

University Network: Children Challenging Sexual Violence

Second briefing paper

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September 2019

INTRODUCTION

The 'International University Network: Children Challenging Sexual Violence' is a new initiative to capture and promote participatory activities undertaken by universities around the world to challenge sexual violence against children (SVAC).

The network, led by 'The International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking' at the University of Bedfordshire (hereafter referred to as 'the International Centre'), and supported by Oak Foundation and Tides Foundation, is part of the [Our Voices programme of work](#).

As part of the Our Voices programme of work, we are particularly interested in participatory approaches involving people collaboratively in university activities: this can include engaging them in developing curriculum or teaching activities or in designing and conducting research.

Following the launch of the network in May 2019, we published a briefing paper sharing initial findings from a survey we designed to map out academics and institutions working in this field (from March to May 2019). This first briefing is available [here](#).

In July 2019 we held our first webinar in which we outlined our vision for the network and shared further survey and interview findings from our initial scoping with experts working in this field. The webinar was held in collaboration with '[The End Violence Against Children Global Partnership](#)' and potential overlapping activities and objectives between these two international networks were identified. The second half of the webinar consisted of a Q&A and discussion session where participants shared ideas for future developments. This second briefing provides a recap of our first webinar.

THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Since its launch in 2016, the [End Violence Against Children Global Partnership](#) (hereafter referred to as 'End Violence') has worked on multiple levels to prevent and respond to all forms of violence against children, including sexual violence.

The End Violence strategy is founded on three pillars:

- Building political will in countries around the world, catalysing a global movement to raise awareness, increase understanding, change thinking and inspire action. Countries in which government leaders make a public commitment to end all forms of violence against children can obtain the status of 'pathfinders'. To date, the partnership comprises of 26 [Pathfinding Countries](#) around the world.

- Mobilising new resources and building co-investment to support countries' national plan to end violence against children
- Equipping practitioners by identifying and sharing solutions, expertise and resources with all those working to end violence, including through the [End Violence Fund](#).

The support End Violence provides to Pathfinding Countries is informed by the evidence-based 'INSPIRE Framework to End Violence Against Children.'

See the WHO's [INSPIRE Handbook](#). This handbook is relevant for all sectors, particularly education, criminal justice, health and social care, and is underpinned by seven strategies to advance efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal target 16.2 'to end all forms of violence against children'.

Universities play a key role in adapting and implementing the INSPIRE framework across these countries. End Violence is initiating work with three universities in Colombia, Cambodia and the Philippines and are keen to expand this model. While at different stages of development, depending on the country context, End Violence supports universities by:

- Documenting their research and making it accessible and user-friendly for practice
- Co-writing research grants to source funds for implementation research that is relevant to national activities
- Brokering technical support and fostering networks to encourage learning and exchanges between Pathfinding Countries.

Additionally, End Violence is collaborating with the University of Edinburgh through **The End Violence Lab** with multiple learning activities underway and planned, including a vision to build centres of excellence on violence prevention, and particularly sexual violence globally. Some of the topics explored as part of this work, include youth-led methodologies, childhood indicators, and mixed-methods approaches to understand under-reporting of violence among children. Many of these approaches are closely aligned with the Our Voices programme at the International Centre.

End Violence and the International Centre are in discussion regarding collaboration opportunities for future work.

EMERGING FINDINGS

Findings from our initial scoping of university activities in preventing and responding to SVAC come from two sources: an online survey and key informant interviews.

We designed a brief survey to begin to map out academics and institutions working in this field. To date, 64 individuals completed the survey. Out of these 64 individuals, 52 are

affiliated to a university representing a total of 42 universities (some respondents were associated to the same university). Another ten responses were received from representatives of various (I)NGOs and UNICEF and one respondent from a government funded research centre.

Survey

The survey is still live and can be accessed via this link:

https://bedshealthsciences.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7PQirxMhd2z3IMV

Please complete it if you would like to join the network to provide us with some background on your work and we will be in touch. We would also be grateful if you could share with anyone who might be interested in this initiative.

Based on initial survey responses we propose six different [membership categories](#) to reflect the range of expertise of interested members.

