University of Bedfordshire

Our Voices

OAK FOUNDATION

Our Voices Too

'They need to see the people they are affecting by their decision-making':
Developing participatory advocacy with young people on sexual violence in Albania, Moldova and Serbia

Monitoring and Evaluation Report

Our Voices Too Youth Advocacy Project

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Key messages from the Our Voices Too Youth Advocacy Project

Key prerequisites

- Participatory advocacy work with young people affected by sexual violence requires **careful planning; adequate funding, time and resources; ongoing support** for both participants and staff facilitating the work; and **thoughtful and flexible facilitation by skilled staff**.

- **Strong partnership working, open communication, trust and collaboration** between project partners; facilitators and participants; and young people in the group were critical success factors.

Benefits to participants

- Engaging in participatory advocacy can offer potential benefits including those related to **posttraumatic growth** and increased **resilience** to young people involved. Participants reported enhanced feelings of **safety** in relation to themselves and others. They also reported **reduced self-blame, increased self-esteem, confidence and hope** for the future.

- Participatory advocacy can promote young people's **personal** and **professional growth**. Participants gained new competencies including communication, advocacy and group work skills during the project.

- The **group work** fostered **peer support**, offering a sense of **shared understanding, solidarity and belonging** to participants.

- Speaking out on behalf of other victims/survivors can provide a sense of **purpose, pride and meaning** to the young people involved (*'turning something negative into something positive'*).

Gains to the wider movement to end sexual violence against children

- If adequately supported, resourced and provided with a safe space, young people with lived experience can be **powerful advocates**.

- Involving young people with first-hand knowledge of the 'system' can **add relevance and credibility to advocacy messages** and potentially **enhance impact**.

Removing barriers to participation

- Young people facing multiple challenges in their lives may find it harder to engage. They may require more **flexibility** and **tailored support to access participatory opportunities**. This should be reflected in risk assessment frameworks and thresholds for inclusion/exclusion.

- Recruitment decisions should consider the **risks as well as the benefits** of including/excluding a young person in/from participatory advocacy work. Whenever possible, the **young person concerned should be involved in such conversations**.

- **Trust** is a prerequisite for engagement. However, loyalty towards staff or the organisation may undermine a young person's ability to give **free and informed consent**. Tuning into subtle, non-verbal signs is crucial.

Safety and support

- Talking about sexual violence is upsetting. There are a range of techniques that can help to **minimise upset** and **set boundaries** in relation to sharing sensitive information in group settings and ensuring **confidentiality**.

- Some participants reported that **sharing personal stories can** – under some circumstances – **foster empathy and closeness**. Sensitive group discussions, however, should always be **facilitated by trained professionals** with **support** and **referral pathways in place**.

- **Transparency and trustworthiness** are key. They require staff to be honest with young people about what can and cannot be achieved and to engage them in open discussions about outcomes and safety.

Key lessons for organisations and professionals

- Participatory advocacy with vulnerable young people is often seen as 'too risky'. However, risk is an integral part of working with trauma-affected populations. Given the **distinct benefits participation can offer**, including in relation to addressing the effects of sexual trauma, the focus should be on building capacity to **manage risk rather than avoid it altogether**.

- **Participatory approaches can be an important part of a trauma-informed response** to sexual violence for their capacity to promote **empowerment, voice and choice**. Creating safe spaces to speak out about sexual violence and offering opportunities to influence decisions as part of participatory advocacy can help young people affected by the issue to **regain a sense of control and safety**.

- Delivering a youth participatory advocacy project requires a different skill set from psychological or therapeutic work: expertise in **working in trauma-informed ways** and experience of **facilitating group work are critical**.

- Participatory advocacy challenges professionals to think in new ways about 'safety', to become more comfortable with 'holding' risk, and to **consider young people's strengths alongside their vulnerabilities**. Young people are often stronger than we, as professionals tasked with safeguarding, think.

2 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would also like to acknowledge the important contribution of Maria Zuurmond and Irko Zuurmond, who initiated the development of the monitoring and evaluation framework and produced a range of monitoring and evaluation learning tools for the Our Voices Too youth advocacy project.

But above all, we would like to acknowledge and give heartfelt thanks to the brave and inspiring young women who took part in the project and generously offered their time and insights with us. This report is dedicated to them.

We are grateful to Oak Foundation for funding the project and supporting us throughout.

3 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

In 2019, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) celebrated its 30th anniversary. The UNCRC grants children the right to participation, to have a say on matters affecting them, and to be heard. On 18 November 2019 – the European Day on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse – the Council of Europe prioritised 'children's participation', emphasising the importance of 'empowering children to stop sexual violence'. Children and young people's participation are high on the international policy agenda. The reality frequently lags behind such political aspirations. In practice, the right to participation is not extended to all children and young people equally.

The significant practical and ethical challenges associated with engaging vulnerable groups in participatory initiatives mean that children and young people affected by sexual violence are often sidelined from such opportunities. As a result, the highly relevant perspectives of 'experts by experience' tend to be marginalised from processes of knowledge-creation and decision-making. However, their perspectives are key to developing targeted responses that reflect the needs and priorities of those affected by the issue. As professionals and organisations, we need to expand our skill set and knowledge about how to safely involve children and young people with lived experience in participatory work. This requires resources as well as professional capacity and confidence building.

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Children and young people as advocates

Prominent examples, such as Malala and Greta Thunberg, demonstrate that children and young people can be powerful advocates and agents for change, garnering popular support and mobilising international political movements on important issues such as girls' education and climate change. Advocacy – sometimes described as 'speaking truth to power' (Edleston *et al.* 2013: 11) – is a promising tool for children and young people to convey their perspectives to those in power and to affect social change. While advocacy can entail a range of different activities, including lobbying and campaigning, advocates typically seek to change the attitudes and actions of decision-makers by communicating the real-life experiences of those who are demanding or requiring the change.

But how does youth advocacy translate into the context of sexual violence? What are the specific benefits and challenges for children and young people who have experienced this type of abuse in advocating on this highly sensitive topic?

While there are reasons to assume that engaging children and young people with experience of sexual violence in advocacy may enhance impact, there are a range of associated risks, including those linked to confidentiality, re-traumatisation and concerns over safety for those involved in such activities. Engaging children and young people *because* they have lived experience and ensuring their need for safety and anonymity bears an inherent tension. Developing an ethical and systematic approach to youth-led advocacy on sexual violence with young people affected by the issue and piloting it in three countries across Eastern Europe has, to the best of our knowledge, never been done before. This innovative work developed as part of the Our Voices Too (OVTOO) project constitutes a ground-breaking step towards boosting young survivors' representation in realms of power and decision-making.

3.1 PROJECT SUMMARY

Responding to the gap identified above, the Our Voices programme seeks to build capacity and knowledge about the ethical involvement of children and young people in participatory work addressing sexual violence at an international level (for more information visit: www.our-voices.org.uk). Our Voices is co-ordinated by the International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking (IC) at the University of Bedfordshire in England, United Kingdom, and co-funded by Oak Foundation.

As part of the broader Our Voices programme, the IC co-ordinated the OVTOO project between November 2016 and March 2020. This report focuses on one component of the OVTOO project: the OVTOO youth advocacy project. As part of the OVTOO youth advocacy project, the IC collaborated with three partner organisations in Eastern Europe: Different & Equal (D&E) in Albania; National Center for Child Abuse Prevention (NCCAP) in Moldova; and NGO ATINA (ATINA) in Serbia. The three partner organisations work directly with children and young people affected by different forms of sexual violence including trafficking for sexual exploitation.

The aim of the project was to build the capacity of the three partner organisations to safely involve young people with experience of sexual violence in participatory advocacy on this issue. To this end, the IC supported the partners to deliver a 12-week participatory advocacy training programme with a small group of young people who were current or former users of their services. The purpose of the training programme was to equip participants with skills and knowledge to become youth advocates; to enable them to identify a problem in relation to sexual violence affecting children and young people in their country and develop advocacy activities to address this problem in their local contexts.

3.2 THE REPORT

This report shares learning gathered between 2017 and 2020 as part of the OVTOO project's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) process. It presents evidence in relation to Objective 1 of the project:

'building capacity to engage young people with lived experience in participatory advocacy addressing sexual violence'.

Terminology

■ **'Children', 'young people', and 'children and young people'**: In this report, we refer to 'children' with reference to the broader international children's rights framework which defines a 'child' as any person up to the age of 18 (UNCRC, 1989). While international law clearly distinguishes between 'children' and 'adults', there is a recognition that the increasingly elongated transition into adulthood is more complex. More recently, our understanding of this period has incorporated new knowledge from neuroscience about adolescent brain development (Coleman, 2018). There is evidence to suggest that, although there may be variations across different social and cultural contexts, the physical, neurological, psychological and social changes associated with adolescence continue well beyond attaining legal age (WHO, 2014; Hagell *et al.*, 2017).[1] As such, the term 'young people' generally describes and recognises the transition from childhood to adulthood as a process, not a singular event.

Informed by this understanding, we use the term 'young people' to acknowledge a multitude of perspectives and experiences associated with this transition and to more accurately reflect the age range of the participants involved in our project. All of the participants were between 18 and 26 years of age and therefore adults in a legal sense. However, it is important to acknowledge potential inequalities between younger adults and older ones, who may have had more advanced professional training and work experience, and as a result, may enjoy higher status. In the context of the project, we felt that the term 'young people' more accurately captures these power differentials. In recognition of the fact that young people may face similar age-specific discrimination to children, we use the term 'children and young people' to delineate this broader category from older adults.

■ **'Sexual violence'** refers to:

'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'
(Jewkes *et al.*, 2002: 149)

■ **'Survivor'**: In this report, we use the term 'survivor' to refer to individuals with personal, direct experience(s) of sexual violence. This reflects the language used by the majority of the participants involved in the project to describe themselves. In places we use other terms including 'victim' or 'victim/survivor' to preserve the accuracy of quotes and authenticity of the language in which the data were conveyed.

Methods for data collection

The report draws from data collected at regular intervals throughout the project using monitoring and evaluation learning (MEL) tools specifically developed for this project. Informed by narrative and grounded theory principles for data collection and analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), the MEL tools comprised a range of group exercises and participatory activities designed to elicit information about 'what works', to evaluate participants' experiences of taking part in the project, and to capture stories of change over the course of the project. The goal was to contribute to a narrative that would reflect the project's value and impact, to record changes in the youth advocates, professionals and organisations involved, and to identify both challenges and strengths of the process. Wherever possible we include young people's own voices and those of staff who facilitated the work to illustrate pertinent lessons.

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1 The United Nations defines the following age bandings for: 'youth' (15-24 years); 'adolescence' (10-19 years) and young people (10-24 years) (UNDESA, 2013; UNICEF 2011).

Table 1: Overview of monitoring and evaluation data collected

M&E ACTIVITIES	PROFESSIONAL PARTICIPANTS	YOUNG PARTICIPANTS	PERIOD OF DATA COLLECTION
Organisational self-assessment	3 (organisations)	0	Dec 2018 – Apr 2019 (baseline) Nov 2019 – Feb 2020 (end-line)
Sexual Violence Learning Scale		15	Dec 2018 – Apr 2019 (baseline) Nov 2019 – Feb 2020 (end-line)
Field logs	3 (organisations)		Sept 2018 – Feb 2020 (updated at regular intervals)
Basic register	3 (organisations)		Dec 2018 – Apr 2019 (updated at regular intervals)
Risk register	3 (organisations)		Nov 2018 – Feb 2020 (updated at regular intervals)
Skype calls (n=30)	3 (organisations)		Apr 2017 – Mar 2020
Inception meeting	10		UK, Jun 2018
Facilitator training	14		Serbia, Nov 2018
M&E workshops with youth advocates (n=3)		5 4 3	Albania, Jun 2019 Serbia, Aug 2019 Moldova, Sep 2019
Focus groups with staff (n=3)	3 3 3		Serbia, Aug 2019 Albania, Sep 2019 Moldova, Sep 2019
Shared learning events (n=2)	11 11	1	Albania, Jun 2019 Moldova, 2019

Key components of evidence gathering comprised:

- **An organisational self-assessment tool**, adapted from Lansdown and O'Kane's (2014) Toolkit for monitoring and evaluating children's participation; partner organisations assessed their understanding of young people's participation and the level and quality of participation within their organisations, at the beginning and end of the project (see Annex 2).

- **A Sexual Violence Learning Scale** (SVLS) measuring changes in the youth advocates' understanding of sexual violence and other empowerment-related criteria such as confidence and self-esteem (see Annex 1). Youth advocates were asked to rate a series of statements about themselves at the beginning and end of the project to provide baseline and end-line data about the impact of the project on participants. We created the SVLS specifically for this project,

drawing on MEL tools that were developed as part of a previous project co-ordinated by the IC: the LEAP against sexual violence' project[2] (University of Bedfordshire, 2018).

- **Field logs** were updated regularly by all partners, capturing learning during the planning and implementation phase of the project. The field logs documented each session conducted as part of the youth advocacy training programme, recording feedback and reflections from staff and youth advocates, observations, incidents and how these were dealt with, as well as 'surprises', including new insights gathered.

- A **basic register** gathered information about the youth advocates and attendance records with updates on participants' wellbeing and progress.

- A **risk register** was updated regularly by all partners to document challenges and successful strategies throughout the project.
- **Documentation of regular Skype calls** with individual partners recorded progress and reporting of specific issues.
- **Fieldwork** including:
  – A two-day i**nception meeting** during which the project team (the IC and project partners) agreed the project aims, timeline, budget and ethical guidelines.
  – A three-day **training workshop** during which the IC trained facilitators on using project-specific resources and consulted with partners on adapting the project toolkit.
  – Three **monitoring and evaluation workshops with youth advocates** which enabled the IC to learn about participants' experiences of taking part in the project and to gather feedback on distinct aspects of the participatory advocacy training programme.
  – Three **focus groups** with partner organisations (project co-ordinators and facilitators) conducted by IC staff using semi-structured interview schedules to gain an in-depth understanding about specific aspects and stages of delivering the project.
  – Two three-day **shared learning events** facilitated by the IC and attended by all partners to capture key learning at different stages of the project.

Data analysis

Data from the M&E activities were coded and analysed thematically, first manually and secondly using NVivo 12, a qualitative data software programme. Coding was conducted independently by the two authors and then compared and discussed. The peer-review process was established to reduce bias and enhance consistency and rigour. The coded data were synthesised and ranked according to frequency to produce key themes. We organised the key themes to address the following questions:

- What are the key prerequisites, steps and considerations for engaging young people with lived experience safely in participatory advocacy work on sexual violence?
- What were the main challenges and how did we address these?
- How did the project benefit:
  – Youth advocates?
  – Partner organisations?
  – The wider movement to end sexual violence against children?
- What do we know about the project's impact and sustainability?

We adopted a 'thematic analysis' approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) as an analytical framework to understand, describe and interpret experiences and perceptions as key to uncovering meaning in particular circumstances and contexts. Drawing

from grounded theory principles, we selected quotes to construct themes reflecting the experiences of youth advocates, facilitators and other staff members involved in the project.

Ethics approval

While the project obtained ethics approval from the Institute of Applied Social Studies' ethics committee at the University of Bedfordshire, it is worth noting that the approval was granted specifically for the M&E element led by the IC research team. Responsibility for delivering the participatory advocacy programme with the youth advocates was held by our partner organisations and fell under the relevant jurisdictions of the respective national contexts. However, as project co-ordinators, we assumed an active and leading role in setting minimum standards and developed project-specific guidance on ethical participatory practice with the young people involved. The ethics application clearly outlined the planned programme of work and rigorously addressed associated key ethical concerns. Critically, ethics approval was granted before partner organisations commenced work with the youth advocates. As the report seeks to demonstrate, ethics was a central, integral and ongoing consideration throughout the project, rather than a distinct aspect.

Limitations

The report should be read with a number of caveats in mind. Limitations arise from the available data and methods of data collection. These include, but are not limited to:

- **Time and space:** Data were collected at different points during the project. Most notably, the M&E workshops with the youth advocates in Albania, Serbia and Moldova were facilitated in June, August and September 2019 respectively. At the time of data collection, the groups in Albania and Serbia had not yet fully implemented their advocacy activities and were therefore unable to reflect on this aspect of the project.

- **Type of project:** The OVTOO youth advocacy project was not a research study; it was a participatory advocacy project. Data were collected as part of the M&E process that was designed to capture learning from the process and to gain some insights into the project's value and impact. The data represents experiential knowledge, for instance, describing which aspects of the project were beneficial or challenging for those delivering or taking part in it. It is important to highlight that the evidence presented here is largely based on self-reporting and observations. This does not undermine the validity *per se*, but it is important to interpret the findings in the context of this specific project. While some of the benefits described here may hold true for wider participatory work on sexual violence, we do not purport that the findings are necessarily generalisable or transferable to other contexts.

