Safer London Empower Project

Evaluation Report: Executive Summary

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Introduction

Safer London commissioned an evaluation of their Empower Project in March 2014. Dealing with gender-based violence is a key issue for the current government, as laid out in the Call the End Violence Against Women and Girls paper (Home Office, 2010), and the accompanying (updated) Action Plan, published in 2013. The guiding principles behind the report include preventing violence against women and girls, as well as tackling societal attitudes that help entrench sexual and domestic violence. Specifically, the government has suggested a number of key outcomes that they hope to achieve in terms of preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG), including: changing attitudes around violence against women, and finding ways of empowering people to challenge violent behaviour; reducing the number of victims in relation to sexual and gender-based violence; assisting professionals who work around these issues to identify violence against women and girls, and ensuring that they have the tools to deal with these problems; enabling organizations to recognize and support victims in the best way possible. There are clear strategies for ensuring that service provision across England and Wales is both good and consistent, and ensuring that statutory, voluntary and community sectors can achieve the best outcomes for women and girls, and their families.

Equally, tackling youth and gang-related violence has also been a priority of the Coalition Government, and continues to be a priority for the newly elected Conservative Government. ‘Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Cross-Government Report’ (2011) suggested that supporting local areas to help address gang-related issues, and working towards preventing young people from becoming involved with violence, are key areas that the government would like to address. Furthermore, providing pathways out of gangs and encouraging partnership working at a local level are identified as positive ways of engaging with young people around these issues.

However, despite the government’s prioritizing of these areas, there is recognition that services for women and girls in relation to gang activity and sexual exploitation, particularly for girls under 18, are poorly developed. Furthermore, recent research (Towers and Walby, 2012; Bennhold, 2012; Vacchelli et al., 2014; Sanders-McDonagh, Neville & Nolas, in press, 2016) across the sector suggests that there have been substantial cuts to agencies and organizations in England, Scotland, and Wales that provide services related to VAWG, and these cuts are expected to lead to an increase in violence against women. Local services are uniquely placed to engage vulnerable populations, including women who experience violence, or are at risk of sexual violence and/or sexual exploitation.
Safer London plays a leading role in designing and delivering interventions that aim to work with pressing social issues, including gang violence, serious youth violence, and sexual violence/sexual exploitation. For girls and young women who are gang-affected, addressing these issues, providing opportunities, and delivering services by professionals who young women can trust is the key to an effective programme (ROTA, 2010; Adamson and Burrell, 2011). The Empower Project provides gender-specific services that engage young women and girls around gang-related activities and sexual violence/exploitation, and works closely with young women, as well as young men, parents/carers, and relevant professionals, to ensure that the services delivered are able to meet the complex needs of the client group.

More specifically, the Empower Project works as a prevention and intervention model to support young women who have experienced issues related to sexual abuse and exploitation. The program targets young people (11-18 years old), who are gang-affected, and as such at increased risk of exploitative and violent behaviour from their gang-involved peers. The Empower model aims to create an environment for young women to make a positive change in their lives. Such an environment is facilitated by professionals through a six strand process.

**Strand 1:** One-to-one intensive individual support for young women who are referred to the program by local authorities, third parties, or by themselves. This process lasts for a minimum of six months, with a review of progress set for every six weeks. This intensive model allows for professional and bespoke assessment of young women’s needs, of their vulnerabilities, and their risk of harm (and in some cases, (re)offending). This model utilises specialist YPAs (Empower Young People Advocates) to work closely with young women and monitor their progress, and make adjustments in accordance with their individual needs and changing life circumstances.

**Strand 2:** Specialist advice and case consultation, providing expert support and knowledge for social workers and other professionals working with young people exposed to sexual violence. Specialist consultations are an important factor in the professional assessment of the progression and efficiency of support offered to young women.

**Strand 3:** Young Women’s Schools Based Group Project Framework, working with Year 8 and 9 female pupils. The Project runs for 10 weeks at schools, and targets the individual needs of boroughs across London. The aim of the school-based project is to develop young people’s life skills based on: a sense of identity, confidence and self-esteem. The sessions discuss a number of pertinent concepts such as: relationships, violence, power, gangs, ambitions and aspirations, decision-making, and making behavioural changes.
**Strand 4:** Young Men’s Schools Based Group Project Framework, targeting Year 8 and 9 male pupils. The Project provides an environment (through interactive sessions and workshops) for young people to discuss and explore life models based on ideas of positive change. The sessions include topics such as: gender, identity, violence and power, relationships, sex and legislations, gangs, and individual aspirations and ambitions. The Project enables young men to discuss views and beliefs regarding gender issues, sex, and relationships based on their own experiences, and on external factors, such as the power of media or stereotypes.

**Strand 5:** Workshops for Parents and Careers, which help them to understand a range of dilemmas and problems faced by young people. The sessions are individually tailored to the needs of parents, careers, and foster families. The project aims to develop carers’ awareness of sexual violence, and also to develop family-based tools in supporting those affected by sexual exploitation.

**Strand 6:** Events and training for professionals to promote the exchange of expert knowledge, and to develop a wider understanding of sexual violence dilemmas that can be encountered by professionals. The Project promotes a multi-agency approach, as well as offering bespoke training for staff and professionals working directly and indirectly with young people exposed to sexual violence.

The central purpose of the Empower Project is to target risk factors that potentially may lead to young women’s sexual exploitation. This intensive, multi-agency model enables young people to shape their own personal views and beliefs on relationships, sex, and law through a holistic approach. The Project promotes positive change based on young people’s own decision-making skills and practices.

