



Promoting Change

The Voices and Needs of Sheffield Girls

together women
REPORT 2015

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Introduction

Over the years, the Together Women Project (TWP) has enjoyed great success helping adult service users turn their lives around for the better after women have found themselves off track. However, when TWP asked adult service users to consider when their lives gradually started taking turns for the worse, many women reported struggles beginning around twelve to thirteen years of age. For this reason, TWP sought and received three years of funding from The Lankelly Chase Foundation to explore the needs of young Sheffield girls with a view towards filling current service gaps by providing relevant early intervention services to girls as young as thirteen years old.

Throughout 2014, TWP consulted with Sheffield girls aged thirteen to nineteen years, engaging many girls previously marginalised from formal decision-making processes despite having legitimate, but often overlooked, needs. Our goal was to listen to the unique needs and wishes of vulnerable Sheffield girls, ensuring that their voices would help shape relevant Sheffield service provision. The importance of early intervention was soon confirmed by the young girls themselves:

“I didn't really get any support ever until about six months ago, to be honest. When I turned sixteen, I started running off and getting caught up with the police and then people did start to take some notice. It probably would have helped if I had been helped before I was sixteen. Just any kind of help at all.”

The Sheffield Young Advisors, a diverse team of young consultants who are trained and commissioned to help local service organisations reach and engage young people, supported the research phase of this project from start to finish. Sheffield Young Advisors 'youth-proofed' focus group questions (i.e., edited them to ensure that the questions would be friendly and understandable to the young girls consulted), helped pilot test the questions through participating in early focus group discussions themselves, and also regularly supported the TWP Young Women's Engagement Worker by co-facilitating (or in some cases, leading) focus groups.

TWP engaged one hundred and twenty-six girls in a total of thirty-one consultations, drawing from twenty-two Sheffield agencies and schools. Nearly all of the consultations were done face-to-face and in focus groups, although discretion required that some girls dealing with extremely sensitive issues were consulted individually. A few girls who were unable to participate in focus group discussions submitted their responses to the focus group questions (see Appendix) in writing. All girls consulted received a £5 Primark or Boots voucher as a token of appreciation from TWP and The Lankelly Chase Foundation.

Focus group consultations varied in length, generally taking two to three hours, and the girls participating were diverse in many ways. Black and minority ethnic (BME) girls represented 46% of the total number of participants, with 41% of the BME girls identifying as Roma Slovak. The LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and

Transgender) community was also well-represented (9% of all participants) and nearly 13% of all participants reported being disabled in various ways (e.g., learning disability, dyslexia, impaired hearing, ADHD, Asperger Syndrome, anxiety, depression, addiction to drugs/alcohol). Exactly half of girls consulted were either not religious or identified as 'Atheists' (see Appendix - Demographic Information).

Some groups were exclusively made up of girls identifying as Roma Slovak, LGBT, Young Carers, Young Mums, BME (Black and Minority Ethnic), SEN (Special Education Needs) or involved in the Youth Justice Service. Other groups were comprised only of girls who are living in supported accommodation, in care, or in a secure unit, are at risk of exclusion from school or of anti-social behaviour and crime, or have suffered eating disorders, mental health issues, sexual exploitation or domestic abuse.

Although many girls showed enthusiasm when invited to participate in the consultations, some were initially sceptical that sharing their opinions would substantially impact Sheffield service provision for girls and wondered aloud if participating would be a waste of time. Nevertheless, participant reactions by the end of the consultation sessions were consistently quite favourable:

“The Promoting Change session was a positive experience. I really enjoyed getting involved with the session and talking about shaping services for young women in Sheffield. Ann, the main worker for the session, is a brilliant woman to work with. She made you feel really involved and very comfortable, even talking about your personal experiences. You received a £5 Boots or Primark voucher after the session which was a nice touch to the end of the session”, “It was really interesting to explore not just how I think about females in society but also how others felt. It also made me more aware of the issues others face and more determined to fight for equality”, and “I thought the session was delivered well. Ann engaged the whole group and had discussions going right from the start. Her enthusiasm and passion on the subject meant that the group felt comfortable expressing any opinion ... good or bad.”