- **Cross-cultural data analysis:** We acknowledge that there are specific issues with regard to collecting, analysing and

comparing data across different cultural and linguistic contexts. This is particularly relevant for a project which involved three non-English-speaking countries. Where staff had a good command of English (as a foreign language), partner organisations shared the data with us in English. Otherwise we relied on translation. We cannot exclude the possibility that, despite our best efforts and intentions, meaning got 'lost in translation' or accidentally distorted. All partner organisations were given the opportunity to review the report and check for accuracy. The authors take full responsibility for any remaining errors.

- **Recording data:** For various reasons, including limited resources and issues of consent, we were unable to audio-record and transcribe all of the data. With the exception of one of the M&E workshops with youth advocates, all fieldwork data were audio-recorded and documented through manual notes. One group did not feel comfortable with audio-recording so we took manual notes of the discussion, resulting in a less comprehensive and detailed record of the data.

- **Inconsistencies in self-reported data:** The SVLS sought to measure changes based on youth advocates' self-assessment collected at the start and end of the youth advocacy programme. Among the inherent limitations of the chosen methodology was the fact that the youth advocates interpreted the statements and the rating system in different ways based on their individual level of knowledge and experience. One group of youth advocates remarked that the descriptions of the ratings were confusing and counterintuitive. They suggested that grade 3 ('I don't know') should indicate the median point between 'I strongly agree' and 'I strongly disagree' so they used the scoring system accordingly. The data from the SVLS therefore only offers a rough indication of the youth advocates' development and progress. The self-assessment was as much an M&E tool for us as it was a useful exercise for partner organisations and the youth advocates to reflect on their journeys.

4 KEY PREREQUISITES, STEPS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING THE OUR VOICES TOO YOUTH ADVOCACY PROJECT

The following section briefly outlines our process of planning and delivering the participatory advocacy work with the youth advocates in Albania, Moldova and Serbia. It seeks to highlight key ingredients that we believe were critical success factors for the project.

4.1 PARTNERSHIP

Identifying suitable partners

The IC has learnt from past projects the importance of spending time identifying suitable partners to work with and to invest in these partnerships. During the first year of the OVTOO project, we carried out an extensive scoping exercise to gain a clearer understanding of how participation is currently understood and approached in the different country contexts. We specifically looked at how young people are supported and involved in decision-making. As part of the scoping, we identified a number of prospective partners and conducted face-to-face meetings in each country to learn about how they work with children and young people affected by sexual violence. We chose three partners who had the skills and capacity to support trauma-affected young people and who already had – or were eager to enhance – their understanding and experience of working in participatory ways.

In the context of the OVTOO project, the partnership was crucial for the partner organisations' ability to support children and young people to participate in ways which promote their wellbeing. Agencies that offer long-term support are well equipped to develop trusting relationships with service users. Reintegration agencies, in particular, frequently provide more than psychological support and crisis response but offer long-term, flexible services that adapt to service users' changing circumstances and fluctuating levels of need and commitment (De Bruin Cardoso *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, reintegration services often constitute a crucial link between children's and adult services. As such, the partner organisations possessed the necessary skills and knowledge and already had processes in place to risk assess potential participants, to provide support throughout, and to help children and young people make informed decisions about participation and whether follow up support was needed. Key assets which all three organisations brought to the project included their:

- Long history in working in the field of sexual violence

- Expertise in safeguarding vulnerable children and young people

- Deep understanding of sexual violence and resulting and associated trauma

- Willingness and ability to manage risk
- Organisational commitment to promoting participatory approaches
- Ethos of reflexive practice and learning; openness to new approaches
- Understanding and experience of advocacy work
- Ability to identify and facilitate access to relevant decision-makers.

At the same time, the three partner organisations have different foundations, perspectives and styles of working with their client groups:

- **NCCAP** in Moldova comes from a strong child protection perspective and primarily provides psychological and therapeutic support to survivors of child sexual abuse. Their client base tends to be younger than that of the other two partner organisations. Participation is a relatively new concept for them.

- **ATINA** in Serbia is a feminist, activist organisation, experimental in its approach and keen to become more service user-led; it works primarily with young women who have been trafficked.

- **D&E** in Albania has been providing long-term holistic care to survivors of domestic and sexual violence and trafficking for many years. It has some previous experience of involving service users in consultations and awareness raising.

This background information is important for understanding why the organisations at times took different approaches to working with the youth advocates.

Ethics as an integral, ongoing and collaborative process

Identifying and carefully thinking through the ethical and practical issues associated with engaging trauma-affected young people in advocacy work on sexual violence was the first and most important step in facilitating young people's safe participation in the project. Indeed, it remained a central theme and standing item of discussion throughout the duration of the project. Developing an ethical framework for the OVTOO youth advocacy project was therefore an ongoing, collaborative and staged process. Gaining a shared understanding of ethics across the project team was central to our approach. The IC produced a comprehensive ethics protocol for the project, which was presented and further refined with partners during a two-day inception meeting. The ethical protocol, which outlined the agreed minimum ethical standards for the project, formed part of the contracts signed by all parties. Reflecting the expertise across the project team, it was informed by a sound understanding of 'what works' in practice and research evidence, adding relevance and robustness.

Building the partnership

Due to limited time and resources, the majority of communication between the project team (consisting of IC and partner organisations' staff members), took place virtually, via Skype calls and email. However, we found that face-to-face meetings are indispensable in order to develop strong bonds across the project team. Particularly in the context of international projects spanning different cultures, norms and languages, face-to-face meetings and country visits offer important learning opportunities to see how partner organisations operate in their own environment and to develop a better understanding of the contexts in which they work.[3] Working together in a joint physical space enabled us to spend time together as a team and to progress work at key stages of the project in a highly task-oriented and time-efficient manner. Having opportunities to discuss, raise questions and ask for clarifications in an informal setting before or after meetings was important for facilitating trust and reducing miscommunication.

Based on our experience, we found that some of the key factors underpinning a successful partnership are:

- Developing a shared vision and understanding of key concepts and project aims
- Being committed to developing work jointly in partnership
- Timely and honest communication
- Investing time and resources for mutual visits and face-to-face meetings to get to know each other
- Creating a safe and supportive learning environment to raise questions and share challenges
- Fostering a culture of mutual respect and support to voice concerns and express fears
- Promoting reflexive practice
- Being flexible and open-minded.

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3 NOTE: This report was written when Covid-19 started to affect all countries involved. While the comments noting the value of face-to-face meetings remain valid, valuable lessons have been learned about communication online as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. The essential learning is about ensuring that communication continues, one way or another; that children and young people have supported access to online communication channels; and that after-care support remains available following online interactions.

4.2   PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Appointing and training facilitators

At the inception meeting, we agreed selection criteria for the staff who would be facilitating the participatory work with the youth advocates. Each partner organisation then appointed two members of staff as facilitators. All of the facilitators had a relevant degree in social work or psychology and significant experience of working directly with the target group. They had typically been working for the organisation for a few years as case managers, psychotherapists or project coordinators. They all:

- Had an understanding of sexual violence and its impact, underpinned by professional training and experience

- Were deeply committed to and enjoyed working with young people

- Were able to respond flexibly and adapt to change

- Were open-minded and willing to go outside of their comfort zones

- Were willing to be led by youth advocates' ideas and needs

- Were skilled at involving young people in thinking through risks

- Were able and willing to 'hold' risk when there were benefits for the youth advocates in doing so.

In November 2018, the facilitators convened in Belgrade, Serbia, for a three-day training workshop facilitated by IC staff. The facilitators were trained on how to deliver the 12-week participatory advocacy training programme ('the training programme') with the youth advocates.

Developing the methodology and resources

The IC developed a methodology underpinned by a range of project-specific resources to deliver the participatory advocacy work with young people. At the facilitator training workshop, IC staff provided guidance on how to use the resources and invited feedback from partners. In an effort to tailor the resources to the specific needs of the youth advocates and facilitators, they were developed in consultation with the partner organisations, who subsequently piloted them in their respective countries during the course of the project.

In addition to a toolkit outlining the methodology of the training programme (discussed on pp. 11-12) the following resources were developed to identify and mitigate risks associated with the work:

a) **Guidelines for recruiting youth advocates:** these were to be used in conjunction with the ethical protocol and outlined a range of key considerations in relation to selection criteria; guidance on sampling with respect to equality and diversity; a template risk assessment; and guidance on disclosures. The guidelines were based on the principle of 'maximising benefits and minimising harm' (ESRC, 2017). They

were designed to be used flexibly and to complement, rather than override, in-house expertise and processes partner organisations already had in place. A key requirement was that each youth advocate had a designated key worker whom they could contact before, during and after the programme if they had any concerns. Throughout the project, facilitators also made themselves available to talk to youth advocates individually during breaks or before/after sessions and followed up with phone calls where needed.

b) **Support structures:** there is currently little guidance available on how to safely involve trauma-affected young people in advocacy on sexual violence. Yet the broader evidence suggests that participatory work on sexual violence can be emotionally demanding for both participants and facilitators (Molnar *et al.*, 2017), requiring significant time, resources and relevant expertise (Warrington *et al.*, 2017). Thinking through how to provide adequate levels of support prompted us to allocate additional funds to the partner organisations for the specific purpose of offering ongoing and independent counselling to youth advocates and facilitators. This ensured that support was available on demand throughout the project.

c) **Risk register:** the project team compiled a risk register to address some of the specific ethical and practical concerns associated with putting the training programme with youth advocates into practice. This involved anticipating and thinking through risks and challenges that may emerge during different phases of the project. We created scenarios, mapping risks and ranking them according to levels of likelihood and severity, and discussed ways to mitigate and address them. The collaborative process reduced anxiety about delivering a new and complex piece of work and helped facilitators feel more prepared. The risk register is a living document that was continuously updated by the project team, documenting the challenges we expected or actually faced as well as the strategies that helped to avoid or manage them (see also Table 2, p.21). It is a valuable resource that will continue to serve as a repository of learning from this project.

The toolkit

The IC developed a project-specific toolkit to serve as framework for facilitating group discussions about sexual violence and children's rights and participation.[4]

It was designed to support group work involving participants with lived experience, recognising potential risks of re-traumatisation and triggering.

The content was conceptualised to divert attention away from the participants' personal experiences of abuse, and instead explored sexual violence as a global, societal problem. It was designed to equip young people with skills and knowledge

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4   To find out more about the toolkit you can listen to our podcast series available at: www.our-voices.org.uk/publications/podcast-series

to advocate on behalf of a wider constituency of children and young people affected by the issue.

The toolkit covered four key themes:

- **Part 1:** Creating a safe space (Warrington, 2020)
- **Part 2:** Sexual violence
- **Part 3:** Children's rights and participation
- **Part 4:** Advocacy

Part 1 offered a range of resources and safety exercises for creating a safe space; setting ground rules; and discussing the importance and limitations of confidentiality within the group setting. The tools introduced in Part 1, such as distancing techniques, third person methodologies and scenarios, were used throughout the training programme to help the participants explore issues sensitively, without requiring disclosure of personal experiences.

Rationale underpinning group work methodology

Research and clinical experience in the field of trauma studies suggests group work for those affected by trauma can be a helpful mode of support. The literature indicates that the group provides opportunities to develop connections, gain support and develop a clearer understanding of one's own experiences through understanding those of others (Foy *et al.*, 2001; Knight, 2006; Mendelsohn *et al.*, 2011; Avinger and Jones, 2007; Offerman *et al.*, 2017). Although group work addressing trauma tends to be led by trained therapists and is associated with clinical practice, Herman's (1997) staged model of recovery recognises that although recovery is not a linear process, there is a role for non-clinical interventions in stage 3, the final stage of recovery. As Mendelsohn *et al.* (2011:12) write, 'the third stage of recovery typically involves efforts to expand the individual's social network, range of activities and self-definition beyond that of trauma survivor; and may include nonclinical interventions such as increased community involvement and social activism'.

Outcomes of group work that are often cited include increased social support, 'normalising' of experiences, increased understanding of self, and feeling less alone, which may help to counter isolation and stigmatisation while promoting participants' self-efficacy and empowerment (Foy *et al.*, 2001; Knight, 2006; Mendelsohn *et al.*, 2011; Avinger and Jones, 2007; Offerman *et al.*, 2017). While 'empowerment' can be understood in many different ways, the concept broadly refers to the process by which individuals or groups gain mastery over issues that concern them (Rappaport, 1987). Empowerment theory recognises the multitude of levels of empowerment, including psychological and community empowerment (Gutierez *et al.*, 1995; Freire, 1970). Zimmerman (1995) suggests that empowerment is both a process *and* an outcome and there is value in both.

Empowerment-related outcomes have been associated with a host of psychological effects comprising key intrapersonal, interpersonal and behavioural aspects regarding, for instance, the perception of control in relevant domains; motivation to control; decision-making and problem-solving skills; critical understanding of the socio-political environment; and participatory behaviours (ibid).

What trauma theory and empowerment theory have in common is that they both recognise that it is not enough to address the individual consequences of oppression, powerlessness and abuse, but that one must also address the forces that enable and perpetuate oppression. They recognise the importance of 'power' and that individuals must have opportunities to exert power at both an individual and a structural level. Developing opportunities for individuals to address these aspects, and supporting them to do so, requires some key elements:

- **Peer-based group working:** research and scholarship on trauma and empowerment both outline the value of bringing together those with shared experience into a group setting.

- Space for **critical reflection and education** to gain knowledge, explore and discuss sexual violence, power and oppression: as Ledwith (2016:3) notes 'we cannot be agents of change without being agents of knowledge'. It is important that individuals develop a greater understanding of the problem that goes beyond their own experience. Having in-depth information about the dynamics and scale of sexual violence, and an understanding of how it affects society, provides a framework to enable individuals to see where and how their own experiences fit. This can help shift self-blame by providing a greater insight into why sexual violence occurs and shift the focus from the personal to the political.

- **Understanding rights:** it is important to understand what 'should' happen and what 'does' happen in reality. Exploring rights enables young people to think critically about injustices, including injustices that they have faced, but also what other young people experience on a daily basis. This can lead to a sense of frustration and anger. These (negative) feelings, can be a starting point to challenge those injustices and instil a desire to change the situation for others. This positions young people as 'rights-holders' rather than passive recipients of support.

- **Understanding our own capacity to bring about change:** informing young people of their rights to be involved in conversations and decisions that affect them. Discussing and learning about how others have influenced change can enable young people to see how they too have the power to make a difference.

- **Having opportunities and support to influence real change at political levels:** it is important that increased knowledge and motivation is followed by opportunities to plan and undertake activities to promote change. This involves having support and access to spaces where young people can advocate and use their expertise to bring about change.

The OVTOO youth advocacy project constitutes a prime opportunity to further explore the links between empowerment-based and trauma-informed approaches. Although small in scale, the project enabled us to test some aspects of the theories outlined above in three different Eastern European countries and to collect primary data on the perceived benefits of involving young people with lived experience in participatory advocacy on sexual violence.

4.3 IMPLEMENTATION

Recruiting youth advocates

Partner organisations contacted potential participants (former or current service users) personally (face-to-face) or via telephone, email or other digital means, each with the aim of recruiting five to eight youth advocates into the programme. This strategy was chosen to accommodate a potential attrition rate that is common in these types of projects.

For reasons explained earlier (see p. 10), D&E and ATINA contacted service users who were currently involved with the organisation in some way whereas NCCAP had to re-establish contact with former service users. As a result, NCCAP approached a significantly greater number of potential candidates than the other two organisations:

- **D&E** contacted ten young people. Seven initially agreed to take part in the project, although some later withdrew due to relocation or other logistical obstacles. The final group in Albania consisted of five youth advocates who stayed throughout the duration of the project.

- **ATINA** contacted 15 service users, some of whom experienced logistical barriers to joining the projects, such as living outside Belgrade; work or family commitments; or other responsibilities. The final group in Serbia comprised five youth advocates who had been involved with the organisation for more than two years, on average, and who stayed throughout the duration of the project.

- **NCCAP** contacted over 70 former service users who had previously been involved with the organisation for a minimum of two years. 27 potential candidates were interviewed. Ten candidates accepted the invitation to join the project, however, some subsequently withdrew. The final group in Moldova consisted of five youth advocates. One young person dropped out during the project (see p. 23).

The youth advocates

All of the participants recruited into the project were female, aged between 18 and 26, and current or former service users of the partner organisations. The duration, types and levels of service they had received varied. Some had been living in shelters or alternative accommodation provided by the organisations while others lived independently or with their parents, partners or families. Many were currently in education or employment and some had young children. All youth advocates had a fair level of literacy although educational backgrounds and previous experiences of being involved in participatory projects varied.

