group work is clearly increasing the engagement of gang-affected young women and girls who experience sexual violence and exploitation. In a short space of time the Empower team has worked with 995 young people and, as identified by its partners, there are now services in place for this group where previously there were none. As evidenced by partner testimonial, the Empower programme is meeting its aim of increasing local capacity and skills to identify this 'hidden group'.

The Empower team's efforts in developing robust partnerships and processes are increasing the identification of vulnerable young women and in doing so are also working towards the Government's aim of improving data to more effectively map and understand the impact of gangs on young women and girls, and ROTA's call to put in place services to support them.

The team's efforts are also having an impact on how other professionals are able to understand and use processes in support of young women.

*"My experience of Safer London is that their partnership work is sound and robust. They are able to work flexibly and collaboratively with partners and to build strong relationships that assist in navigating existing services and structures". (YOS Operational Manager – Gangs)*

An area of emerging practice that is particularly promising, is Safer London's efforts to develop and broker information-sharing across sectors and to establish data capturing and analysis mechanisms in order that young women are identified and do not slip through the net.

The embedding of the Empower team within local authority structures is increasing the exchange of 'expert knowledge' across traditionally silo sectors (such as gangs, violence against women and sexual exploitation). YOS gangs and Empower workers are working alongside each other and developing a shared expert knowledge through co-location and a continuous formal, and informal, exchange of information and knowledge which is helping to build a richer intelligence picture of the young women who are affected by gangs.

A significant achievement in identifying abused young women is in the Empower team's ability to see beyond the constructed identities that have been ascribed to young women based on their sexual reputation, which in turn have exacerbated their vulnerability in the context of gangs. Serious case reviews conducted following child sexual exploitation cases<sup>26</sup> have highlighted the failings of statutory services that have responded punitively to exploited young women's presenting behaviour (including perceived 'promiscuity', sexualised risk taking, 'difficult' and aggressive behaviour), rather than recognising their vulnerability and abuse.

The Empower team understands this surface behaviour to be risk indicators and representing complex vulnerabilities. They are also supporting other professionals and services to develop this nuanced understanding in order to identify and reach more hidden young women in need of support. Their youth support service colleague talks of the Empower team's "generosity" of this specialist knowledge and suggested that "more Empower workers are needed" to meet the hidden need.

---

<sup>26</sup> Boxall, B and Wonnacott, J (2013) *Serious Case Review Executive Summary, Case 26*. Torbay Safeguarding Children Board  
Derby Safeguarding Children Board  
Galley, J (2010) *Serious Case Review BD09, Executive Summary*. Derby Safeguarding Children Board

He endorsed the idea that without the Empower Programme young women would remain hidden with their vulnerability unrecognised and that they would continue to fall beneath the radar of services or have been dealt with in non-specialised settings where the risks specific to their gang associations would not be understood and could possibly have been exacerbated.

Safer London's one-to-one and group work is meeting a number of the principles of effective working with young women suggested by the Griffin Society.

- They work holistically, addressing the 'multiplicity' of young women's experiences. Rather than responding to either a young woman's victimisation, her criminal behaviour and attitudes, her housing issues or her school attendance, for example. Instead they respond to the issues that are relevant to each young woman, 'addressing physical, sexual, emotional and mental health'.
- They prioritise creating safe and single-sex spaces which appear to be successfully nurturing young women's critical thinking, developing their awareness of the risks for gang-associated girls and creating opportunities for them to disclose and access intensive support.
- It is evident from young women's feedback that the team are 'fostering respectful and positive relationships' with young women and this is having an impact on whether young women engage with the service or not. This is also evidenced by young women trusting the service and the workers enough to disclose more about their circumstances the longer they are engaged – perhaps also reinforcing the importance of long-term and sustainable services for young women.
- There is a sense that young women really believe that the Empower workers are 'on their side'. The degree to which the workers advocate for young women and their families (often beyond their official remit) is evidence of this and that the team have the right communication skills to work effectively with gang affected young women.

Amongst the Empower team there is a genuine respect for, and belief in the rights of the young women they work with. Through their advocacy and group work they elicit and value young women's perspectives and are sensitive to their experiences. Young women seem to react well to this and as a result are engaging in the support long term, where previously they have been wary of and distrusting of other services. Often the Empower worker is the only adult who is offering "positive relationships, characterised by consistency, continuity, respect and warmth"<sup>27</sup> to the young women".

The analysis of the intensive one-to-one support case files, the emerging outcomes and the statistics from the 10-week group work programme strongly indicate that Empower is having a positive impact on young women's understanding of the risks and vulnerabilities they face within a gang context. Through their face-to-face work, their advocacy and their partnership work they are increasing the protective factors around young women, enabling them to consider consequences and begin to make changes in their behaviour and in their lives.

---

<sup>27</sup> Batchelor, S.A. (2005)

## References

Batchelor, S.A. (2005) *'Prove me the bam!': victimization and agency in the lives of young women who commit violent offences*. *Probation Journal*, 52 (4). pp. 358-375.

Beckett, H. et al (2012) *Research into gang-associated sexual exploitation and sexual violence - interim Report*. University of Bedfordshire: Luton

Berebowitz, s. et al (2012) *The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups. Interim Report*. London: OCC.

Boxall, B and Wonnacott, J (2013) *Serious Case Review Executive Summary, Case 26*. Torbay: Torbay Safeguarding Children Board

Department of Children Schools and Families (2009) *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation*. London: HMSO

Department of Children Schools and Families (2010) *Safeguarding Children and Young People who may be Affected by Gang Activity*. London: HMSO

Firmin, C. (2010) *Female Voice in Violence Project, A study into the impact of serious youth and gang violence on women and girls*. London: Race on the Agenda (ROTA).

Firmin, C. (2011) *This is it, This is my life...Female Voice in Violence final report on the impact of serious youth violence and criminal gangs on women and girls across the country*. London: Race on the Agenda (ROTA)

Galley, J (2010) *Serious Case Review BD09, Executive Summary*. Derby: Derby Safeguarding Children Board

Home Office (2011) *Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Cross-Government Report*. Norwich: The Stationary Office (TSO)

Home Office (2011) *Ending Gang and Youth Violence: Ending Gang and Youth Violence. A Cross-Government Report including further evidence and good practice case studies*. Norwich: The Stationary Office (TSO)

London Safeguarding Children Board (2006) *Safeguarding Children Abused through Sexual Exploitation*. London: LSCB.

Pearce, J.J. & Pitts, JM (2011) *Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation. A Scoping Exercise for The Office of the Children's Commissioner for England*. The University of Bedfordshire: Luton.

Southgate, J (2011) *Seeing differently: Working with girls affected by gangs*. The Griffin Society