The girls participating were each given £170 in play money and asked to imagine that they were on the Sheffield City Council, empowered to make serious decisions about how money should be spent to help Sheffield girls. The girls completing this activity numbered one hundred and nineteen. How the girls collectively chose to spend £20,230 (see Appendix - Spending Options) was considered alongside qualitative information gleaned when girls discussed the open-ended focus group questions. Taken together, the girls' quantitative and qualitative responses exposed eight key themes central to their shared perceptions about what Sheffield girls need in terms of service provision. We consider first the top ranked theme: Abusive Relationships.

Abusive Relationships

THE ISSUES

Within the scope of this research, 'Abusive Relationships' emerged as the top shared concern among Sheffield girls. Struggles with creating and maintaining healthy, stable relationships of all kinds (e.g., romantic, peer, family) featured heavily across all groups in questions about issues currently impacting the girls' home, school and social lives. The girls clearly desired guidance about how to best manage relationships and seemed eager to learn more about healthy boundaries, domestic abuse and personal safety.

Healthy Boundaries

Many girls admitted to having trouble with knowing how to both set and accept proper boundaries in relationships, but they also generally acknowledged that sometimes drawing a firm line and refusing to accept certain behaviours is necessary. As one girl explained,

"It's important to understand that sometimes in relationships it's alright to say 'no' and it's okay to have boundaries that can't be crossed."

The girls particularly struggled with lack of clarity around what should be considered acceptable behaviour in friendships and among family members. They admitted to often dismissing abuse or bullying in friendships, shrugging it off as their friends 'just messing about' or thinking it is 'normal' to manipulate or shout at each other, only to realise much later that they had been in abusive relationships with friends. They also admitted to confusion about how to effectively resolve relationship problems with family members since it is not always entirely possible or desirable to completely end those relationships when they become problematic.

Interestingly, the girls consistently expressed a desire for parents and authority figures to model healthy boundaries for them. Many girls showed clear frustration with and disappointment in parents who failed to set firm, clear boundaries in response to their negative behaviours. As two girls living in care explained,

"I'd rather be in this place and just straight down hard – I can't do this, I can't do that. It shows that they're respecting me MORE"

"When I come out, she [Mum] needs to come down harder on me. Like the hardest that she can. I know that I need her to be more strict. She's gonna feel bad for me when I get out."

The girls who shared personal experiences with having to work within the limits of very clear boundaries – and who suffered the consequences for not respecting those boundaries – also generally showed greater appreciation for how setting firm boundaries in their own relationships could be beneficial:

"You need relationships and you need boundaries. If you put boundaries in place and you come down on them proper hard and tell them how it is, then they're more likely not to do the same thing again."

Domestic Abuse

The topic of domestic abuse dominated many group discussions. There was some recognition that domestic abuse is about power and control:

"Most guys like to think that they're the man of the house; they're more powerful than the woman and they like to show that. Physically, men are a bit stronger but everyone's equal so they shouldn't treat girls like they're not as good. They shouldn't take advantage. And they do."

The girls also pointed out that it is usually not very easy for girls to simply walk away from abusive relationships. Reasons identified for not leaving relationships when domestic abuse occurs included lack of money, lack of knowledge (e.g., not recognising the abuse, not knowing how to escape), lack of higher expectations (i.e., girls 'get used to it'), strong emotional attachments, being isolated from family and friends, and having little self-esteem or confidence intact following the abuse. One girl shared,

"Men are stronger than us. Girls can't really do anything because they're scared and they feel embarrassed when they tell anyone so they don't say anything and just let it happen, to be honest. There's not many places you can go that girls know about domestic abuse. If it happened to me, I'd have no idea where to go."



Concerns about the long-term effects of domestic abuse were prevalent:

"If it just keeps building up and you can't cope then you're likely to commit suicide so you can get away from it. And you'll never recover from it either. It'll always affect you no matter what. Like it's always going to be there in the back of your head. Even if you do get in a new relationship, that fear is always going to be there. It affects how you expect to be treated."

The girls were also extremely concerned about how common it is for domestic abuse to go unrecognised. Many of the girls consulted seemed unclear regarding what truly represents domestic abuse and some made rather alarming comments which largely went unchallenged by fellow group participants:

"This guy showed his love for her by hitting her because when she was vulnerable, it made him feel powerful. And as a child, he probably didn't feel powerful. Everybody hated him for it . . . but I was like, that's just his way of showing the love he has for her"

"I don't think it's abusive for him to smack you; I just don't think it's very nice. Like if they proper punch you and leave bruises and blood and stuff, like THAT'S abuse. But slapping you around the face, that's just like getting told off by your Mum or something like that when you're little. If someone's only getting smacked in the face, I don't really think that's domestic abuse."