The majority had experienced (or were still experiencing) different types of marginalisation, on the basis of their gender, religion, ethnicity or presumed social status. Most were dealing with some challenges in their lives. These included finding accommodation; being a single parent; managing strained family or intimate relationships; loss of a close family member; or living estranged from their families. Many had been through long and difficult court processes in relation to the sexual violence, trafficking and/or other abuse they had experienced.

All were motivated and committed to using their experiences to bring about positive change for other young people. They contributed a range of skills and strengths to the project, such as:

- Courage

- Curiosity

- Creativity

- Flexibility

- Enthusiasm

- Sensitivity to social justice; interest in children's rights

- An activist spirit; a strong desire to help others and affect change

- First-hand experience of the 'system' and professional responses
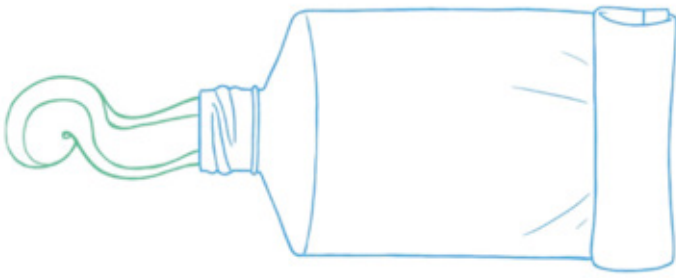
Maximilien Wright @maximilien.wright1

Implementing the participatory advocacy training programme

Five young people took part in the 12-week training programme in each country. Following the curriculum of the toolkit, the facilitators started by working with the youth advocates on setting ground rules for group work and agreeing boundaries around confidentiality.[5] The youth advocates took part in the 'toothpaste' exercise, an activity illustrating that toothpaste, similar to a disclosure, once squeezed out is nigh impossible to put back into the tube. After creating a safe space, the youth advocates explored different types of sexual violence and issues around consent. As part of this session, they watched and discussed 'Tea Consent',[6] an animated video which makes analogies between forcing someone to drink a cup of tea and to have sex.

In the next session, focusing on children's rights and participation, the youth advocates took part in an activity called the 'power walk' to gain a deeper understanding of intersecting forms of marginalisation and discrimination. During this exercise, the youth advocates were assigned different characters and were asked to respond to different scenarios by taking a step forward or staying put, depending on their character's individual circumstances. The aim of the activity is to illustrate that some persons have greater difficulties accessing their rights than others. The final part of the programme focused on advocacy and facilitated understanding of young people's role in calling for social change. In this session, the youth advocates developed a problem and solution tree to identify and map key issues for children and young people affected by sexual violence in their countries. Each group ranked these in order of importance and developed ideas regarding possible solutions.

Identifying advocacy topics

Although the youth advocates discussed a range of pertinent problems, reaching consensus about the most salient issue for children and young people affected by sexual violence was surprisingly straightforward. Poignantly, all of the groups independently chose more or less the same advocacy topic. How victims/survivors of sexual violence are viewed and treated by first contact professionals was identified as the key problem in all three settings.

'We think that there are a lot of problems here… but the issue that touched us… [we] thought immediately about the police… we think the voice [of the victim/survivor] doesn't go to the right place, that's why… we thought that was important. And we want that these cases… get the right support and assistance and not to be victimised.'
(Youth advocate, Albania)

'Police, medics, social assistance, so actually I know that social assistants are afraid to deal with this… they are scared to interfere with that, but the police sometimes, they just do not want to take responsibility, they don't want to dirty their hands.'
(Youth advocate, Moldova)

'They [professionals] need to see[7] the people they are affecting by their decision-making.'
(Youth advocate, Serbia)

Each group developed advocacy messages, identified target audiences and designed a range of corresponding advocacy activities (see Table 5, p. 41). For example, in Albania the focus was on improving responses from first contact police officers to victims/survivors of sexual violence. The youth advocates wrote and submitted an official statement to the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Interior and National Coordinator for Anti-Trafficking in Albania. In the statement, they outlined how victims/survivors are treated by first contact police officers and made recommendations about improving responses. The youth advocates designed information materials for police stations and organised information sessions with police officers on how to engage with victims/survivors of sexual violence. They developed a short film called 'Break the Silence'[8] and facilitated information sessions about sexual violence with other young people.

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5   See Warrington (2020) for more details on the activities undertaken as part of 'creating a safe space'.

6   To view the video, visit: www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQbei5JGiT8

7   In the context of the quote, 'seeing' implies that young people affected by trafficking for sexual exploitation often do not feel heard and properly understood by professionals.

8   To view the video, visit: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgEA550aUNY&feature=youtu.be

In Moldova, the youth advocates wanted to sensitise a wide range of professionals who may come into contact with child victims of sexual abuse. They jointly wrote a powerful script for a short film called 'Letter to the Judge',[9] which tells the story of a survivor's experience of coming before a judge as a child and recounts the opportunities professionals missed to listen and respond to the abuse. The film, which was developed as a composite case study integrating aspects of the youth advocates' own stories, was launched at a high-level national event attended by key stakeholders from different ministries. Drawing on the youth-led advocacy activities, 50 child protection professionals were trained on how to take statements from child victims of sexual violence.

In Serbia, the youth advocates organised high-level meetings with the National Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and representatives from the Centre for Social Work to discuss the treatment of victims/survivors. They also delivered information sessions about victim-centred responses to a range of professional groups and institutions. As part of a wider awareness-raising campaign, the youth advocates produced and distributed materials, such as posters, postcards, T-shirts and bags with positive messages promoting core values such as freedom, non-discrimination, equality and children's rights. Targeting peers, the youth advocates organised various events around the country to deliver information sessions about sexual violence and trafficking.

More information about the advocacy activities can be found on the Our Voices website (visit: www.our-voices.org.uk).

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9 To view the video, visit: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dw-BhWfkeDo

5   FINDINGS

5.1   CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

This section presents and discusses our findings: first, in relation to the key challenges encountered during the project by the facilitators and the organisations supporting them (Table 2); and second, in relation to the key challenges faced by the youth advocates (Table 3) during the project. Next to each challenge, we list key resources and strategies that were helpful in mitigating them. The findings are subsequently explained in greater detail to provide more context.

5.1.1   OVERVIEW OF KEY CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR PROFESSIONALS

Challenges for facilitators and organisations were largely clustered around two themes:

a) Recruitment, and

b) Group work

Table 2:   Overview of key challenges and strategies for professionals

CHALLENGES	STRATEGIES USED BY PROFESSIONALS
Recruitment	
Determining 'readiness' of youth advocates	■ Utilising recruitment guidelines ■ Applying professional judgement ■ Being flexible ■ Involving youth advocates in risk, needs and strengths assessments
Recruiting youth advocates	■ Having established trusting relationships between youth advocates and staff/organisations ■ Clearly communicating the purpose of the project, the process, participants' role and availability of support ■ Investing time and effort to contact and follow up with candidates ■ Recognising and addressing individual barriers to participation, e.g. providing childcare during sessions ■ Working around young people's other commitments, schedules and needs ■ Paying youth advocates a small wage for their contribution; covering expenses for travel and subsistence
Ensuring voluntary and informed consent	■ Explaining consent – giving young people opportunities to refuse, change their minds and opt out at different stages ■ Being mindful of current and former service users' emotional ties and feelings towards the organisation and staff that may affect their ability to say 'no' ■ Being sensitive to non-verbal cues and behaviours communicating discomfort or lack of consent
Getting the group right	■ Selecting young people who bring relevant skills, potential and motivation to the project ■ Recognising the specific competencies of each young person ■ Identifying young people who would work well together as a group ■ Balancing group cohesion and diversity

Table 2: *continued*

CHALLENGES	STRATEGIES USED BY PROFESSIONALS
Group work	
Setting up the group	■ Accommodating different personalities, levels of understanding, education and previous experiences ■ Recognising and harnessing each youth advocate's unique strengths ■ Creating a safe space ■ Building group cohesion, promoting a culture of non-discrimination and mutual support ■ Countering 'hierarchies of oppression'[10] by promoting a non-judgemental culture
Re-traumatisation/triggering	■ Consulting with youth advocates' key workers to understand individual vulnerabilities and potential triggers ■ Using the risk registry to identify potential risks and strategies to mitigate them ■ Using distancing techniques ■ Providing ongoing (on-demand) support for youth advocates and allocating time and budget for this ■ Recognising risk of vicarious trauma for staff and responding by organising regular supervision and building in support/counselling ■ Having regular de-briefs with managers and the wider team to encourage reflexive practice
Confidentiality/sharing personal information in the group setting	■ Using 'vignettes' and 'third person' methodology techniques to assist young people to share thoughts and perspectives ■ Reminding youth advocates of the purpose of the group ■ Mobilising peer support systems within the group
Managing issues around stigma, anonymity and representation	■ Referring to the ethics protocol and recruitment guidance ■ Discussing implications of losing anonymity with youth advocates ■ Identifying and mitigating risks of further stigmatisation ■ Facilitating discussions with youth advocates about how they want to be represented in relation to their own experiences of sexual violence ■ Preparing target audiences before meetings with youth advocates to clarify purpose and content of the meetings and to set boundaries
Shifting from therapeutic/case work to facilitating group work on advocacy – addressing the blurred boundaries between these roles	■ Setting clear boundaries and reminding youth advocates that facilitators assumed a different role from case workers or psychotherapists in the context of the project ■ Offering counselling outside the programme
Managing expectations	■ Explaining to youth advocates that social change does not happen overnight ■ Being clear about the remit of youth advocates' role and responsibilities
Protecting from negative experiences	■ Using the risk register to identify potential risks and strategies to mitigate them ■ Anticipating possible outcomes, including critical responses from target audiences ■ Devising back-up plans for different scenarios ■ Sensitising target audiences to the issue of sexual violence ■ Getting comfortable with a degree of risk and uncertainty ■ Providing spaces to express feelings of fear and anxiety ■ Providing ongoing support for youth advocates and facilitators ■ Organising de-briefs and space for joint reflection

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10 'Hierarchy of oppression' refers to a ranking or hierarchy according to the negative effects or disadvantage experienced by oppressed communities and/or individuals. Resulting in 'competing' systems of oppression, for example in relation to their 'victimhood' or other aspects of identities such as race, gender, age, minority ethnic or religious background, sexual identify, socioeconomic status or social class.

We now elaborate on the bullet points above to provide more context to the findings.

a) Recruitment of youth advocates

Trusting relationships underpin effective recruitment

There was a degree of anxiety among partners in relation to how to approach potential candidates; how to communicate the purpose and sensitive nature of the project; how to frame the potential involvement of the person contacted; and about how young people would respond. Some young people were suspicious and did not understand why they were approached; others were unsure about joining the project. At the same time, many of the young people responded very positively. They reported feeling flattered, proud, happy and enthusiastic at the prospect of working on the project with the organisations. The majority of the youth advocates later told us that they joined the project because they trusted the organisation.

Recruitment choices had to balance considerations of safety and 'readiness' with a commitment to inclusion. This meant that new service users were not able to participate at this stage:

'What we didn't want to do, we didn't want to include people who were in the programme less than a year, so we made that structure, and we even told those girls, "This is the project", and that we would like to see them in the phases, but because we decided for the girls who [were] less than a year in the programme, because they do have their own problems, and we didn't want to put them in the situation.'

(Project co-ordinator, Serbia)

Consent

Whilst trust facilitated recruitment, we had some concerns about how potential feelings of loyalty, gratitude or indebtedness towards the service provider might affect young people's ability to give voluntary consent. We were mindful that some service users might join the project to 'repay' the organisation or to please their worker. The partner organisations gave young people opportunities to opt out in subtle ways, both verbal and non-verbal. This was easier for staff who knew potential candidates well and could easily read their signals.

'I had a feeling that they just said "yes" initially from politeness, they were not capable to say "no", and they actually didn't say exactly, "No, I refuse to participate", but they had some avoiding type of behaviour, either they wouldn't pick up the phone, or they would pick up the phone and say, "I'm busy now, I will get back to you", so they did everything just to show that they don't want [to participate in the project], but without saying no.'

(Project co-ordinator, Moldova)

Determining 'readiness'

The young person's state of wellbeing was a key criterion in determining suitability to join the project. Informally, this was often described as 'readiness' or being in the 'right place'.

One of the youth advocates in Albania explained that, for her, being able to ask for help indicated that a young person was ready to engage in wider participatory work on sexual violence. Asking for help presupposes that a survivor is no longer caught up in a state of coercion and has regained a sense of control and emotional and psychological freedom and can critically reflect on the abusive experience.

For the NGO in Serbia, key criteria for assessing readiness included how long the young person had been in the organisation's programme; how well they had integrated their trauma; that they could independently take care of their own needs; and that court proceedings had ended. Psychologically, 'readiness' can refer to a stage in the recovery process at which the survivor has integrated the traumatic experiences – at least to a degree that makes it possible to gain some emotional distance from the traumatic event. Facilitators in Moldova explained that, in the context of a psychological assessment framework, readiness was linked to regaining a sense of emotional stability in the aftermath of abuse.

However, one youth advocate from Serbia challenged professional assumptions about posttraumatic emotional stability as a static concept that could be measured through an assessment.

'For me surviving is every day, not 10, 11 days. When I wake up I'm surviving, every day. It's not that I have rehabilitation therapy, it will stay with me, it's not going to change. When I say emotionally stable it is not to be addicted to drugs like in one moment. And then we will feel responsible and maybe it's because of the project, it's normal not to be emotionally stable when you experience the things you did. I don't know any survivor that is emotionally stable. I have anxiety, I have a problem with big groups, I have a problem with public speaking, I have a problem with strangers touching me… I can be ok, I'm emotionally stable.'

(Youth advocate, Serbia)

As noted previously, recovery from sexual violence is not a linear process with a clearly defined end-line. Instead, it is a highly individual process that can fluctuate, as can a person's subjective sense of wellbeing. A survivor may be resilient in one moment but feel vulnerable in another and this may not always follow a logical or predictable pattern. The project team recognised that trauma-related mental health challenges may persist and should not per se preclude a young person's participation. As such, we grappled with a number of key questions:

- What does 'emotional stability' mean?
- Can it be measured and, if so, what is the threshold at which a person is deemed ready to join the project?
- How do we define 'wellbeing' holistically and account for fluctuations that are an integral and inevitable part of life, not just for trauma-affected populations?
- How do we weigh up the potential risks and benefits of exclusion/inclusion for each individual candidate?

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Given that the youth advocates were risk assessed through the partner organisations' existing assessment frameworks, there were variations in the thresholds that were applied to assess whether a young person was 'ready' to join the project. Organisations used their professional judgement during recruitment, considering both the potential risks and benefits of inclusion and exclusion. We have learned from the joint discussions that assessment frameworks based on child protection models, which are commonly used in therapeutic work with younger children, tend to be more risk-averse than frameworks that are underpinned by holistic, ecological models such as those drawing from feminist/empowerment ideologies. NCCAP, for example, had high thresholds for inclusion but on reflection revised their assessments and agreed to ensure a high level of support to facilitate engagement:

'When we did the risk assessment, we accepted one [into the group], all the rest wouldn't meet the requirements, only one was stable enough from the interview… We accepted to take them into the group but we took responsibility to provide support to them.'
(Facilitator, Moldova)

The project constituted a valuable opportunity to critically reflect on how we assess and manage risk. Every organisation and staff member travelled a noticeable distance in this respect during the course of the project. There was a realisation across the project team that not every young person who might benefit from being included in the project would meet the high thresholds outlined in our recruitment guidelines and in the partner organisations' existing risk assessment frameworks. Through discussions, we recognised that flexibility and support were two crucial prerequisites for involving young people who might have a harder time to engage due to a range of challenges they might be experiencing in their lives.

A key lesson was that there is value in balancing risk assessments with considerations about young people's strengths and resilience. Wherever possible, partner organisations sought to involve the young person concerned in conversations about the implications of their participation in the project, to actively engage them in thinking through potential risks, and to identify support and resources needed to enable their safe participation.

Diversity and equal opportunities

Despite good intentions to include participants from diverse backgrounds, our attempts to recruit young people with disabilities and young men were unsuccessful. While the recruitment process attracted some candidates who were male and/or had a disability, none of them entered the project. Reasons varied and were sometimes linked to a person's changing circumstances and relocation. In the end, partner organisations had to make thoughtful and pragmatic recruitment choices. We recognise, however, that engaging marginalised groups in participatory work remains an area for development requiring further capacity-building at organisational level.