We also conducted eight semi-structured interviews with experts comprising of five academic staff and two PhD students from two European Universities, one Australian university and a British university, and one representative from UNICEF.

The following findings are emerging from our initial survey mapping and our conversations with experts in the field.

1. There appears to be limited university involvement in this field

- The survey identified a relatively small number of universities that focus specifically on SVAC (17 out of the 42 identified) and even fewer that are engaged in participatory approaches in this field (five universities identified).
- Research on sexual violence against children seems largely reliant on independent, external funding. We didn't find any example of universities that fund this work directly; all the examples we identified were funded via clinical practice or via trust and foundations.
- Research on SVAC is mostly contained within the disciplines related to social work and health and psychology. There seems to be little engagement with the topic of child protection and preventing SVAC in other subject areas like education, sport, tourism, geography or business studies. We know from research that these are all areas in which children can experience significant harm and various forms of sexual violence.
- Universities working on addressing SVAC rely on close partnerships with (I)NGOs. (I)NGOs value the research expertise that universities bring to this work. Researchers in this field tend to have a background in practice (often as youth

workers or clinicians). Their research is largely informed by their practice experience and they tend to adapt research tools from practice tools. These researchers are thus well equipped for working with young people and handling potential risks associated to conducting research in this field, such as handling disclosures.

- There is real value to having researchers with practice background sit on university ethics committees as they can provide the reassurance that university ethics board often need to allow this type of works.

2. There is a lack of ethical standards for doing participatory research with children and young people on SVAC (and VAC more broadly)

- Participatory research on SVAC is still very much an emerging field. Academics as well as (I)NGOs conducting research with young people on this topic would welcome more ethical guidance.
- It was noted that current ethical standards for conducting research with young people are predominantly Western-centric as they have been developed in the Global North and that there is a need to adapt participatory methods to various cultural contexts.
- Our discussions with experts in this field highlighted some added complexities linked to participatory research on SVAC. Added challenges they identified in low and middle income countries include:
 - Lack of services such as the lack of access to post rape care
 - Internal challenge for researchers related to setting clear boundaries between being researchers and case managers. This can present the research team with difficult choices: for example, do researchers become case managers or do they try to partner with existing service providers?
 - Different perception of childhood: older adolescents may not always be recognised as a vulnerable group and as such don't necessarily get the same support and protection as younger children.

3. There are perceived advantages and disadvantages of addressing SVAC through university-led work

Advantages

- Universities benefit from a strong research culture and can contribute to the development of rigorous research methods, analysis and dissemination.
- Universities can contribute to impact-led and practice-led research.
- Due to their research expertise, universities can play an advisory role to help think through what instruments might be best for qualitative and quantitative participatory

research with young people. For instance, one expert interviewed suggested that universities can do 'knowledge brokering' around tools that are being used internationally and shape and share good practice

- Universities can enhance the relationship between research, curriculum development and training. For instance, universities can train professionals and other academics on how to use research tools.

Limitations

- This work operates within a challenging funding environment and a number of academics we spoke with have explained that there were significant cuts to social sciences including social work, sociology or educational sciences in favour of 'harder' sciences. This can make interdisciplinary work difficult.
- University departments tend to work in silo which can sometimes lead to missed opportunities for collaboration and joint learning.
- University ethics board can be very risk averse to participatory research with children, especially around sensitive topics like sexual violence. We spoke to academics involved in participatory research who said they needed to provide ethics board with a lot of reassurance to convince them of the value of doing research with children on these topics when done appropriately and ethically. On the other hand, academics noted that some ethics board may not give enough consideration to child protection, highlighting the discrepancy around ethical standards in this field.

International evidence on children and young people's involvement in participatory research on sexual violence

These emerging reflections correspond to findings from an international scoping review about the involvement of children and young people in participatory research on sexual violence. This review was conducted by the International Centre in partnership with the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) as part of the 'Being Heard' project, within the Our Voices programme of work. See the [Being Heard research report](#).