Several focus groups pointed out that the media's portrayal of domestic abuse and other social messages cause many girls not only to minimise their own physical abuse, but also to completely ignore other forms (e.g., emotional, sexual) of domestic abuse:

"It [domestic abuse] is pretty severe in the adverts. They will portray domestic abuse as something really obvious. I don't think people think about emotional abuse when they think about domestic abuse."



Many girls also identified a need to increase awareness that domestic abuse can be of a sexual nature, revealing interest in being taught about personal rights in relationships:

"I only just found out that rape is illegal inside marriage and I didn't find out in school. And there wasn't any other person in my class that knew that. Like we all thought that if you're married to somebody then you couldn't say that was rape because you don't have a choice. So there needs to be more stuff like that being taught."

The girls often expressed that coercion can be so subtle in relationships that 'just going along with it' can seem to girls as if they are freely choosing to participate in their own abuse – and therefore, they do not recognise the abuse.

Furthermore, the girls generally agreed that teaching and discussion about the warning signs of domestic abuse should start early for young girls:

"I think a lot of things can be avoided if you teach girls early, you know, not to depend on a man. Not to accept certain behaviours."

Although the British Government now recognises domestic abuse for girls as young as sixteen years of age, the girls expressed concern about 'under-16s' slipping through the cracks of service provision and not being aware of domestic abuse or any resources available to them to help if they are suffering from it:

"There is a service gap for girls under sixteen years old who suffer from domestic abuse. They tend to not get as much support"

"There's not enough awareness on seeing the signs and knowing what to do if it's happening to me. Really young girls don't know what to do or who to talk to about it because the person who they might usually go to for help might be the person who is doing it."

Additionally, there was considerable interest in creating support for Sheffield girls who care about other girls who are in abusive relationships. Although all of the girls consulted knew at least one other girl who had been or is still being abused, most admitted to feeling inadequate and unsure of how to respond when their abused friends refuse to leave their relationships:

"Even if it's someone else in an unhealthy relationship, it could be affecting you and you'd need somebody to talk about it to."

Another point of interest is that several girls whose parents had supported them in leaving abusive relationships emphasised that they would never have disclosed their abuse had their parents not been paying attention, noticing bruises or changes in their moods, and then asked them outright if they were being abused. Being directly asked to disclose reportedly made it feel easier for these girls to talk about the abuse than it would have felt for them to raise the issue for discussion by themselves. There was also general agreement that if a girl is not ready to disclose, then the best approach for concerned parents is simply to let her know that they care and that they're happy to speak with her about it at any point in the future should she change her mind.

Personal Safety

Fear of being raped was a common theme throughout most focus groups, with many girls complaining that

"Girls are taught to protect themselves but guys aren't taught to have some restraint or anything. Or to learn to take when girls say 'no' seriously. It all seems to be on the girls."

Nearly all girls admitted that they would feel unsafe walking outside after dark unless accompanied by their family members, friends or a dog. Many Roma Slovak girls confessed that their parents restrict them more than their brothers when it comes to being allowed out of the house because girls are perceived to be more vulnerable than boys:

"It's [being kept inside the house] to keep girls safe because a boy can protect himself. Our parents say it's always better to have boys than girls because with the girls there's lots of problems. They need extra protection."

THEIR SOLUTIONS

The most popular response when the girls were asked what they need to address the problem of abusive relationships was that they would like to have a readily available, girls-only abusive relationships workshop series. According to the girls, this series should particularly welcome girls below the age of sixteen and also focus on recognising the early warning signs of abuse. These workshops should include training on how to maintain confidence in the boundaries that girls do manage to set, even when they come under pressure to change them:

"It's sometimes easy for a young woman to say 'no', but it's usually hard for men to hear it."

They should also teach strategies about exactly how to move towards leaving an abusive relationship:

"All they [the school] taught us is that if you start getting abused, you should leave the person. It's not just that easy to leave someone who's abusing you ... and if they find out you've left them, they're gonna find ya and they're gonna do something even worse."

