



‘We have personal experience to share, it makes it real’: Young people's views on their role in sexual violence prevention efforts



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ABSTRACT

Young people, particularly those affected by sexual violence, are rarely asked about their views on sexual violence prevention initiatives. Forty seven children and young people (aged between 11 and 25) from Albania, Bulgaria and England took part in a series of consultation workshops exploring sexual violence. This article outlines their views and recommendations in relation to the role of young people in prevention work. Young people are clear that they have a role to play when it comes to reaching and informing their peers. They are also aware of the risks of engagement and cognisant of the need for support and training. The consultation findings contribute to the limited evidence base surrounding young people's views on sexual violence prevention. The article illustrates the valuable insights and contributions that children and young people, particularly those affected by the issues, can make to the field. This calls for a shift in how we view and engage children and young people in shaping future sexual violence prevention strategies and projects.

1. Introduction

Sexual violence is defined by the [World Health Organisation \(2002\)](#), p.149) as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work”. The term ‘sexual violence’ is increasingly used as an umbrella term to encompass different forms of sexual abuse including the sexual exploitation of children and young people ([Greijer & Doek, 2016](#)). In recent years there has been growing interest in the sexual violence of children and young people across Europe. A number of policy developments have taken place in the region including the introduction in 2007 of the Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, also known as the Lanzarote Convention. The Council of Europe's ‘one in five’ campaign, which supports the implementation of the convention, is built on the estimates from available data which suggest that one in five children in Europe experience some form of sexual violence during childhood ([May-Chahal & Herczog, 2003](#)).

Children and young people across Europe have been involved in a number of projects which aim to better understand abuse and violence in their relationships and communities ([Barter et al., 2015](#); [Horwath, Kalyva, & Spyru, 2012](#); [Parren, Murauskienė, & Papadakaki, 2013](#)). A number of research studies have also sought to understand young people's views on particular programmes and services targeted at them,

including those that aim to address domestic abuse ([Fox, Hale, & Gadd, 2014](#); [Stanley et al., 2015](#)) and those that provide sexual health services to young people ([Sherriff, Gugglberger, Hall, & Scholes, 2014](#)). Research that explores young people's perspectives on sexual violence prevention strategies is limited. In [Barter et al.'s \(2015\)](#) study, young people were asked about their general views on prevention and intervention, specifically in regards to interpersonal violence and abuse in young people's relationships. This article aims to provide insights from children and young people, including those affected by various forms of sexual violence, on why and how young people might wish to get involved in sexual violence prevention work.

This article explores the findings from a number of consultation workshops with young people in three European countries. It outlines why young people felt that their engagement in sexual violence prevention efforts was important and needed. It provides advice from young people surrounding what might help or hinder young people from getting involved in this work. The benefits and perceived risks, as reported by the young people, are also shared. Finally the lessons learnt from the consultation process and implications of these findings for future policy and practice are outlined.

1.1. Context: victims and agents?

The children's rights and participation agenda has expanded since the introduction of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\) \(1989\)](#). This has arguably created more spaces for

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children and youth to be involved in consultation and decision-making about various aspects of their lives. It has been argued that opportunities to engage in consultations and other participative spaces are often restricted to those children and young people who are deemed reliable and capable (Brodie et al., 2016; Hill, 2006; Horwath et al., 2012). This often excludes young people who could be considered ‘marginalised’, particularly young people who have experienced violence (Horwath et al., 2012). Horwath et al. (2012) note that when young people come to the attention of statutory agencies, this often leads to what the authors describe as a ‘protective’ and ‘caring’ response where participation is viewed as less important. Warrington (2013), in discussing work with young people affected by sexual exploitation, underscores this tension between protection and participation. Warrington (2013) observes that once young people are identified as ‘victims’ professionals struggle to believe that these same young people can be ‘agents of change’ as the two identities appear to be at odds with one another. This means that those who have experienced different forms of sexual violence – ‘victims’ – are often not included in decision-making about their own needs, or in discussions about how to help or improve responses for others (Brodie et al., 2016; Brown, 2006; Warrington, 2013).

Warrington (2013) suggests that the paradigm shift which has taken place in the UK in recent years – which has sought to acknowledge that children and young people affected by sexual exploitation are victims and are not consenting to their exploitation – has highlighted young people's vulnerabilities. This reframing has been important: ensuring that young people are viewed as victims of abuse in need of protection rather than ‘criminals’, ‘child prostitutes’ or young people making informed decisions about the exploitation they experience. On the other hand, this has led to the construction of ‘the passive victim’ which may in some respects downplay children and young people's agency.