Remuneration

As part of developing the ethical protocol for the project, we considered the potential advantages and disadvantages of offering payment to youth advocates. In terms of advantages, we felt that a monetary contribution in addition to reimbursing travel and other expenses was a way to make up for any potential losses of earnings incurred during the time spent on project-related training and duties. Considering the age range of the participants, paying youth advocates a small wage appeared to be a more appropriate means of remuneration than the payment in kind frequently offered to younger children involved in participatory initiatives. We hoped that the gesture also carried symbolic value that would help to acknowledge existing power differentials and inequalities between ourselves as paid professionals and the youth advocates. In the context of participation, children – and to a perhaps lesser degree young people – are often expected to work 'for free'. Participants may typically receive a token of appreciation for their contribution, such as a voucher or certificate. Due to their lower 'status' and relative lack of formal education and professional experience in comparison to older adults, children and young people have little leverage to request much in return for giving up their time and expertise.

In the context of the OVTOO youth advocacy project, the remuneration was intended to demonstrate that the youth advocates' contributions have real value, which in the adult professional world is often expressed in monetary terms. We wanted the youth advocates to have freedom and choice about how to spend their earnings from the project. Many of the youth advocates appreciated this decision: some reported that the remuneration made them feel *'more important… more like staff'*. One youth advocate in Moldova told us that the money she had received through the project enabled her to fulfil a lifelong dream – to acquire passports for herself and her son which would allow her to travel abroad in the future.

Considering the potential disadvantages of this approach, we recognise that offering remuneration in the context of children's participation can be problematic. Because our project focused on sexual violence, remuneration was a particularly contentious issue given the central 'exchange' element of abusive and exploitative dynamics. In the case of one candidate, offering a wage elicited an adverse reaction. The young man who had initially agreed to join the project withdrew consent when he learned about the remuneration. Staff later reflected that this may have triggered painful memories of having previously received money in exchange for sex. The young man decided to retain the option to be informally involved in the project but no longer wanted to participate in the training programme.

While we recognise the potentially negative implications of our decision, we feel that, overall, the benefits of remunerating youth advocates outweighed the drawbacks. Considering the socio-economic contexts in which the work took place, we believe it was the right decision to offer participants a wage, given that many of the youth advocates have limited income sources to provide for themselves and sometimes their children.

Key lessons about recruitment:

- **'Readiness'** can mean different things.

- Organisations have different approaches, comfort levels, and capacities to **assess** and **manage risk**.

- It is helpful to acknowledge how our underlying assumptions inform recruitment decisions.

- There are always risks and benefits that need to be weighed up against each other.

- Young people can often be **more resilient than you think** but they need **tailored and flexible support** to be able to participate safely.

- **Trust** is paramount; young people need to feel valued, respected and safe to participate and share their views on a highly sensitive topic.

- Attuned professionals understand that young people may refuse or withdraw **consent** in subtle and non-verbal ways. Consent is an **ongoing process** offering participant opportunities to change their minds and opt out at different stages.

b) Group work

Catering to different strengths, levels of ability and experiences

In addition to assessing each candidate's suitability for the project, organisations had to consider the composition of the group as a whole. Partner organisations approached young people who they could see working well with others and with whom staff already had established a good rapport.

Across and within the three groups, youth advocates had different educational backgrounds, histories – including in relation to abuse – and life circumstances. Some of the facilitators had concerns about how these differences would play out in the group setting. A key question was how the training programme could be delivered so it would not be too complex for some and too boring for others:

'One of our worries was the fact that not all youth advocates had the same level of education. Through this opportunity to practice all together, this kind of worry disappeared as they supported each other.'
(Facilitator, Albania)

'We were not sure if they had the necessary cognitive skills and understanding. But they managed. We were surprised at how well they did during the programme.'
(Facilitator, Moldova)

Facilitators' skills and experience, underpinned by the toolkit, helped to create a safe and non-judgemental group environment that enabled all youth advocates to participate at their own pace and on their own terms.

> *'Actually, we felt very good [as a group] because we supplemented each other, so we are different, but we kind of all worked.'*
>
> (Youth advocate, Moldova)

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Countering hierarchies of oppression

As youth advocates' experiences of sexual violence and marginalisation differed, there was a potential for 'hierarchies of oppression' to form in the group setting that might potentially make some participants feel less entitled to participate in the project than others. Some facilitators noted that there were tendencies among one of the youth advocate groups to view commercial sexual exploitation as the 'worst' form of abuse:

> *'They think: "Ok, so you've been raped once but I have been raped a thousand times." We work very hard at this as an organisation. To make them understand that every person's pain is unique, individual and valid. The pain this person is feeling isn't any less than your pain.'*
>
> (Facilitator, Serbia)

> *'What we noticed during our work is that from time to time they can be very judgemental to each other, like if you didn't survive sexual exploitation you're less victim than the others...'*
>
> (Facilitator, Serbia)

The partner organisations had laid important ground work with respect to promoting a non-judgemental culture fostering mutual respect, empathy and support among service users. Validating personal experiences was an integral aspect of this:

> *'Each person is living their own worst nightmare.'*
>
> (Youth advocate, Serbia)

> *'It takes more than four meetings, just to go through that, that everybody [understands] "whatever happened to you happened to you, and you have all the rights to feel that that is the worst thing in the world."'*
>
> (Facilitator, Serbia)

Is it worth noting that while an awareness of power dynamics in relation to experiences of abuse is important in group work where young people share their experiences, it may not necessarily be an issue in other contexts where young people do not share their stories.

Managing disclosures in the context of participatory group work

The aim of the OVTOO youth advocacy training programme was to equip young people with lived experience with skills to advocate on behalf of others affected by the issue. As explained earlier, the project team was mindful to design and implement the toolkit in a way that would not require youth advocates to share their personal histories of abuse. At the same time, we acknowledged from the start that the content, involving conversations about sexual violence and children's

rights, could trigger painful memories and that personal experiences of abuse and discrimination were likely to be disclosed within the group setting. Clearly, the fact that we recruited youth advocates *because* they had personal experience of the issue but set boundaries in relation to sharing personal information bore an inherent tension. Facilitators commented that this was one of most challenging aspects of facilitating group work in the project.

> *'The most important difficulty was the fact that we had to focus here on the advocacy project and not on trauma. Our role was to speak as less as possible about trauma, but the group participants did it on the contrary, they always wanted to put up their traumatic experiences.'*
>
> (Facilitator, Moldova)

As mentioned previously, the training programme started with a range of exercises, including the 'toothpaste' exercise (see p. 14), to explore the importance of confidentiality in group settings. Perhaps because of different organisational cultures, this issue was managed differently within the three groups. Overall, two distinct working models emerged:

- a predominantly **'task-based' model** where youth advocates primarily focused on developing their advocacy activities; and

- a **'relationship-based'** model in which peer support played an equally central, if not more important, role.

In practice, both working models overlapped in all groups to some degree.

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Two of the partners took active measures to minimise group disclosures.

> *'The toothpaste exercise was very good. When people started sharing [personal information] during the programme… we kept saying: "remember the toothpaste activity!" and then we all remembered [the importance of confidentiality].'*
>
> (Facilitator, Albania)

> *'We tried to avoid group disclosures… the activities were pretty effective, for example, keeping in mind the toothpaste activity. Youth advocates were reminding us… some moments they were feeling something more but they were careful not to disclose personal things and to have individual meetings with the facilitator who is always available. We were able to manage.'*
>
> (Facilitator, Moldova)

> *'I believe the role of the facilitator is to take care of the security and safety when they talk about their experience to stabilise and limit it somehow… setting boundaries.'*
>
> (Facilitator, Moldova)

One group, however, had a slightly different attitude towards disclosures. In the context of this group, sharing personal information was seen to facilitate closeness between youth advocates and offered a strategy to pre-empt *'gossiping or guessing the stories of individual group members'* (Facilitator, Serbia). While not actively encouraged, youth advocates were not stopped when they wanted to share how particular topics covered by the programme related to their own experiences. In this specific context, facilitators and youth advocates highlighted the importance of *'not shutting people down emotionally'* (Youth advocate, Serbia).

> *'With this group we work with survivors. Sometimes you only have one opportunity and one moment to hear part of their story, maybe not all, two parts, so I think that from my experience it's important to catch those moments… It's very difficult and if you close that maybe you won't get a second chance.'*
>
> (Facilitator, Serbia)

The experience of implementing the project suggests that we need a more nuanced understanding of the contexts in which personal information is shared and the rationales underpinning disclosures in a group setting. Sharing personal information may be an indication that facilitators and group members have succeeded in creating a space in which participants feel safe to share and seek support. It may also reflect that victims/survivors have reached a point in the recovery process where they feel ready to disclose and critically reflect on their personal stories.

'The second assumption is that probably they [youth advocates] already overcame their acute trauma, so now they're more capable to share what they went through in words, and when somebody's capable to verbalise some experiences this is a good sign that the pain is bearable already, they can support it.'
(Facilitator, Moldova)

Echoing our earlier discussion exploring the rationales for integrating group work as part of 'empowerment' in the later stages of trauma recovery, youth advocates repeatedly stressed the value of working with other survivors in a group. Some described the group dynamic as 'healing'.

While the majority of disclosures were purposeful and managed well within the group setting, there were occasional incidents where a youth advocate shared personal information 'on the spur of the moment' that required a higher level of intervention and mitigation by staff.

'Everything started at the more advanced stage of the group work, when we were already talking about the scenario of the film, so after we had decided what the product [would] be. She [one of the youth advocates] initially wanted to show her story in this documentary film, she took the floor and disclosed her story from A to Z, but for you to understand, in all the details… [description of the abuse] and she thought that this should be the scenario of the movie, so we discussed about that, we tried to manage the situation as good as possible, then she said she doesn't feel well, she feels sick, or something, and she left, then we followed a long period of phone calls, she called [name of worker] drunk or something, they had all kinds of discussions, then we lost her.'
(Facilitator, Moldova)

Although the young person received immediate counselling from her psychotherapist at NCCAP, she decided to leave the programme after the incident because she felt distressed and *'no longer wanted to deal with the topic of sexual violence'* (Facilitator, Moldova). Facilitators noted that the young person was managing other challenges in her life at the time.

'This girl, this lady withdrew from this formal group, then she went to [name of country], some things happened in her life, then she asked us to get her back in the group, so she keeps in touch with the group, she expresses her opinion, so she participates actually as a [remote] consultant.'
(Facilitator, Moldova)

Staff spoke individually with each youth advocate followed by a group discussion in an effort to mitigate the impact of the incident on the other participants. The group invited the young person who had disclosed to stay involved in the project to a degree of her choosing and stayed connected with her via social media.

Accessing support

A dedicated budget was allocated to provide flexible and ongoing support to youth advocates and facilitators throughout the duration of the project. Support was taken up by three youth advocates and one facilitator in Albania and by two youth advocates in Serbia. In Moldova, some of the youth advocates requested additional counselling following the sessions but later changed their minds. Some youth advocates chose to speak to one of the facilitators during or after sessions instead.

We interpret the fact that young people took up support as a positive sign rather than as a reason for concern. Given the content of the programme, emotional responses were part of the course. The important lesson was to anticipate this, to provide additional support ahead of time, and to communicate that there is no stigma or problem attached to accessing it.

Issues around representation and stigma

Issues relating to representation and stigma surfaced as a key challenge for facilitators throughout the project. Questions of how youth advocates wanted to be represented internally (inside the project) and externally, to target audiences for example, and associated concerns over further stigmatisation, had to be considered and managed very carefully.

During recruitment, partner organisations invited current or former service users to become 'consultants', 'advisors', or 'youth advocates' as these titles have positive connotations: they focus on young people's strengths and on what they have to offer rather than on their 'survivor' status. Given that sexual violence is a highly sensitive and stigmatised issue in most societies, some of the youth advocates understandably did not want to be identified as service users. For this reason, some kept their involvement in the project a secret from their partner, family or friends.

'…Prefers to be presented as a consultant… Worries that her husband and his family might learn about her abuse-related experience.'
(Risk assessment, Moldova)

'…Wants to keep her involvement in the project confidential. Concerns over partner's jealousy.'
(Risk assessment, Moldova)

After discussing the issue with the groups, the partner organisations confirmed that youth advocates wanted to be described as 'survivors' (rather than 'victims') of violence internally and for the purpose of this report. Externally, participants were introduced as 'youth advocates', 'consultants' or 'advisors' to the organisation. While we recognise the ambiguity of this approach, the need to ensure confidentiality represents one of the inherent tensions of working with survivors of sexual violence, alongside those arising from stigma.

Due to the wide range of advocacy activities and audiences targeted, the youth advocates had to be introduced differently to different stakeholders. Although the measures taken varied depending on the advocacy activities, the partner organisations took a range of steps to safeguard youth advocates. A key first step was to 'frame' interactions by preparing relevant stakeholders before meetings with the youth advocates, by letter, telephone call or face-to-face conversation explaining the project and the purpose of the meetings. Stakeholders were informed that the youth advocates would be making recommendations on how to improve professional responses to victims/survivors of sexual violence. In some cases, organisations specifically chose stakeholders with whom they had already built a good relationship and who were likely respond sensitively. In other cases, organisations made efforts to sensitise stakeholders to the issue of sexual violence and set clear boundaries in relation to the topics that would be covered during the meeting. Audience members were instructed not to ask youth advocates any personal questions. Facilitators also reiterated that the youth advocates were not representing themselves but delivering advocacy messages on behalf of a wider constituency of children and young people. In an effort to protect anonymity and confidentiality, target audiences were not informed that the youth advocates were themselves survivors of sexual violence.

'[the girls are] not ready to present themselves as survivors…'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

Different roles for facilitators

The facilitators involved in the OVTOO youth advocacy project had typically been working for the organisation for a few years as case managers, psychotherapists or project coordinators. This had advantages and disadvantages. Case managers have already established relationships with service users, facilitating trust, a key prerequisite for engagement. They also tend to know their clients' histories, understand their vulnerabilities, and can often anticipate emotional triggers, which helps them to pre-empt and manage difficult situations.

'We were thinking about what are the benefits [of appointing case managers as facilitators], so we saw the two sides of it, one side will be that we decided to put more experienced case workers into situations of being facilitators… they know all of the girls, so we saw the benefits… there wasn't a need for them [youth advocates] to explain to them [facilitators] their situation all over again, they already knew everything about them… they saw them in their most fragile moments, so they can always put a light on how they progress from that situation to this situation, so this is why we decided to have two of them in this situation… But it will be necessary for them to put the boundary: "I was your case manager during some time, but right now we are in a different situation."'
(Project co-ordinator, Serbia)

While some of the facilitators had previously been working directly with some or all of the youth advocates, the partner organisations made sure that none of the youth advocates' cases were managed by the facilitators at the time of the project. This had been an important consideration when developing ethical guidelines for the project. We felt that not appointing case managers as facilitators would help to delineate facilitators' role as part of the project and create more equity in their relationships with individual youth advocates.

Although establishing a clear distinction between 'case managers' and 'facilitators' was helpful, switching roles was not always straightforward. Case work entails giving individual young people targeted attention; group work requires a very different skill set, including managing group dynamics, training and facilitating group work.

'It is [a] really, really different role for us, and I think that we have big experience from the period, the role that we are a case manager, and we managed that better… but it's hard when we are in the role as facilitator because we know a lot about them, we know everything about their private life, about the situation of exploitation and violence, and about court procedure, and we are with them every day and every moment of the reintegration process, we go with them to court, to health physician, to school, to find a job, prepare them for every new role in their life, and we also know a lot about their families, if they have families, husband, boyfriends, etc, and it's really a challenge for us to put them in a new role, and also us in a new role.'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

Some facilitators noted that they needed to develop new strategies in order to adapt their approach to the different parameters of participatory advocacy work.

'It was difficult, because what we are doing usually is psychotherapy groups, so a psychotherapy group has a very clear framework, a very clear structure, we know exactly what to do, we have one or two meetings per week, and then we process the emotions, we process the feelings of our beneficiaries, but this kind of group had to be dealt with in a totally different approach, because the girls were different, the principles for working with this group were different, and sometimes we had this feeling of personal ineffectiveness, inefficiency, because actually it was different.'

(Facilitator, Moldova)

The shift required facilitators and youth advocates to recognise the purpose and limits of both roles. Setting new boundaries was not always easy.

'For this project it's… really a challenge for us to put the line: "In the morning I'm a case manager and you can speak with me about that problem, and in this moment, from workshop and for peer group, from two to five for example, I am here to [facilitate the participatory advocacy project]".'

(Facilitator, Serbia)

Facilitating youth-led advocacy required staff whose daily job entails safeguarding in one way or another to adopt a different mindset. Some noted that they intuitively wanted to protect youth advocates from negative experiences, for example, being asked inappropriate questions by target audiences. In some respects, however, the participatory project reinforced a gradual transition from victimhood to agency, which is an integral part of reintegration services.