Girls stressed that these workshops must not be of mixed gender due to the topic of abusive relationships being such a sensitive one. There was general agreement that girls would not feel comfortable sharing in front of boys because boys could not relate well, would not take the issue seriously enough, and could not be trusted to avoid gossiping or using personal information girls share against them in the future.

The girls also suggested that this proposed workshop series would feed into a girls-only support group for those wanting

additional support to cope with any abusive relationships, whether their own relationships or those of loved ones:

"We need a support group for girls dealing with controlling or abusive relationships. My biggest obstacle to leaving the abusive relationship was fear. He threatened to kill himself if I split up with him. He threatened to hurt my baby sister. I've learned. But a lot of girls don't realise it ... and then they don't know how to get out. But if there was a group or place where girls can go sit and talk about it ... just help them and be there for them ... then maybe they might be able to talk about their relationship issues. That's all anyone can do for anybody."

The value of this design was said to be that it features educational, social and emotional support elements without unnaturally fixating on providing 'support' to girls:

"It shouldn't always be like, 'Let's sit in a circle and talk about all of our issues', like that's all we are. We already know that; we already know why we're all here. So let's just get to know YOU, not your issue."

Focus group participants also expressed interest in assertiveness training provided exclusively for girls:

"I think all girls should be taught to say what's on their minds to men instead of just going 'Oh, it's alright...' like most women do" and "I'd like to be more assertive and I don't think anyone teaches us how to be assertive towards parents or friends, or when to say 'no'. I think there's the odd girl who might say her opinion sort of thing, but I think most girls just kind of go along with everything that's happening and don't really realise that they didn't really want to do that until after. Or even if they want to say 'no' at the time, they feel rude."

Additionally, several girls shared that they would be interested in learning some basic self-defence techniques and strategies for keeping themselves safe when not at home.

Finally, the girls suggested that more services in general surrounding domestic abuse issues should be made available to girls under the age of sixteen. They recommended frequent and confidential domestic abuse support groups, free one-to-one sessions for girls who are at particularly high-risk for abuse and having more service buildings to help ease travel and transport limitations. The girls cautioned against these domestic abuse services being school-based for privacy and confidentiality reasons.

THE PERCEIVED SERVICE GAP

More education and support about how to effectively set healthy boundaries, particularly in friendships and with family members

More resources aimed at helping young girls identify the early warning signs of all forms of abuse in relationships

Gender-specific education focusing on issues relevant to domestic abuse

Assertiveness training

Easily accessible, gender-specific training on self-defence techniques for personal safety

Private, confidential, gender-specific support for all Sheffield girls struggling with domestic abuse, but particularly those who are younger than sixteen years of age

Confidence and Self-Esteem

THE ISSUES

The girls shared many struggles with building and maintaining confidence and self-esteem in a society that they generally agreed discourages 'strong girls':

"Some girls don't want to be bossy; they want to be accommodating and to never be seen in a negative light. So they don't feel confident asserting themselves..."

"I think that a lot of times when girls assert themselves, people shoot them down because they don't like strong girls."

Nevertheless, the girls also frequently valued both confidence and self-esteem, often because they perceived both qualities to be directly linked with success in interviewing for rewarding employment opportunities. They spoke in great detail about the need to feel unconditionally accepted in a society where difficulties surrounding identity, body image and the sexual objectification of girls all impact their efforts to view and present themselves positively.

Identity

The girls highlighted various identity issues which tend to chip away at girls' confidence and self-esteem. In several instances, girls spoke out about confidence and self-esteem difficulties stemming from challenges surrounding sexuality:

"My Mum said to me that she wished I was straight and I asked her why? She said, 'Because I don't want you to get any hate for it', and as nice as that is, I don't really want her wishing that I'm something I'm not..."

"Nowadays, the world isn't as black and white as it was fifty-odd years ago. Like there isn't just male and female. There's not just straight, gay, bisexual. There's so many other subtypes. Especially now that people are starting to become aware of all of these different identities that people have, it's crucial to actually educate people in saying that it's alright to feel different than what you are. It's alright – it's not an abnormality. It's alright to feel the way you do."

Many girls struggled with feeling unfairly judged and shameful for being sexually active at all:

"If a lad has sex with a lot of girls, he's a stud. But if a girl has sex with a lot of lads, she's a slag."