All children and young people have the right to have their views heard and to be involved in decisions that affect them (UNCRC, 1989). There are however reasons why enabling the voices of children and young people affected by sexual violence to be heard is particularly critical. We know that children and young people affected by these issues may have been silenced in the past and/or that their disclosures may have been unheard or disbelieved (Allnock & Miller, 2013). Providing opportunities for these young people to exert control, voice their views and be heard is therefore arguably even more significant. Emerging evidence also indicates that when young people affected by sexual violence engage in activities that aim to raise awareness or improve the situation for other young people, this too can have a positive impact on their own sense of self-worth (Batsleer, 2011; Hagel, 2013; Levy, 2012).

If campaigns are to be targeted at young people, it is also important to understand young people's views on sexual violence prevention initiatives. If young people are to be involved in such activities and campaigns, there are a number of questions to explore: How might young people like to be involved? What might influence a young person's decision about getting involved in prevention activities? What concerns might young people have about their involvement, particularly if they themselves have been directly impacted by the issues? This study aimed to provide answers to these questions.

1.2. The current study

This study was part of a larger project which aimed to promote the involvement of young people in efforts to prevent sexual violence in Europe. As part of the project, consultation workshops were developed to better understand what young people felt were the issues around sexual violence in their local areas, what they felt needed to happen to prevent sexual violence, how young people could be involved and what would help or hinder young people's engagement in prevention efforts. The consultation workshops generated a large amount of data. This article explores the findings that relate to the ways that the children and young people involved felt they or other young people could get

Table 1
Details of the Youth Advisors involved in the consultation workshops.

Country	N	Age	Gender	Background
Albania	6	18–25	F	Ex-service users affected by different forms of sexual violence
Albania	8	14–18	F	Service users receiving services for a range of issues
Bulgaria	9	14–16	F	Service users mainly from the Roma community
Bulgaria	8	19–24	M/F	Service users mainly street affected young people
England	3	15–16	F	Service users at risk of or affected by CSE
England	6	15–20	F	Service users at risk of or affected by CSE
England	7	11–17	F	Ex-service users including those affected by CSE and child sexual abuse (CSA)
	47			

involved in sexual violence prevention initiatives.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The consultation workshops involved 47 children and young people. The young people involved (who acted as Youth Advisors for this project) were aged between 11 and 25 and were identified and recruited via seven voluntary sector partner organisations (Table 1).

All of the young people involved were described as ‘marginalised’ by these partner organisations and were all accessing, or had accessed, support services. Three of these organisations were based in Northern England and were specialist support services for children and young people at risk of or affected by child sexual exploitation (CSE). Two organisations were based in different cities in Bulgaria with one supporting mainly Roma children and the other working predominantly with street-affected youth. In Albania, two organisations were also involved, one of these services worked with young people affected by various forms of sexual violence, including trafficking, and the other organisation worked with children accessing different support services, many of whom had experience of the care system.

Out of the seven partner organisations, four had a particular focus on supporting children and young people assessed to be at risk of or affected by different forms of sexual violence. The other organisations engaged in the project as they felt that sexual violence was an issue for the groups of young people they worked with – recognising that, for example, those leaving care, living on the streets or belonging to certain groups may be more vulnerable to sexual violence. These partner organisations recruited Youth Advisors who were invited due to their status of being ‘young people’ however a number could also be described as ‘experts by experience’ (Scourfield, 2010).

2.2. Data collection

Ethical approval was granted for this project from the Institute of Applied Social Research at the University of Bedfordshire. A set of ethical guidelines were developed specifically for the consultation workshops and these guidelines were shared with all partner organisations. Within these guidelines, partners had to ensure that in addition to having a facilitator and note taker present during the workshops, that there was a child protection coordinator available during the workshops who could respond to any concerns. Partner organisations were instructed to follow their own organisational procedures in dealing with any disclosures. Partners also had to commit to provide immediate and on-going support if Youth Advisors became upset at any time during their engagement in the workshops or following their involvement.

After a process of communication with partner organisations about the project and consultation process, all partners were provided with detailed workshop plans. These plans included activities and resources

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