'It [working with case managers in the context of a participatory project] can be a trigger for them [youth advocates] also to be in the same situation with the same people, then you can easily come back to the beneficiary who needs your help and your support. But it's also the constant process in our programme, it's constant process of giving back the responsibility to the person, because when somebody comes into the programme as, just identified as a victim of human trafficking, who is in trauma, you are responsible for most of the things, and you are guiding the person, and you are taking care of the person for some period of time, and then you're giving back the responsibility. So this is why we decided to do it like this, not to hire anybody just for facilitation, or somebody who has never worked with a beneficiary in that way.'

(Facilitator, Serbia)

There were times during the project when facilitators felt outside their comfort zones. But the process showed that facilitators – with the support of their organisations – were able to develop effective strategies to overcome a range of unexpected challenges that emerged along the way.

'Risks are everywhere, not only in our professional life, in our daily life, and the fact that we identify some risks at the very beginning does not in no way mean that we will not get involved, but we will try to reframe from participating, it's just to set some strategies.'

(Facilitator, Moldova)

Corroborating with the existing evidence on the ethical engagement of children and young people in participatory research on sexual violence (Bovarnick *et al.*, 2018), the project showed that participatory projects involving a high degree of risk need to be facilitated by trained staff who are experienced and skilled at working with trauma-affected groups. Participatory work requires a considerable amount of time and resources. Facilitators, in turn, need support and managerial backing enabling them to 'hold' risk. Having organisational structures including referral pathways and safeguarding/child protection policies in place is a vital prerequisite.

During the course of the project, there was a notable shift in facilitators' perspectives; many noted that the youth advocates dealt with challenges much better than they had expected. This underlines the value of adopting strengths-based approaches (Saleeby, 1996; Shriver, 2008) that recognise a young person's inherent competence and resilience. However, it also requires professionals to get comfortable with 'holding' risks when there are benefits in doing so and supporting service users to exert choice and control.

Key lessons from group work

- Creating a **safe space** is an essential first step.

- Identifying **strengths and weaknesses** of the participants can significantly improve the group dynamics and, as a result, the group work.

- Discussing **boundaries around confidentiality** is critical. This should include conversations about the implications of sharing personal information and staff obligations in relation to safeguarding responsibilities. It is likely that personal stories will be shared in group settings. Organisations need to anticipate this and **devise a plan** on how to support staff to respond swiftly and appropriately.

- Clarifying issues around **representation** is key. Participants' views on how they would like to be introduced/described may shift as work progresses and change depending on the target audience.

- Facilitating participatory advocacy requires a **different skill set** from case/therapeutic work.

- Group work, if properly planned, resourced and facilitated, can have therapeutic benefits, most notably those related to **peer support**.

5.1.2 OVERVIEW OF KEY CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH ADVOCATES

Table 3: Challenges and strategies for youth advocates

CHALLENGES	STRATEGIES USED BY FACILITATORS AND YOUTH ADVOCATES
Recruitment	
Establishing trust with facilitators and other youth advocates	■ Using the toolkit, which provided trust- and relationship- building activities ■ Organisations/facilitators promoting a culture of acceptance and support
Concerns over impact	■ Facilitators addressing youth advocates' concerns over impact by managing their expectations regarding outcomes ■ Facilitators reminding youth advocates of the remit of their role: to deliver their advocacy message – it is the audiences' responsibility to hear it and take action
Talking to different stakeholders	■ Preparing youth advocates and audiences ■ Offering different levels and areas of participation to young people, e.g. finding alternative ways to contribute for those who do not want to speak in front of an audience ■ Anticipating challenges, considering different outcomes (having a plan A, B, C) ■ Devising strategies to mitigate risks, e.g. setting boundaries for discussions and Q&As ■ Taking part in de-briefings ■ Making use of ongoing support available
Emotional content of programme (sexual violence, social injustice)	■ Using the toolkit, which provided a framework for creating safe spaces and diverting focus away from personal experiences ■ Using ongoing available support ■ Accessing peer support ■ Validating anger and upset as a healthy reaction to injustice and abuse and recognising that it can be a driving force for advocacy
Revisiting/drawing on their experiences of victimisation and marginalisation	■ Setting boundaries ■ Offering ongoing support ■ Accessing peer support

Again, we now elaborate on the findings presented in the table above in greater detail:

Establishing trust with facilitators and peers

Even when the youth advocates did not have a relationship with the facilitators, there appeared to be a level of trust because of their connections with the organisation. When asked whether the young people in Serbia would have joined the project if they didn't know the facilitators involved, one responded:

'I may have hesitated but I'm sure all persons working with [ATINA] are safe.'

(Youth advocate, Serbia)

Participants did not know the other young people they would be working with. The toolkit offered a range of activities to create a safe and supportive environment, which helped to facilitate trust and foster peer support. Facilitators reflected on how important it was in the early sessions to establish that trust and sense of safety:

'The most difficult part in this session was that the girls had to get to know each other and feel comfortable with each other, they needed some time to be comfortable and see each other as part of a team.'

(Facilitator, Albania)

Youth advocates shared that at first, joining the group was a little daunting:

> 'At the beginning I wasn't sure how it would go and then when it started it felt safe and secure.'
> (Youth advocate, Albania)

During the M&E workshops with youth advocates, we were able to observe that the participants displayed high levels of comfort with and support and respect for each other. Youth advocates in all three countries commented how much they valued the relationships they were able to develop with other young people and the facilitators as part of the project (see pp. 33-34).

Concerns over impact

One of the key concerns expressed by youth advocates during the M&E workshops was whether their advocacy activities would achieve the desired impact.

> 'My main worry is that our activities will raise awareness within police and will not impact on [their understanding of] abuse.'
> (Youth advocate, Albania)

> 'I want them [professionals] to see themselves in this movie, like in a mirror, that they didn't do it right in some moments and hopefully they will change their approach.'
> (Youth advocate, Moldova)

It was important to relieve the burden of perceived responsibility. Facilitators tried to manage youth advocates' expectations by explaining that social change rarely happens overnight. Another useful strategy was to clarify the remit of their role as advocates and to explain that the onus is on professionals to hear and act on the information presented:

> 'You deliver the message… they [the target audience] can't unhear that.'
> (Facilitator, Serbia)

Talking to different stakeholders

There was a degree of nervousness about delivering the advocacy messages and uncertainty about how these would be received by the target audiences. Partly due to issues linked to stigma and representation, not all of the youth advocates were comfortable speaking in front of an audience. It was therefore important to offer different forms of engagement to ensure that valuable perspectives would not be lost.

> 'That was also a bit hard, because we had a few girls who were so strong in their arguments, and they had such good points, but they didn't want to go up [in front of an audience]. So you have so good material to say, but they don't want to share it with them. We needed to find a way to make their words count, but not to put them in a situation where they won't feel comfortable… We used a lot of art, a lot of art activities for them, so they can show and say their story the way that they want, but not to be present, and for them not to have to appear in some meetings.'
> (Facilitator, Serbia)

For those who wanted to talk directly with stakeholders, ample practice and preparation were vital in reducing risks and anxiety.

> '[It] is more about practice, so we didn't want to force them, but we wanted to provide them with the training, because you don't know what you can do until you try or have some information, or some techniques how you can do that. So we involved more techniques… and activities, how you can speak in front of an audience, how you can try your speech, you can write, you can memorise, there's a lot of techniques… So we tried to show them most of them, and some of them made progress… we did role play in conference settings for them, they tried in front of us… And also for the future, we plan maybe to find some experts to do some exercise and teach them more about communication skills…'
> (Facilitator, Serbia)

Preparing youth advocates to face an external audience also entailed involving them in identifying possible outcomes and devising back-up plans for each scenario. Some partner organisations used their influence, connections and experience to prepare the target audience in advance of any interaction between youth advocates and key stakeholders.

Two of the three groups of youth advocates stressed that they felt more comfortable talking to professional audiences about sexual violence than to peers. Some facilitators suggested this may be due to the fact that, having gone through the system, most youth advocates were used to talking to professionals about abuse. Professionals are also presumed to have at least some rudimentary knowledge of sexual violence whereas it can be difficult to gauge young people's level of understanding and to know where to pitch information sessions for peers.

Some facilitators also suggested that interactions between survivors and professionals are characterised by a degree of distance on grounds of age and power/status, whereas speaking to peers about sexual violence might evoke feelings of self-consciousness, embarrassment and stigma, especially when audiences shared social connections or were from the

same community. However, this was not a universal experience. In Albania, the youth advocates had a more positive experience delivering information sessions to peers and found the meetings with professional audiences, such as the police, more challenging.

Emotional content

> *'I still get a feeling that people don't understand how much of a challenge it is to participate and how much motivation you need to have to decide to get in this project and work on the project and talk about the issues.'*
>
> (Youth advocate, Serbia)

One of the key barriers to involving survivors, especially children and young people, in participatory work on sexual violence is concerns over secondary/vicarious trauma, triggering, and causing upset to participants. Although these concerns are valid, there is also an increasing recognition that distress and posttraumatic growth can, and often do, co-exist (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995; Volgin *et al.*, 2019; Ulloa *et al.*, 2016). While more research is needed to develop a clearer understanding of the conditions under which posttraumatic growth develops in specific contexts, there is some evidence to suggest that one's struggle with traumatic events – which necessarily entails dealing with difficult emotions – can be a catalyst for personal transformation and growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996/2004). This provides an important context for the following discussion.

There was a strong recognition across the project team that the programme, and specifically the session on sexual violence (Part 2 of the toolkit), might trigger painful memories, requiring extremely careful preparation and facilitation. However, facilitators in all three countries reported that this session went more smoothly than anticipated and that the strategies put in place to minimise upset, such as distancing techniques, worked well overall.

Interestingly, it was the section on children's rights and participation (Part 3 of the toolkit) that evoked particularly strong emotions. As part of this session, the youth advocates took part in the 'power walk', an activity that explores how different forms of marginalisation and discrimination affect individuals' ability to access human rights. Youth advocates reflected on the intersections between gender, ethnicity, disability, social class, economic status and other factors by sharing personal stories of discrimination and victimisation. In Serbia, one youth advocate shared a story of being harassed on a bus and related this experience to discrimination based on her minority religious background (as a Muslim wearing a headscarf). Another youth advocate recounted being beaten on a public bus by her father for a prolonged period in the presence of another sibling while a group of strangers looked on. She reflected that *'nobody interfered, presumably because I was a child and no one wanted to interfere in a private matter'* (Youth advocate, Serbia). In Albania, one of the youth

advocates emotionally recalled how her father refused to pick up her mother from hospital after she was born because she had delivered a baby girl, not a boy.

Talking about experiences of abuse and discrimination is painful and upsetting. As feelings of anger, shock and sadness about social injustices and children's specific vulnerabilities surfaced across the groups, boundaries between a sense of collective and personal disenfranchisement became blurred.

> *'I put a crying face, a sad face there, because when we started first to talk about… the problems I was thinking about my own situation, my own problems, but then I started discovering that I'm not alone, that there are so many children in my similar situation, that felt how I always felt, and I was crying for every child.'*
>
> (Youth advocate, Moldova)

> *'Don't know why, in our group nobody was abused as a [young] child, it was a strange feeling, we were emotional but not because of our experiences.'*
>
> (Youth advocate, Serbia)

In eliciting feedback from the youth advocates during the M&E workshops on the training programme, it was evident that the session on children's rights in particular had a profound impact on participants. The group in Albania shared how it had felt to see their rights on paper and to explore how the situation in reality was quite different:

> *'We had the paper in our hands where the articles were written down of children's rights and we saw each of them to see them so carefully… there are a lot of rights but how are these rights practiced in the right way?'*
>
> (Youth advocate, Albania)

Another youth advocate in Serbia chose an 'emoji' of faeces to describe her own experiences:

> *'I realised what human rights are – it's crap.'*
>
> (Youth advocate, Serbia)

The sense of disillusionment was shared by the group in Moldova, where the youth advocates commented on discrepancies between children's rights discourses and children's lived realities:

> *'This is real life, you have no knowledge, you have no supportive relatives, you have no money, you're just invisible.'*
>
> (Youth advocate, Moldova)

Taking part in the training programme evoked a myriad of emotions for the youth advocates. Some noted how difficult it was to be reminded of their own experiences. Others expressed feelings of sorrow and anger about the scale of sexual violence experienced by children and young people. There was a shared feeling across all three groups of frustration about common infringements on children's rights and anger over the different forms and levels of discrimination, rejection and fear which are still part of children's daily lives all over the world.

As professionals, we may worry that educating young people and helping them explore the contours of children's rights and the limitations of these in practice may add to feelings of disempowerment. Through the project, however, there were opportunities to address these feelings and attempt to make a positive change. Some of the youth advocates reflected on how harnessing these feelings were important. As discussed earlier in the report (p. 12), anger and frustration over injustices can be a catalyst for action and a starting point to challenge those injustices. Just as different approaches to sharing personal information emerged from the work, so our understanding of young people's ability to manage difficult emotions expanded and became more nuanced.

'I disagree with boundaries to getting emotional. I do my best work and best ideas when I get emotional. Real life never stops… I encourage the girls to get emotional and talk about what are they feeling because in the end nobody is disclosing personal things, we are just talking about things that are making us sad and mad and I think it's important to feel those things and not be "I'm just advocating" or "I won't feel anything about this, everything is ok", I don't think so…'
(Youth advocate, Serbia)

From the inception of the project, we grappled with questions about how to minimise risks of harm and maximise benefits for those involved, recognising that both aspects are intertwined. Revisiting, acknowledging and validating difficult emotions is an integral part of healing, recovery and posttraumatic growth. Central to this is an understanding that this process is likely to be different for different individuals – while some young people may prefer to minimise conversations that might cause upset (to themselves or others), others may draw benefits from discussing difficult emotions in a group setting. Facilitators highlighted that the groups responded very empathetically to signs of distress as individual group members recounted painful memories of abuse and discrimination. For many youth advocates, the group appeared to provide a pivotal sense of support, understanding and healing.

'What we notice is that a group can heal, so even when somebody is coming in a mess, the experience that they share and the empathy that they share is something more than we can give.'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

At the end of the project, the majority of the youth advocates strongly agreed with the statement on the Sexual Violence Learning Scale that working with other young people had been a positive experience. However, one of the groups struggled with this statement because the project had evoked such strong emotions for them. When qualifying their rating, the youth advocates explained that the sometimes painful process of revisiting difficult emotions, such as fear, shame, emotional pain and fury, had, on reflection, promoted resilience and made them stronger. The group highlighted the crucial role of facilitators in guiding and supporting the process and stressed the benefits of knowing that continuous and flexible support was available throughout.

Putting 'risk' into perspective

Children and young people's participation always carries a degree of risk, especially when engaging and bringing together vulnerable groups. However, in this report we argue that it is important to put into perspective the notion that participatory advocacy work with survivors of sexual violence is particularly risky in comparison to other more tried and tested interventions. Any intervention aimed at trauma-affected populations, including counselling and one-on-one or group therapy, bears the potential of re-traumatising or triggering the individuals involved. In clinical settings, trauma may be re-visited purposely with a trained clinician as part of a strategy to address posttraumatic stress disorder (van der Kolk, 2015). In more conventional therapeutic settings, however, clients – especially when they are children and young people – may not always be afforded a high degree of choice, power or control

over the type, course and pace of their treatment. As Hickle (2019:159) notes, trauma-informed approaches should:

> 'take every opportunity to support survivors in taking control of their own lives, making choices and feeling empowered. This is incredibly important for those who have trauma experiences that were characterised by a lack of autonomy and control.'

There is evidence to suggest that interventions aimed at empowering survivors of sexual assault, for example by providing opportunities to safely reflect and 're-tell' their stories on their own terms, can promote posttraumatic growth (Rolbiecki *et al.*, 2016). Participatory approaches, which seek to foster participants' sense of agency and empowerment, can be helpful in this regard. Based on the evidence presented in this report, we suggest that participation can be part of – and play an important role in – reinforcing trauma-informed interventions. We will substantiate this argument further when we explore some of the overlaps between participatory and trauma-informed approaches (pp. 31-37).