Another troublesome area regarding identity issues was identified as 'sexist attitudes' regarding career vs. home life, with many girls feeling pressure from society, schools and parents to value and pursue one above the other:

"I think a lot of girls have crises about what they should really do when it comes to balancing career with home life. Girls should have the right to choose to be a homemaker or not – but not to have certain roles forced on them to stay at home or to work, based only on what someone else wants or expects of them. I think that schools are always pushing 'career, career, career' on girls and sometimes that's not what she really wants. And it's alright for that girl not to want that as long as that is her decision and not a man's decision or her Dad's decision"

"There's a stereotype about girls that they're going to kind of be a housewife where they're just at home and boys at school still sort of joke about that. It's annoying that this stereotype is still there because it makes you feel like you're not as good, like you can't go out and get a job. I'd be surprised if there ever was NOT a gender imbalance but more could be done to at least close the gap."

Body Image

Nearly all girls consulted heavily linked confidence and self-esteem with how they believe they look (i.e., 'body image'):

"Your appearance and how you treat yourself is all to do with your self-confidence. You feel better when you look after yourself. Your appearance is everything."

The key overall factor influencing how the girls believed they look to others in terms of attractiveness was body weight, with girls idealising slim, lightweight figures:

"If a girl is really fat then there is no way she doesn't have self-confidence problems. I can tell you that for a fact"



"I know girls who weigh themselves every day and if the scale goes up even a little bit, their whole day is ruined and they feel really bad about themselves. But nobody really talks to us about body image and stuff"

"I would hate wearing a bikini. I'm a size 10-12... but in a load of situations, I've just felt fat, horribly fat. Especially at our ages, I'm generally the biggest person. I feel like I look fat a lot. I think a lot of girls do."

Nearly all girls had witnessed other girls developing eating disorders or being bullied when peers judged them to be 'too fat':

"Sometimes girls with fat, they no like her, they bully her, they laugh at her. And when she goes home, she cries. She wants to kill herself."

Collectively, the girls pointed to the media's preference for Photoshopping and airbrushing images of the female body as a major contributing factor to problems with accepting their own bodies as they are:

"Body image is such a problem for girls today because of the media; models and celebrities plastered everywhere around Sheffield – magazines, TV, Internet, social networking. And everywhere girls see them, they all look a certain way. And even the models are pressured to look a certain way even though they get airbrushed and Photoshopped in the end anyway..."

"If it was up to me, I would completely ban Photoshopping of female bodies in magazines and adverts. It's not necessary to airbrush if no one's doing it. It's silly because it projects a fake image to everyone and they think that's what's real but it's not."

Even from very young ages, many girls compared themselves unfavourably to biased media images and reported feeling inferior and insecure regarding their own attractiveness as a result of these comparisons:

"...When you see someone proper pretty on the TV or in a magazine, when you're like fourteen or fifteen [years old], you just think models are naturally like that and you look at yourself and think, 'Well I'm nowhere near that!' And you feel so ashamed"

"They never put big girls in magazines – NEVER. So it like puts down girls that are quite big."

Sexual Objectification of Girls

The Sheffield girls consulted complained frequently of being regarded as mere 'things', not real human beings with valid thoughts and feelings :

"It's like men just pick you up and put you somewhere else and do what they want to you, but you're not a real person..."

"...it's like she's instantly a sexual object."

Many girls also shared that their confidence and self-esteem is regularly eroded by sexual harassment and 'catcalls' whilst out in public, leaving them feeling threatened and confused about how to prevent the unwanted attention:

“They're trying to get rid of the traditional view of girls but if you never wear a skirt, then you're a bit tomboyish. But then if you do wear skirts, then you're 'asking for it' and you get harassed because of it. It doesn't seem like there is ever a point where girls can be good or right and people won't criticise...”

Concern also emerged that girls who are repeatedly sexually objectified by others (“Boys are constantly asking me for naked photos on Snapchat; I get 'Send me a picture of your tits' messages every day...”) may later lack the necessary confidence and self-esteem to resist the peer pressure to sexually objectify themselves:

“My one friend – she always got lots of attention for her body. Then she were fully naked and everything in this picture her boyfriend wanted. She sent it to him and it went all around school . . . she nearly died . . . she tried killing herself . . . Luckily, she survived. But I think she only did it because deep down inside, she thought he [the boyfriend] only wanted her for her body.”