The scoping highlights the dearth of evidence of participatory research in this area and most of the existing evidence base published academically seems to be skewed towards high-income countries. It explores a number of barriers to young people's involvement in participatory research addressing sexual violence including concerns over managing risk and vulnerability; lack of confidence and knowhow amongst the wider research community of safely and meaningfully involving young people in sexual violence research; and a perceived lack of young people's competencies in relation to their ability to undertake research and handle sensitive topics. The report also shares learning from participatory

research involving vulnerable groups of young people on sensitive issues and discusses specific challenges that can arise as part of this process and strategies to overcome them. It considers the need for promoting ethical research practice and developing guidance for ethics boards on how to navigate risks identified in research proposals.

FUTURE ACTIVITIES

Our initial scoping reveals a strong appetite for an international university network in this field. Based on this scoping, we suggest the following activities between now and April 2020:

- Create a framework for university-led strategic engagement on addressing SVAC
- Build on the very limited evidence of university activity in this field
- Identify opportunities for research collaborations
- Collaboratively identify some targeted activities that will foster collaboration between university departments and promote international and interdisciplinary learning
- Connect postgraduate students around the world and share learning from their research
- Explore the appropriateness of existing ethical guidance to youth participatory research in low and middle income countries

As the network develops we would like to continue to explore work undertaken across disciplines and opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.

We aim to secure funding to keep this network running beyond April 2020 and we are considering the following activities. While we do not seek to achieve these longer-term targets by April 2020 we would like to start thinking about those with network members.

- Identify one or two key issues related to members' work through more surveys, interviews or participatory webinars that we could focus on.
- This could involve collaborating on targeted projects, such as:
 - Specific campaign projects. E.g. campaigning for an international age of consent to sexual activity
 - Joint conference or a symposium
 - International research projects (mixed studies)
 - Edited book/special issue/joint papers

Q&A SESSION: KEY DISCUSSION POINTS

This section outlines key discussion points from the Q&A session.

Capturing different theoretical perspectives that inform this research

It was suggested that the network could build on existing conceptual and theoretical foundations to inform SVAC prevention and responses by pulling together knowledge and theory from existing projects. We could explore pursuing this from an interdisciplinary perspective, through a joint briefing paper for example.

The [‘Edinburgh Futures Institute’](#) at the University of Edinburgh was flagged as a valuable resource. The institute brings together interdisciplinary expertise in social and data sciences, the arts and humanities to support organisations tackling society’s most pressing needs.

Developing adolescent-centred research

Several participants raised the need for more guidance and youth-led research methods targeted at engaging adolescents and young people transitioning into adulthood in the research process. It was mentioned that adolescent females in particular often fall through the gaps of both the child protection and the women’s rights fields. The need to engage with sexual violence amongst adolescent males and young men, an under-reported and under-researched area, was also flagged. Beyond the question of age, we are also keen to think about how we can better engage adolescents with added vulnerabilities such as learning disabilities.

Ethical considerations

There were a number of questions and comments related to ethical considerations and we discussed the importance of using a common language and clear definitions when discussing the following ethical concerns across varying cultural contexts.

Balancing protection and agency

Researchers have to ensure young people’s safety and wellbeing while supporting their agency and recognising their resilience. At the International Centre, we encourage young people to talk about the impact of these different demands. The network could build on this by helping us to consider how we can involve young people in informing these questions.

Engaging more marginalised or vulnerable groups of young people that fall outside of institutions and systems

We discussed the need to better engage children and young people outside of institutions and systems. Strengthening partnerships with (I)NGOs and agencies who have direct reach

with these young people, such as street-connected children or those detached from any form of support, is key to ensuring that we do not overlook these more marginalised groups.

The 'Being Heard' report aforementioned shares some strategies for engaging with vulnerable young people in participatory research on SVAC and related topics. See the [Being Heard research report](#).