Key strategies/principles that help staff to address challenges for participants:

- **Careful planning:** anticipating and thinking of ways to respond to different outcomes
- **Weighing up risks and benefits** for inclusion/exclusion
- **Thoughtful implementation:** taking one step at a time and taking stock regularly
- **Reflexive practice:** sharing concerns and key learning across the team; creating a safe and supportive environment to enable staff to discuss challenges and ask for advice/support
- **Courage:** getting comfortable with managing risk
- **Strengths-based approach:** having trust and confidence in young people's abilities, acknowledging and promoting their strengths and resilience
- **Offering choice and control**
- **Being open and transparent**
- **Flexibility and creativity:** adapting to change, being open to new ideas and approaches
- **Organisational buy-in:** providing managerial support to advance participatory practice
- **Ongoing, flexible support:** providing counselling and/or opportunities to talk to youth advocates and staff as and when needed

5.2 BENEFITS

5.2.1 HOW DID THE PROJECT BENEFIT THE YOUTH ADVOCATES?

There were a range of self-reported benefits for youth advocates from taking part in the project. We have clustered these around two key themes: a) **recovery**; and b) **prevention**. It is important to note that there are overlaps between the two categories as many of the benefits are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. For example, some of the benefits associated with empowerment (such as enhanced self-esteem) or peer support may contribute to both recovery and prevention.

Benefits linked to recovery

Youth advocates:
- agreed that the project enhanced their **self-esteem and confidence** (SVLS).
- agreed that they gained a **better understanding of sexual violence** and its consequences (SVLS).
- Youth advocates noted that the project has offered opportunities to critically engage with social norms and gender, **reducing self-blame** (M&E workshops).
- reported enhanced feelings of **safety and freedom** – they valued opportunities for **self-expression** and to exert **choice and control** (M&E workshops).
- highlighted the benefits of **peer support** developed through the group work, saying it promoted a sense of understanding, solidarity and connectedness (M&E workshops).
- agreed that the project enhanced their **competencies** including communication, presentation, team/project work and advocacy skills (SVLS).
- reported a sense of **personal and professional growth** – the project fostered youth advocates' ability to take responsibility for their own decisions. It inspired some to **change career trajectories**, contributing to wider re-integration efforts (M&E workshops).
- noted the significance of becoming **agents for change** and helping others. This instilled a sense of **self-worth and purpose** (M&E workshops).

Benefits linked to prevention

Youth advocates:
- reported **enhanced self-esteem**, **confidence** (SVLS) and an increased sense of empowerment as a result of the project (M&E workshops).
- in two of the three countries, **felt significantly more confident to talk about sexual violence with others**; to discuss issues that would help young people affected; and to raise concerns with service providers (SVLS).

- highlighted the significance of developing **peer support** as part of the project.
- noted that the project **increased their ability to identify risks** in relation to sexual violence affecting themselves and others (M&E workshops).
- strongly or mostly agreed that the project enhanced their **awareness of children's rights and participation**. Participants developed a greater understanding of young people's role in the movement to end sexual violence against children (SVLS; M&E workshops).
- reported that the project had **increased their understanding of advocacy**. Youth advocates gained more confidence and skills to work with others to develop advocacy plans (SLVS).

Countering the effects of trauma through participation

The relationship between participation and trauma recovery is still underexplored in the research literature. However, many commonly reported benefits from participatory practice appear to correlate with key aspects of trauma-informed work (see p. 12). While analysing the benefits of participatory advocacy through a trauma-informed lens is helpful, we recognise that the aim of the OVTOO project – and participatory work more generally – goes well beyond addressing trauma.

As one of our partner organisations explained:

> 'It's very important for us, for all of them [service users] to have the same opportunity [to participate], and not to be boundaried by their trauma or their experience, because we want to break those boundaries.'
>
> (Facilitator, Serbia)

This is particularly significant in the context of sexual exploitation, where children and young people's experiences of abuse are often framed through a narrow 'victimhood' lens which leaves little room for them to be recognised as reflexive and powerful agents (Beckett, 2019). As part of a rights-based approach and wider empowerment agenda, the OVTOO youth advocacy project sought to support the development of a small group of young people to become advocates and youth leaders. As Harden *et al.* (2014) point out, despite the number of programmes targeted at survivors of trauma, there is little attention paid to 'positive youth development';[11] the value of approaches that foster youth empowerment and youth leadership in contexts of violence are rarely discussed. Further exploration through research and rigorous evaluation of such approaches would provide important insights into the potential benefits of such programmes.

In an attempt to explore the links between empowerment-based and trauma-informed approaches further, we have mapped relevant evidence from the OVTOO youth advocacy project onto the six guiding principles of trauma-informed approaches developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association in the United States of America (2018).

Figure 1: Guiding Principles to a Trauma-Informed Approach (SAMHSA, 2018)

1 SAFETY   **2** TRUSTWORTHINESS & TRANSPARENCY   **3** PEER SUPPORT   **4** COLLABORATION & MUTUALITY   **5** EMPOWERMENT VOICE & CHOICE   **6** CULTURAL, HISTORICAL & GENDER ISSUES

Source: www.cdc.gov/cpr/infographics/00_docs/TRAINING_EMERGENCY_RESPONDERS_FINAL.pdf

11 'Positive youth development' refers to community approaches and/or programmes that seek to enhance resilience and protective factors of young people, for example, through forming adult/youth partnerships, engaging young people in formal or informal mentoring schemes, or promoting youth leadership opportunities. (Harden, *et al.*, 2014: 66)

Evidence from the OVTOO youth advocacy project supporting the value of participatory advocacy work as part of a trauma-informed approach

1 SAFETY

Youth advocates reported feeling safe and secure in the project. The notion of 'safety' emerging from the data was multi-dimensional, resonating with Shuker's (2013) model of three-dimensional safety. With reference to children in care affected by child sexual exploitation, Shuker (ibid.) argues that the concept of 'safety', in addition to encompassing a physical aspect, should also include a relational and psychological dimension. For young people who have experienced this form of abuse, it is particularly important to develop a sense of safety and stability in their relationships. During the M&E workshops, youth advocates repeatedly noted how they had developed enhanced feelings of 'safety' during the course of the project, both in themselves and in relation to others (most notably facilitators and other participants).

'I felt like embraced by protective wings during this project. This protection made me feel more confident. The games… made me laugh, they triggered positive emotions, emotions that I needed since childhood, I experienced them in this wonderful environment. After several activities I felt clarity in my thoughts. I remained aware that the past cannot be changed and if I stay with the past, I will not be able to enjoy my present, to build a family. Now I am able to look at the people around me with different eyes… The things they taught us are like real protective weapons against any danger, regardless of the source of the respective danger. Today, due to them, I feel myself protected and with a future ahead.'
(Youth advocate, Moldova)

'OVTOO is like a soul project for me, a chance for my future. My experience with this group helped me to develop myself psychologically, to become stronger and more courageous. Together with the other colleagues, with whom I became friends, I managed to cope with a challenging period in my life… I am very grateful… for the chance to find a new me, to find friends whom I trust.'
(Youth advocate, Moldova)

The quotes reiterate the value of conceptualising 'safety' beyond physical safety, illustrating the importance of additional dimensions. The group work aspect of the project fostered peer support, enhancing youth advocates' sense of relational and emotional safety. Facilitators noted that working with other young people towards a common goal in efforts to 'help others' promoted youth advocates' sense of agency. This suggests that participatory initiatives can offer opportunities for young people to develop a positive identity outside abusive relationships – an important aspect of promoting psychological safety (Shuker, 2013).

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Another finding in relation to safety emerged from the critical engagement with the topic of sexual violence. Gaining a deeper understanding of sexual violence and the issue of consent can help to make sense of abusive experiences (recovery), reduce self-blame, and strengthen the ability to recognise abuse and to identify risks to self and others (prevention).

'We thought that sexual abuse was only when you're raped but now we have learned that sexual abuse is even when someone touches you in different parts of your body, this is what we've learned.'
(Youth advocate, Albania)

'I have more knowledge about sexual violence and about how to prevent it.'
(Youth advocate, Albania)

Many of the youth advocates reported that the training programme and ensuing group discussions had enhanced their ability to recognise different forms of sexual violence and their knowledge about how to keep safe.

'Through [the] project they are more able to identify signs of abuse, so young people are more vigilant in their lives. One participant was subjected to emotional abuse by [her] husband – through [the] project she was able to disclose and recognise this abuse was happening to her.'
(Facilitator, Moldova)

'[The participants] take this active part even in protecting their peers. For example, one of the youth advocates… she called us, and she said, "Well my friend is pregnant and her boyfriend, he's threatening her… and things like this, so what to do, what advice should I give to her?"'
(Facilitator, Albania)

This suggests that some of the self-reported benefits of the project, such as greater awareness of sexual violence and children' rights, may have a positive ripple effect beyond those directly involved in the project and potentially help to keep others (friends, peers, family members, neighbours) safe. The contribution the project made to a wider constituency of children and young people will be further discussed later in the report (pp. 40-41).

2 TRUSTWORTHINESS AND TRANSPARENCY

Facilitators highlighted that trust hinges on open and honest communication. This includes engaging young people in conversations about risks and boundaries – being transparent about what is, and is not, safe and/or realistic in terms of feasibility and outcomes. An important aspect of this was managing youth advocates' expectations (see p. 36) by drawing on organisations' and staff's professional experience and knowledge, for example, of dealing with key stakeholders and processes of change. But it also meant being open to youth advocates' ideas and suggestions and including them in thinking through different scenarios, potential outcomes, and coming up with solutions:

'We always need a back-up plan, that is also a recommendation, you cannot rely totally on everything is going to be on the plan A, you need to have plan B, and we include them [the youth advocates] also in making a plan B: "Okay, what are we going to do?" We plan a meeting with the National Coordinator, and we spoke about what you're going to say, and then we ask, "What if nobody wants to say anything, what are we going to do?", because it is a possibility, so they figure out what we're going to do. "We want to write the speeches, and then we're going to give it to him, letters, and then we're going to leave him to answer us." So we had a back-up plan, and they were part of the back-up plan.'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

Trustworthiness emerged out of a commitment to provide the youth advocates with real opportunities to express their views and scope to influence decisions. The youth advocates valued open and clear communication about what was happening during each stage of the project. Keeping to agreements was an important indicator of trustworthiness that gave youth advocates the sense that they were taken seriously.

'I was proud that my contribution was taken into consideration and that our expectations were met. When we expressed the desire to meet the film producers, we met them; when we wanted to meet other specialists, that turned out to be possible again. We discussed the film scenario with them and it was an easy and pleasant process. I am so eager about new meetings. I am eager to learn new things; I am curious to know what changes occurred after the launching of our video.'
(Youth advocate, Moldova)

This was a contrast to the youth advocate's previous experience of 'participation':

'It is a rare occasion when such meetings, especially such informative meetings, are organised. As for other meetings that I attended before this project my feeling was that they had been organised just to tick a box, while the sessions held in NCCAP really made me benefit of useful information.'
(Youth advocate, Moldova)

One facilitator noted how participants understanding of meaningful participation expanded as a result of the project:

'Initially the youth advocates thought participation equals to merely presence. Subsequently they understood that participation implies much more action on behalf of them and that it allows them a power to change the important aspects affecting children, adolescents and also them.'
(Facilitator, Moldova)

3 PEER SUPPORT

Youth advocates highlighted the benefits of working with peers with shared experiences who could offer understanding and support. The group setting fostered a sense of community and solidarity between youth advocates. Realising that they were not alone countered feelings of isolation and gave youth advocates a sense of belonging. It provided a type of support that was inherently different from the support offered by professionals.

'To be honest I never saw that before, but they can do more for each other than some professionals can do for them, and that is the truth.'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

'I am surprised that it's gone so well and we have such a good relationship in our group… We are like friends now, not like co-workers, we have this kind of relationship.'
(Youth advocate, Albania)

'[Being in this group felt] familiar, non-judgemental and comfortable… I've had bad experiences when friends have been quite judgemental. We need support and now we have it officially.'
(Youth advocate, Serbia)

'I feel stronger now and this has given me new energy. The other girls… we give each other advice and support.'
(Youth advocate, Serbia)

'The strength is that they have each other… I think it's because of the shared experience. Because they know the feeling, and they are going through the same situation, same problems.'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

During the Shared Learning Events, the facilitators highlighted the important role of peer support in promoting protective factors and reducing vulnerabilities to re-victimisation.

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As a result of the project, some of the youth advocates became interested in, or deepened their commitment to engaging in, peer support and/or mentoring.

'[The project] sparked my interest in becoming a mentor.'
(Youth advocate, Albania)

Subsequently, some of the youth advocates are now receiving formal training on how to become a peer mentor from the partner organisations. Given that discourses are often constructed in binary terms – 'service user' versus 'service provider' or 'child/young person' versus 'adult' – the transition from being someone who receives services to someone who provides services in relation to sexual violence is significant, irrespective of whether peer mentoring schemes run on an informal or voluntary basis or constitute paid employment.

4 COLLABORATION AND MUTUALITY

Youth advocates reported that they enjoyed working in a collaborative environment that promoted equality among participants and between youth advocates and facilitators. Participatory group work offers an important alternative to individual forms of support in the aftermath of abuse, providing spaces for collaboration with a view to achieving a common goal. Using a terrible experience for something good and contributing towards positive change for others can provide a sense of meaning, purpose and healing.

'During the entire process, they shared with the team that their experience has gained significance, in a sense that they feel that, through this process, they are turning something that was negative into positive. That contributed to the growth of self-respect, and a sense of greater respect they receive from the others.'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

One of the groups of youth advocates came up with a powerful image to express this sentiment:

'We [are] like the people who are emerging from the fire of hell bearing buckets of water for the ones who are still suffering of that fire.'
(Youth advocates, Moldova)

'The main idea they wanted to promote with this is that after having gone through such a bad experience, they felt themselves powerful, capacitated to provide some support to other peers who went through similar situations.'
(Facilitator, Moldova)

5 EMPOWERMENT, VOICE AND CHOICE

For many of the youth advocates, taking part in the participatory advocacy programme was an empowering and confidence-building experience. Reflecting on their work as part of the project, youth advocates noted a sense of pride and accomplishment:

'I feel proud. It has been an achievement for me.'
(Youth advocate, Albania)

'I feel more independent, safe and self-confident.'
(Youth advocate, Serbia)

'I feel more optimistic.'
(Youth advocate, Albania)

Positive changes in youth advocates' self-esteem and confidence were also observed by staff. Some facilitators suggested a link between empowerment and increased resilience, which may reduce risks of re-victimisation.

'Based on this group advocacy activity they became more resilient.'
(Facilitator, Moldova)

'We see them so much empowered during the process, and for sure, the risk of re-victimisation is less in comparison, reduced in comparison.'
(Facilitator, Albania)

Several youth advocates noted that the project had offered opportunities for professional and personal growth:

'[The project] helped me to move ahead and progress.'
(Youth advocate, Albania)

'It [the project] helps me to go ahead.'
(Youth advocate, Serbia)

'[The experience] has a significant impact on increasing young people's ambition and their desire to improve their status/life.'
(Project co-ordinator, Albania)

For some youth advocates, the project was a catalyst for changing career trajectories and entering or continuing education. Facilitators remarked that their choice of professional training or academic studies was often linked to a desire to change victims' experiences of the system. By entering relevant professions, some youth advocates hoped to improve responses to victims/survivors in the future.

'[The youth advocates] decided plans for future, education, work, career very close to professional that traumatised them. [They] want to be part of system change.'
(Facilitator, Moldova)

'Policewoman… social worker or judge… these are the types of studies they usually select when they are able to access this, because it's good that they connect with their story.'
(Facilitator, Albania)

'They [the other youth advocates] offered support to me, they encouraged me to apply for University studies. Thus, I am a student at the faculty of Law as of this year. I hope to finalise the studies successfully, to get my licence and to be able to help women and children who experienced similar situations that I did. I want to help them find justice.'
(Youth advocate, Moldova)

Facilitators commented that participants found the project empowering because the training programme and activities they developed promoted a sense of self-efficacy and agency for those directly involved. This was an important shift.

'In the beginning… no one was willing to present. But then step by step they were fighting, "I will present, I will present". It was really obvious for us that something has changed, they were more willing to show up, to stand up and present for that.'
(Facilitator, Albania)

'They realise what influence they can be on the system and on the institutions, and power, they feel the power that they have, for maybe the first time in their lives.'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

Feeling in control and powerful in relation to the system is of pivotal importance given that professional responses can often mirror the controlling dynamics of abusive relationships and exacerbate victims' feelings of powerlessness. As such, children and young people affected by sexual violence – and their support workers – often report that encounters with service providers can be a difficult and, in some cases, re-traumatising experience for them (Beckett *et al.*, 2015; Beckett and Warrington, 2015). In the United Kingdom, the Office of the Children's Commissioner's inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups in England highlights:

'Children and young people told us repeatedly that 'being done to' by the agencies charged with their care compounded their sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. They want to be partners in their protection and recovery plans and those that had this experience valued it immensely and felt stronger for being involved.'
(Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013: 56)

Adopting a collaborative approach that actively involves children and young people in discussions about the development of their care plans is increasingly considered good practice. Promoting 'voice' and taking into account young people's views on matters affecting them should be an integral part of a trauma-informed response (Hickle, 2019). This is particularly pivotal in the context of sexual violence, given that this crime is a taboo topic in many societies (Cody, 2015). Providing safe spaces and opportunities for victims/survivors, who are often silenced as part of the abuse, to speak out and critically engage with this subject is highly significant (Bovarnick with D'Arcy, 2018). Evidence collected as part of the OVTOO youth advocacy project suggests that the project constituted the first opportunity for many of the youth advocates to talk openly and freely about this topic:

'When you have had bad experiences, there is a lot of judgement. You learn not to speak.'
(Youth advocate, Serbia)

'I felt like sexual violence was a taboo before I joined this project. Now I feel free to talk about it.'
(Youth advocate, Albania)

'By working in a group, youth advocates felt they have more space, and believe their voices are stronger when united.'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

Hickle (2019) argues that in the aftermath of sexual exploitation, young people must regain a sense of control in order to begin to feel safe again. From a trauma-informed perspective, offering opportunities for young people to make choices is a central aspect of promoting recovery and self-efficacy (ibid).