The evaluation of the Empower Project plays an important role in: helping to identify emerging best practice around key policy areas related to sexual violence and sexual exploitation, assessing the impact the project has had so far and how this might be built upon going forward, and getting a clear understanding of the value the project is bringing to young women, young men, and local partnerships.

**Objectives**

The overall objective of the evaluation is explore the efficacy of the Empower Project in relation to the key aim of preventing the sexual exploitation of women and girls, and creating positive changes to the lives of young people by developing decision-making skills and practices.
There are six more specific objectives focused on the impact of the Empower Project, in relation to particular work carried out in different strands:

**Strand 1:** Does the Empower Project make a difference in the lives of young women receiving intensive 1:1 support? We explore this issue by looking at data from both repeated quantitative measures and in-depth qualitative interviews carried out with young women across London.

**Strand 2:** To what extent does the Empower Project provide support for social workers and other professionals working with young people exposed to sexual violence, and what impact does this have on their work? We explore this issue by looking at data gathered from in-depth qualitative interviews with a wide range of professionals across London.

**Strand 3:** To what extent do the Young Women’s School-Based Group Projects encourage confidence and self-esteem for the young women who take part? To what extent is their knowledge of key concepts such as healthy relationships, violence, power, and decision making impacted? We explore this issue by looking at data from both pre/post quantitative measures and focus groups conducted with young women across London.

**Strand 4:** To what extent do the Young Men’s School-Based Group Projects encourage increased understandings of healthy relationships and related key issues such as violence and power? We explore this issue by looking at data from both pre/post quantitative measures and focus groups conducted with young men across London.

**Strand 5:** To what extent do workshops for parents and carers work to facilitate a better understanding of key issues faced by young people? We explore this issue by looking at data from quantitative measures undertaken following Parent/Carer Workshops.

**Strand 6:** To what extent are the training sessions and events put on for professionals by Safer London around sexual exploitation and sexual violence work relevant for their work, and do they help develop their understanding of key issues in tangible ways? We will explore this issue by looking at data from quantitative measures undertaken following different events and training sessions.
Key Findings

We employed a mixed-method research strategy, and both qualitative and quantitative elements have been used to illustrate the salience and impact of the Empower Project’s different strands, in a qualitatively-driven way (Mason, 2006; Nolas, Neville, and Sanders-McDonagh, 2011). During the 12-month evaluation, we spoke to 10 young women who were gang-affected, 18 boys who had taken part in the boys groups, 22 girls who had taken part in the girls groups, and 13 professionals involved in the programme.

We also analysed quantitative data drawn from pre- and post-intervention questionnaires designed and developed by Safer London and completed by young men and women involved in the Empower project (Strands 1, 3, and 4), as well as parents and carers of young people who had worked with the Project (Strand 5), and professionals who had attended relevant training run by Safer London (Strand 6).

The data presented here suggests that the Empower Project is delivering its key aims for all six project strands, and is effective in creating positive differences in the lives of young people.

The one-to-one intensive work with young women overwhelmingly suggests that the work YPAs do with young women has a positive impact on their lives, keeps them safer and empowers them to make better life choices.

The outcomes of the group work clearly suggest that young people take on board information about sexual consent and healthy relationships, and both young men and young women are able to recall key ideas related to healthy and unhealthy relationship practices. While it is not clear if this will develop into immediate behavioural changes, it clearly has an impact on young people in terms of their understandings, and the group workshops are meaningful to them.

Limited data from the parents and carers group suggests that the sessions are salient and that participants find the workshops helpful.

A wide range of professionals working with Safer London in different capacities across different London boroughs had incredibly positive experiences with both Safer London training, and with more direct ways of working alongside the project team. It is clear that Safer London has worked to develop strong relationships with local authorities and key contacts within different boroughs. Their flexible approach to working and their thorough knowledge of the area demonstrates their capacity to deliver the Empower Project in a way that creates real impact.
Recommendations

- Safer London may want to explore the possibility of developing relationships with parents and carers of young men and women. This is in relation to the group work (very few of the young men or the young women had discussed what they had learned about in their groups with their parents or family), and has been highlighted as a key area by a variety of professionals and stakeholders. Engaging parents and carers with the work being done with young people may foster a more integrated approach and have a positive impact on the (re)enforcement of key messages.

- For some young women involved in the intensive one-to-one sessions, six months may not be long enough if there are particular vulnerability issues that require more support. Funders may want to consider that in some cases, providing more long-term support may result in better outcomes for particularly vulnerable young people.

- While continuing one-to-one support for long periods of time may not be suitable for every young woman, developing a follow-on project as a step-down may be useful for young women to ensure that the achievements and successes made in the sessions are continued.

- Continuing and expanding work with young men is a key area that Safer London should develop. There is currently a dearth of projects engaging with young men in positive ways to help them learn and understand healthy relationships. The work Safer London do in schools with young men could be developed into a wider project that allows young men to further develop this learning in a supportive and open setting.

- Safer London may want to seek out contacts with third sector or statutory groups that engage with LGBTQ young people around (child) sexual exploitation, and consider how the Empower model might fit the needs of LGBTQ young men or young women who may be at risk of CSE.

- One-to-one work with some young men who disclose gang-related abuse (either receiving abuse or abusing) or are flagged during group sessions as needing further help is another area Safer London could usefully develop. Again, this is an area where there is a clear gap in service provision, and given Safer London’s close ties with schools, local authorities, and key stakeholders, they may want to work with key partners to try to explore this possibility further.

- Developing an online ‘Best Practice’ guide that highlights intra and inter boroughs successes and areas of good practice may help with more effective information sharing. An online toolkit for professionals (developed in conjunction with different stakeholders) may also be worth exploring in terms of feasibility and potential impact.