Other useful reading on this topic include:

- Aparajeyo-Bangladesh (2010) [Youth-led survey on the commercial exploitation of vulnerable children & youth in Dhaka slum areas](#). Aparajeyo-Bangladesh and ECPAT.
- Block, K., Warr, D., Gibbs, L. and Riggs, E. (2013) 'Addressing ethical and methodological challenges in research with refugee-background young people: Reflections from the field', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 26(1), pp. 69–87.
- Cody, C. (2017) "We have experience to share, it makes it real": Young people's views on their role in sexual violence prevention efforts', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, pp. 221-227.
- Gerison Lansdown, ['Every Child's Right to be heard: A resource guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 12'](#), Save the Children UK and UNICEF, 2011
- SANLAAP (2010) [Vulnerability of children living in the red light areas of Kolkata, India: A youth-led study](#). YPP-SA and ECPAT.
- van Blerk, L., Shand, W., and Shanahan, P. (2017) *'Street children as researchers: Critical reflections on a participatory methodological process in the 'Growing Up on the Streets' research project in Africa'*, *Methodological Approaches*, 2, pp. 159-178
- YPP Youth from Maiti Nepal (2010) [Youth-led study on the vulnerability of young girls working in restaurants, bars and massage parlours in Kathmandu](#). YPP Youth from Maiti Nepal, CWIN, Bishwas Nepal and ECPAT.

Researchers' duty to report

One participant raised the question of researchers' moral and legal duty to report disclosures from participants or reporting of abuse within the communities they work in. They reflected on how the fear of being referred to social services or the police can sometimes deter young people or community members from talking openly about their experiences. This is something that will be further explored within the work on ethics.

Considering broader social determinants

It was further suggested that we need to consider the role of broader social determinants, like poverty, in addressing SVAC.

The [End Violence Against Children Global Partnership](#) is supporting a knowledge hub that collates data related to structural poverty and climate for users and producers of evidence. If you are interested in the knowledge hub, please email Dr Catherine Maternowska: catherine.maternowska@end-violence.org

Children on the move

Children on the move and in refugee camps were acknowledged as a particularly vulnerable group. The issue of child trafficking and exploitation within this context is an under researched area. Participants noted the need for opportunities to develop this research from a participatory perspective.

The role of international law

We discussed the gaps that often exist between international law and local practice on issues related to SVAC, such as FGM. As part of the interdisciplinary focus of this network, further engagement from researchers working on the criminal justice system and law would be welcomed. As one participant pointed out, partnerships with governmental organisations and agencies are crucial to accessing data and influencing policy and legislation.

Peer-on-peer abuse

There was also some interest expressed on addressing various forms of sexual exploitation and abuse that takes place within peer groups. Current child protection systems are not sufficiently equipped to identify and address these forms of abuse.

The Contextual Safeguarding programme of work at the International Centre has developed an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships that young people form in their neighbourhoods, schools and online can feature violence and abuse. This approach seeks to expand the remit of the current UK child protection system to engage with individuals and sectors who do have influence over/within extra-familial contexts, and recognise that assessment of, and intervention with, these spaces are a critical part of safeguarding practices. Find out more on the [Contextual Safeguarding network](#).

Public health approaches to sexual violence prevention

One participant asked whether the network had uncovered any innovative examples of public health approaches to sexual violence prevention, including any examples of young people-led messaging.

The International Centre has been involved in a number of participatory and youth-led projects. An example of this is the [Learning from the experts](#) project which shares young people's perspectives on how we can support healthy child development after sexual abuse. This is a participatory action research project focusing on supporting mental health and wellbeing after sexual abuse in adolescence.

See more on the International Centre's [webpage](#).

The NSPCC has also conducted work in this area, in consultation with young people:

Brown, J. and Saied-Tessier, A. (2015) [Preventing child sexual abuse: towards a national strategy for England](#). London: NSPCC.

Brown, J. O'Donnell, T. and Erooga, M. (2011) [Sexual abuse: a public health challenge](#). London: NSPCC.

More international examples of this would be welcomed.

Funding opportunities for conferences and training workshops

There was a question around whether universities had funding available to offer conferences and training workshops to practitioners. The purpose of these would be to disseminate findings from research on sexual violence and guide professionals on how to apply the findings directly to their practice. We recognise that academic conference fees can restrict access to practitioners and (I)INGO staff to these spaces and we are hopeful for future opportunities to share research findings through this network.

As this network will develop over the coming months we would love to hear from you. For any questions or suggestions please get in touch with jenny.pearce@beds.ac.uk



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