During the OVTOO youth advocacy project, youth advocates were free to design and develop their own advocacy plans, to be creative and to express and implement their own ideas. In line with the participatory ethos of the project, the partner organisation recognised the importance of offering genuine choice, which required skilful facilitation.

'When a new idea arises, it was of utmost importance to have consensus of all members of the group, and we always had in mind how important it is to always think about that, and how essential it is that nothing is imposed on the youth advocates.'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

In the context of the project, offering choice was pre-empted by thoughtful considerations and transparent conversations about: a) the degrees and types of choices that professionals are willing to offer to young people; b) young people's capacity (as individuals or as a group) to make informed and safe choices; c) structural realities that may constrain young people's choices; and, d) professionals' safeguarding responsibilities towards service users that may limit young people's choices. According to the facilitators, this process made youth advocates *'…feel important, taken into account'*. (Facilitator, Serbia)

Offering 'choice' to young people requires professionals to relinquish control. Some of the facilitators, particularly those coming from a child protection background, stressed that promoting greater levels of independence and self-efficacy among youth advocates was a pivotal learning curve both for staff and service users and *'helps young people take responsibility for their actions.'* (Project co-ordinator, Albania)

5 CULTURAL, HISTORICAL AND GENDER ISSUES

Critical and feminist theories have drawn attention to the instrumental role of gendered narratives in facilitating sexual violence and enabling this crime to flourish with impunity (Brownmiller, 1975; Kelly and Radford, 1990; Murnen *et al.*, 2002). Deconstructing harmful discourses is an important aspect of challenging gendered forms of violence and abuse. The project provided a safe space to critically engage with prevailing social norms and constructions of gender, including victim-blaming attitudes, and discourses that normalise sexual violence and stigmatise victims/survivors. Each group of youth advocates stated that they wished to challenge harmful attitudes permeating professions and wider society through their advocacy activities.

'Males when they see younger women in a certain outfit in the street, they would think this is indirect consent.'
(Youth advocate, Moldova)

'If you put on makeup, red lipstick, or if you have some skinny jeans this means that you want to sell yourself, you want to promote yourself.'

(Youth advocate, Moldova)

'The father… he alerted the police, but he did it only because he [was] blaming her: "Why did you go to bed with him?" And she said, "At that age I didn't know what it means to go to bed with him, maybe this was to sleep".'

(Youth advocate, Moldova)

Discussing common stereotypes helped youth advocates to address feelings of self-blame.

'Before being part of the advocacy group, all of them felt guilty for having triggered their abuse, then based on training they analysed their situation and now they are aware that actually it was not their fault.'

(Facilitator, Moldova)

As discussed in a previous section (p. 28), the project also offered opportunities to critically engage with intersectionalities between different forms of discrimination and marginalisation and the implications for accessing children's rights.

Key benefits for youth advocates linked to trauma recovery and prevention:

- Enhanced sense of multi-dimensional **safety** encompassing physical, emotional, relational and psychological dimensions

- **Peer support**: enhanced sense of belonging, reduced feelings of isolation

- Deepened **understanding of sexual violence** and consent

- Increased **confidence and self-esteem**

- Greater **awareness of rights**, participation and advocacy

- Improved communication, team and project work **skills**

- Reduced **self-blame**

- Enhanced feelings of **empowerment, personal/professional growth, and agency**

- Increased ability **to speak out about sexual violence** and to raise concerns

- Increased sense of **hope** for the future

5.2.2 HOW DID THE PROJECT BENEFIT THE PARTNER ORGANISATIONS?

As part of the M&E process, we sought to find out whether the project had:

a) **built partner organisations' capacity to deliver safe participatory advocacy with young survivors and enhanced participatory practice at organisational level; and**

b) **demonstrated any benefits for organisations of involving young people (current or former service users) in participatory advocacy.**

a) Capacity-building to deliver safe participatory advocacy work

The key objective of the project was to build partner organisations' capacity to safely involve young people who are current or former service users in participatory advocacy. Our data suggest that this objective was met and that, at the end of the project, the partner organisations' ability and confidence to support young people's participation had grown (Organisational self-assessment forms). At the end of the project, partner organisations reported a number of changes in their participatory practice:

Managing risk

Partner organisations reported greater confidence and willingness among staff to manage risks associated with involving current or former service users in strategic work addressing sexual violence:

'Our perception of risks changed. We are [now] more courageous to allow survivors to get involved. Seeing risks will not prevent us from getting involved but preparing. [Our] perceptions around [young people's] resilience changed.'

(Facilitator, Moldova)

'The staff became more confident in dealing with children. Before that, they used to be very cautious and avoided involving children in certain activities by reason of being afraid of harming them; now they are more capable to manage sensitive aspects and they are more confident in consulting the children's opinions and in taking it into consideration.'

(Organisational self-assessment form, NCCAP)

Informed choice

One partner organisation reported that the project had enhanced their understanding of participation and increased their capacity to enable young people to make an informed decision about participation:

'The children are now receiving the information in written form about the activity and their role in it; they have the possibility to influence or to introduce changes in the activity… Their roles and the ways in which they can contribute for the change to happen are discussed in a participatory manner, so that they themselves could feel the change. Besides, the children are constantly informed about the changes produced/results attained.'

(Organisational self-assessment form, NCCAP)

Relevance

All of the partner organisations reported that the project had increased their ability to ensure that participation is relevant to participants' experiences, knowledge and abilities; that clear selection criteria are applied; and that children and young people are involved in ways that are appropriate to their capacities and interests.

'Team members emphasised that their primary concern was that youth advocates are involved in a way that is completely appropriate to their capacities and interests. Because of this… team members were constantly checking, again and again, how they felt, what their thoughts were; they were asking confirmations for every step that was made.'

(Organisational self-assessment form, ATINA)

'Youth advocates really and truly believe that they could contribute, and this is a big change compared to the previous period. OVTOO project has made this happen. This is a huge shift not just for youth advocates, but for the whole organization.'

(Organisational self-assessment form, ATINA)

Time and resources

One of the organisations noted that they had enhanced youth-friendly participation by building in enough time and resources to properly support young people's involvement in activities. (Organisational self-assessment form, D&E)

Accountability

One organisation reported that the project had enhanced its understanding of how to render children's participation accountable.

Before, the children would only participate in the evaluation of direct services (individual participation), now they are also involved in the evaluation of other projects and bigger activities performed by NCCAP. We take into account all the recommendations from the children and we try to implement them.'

(Organisational self-assessment form, NCCAP)

Action plans to improve participatory practice

At the beginning of the project, each partner organisation identified priorities as part of an action plan to improve their participatory practice. At the end of the project, they recorded the level of change they had achieved in relation to each priority.

Table 4: Progress in relation to goals identified in partners' action plans

D&E

GOOD

Develop projects for young people affected by sexual violence that enable them to speak about their difficulties and hopes for the future

Build activities for young people who are not aware of being violated and have difficulties talking about their problems related to sexual violence

Enhance awareness of human rights and practice them in real life

Develop activities for young people to challenge myths surrounding sexual violence

SMALL

Increase the participation of boys who experienced sexual abuse

NCCAP

EXCELLENT

Create spaces for NGOs and professionals to share learning on children's participation

GOOD

Integrate commitment to children's participation into organisational policy and strategy

Provide staff training on children's participation

Engage children and young people in organisational public awareness activities

Develop parenting programmes with participation of children and young people

ATINA

EXCELLENT

Increase the participation of youth advocates and use their work for advocacy purposes

GOOD

Foster peer-to-peer dialogue and youth activism through advocacy activities

Provide model for creating social change and promoting children's rights

Create resources and spaces for youth advocates to expand youth advocacy groups by drawing on lessons and experience gained from the project

How did the project build capacity?

During the shared learning events, all three partner organisations fed back that the resources and training developed as part of the project had enhanced their organisational capacity to safely involve young people in advocacy work. One organisation highlighted that the process of implementing the programme with the youth advocates itself provided an important learning opportunity:

> *'A significant part of the manner in which the work with advocacy group was conducted came not just from the training and instruments, but also from the experience and long-term work with this group of youth...'*
> (Organisational self-assessment form, ATINA)

This demonstrates that facilitators' expertise and experience of working with the target group were crucial success factors.

Partner organisations also highlighted that adopting a staged and reflexive approach was a key strength of the process. As outlined previously, key pillars of our approach included: collaboration; careful planning; regular stock-takes; extensive risk mapping; flexibility; ongoing support; and a culture of safety and support in which challenges can be discussed openly. Partner organisations noted that the project had offered a valuable opportunity and protected time to critically reflect, discuss, and advance their thinking on important ethical issues in relation to children and young people's participation. For service providers who typically operate in a crisis mode, setting aside time to think and have in-depth discussions about how to safely expand their participatory practice can be a rare luxury. As such, partner organisations reported that the project increased reflexive practice at organisational level by providing additional time and designated resources for staff to critically engage with their own practice and relevant organisational policies.

b) Benefits of using participatory approaches

Partner organisations were asked to reflect on how young people's participatory involvement benefitted their organisations. They reported four key benefits:

- Improved staff skills in **identifying young people's strengths** and understanding how these can be utilised to achieve project goals.
- Improved **organisational decision-making** in terms of tailoring responses to better address young people's needs.
- Enhanced **credibility and accountability** within their organisation.
- **Improved ways of working with young people to build self-esteem**, reiterating the argument that participation can be part of a trauma-informed approach and reinforce reintegration work.

Sustainability

Although it is difficult to substantiate claims about the sustainability of positive outcomes from the project, there is a strong possibility that many of the gains discussed above will inform partner organisations' future practice. The resources developed as part of the OVTOO youth advocacy project remain useful tools that will inform the IC's and partners' future work. The project provided an impetus to integrate participation more centrally into organisational policies and practice. NCCAP has now adopted children and young people's participation as a core value in their new strategic plan. D&E has revised and formalised their organisational policy on children's participation.

The project also served as a catalyst to further develop work around peer support. D&E is currently formalising a peer support training programme. ATINA has used learning from the project to expand their peer mentorship/leadership activities.

Key benefits for organisations and professionals:

- Strengthened **skills** in relation to adopting **participatory approaches**
- Enhanced **confidence** to involve young people in participatory advocacy work
- Increased ability and willingness to **manage risks** associated with engaging service users in advocacy work on sexual violence
- Enhanced understanding of how to ensure that participation is **relevant and accountable**
- Strengthened skills in relation to **facilitating non-therapeutic group work**
- Enhanced understanding of **peer support** and related benefits

- Increased motivation to develop **peer support/mentoring initiatives** with service users
- Enhanced understanding and capacity **to harness the benefits service users can bring to organisations' own advocacy work**

5.2.3 HOW DID THE PROJECT CONTRIBUTE TO THE WIDER MOVEMENT TO END SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN?

Although the project involved only a small number of young people and organisations directly, there are reasons to believe it had positive ripple effects. We believe that the project made an important contribution to the wider movement to end sexual violence against children because:

a) **The project's reach and impact went far beyond the project partners and young people directly involved;**

b) **Learning from the project on how to safely involve vulnerable young people in participatory advocacy was shared across practice and policy communities within countries and internationally; and**

c) **The project clarified the rationale for, and provided new evidence in relation to, engaging young people with experience of sexual violence in participatory advocacy on this issue.**

a) Reach and impact of the youth-led advocacy activities

To understand the project's reach and impact, partner organisations collected data in relation to the advocacy activities conducted as part of the project and, wherever possible, captured information regarding the numbers of individuals reached and invited feedback from those who attended dissemination events.

To contextualise the numbers presented in Table 5 below, it is important to note that the youth advocates and partner organisations undertook a range of different activities, reaching target audiences in different ways. Some of the advocacy activities, especially those directed at decision-makers responsible for policy and practice development, reached relatively small numbers. However, these activities were often more targeted and in-depth – and may have achieved a higher impact in terms of changing practice – than the public awareness-raising activities which reached a greater number of individuals.

Table 5: Advocacy activities in numbers

Our Voices Too Youth Advocacy Project
Advocacy activities in numbers

15 YOUTH ADVOCATES
SUPPORTED BY 3 PARTNER ORGANISATIONS
delivered the following youth-led advocacy activities

Albania

Policy and practice

1 official statement on how to improve support for young victim-survivors of sexual violence submitted to the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Interior and National Coordinator for Anti-Trafficking in Albania.

3 meetings held with high-level officials to discuss the treatment of victim-survivors by first contact police officers.

69 police officers in 6 districts reached through information sessions on how to enhance responses to victim-survivors.

600 posters and leaflets outlining victim-survivor centred responses designed and sent to police stations across the country.

Young people and wider society

187 young people in 6 districts reached through information sessions to raise awareness of sexual violence.

80 individuals reached in street actions to raise awareness of sexual violence.

45,000 individuals viewed the short film 'Break the Silence' produced to raise awareness and support young people to report sexual violence.

Moldova

Policy and practice

2 meetings held with high-level officials.

25 professionals engaged in meetings to help shape advocacy messages.

1 film launched at high-level event to 40 professionals in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection.

50 child protection specialists trained on taking statements from child victim-survivors drawing on advocacy activities of Youth Advocates.

23,000 shares and **10,400** views of the short film produced 'Letter to the Judge'.

3,000 child protection specialists reached through the distribution of leaflets, posters and banners about the film.

Serbia

Policy and practice

4 meetings held with professionals and high-level officials including the National Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings in Serbia.

194 institutions working with children and young people contacted and sent advocacy materials on children's rights and equality.

Young people and society

118 young people in 4 districts reached through information sessions to raise awareness of sexual violence.

1100 individuals reached, and advocacy materials shared, through street actions and events.

For more information about the advocacy activities visit our website (www.our-voices.org.uk/news).

Sustainability

It is too early to assess whether the advocacy activities will affect lasting change in any of the countries involved. We acknowledge that claims regarding the project's reach and sustainability are difficult to substantiate, partly due to methodological challenges linked to measuring impact. Firstly, research suggests that there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of public awareness-raising activities (Christiano and Neimand, 2017). Secondly, given the complex and multifactorial nature of social change – the long-term goal of the youth-led advocacy activities – it is difficult to ascertain whether any relevant progress in this respect is attributable to the project.

b) Sharing learning across practice and policy communities

International Centre activities

In October 2019, IC staff shared pertinent lessons from the project during a keynote presentation[12] at a high-level meeting in Brussels hosted by the European Commission on funding for the rights of the child under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme. The meeting highlighted that while there appears to be a strong appetite to use youth participatory approaches across the public, non-profit and academic sectors, there remains a high degree of uncertainty about how to involve vulnerable children and young people in a safe and meaningful way.

To build capacity in this area, the Our Voices programme has been sharing learning from different projects about ethical children's participation through the Our Voices Network, targeting relevant research, practice and policy audiences. Through this platform, we have disseminated insights from the OVTOO project via a webinar, a series of podcasts, briefings and blog pieces written by project staff and the youth advocates.[13] This report will also be shared across the University Network: Children Challenging Sexual Violence, reaching researchers engaged in promoting university activity challenging sexual violence against children (www.beds.ac.uk/ic/current-projects/university-network).

Partner organisations' activities

The partner organisations have engaged in a range of dissemination activities to share key lessons from the project and to raise the profile of children's participation in advocacy in the context of sexual violence. Some of these activities entailed setting up communities of practice or presenting at relevant national or local practice events and/or policy meetings.

'We performed a series of activities for informing our partners about the essence and ways of achieving ethical and meaningful child participation. We took a stand when the state institutions planned activities… but [when they] failed to allocate enough time for the children to express themselves, or when the children's images had been used in a harmful manner…'
(NCCAP, End-line data)

Our partner in Serbia, for example, noted that the youth-led advocacy activities were reaching more people across the national policy and practice community.

'Recent conversations with other agencies and network meetings indicated that the campaign has reached a wider professional audience in Serbia and that the messages developed by the youth advocates are spreading. In response to key lessons from implementing the project that were shared across practice networks, other professionals have noted that this "specific model" was very valuable for them.'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

c) Rationales for involving young people affected by the issue in advocacy

The OVTOO youth advocacy project explored the rationales for engaging young people with lived experience in participatory advocacy challenging sexual violence. Our M&E data suggests that this can promote:

Relevance, credibility and impact

Participatory involvement in advocacy can help to identify issues that are salient to children and young people. Involving young people who are experts by experience in advocacy ensures that messages more accurately reflect young people's needs and priorities.

'The girls have been through the system… they understand better than us what the issues are.'
(Facilitator, Serbia)

'We felt what happened, and we know better what it feels like.'
(Youth advocate, Moldova)

Partner organisations argued that engaging service users in advocacy helped to achieve *'better targeted and more relevant services for the children involved and their peers'* (Project co-ordinator, Albania). Better targeted services would, in turn, benefit a wider group of children and young people seeking help and justice in the aftermath of abuse in the future.

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12 A video excerpt of the presentation is available on the European Commission website: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-183107

13 For more information visit the Our Voices website (www.our-voices.org.uk/news)

Participatory advocacy can generate messages that are underpinned by lived experience, thereby adding credibility. This can render messages more powerful and strengthen impact. For example, in a meeting between youth advocates and the National Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings in Serbia, youth advocates highlighted that victims/survivors are not just a statistic:

> '[They want to show] that they represent a lot of girls, that it is very important… they want to show that they are not just a case in front of the court, and a name, a statistic number without a face, without emotions, and without families behind them.'
> (Facilitator, Serbia)

Involving current and former service users in advocacy *'puts a human face [on the issue].' (Facilitator, Serbia)*.

At the same time, it is important to highlight that there are inherent tensions between the benefits of credibility based on lived experience and the need for victims/survivors to remain anonymous. The real risks associated with being identified as a victim/survivor of sexual abuse mean that organisations facilitating participatory advocacy need to carefully consider these and prioritise the safety of participants over the potential benefits of enhanced authenticity and impact.

Participatory approaches can enhance advocacy on sexual violence irrespective of whether participants have direct contact with the target audience. Engaging young people in the design of advocacy messages and activities can add clarity and legitimacy to organisations' own advocacy work.

> 'Young people go right to the heart of the problem with no concern in their mind, on the other hand for us as professionals it is difficult to have such a way of thinking and acting. This often limits our areas of action.'
> (Facilitator, Albania)

Partner organisations noted that involving service users increased their confidence and authority to address issues if they are rooted in young people's own priorities and reflect their lived realities.

Children and young people as powerful agents for change

Promoting children's rights to participation and protection, youth-led advocacy can raise children and young people's profile and role in the fight against sexual violence. The project offered valuable opportunities for survivors to speak out about the abuse and injustice they have suffered and to speak on behalf of others who may not be able to raise their voices. This is particularly significant in the context of sexual violence.

> 'The project helps those who cannot escape because of threats.'
> (Youth advocate, Serbia)

Engaging young people with lived experience in participatory advocacy can make an important contribution to prevention and strengthen the wider movement to end sexual violence against children.

> 'When I heard about this project I thought why not take part as it's something we've experienced and I wanted to know more about what happened to me and tell others to be aware of these things and to raise our voice so that it doesn't happen again.'
> (Youth advocate, Albania)

Youth-led awareness-raising initiatives targeting peers, for example, can be an effective tool for disseminating messages about prevention. Facilitators noted that, in some contexts, peer awareness raising was a particularly successful method to reach and mobilise other young people. Feedback from young people who attended an information event held by the youth advocates in Obrenovac, Serbia, indicates that the event inspired others to take action:

> 'Young people expressed a desire to organise a similar action so they have an opportunity to invite even more peers to join in and hear the stories. This is an indicator that the easiest way to achieve results is through peers, which confirms the success of chosen methodology.'
> (M&E data, Serbia)

The project demonstrated that young people can be powerful agents for change. Facilitators repeatedly expressed how the youth advocates, individually and as a group, surpassed their expectations in terms of their creativity, resilience, competence and determination in achieving their goals, as well as in the way they supported each other during the process. At the same time, data captured through the field logs concur with the existing research literature (Blanchet-Cohen, 2014; Bovarnick *et al.*, 2018; Lushey and Monro, 2015) suggesting that such processes, especially when these involve a high degree of risk, need to be adequately supported and facilitated by skilled and experienced professionals:

> 'One key learning, young people can be great project leaders… The most important thing is that if you give young people the right space, the right facilitation, the right opportunity, they are able to lead successful initiatives that affect not only their lives, but the lives of their peers.'
> (Facilitator, Albania)

'Yes, it was hard but we saw the impact… their [young people's] contribution is precious even though it requires effort and is difficult.'

(Facilitator, Moldova)

'When working directly for so many years, sometimes we forget. I'm a case manager I got into a trap where we forgot the power of a group… I now remember that power.'

(Facilitator, Serbia)

Key contributions to the wider movement to end sexual violence against children:

- The project's **reach and impact** extended far beyond the individuals directly involved. The youth advocates campaigned for better services on behalf of a wider constituency of children and young people who may reap the benefits from this work in the future.

- **Professional capacity-building** to safely engage service users in participatory advocacy **extended beyond the partner organisations**. Key lessons from the project were shared externally with practice and policy audiences through communities of practice and other dissemination events.

- The project explored the rationale for, and **demonstrated benefits** of, safely engaging young people with lived experience in participatory advocacy on sexual violence.

6 CONCLUSION

The OVTOO youth advocacy project enhanced the capacity of three service providers in Eastern Europe to safely involve young people (former or current service users) in participatory advocacy addressing sexual violence against children. The partner organisations successfully piloted a participatory advocacy training programme with fifteen youth advocates in Albania, Moldova and Serbia.

Our experience of delivering the project affirmed that young people can be powerful advocates with a unique role to play in promoting change and challenging sexual violence against children. We learned that, despite the real and complex challenges associated with this work, it can be done safely. The evidence discussed in this report therefore challenges the notion that engaging young people who have themselves experienced abuse in participatory advocacy should be avoided on grounds of risk. While safeguarding concerns are valid, the evidence presented here suggests that the associated risks can be managed with careful planning; highly skilled, thoughtful and trauma-informed facilitation; ongoing and flexible support; adequate time and resources; and a commitment to children and young people's participation.

Although small in scale, the OVTOO project demonstrated that there can be a range of significant benefits for participants, for the organisations facilitating such initiatives, and for the wider movement to end sexual violence against children. Most importantly, the project has demonstrated that despite their vulnerabilities, young people are resilient, experts on their own lives, and a driving force for change that we, as professionals committed to eradicating sexual violence against children, should recognise and support.

We also identified two key gaps that deserve further attention and engagement from research, practice and policy communities at regional and international levels:

- As identified by the youth advocates in this project, **there is a clear need to establish an evidence base documenting how children and young people experience professional responses in the aftermath of sexual violence in Albania, Moldova and Serbia**. This mirrors a global dearth of research, for example, on children and young people's experiences in the criminal justice system. Where such evidence exists, it is rarely informed directly by young survivors' perspectives. Addressing this gap would strengthen our efforts to advocate for policy and practice responses that more adequately reflect and meet children and young people's needs and priorities.

- Our understanding of how engaging children and young people affected by sexual violence in participatory advocacy may address the effects of trauma is still its infancy. The learning from this project indicates that participatory and other empowerment-based approaches may offer a range of distinct benefits to trauma-affected populations, especially in the later stages of recovery. **Specifically, there is a need for rigorous evaluations of participatory advocacy initiatives and relevant youth empowerment and/or leadership-based programmes** that could generate a more robust evidence base to connect the fields of trauma-informed and youth participatory theories and practice. Much valuable and relevant knowledge in this regard resides in practice but is rarely documented, systematically evaluated or captured comprehensively in academic publications. Strong research collaborations between academic institutions and relevant statutory and voluntary sector service providers can play a vital role in addressing this shortcoming.

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ANNEX 1: Aggregated data from Sexual Violence Learning Scale

Method

The **Sexual Violence Learning Scale** (SVLS) was designed to measure changes in participants' understanding of sexual violence and other empowerment-related criteria as a result of their engagement in the project. Youth advocates were asked to rate the statements below at the beginning and end of the project to provide baseline and end-line data. The rating scale ranged from 1-5:

1	Strongly disagree
2	Mostly disagree
3	I don't know
4	Mostly agree
5	Strongly disagree

The figures below represent the average score given by each group.

Limitations:

a) The SVLS was translated into three different languages, which may have slightly changed the meaning of the statements, rendering a comparative analysis of the data problematic.

b) The SVLS was filled out by participants in a group setting, which may have homogenised the ratings. At the start, the statements were discussed with the facilitators and other members of the group. This may have influenced how participants rated their own knowledge and progress at baseline and end-line.

c) The data result from self-reporting and represent participants' own perceptions of change. The statements were rated by participants based on their individual level of knowledge and experience. For example, the SVLS did not clearly define 'sexual violence', nor ask sub-questions to test their knowledge in detail. At baseline, it is possible that some participants overestimated their knowledge of sexual violence and rated it as high without fully understanding some of the underlying dynamics and key concepts, such as consent. By the same token, when participants rated their knowledge as poor, this does not necessarily indicate that their level of understanding of sexual violence was lower than others. It is therefore problematic to make direct comparisons between the three groups based on the scoring alone.

d) Facilitators noted that the groups of youth advocates interpreted the rating system differently. As a result, comparing the scores across the three groups is problematic.

PLEASE CIRCLE THE NUMBER THAT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR CURRENT KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE	BASELINE (AVERAGE SCORE)	END-LINE (AVERAGE SCORE)
I have a good understanding of what sexual violence is	4.5 (Moldova) 2.2 (Albania) 3.68 (Serbia)	4.75 (Moldova) 5 (Albania) 4.6 (Serbia)
I can confidently talk about sexual violence with other people	3.5 (Moldova) 2.4 (Albania) 2.4 (Serbia)	4.75 (Moldova) 4.6 (Albania) 4.4 (Serbia)
I know about the impact of sexual violence on those affected	4 (Moldova) 2.2 (Albania) 2.4 (Serbia)	5 (Moldova) 5 (Albania) 4.8 (Serbia)
I feel confident to talk about different issues that would help young people who are affected by sexual violence	5 (Moldova) 2 (Albania) 3.2 (Serbia)	4.5 (Moldova) 4.6 (Albania) 4.8 (Serbia)
I understand and can talk about children and young people's right to participate	5 (Moldova) 2 (Albania) 3.2 (Serbia)	4.75 (Moldova) 4 (Albania) 4.2 (Serbia)
I have a good understanding of what 'advocacy' is	2.25 (Moldova) 1.2 (Albania) 2.4 (Serbia)	4.5 (Moldova) 4.8 (Albania) 4.4 (Serbia)
I have good skills in presentation, communication, and team work	4.75 (Moldova) 3.4 (Albania) 3.8 (Serbia)	4 (Moldova) 4.2 (Albania) 4.4 (Serbia)
I understand the reasons why young people should be involved in advocating on behalf of other young people affected by sexual violence	2.5 (Moldova) 1.2 (Albania) 3.8 (Serbia)	4.75 (Moldova) 4.2 (Albania) 4.6 (Serbia)
I am confident to work with others to design and develop advocacy plans	3 (Moldova) 1.4 (Albania) 2.8 (Serbia)	4 (Moldova) 5 (Albania) 4.2 (Serbia)
I understand how to raise an issue of concern with service providers (state name of the service in your local context)	5 (Moldova) 1.6 (Albania) 2.8 (Serbia)	4.25 (Moldova) 4.8 (Albania) 4.2 (Serbia)
I have the skills to work with others to design and develop advocacy plans	3.25 (Moldova) 1.6 (Albania) 3 (Serbia)	4 (Moldova) 4.2 (Albania) 4.2 (Serbia)
Additional questions at end-line		
I feel more self-confident as a result of my involvement in Our Voices Too		4.75 (Moldova) 5 (Albania) 4.4 (Serbia)
Working with other young people during Our Voices Too has been a positive experience		4.75 (Moldova) 5 (Albania) 5 (Serbia)

ANNEX 2: Aggregated data from Organisational Self-Assessment Forms

Background

This organisational assessment tool was adapted from Lansdown and O'Kane's (2014) 'toolkit for monitoring and evaluating children's participation'. 'Children's participation' is understood as children's right to be involved and influential in decision-making about issues which affect their lives and those of their communities in accordance with their evolving capacity, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). In developing the tool, we were also influenced by others who extend this definition and highlight a need to also focus on evidence of children's influence and change resulting from children's involvement in decision-making (Gallagher, 2008).

Method

The partner organisations were asked to discuss a range of quality measures in relation to their understanding of children's participation and organisational participatory practice in their teams. Based on these internal discussions, the organisational assessment form was filled out at the beginning and at the end of the project. The following scoring system was used:

Level 1	Not considered
Level 2	Aware of this but not done in practice
Level 3	Sometimes, but no systematic way of doing this
Level 4	Understood and systematically implemented by staff

QUALITY MEASURES	DIMENSIONS	BASELINE			END-LINE		
		D&E	ATINA	NCCAP	D&E	ATINA	NCCAP
Children and young people have enough, clear information to make an informed decision	▪ children's participation has a clear purpose ▪ children and young people understand how much say they will have in decision-making ▪ roles and responsibilities of those involved are clear and well understood ▪ children and young people agree with the goals and targets of the activity	4	4	3	4	4	4
Participation is voluntary	▪ children and young people have time to consider their involvement and provide consent ▪ children and young people are aware of their right to withdraw and can do so at any time ▪ children and young people's other commitments (e.g. work and school) are respected and accommodated	4	4	4	4	4	4
Participation is respectful	▪ children and young people can freely express their views and are treated with respect ▪ ways of working build children and young people's self-esteem and confidence ▪ children and young people feel that they have valid and useful experiences and views to contribute ▪ all adults involved in the programme are respectful towards children and young people at all times	3.75	4	4	4	4	4

QUALITY MEASURES	DIMENSIONS	BASELINE			END-LINE		
		D&E	ATINA	NCCAP	D&E	ATINA	NCCAP
Participation is relevant	■ activities are of real relevance to the experiences, knowledge, and abilities of the children and young people involved ■ Clear selection criteria are developed for all activities ■ children and young people are involved in ways that are appropriate to their capacities and interests	3.33	3	3	3.66	4	4
Participation is child-friendly	■ enough time and resources are made available for children and young people's involvement in activities ■ children and young people are properly supported to prepare for their involvement in activities ■ adults have the capacity to support and deliver child-friendly approaches ■ meeting places and activity locations are easily accessible and make children and young people feel comfortable ■ children and young people are given information in child-friendly formats (e.g. in simple language if children and young people's literacy level is low)	3.75	3	4	4	3	4
Participation is inclusive	■ children and young people are not discriminated against because of age, race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin or disability ■ efforts are made to reduce potential barriers (e.g. in relation to disability, single parenting, language skills, etc.) to enable access for all children and young people	4	4	4	4	4	4
Participation is supported by training for adults	■ all staff and managers are sensitised to children and young people's participation, understand its importance, and understand your organisation's commitment to it ■ staff are provided with appropriate training, tools, time out of their normal workload and other opportunities to learn how to work in a participatory way ■ staff can express any views or anxieties about involving children and young people, in the expectation that these will be addressed in a constructive way ■ participatory activities are supported by sufficient time and resources	3.75	3	3	3.75	4	4
Participation is safe and sensitive	■ the protection of children and young people's rights is a priority in the way children and young people's involvement is planned and organised ■ children and young people involved in participatory activities are aware of their right to be safe from abuse and know where to go for help if needed ■ skilled, knowledgeable staff are delegated to address and coordinate child protection issues during all activities involving children and young people	4	4	4	4	4	4

QUALITY MEASURES	DIMENSIONS	BASELINE			END-LINE		
		D&E	ATINA	NCCAP	D&E	ATINA	NCCAP
Participation is accountable	■ adults are accountable to children and young people for any commitments they make during the course of activities ■ children and young people are supported to take part in follow-up and evaluation processes ■ feedback reaches all the children and young people who were involved in activities ■ children and young people are asked about their satisfaction with activities and their views on how their involvement could be improved; children and young people's feedback is sought in an anonymous and safe way so children and young people can express criticism without fear of repercussions ■ mistakes identified through evaluations are acknowledged and used to improve participatory processes	4	3	2	4	3	4

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