Some girls shared the belief that girls having confidence and high self-esteem may help protect them from males who, viewing girls as sexual objects, would seek to sexually exploit them:

“I want to have even more confidence . . . so then like a man knows . . . how I'm rolling. So he can't come on to me and chat s**t, telling me what I want to hear when that's not the case.”

Furthermore, almost all of the girls consulted perceived that most boys their age intentionally view pornography online and many girls believed that this negatively impacts girls' confidence and self-esteem. The girls' primary concern was that since porn videos are not Photoshopped or airbrushed and that the actors are 'real' (though possibly surgically enhanced or not 'the norm'), viewing pornography unrealistically shapes boys' sexual expectations of how girls should look naked in addition to how girls should perform sexually:

“I expect most of the boys in my year probably watch porn and most of them think it's realistic. It gives them an image of what girls should look like and how girls should act. It puts pressure on us”

“Some lads might watch it [porn] and be like, 'Oh, so that's how girls like to be intimate!' . . . I think boys put pressure on the girls and girls feel insecure about their bodies as a result of it”

“Young teen boys see porn and think, 'Oh, I wish my girlfriend would do that.' Then you're made to feel bad if you don't want to or you just can't”

“Boys who watch porn are more likely to be disappointed in normal sex . . . because it's not the same. Younger boys are less likely to realise that porn isn't real sex”

“Porn makes men think girls can do things they're not made to do”

“Normal girls aren't porn stars”

“Watching porn could affect how a man views girls in general.”

Many girls pointed out that boys viewing pornography had caused serious relationship problems for girls, sometimes even leading to break-ups with their boyfriends due to girls feeling insulted, disrespected, inadequate and even more insecure about their bodies.

Several girls complained about how society has normalised the viewing of pornography with some even expressing concern that boys are constantly being pressured by peers to view porn:

“Now part of the pressure of being a guy is that if you're not watching porn then you're not a guy. But to be honest . . . you don't have to watch porn to be a proper guy!”



THEIR SOLUTIONS

The girls consulted proposed several ideas which they hoped might help other Sheffield girls better manage issues connected to confidence and self-esteem. First, they focused on mandatory education (i.e., included in the school curriculum) to help increase awareness about what sorts of issues affect girls' confidence and self-esteem and to help girls identify beneficial strategies and skills for improving both. Several girls highlighted the need for education about accepting girls' freedom to choose their own identities and also about respecting interpersonal differences:

"It would be good to educate people more about differences in the world and that everyone can't be the way you want them to be or be like you. Everyone's got their own right to be whoever they want to be. So educate people that they need to accept that."

Other girls called for more education to increase awareness among young girls about the media's tendency to Photoshop and airbrush female models, with some girls even calling for a complete ban on the use of these techniques. The girls also recommended that both girls and boys receive education about how the actors in porn are often surgically enhanced or outside of 'the norm' and how the sex portrayed in porn is not necessarily 'real sex', a guide for how to treat a girlfriend, or a realistic representation about what to expect during a sexual experience.

It is noteworthy that although many group discussions focused on the need for girls to feel unconditionally accepted by others, only a couple of girls expressed any awareness of the need for girls to learn how to unconditionally accept themselves, basing confidence and self-esteem on their own personal ideals independent of the judgements of others:

"People put too much pressure on girls to look a certain way and they don't care about what's inside. It's about the heart. Even if you're pretty and all that, you have to have a good heart. There's other pretty girls..."

"What young girls have got to realise is that everybody is beautiful in their own right. Just because you've not got beautiful long hair or you've not got straight white teeth, it doesn't mean you're not beautiful. It just means you're different."

In addition to the need for enhanced education surrounding these issues, the girls recommended that every Sheffield girl should have easy access to support services specifically geared towards building her confidence and self-esteem:

"Girls need support with being more confident, talking about their emotions and maybe talking about personal experiences because they are facing different things within the home and school. Having a mentor or counsellor could lead them to feel more comfortable and therefore, to be able to share their problems."

The girls further suggested that these support services should also offer emotional and practical assistance around any issues likely to chip away at self-worth.

THE PERCEIVED SERVICE GAP

Education about unconditionally accepting interpersonal differences

Education around the media's portrayal of females (e.g., airbrushing, Photoshopping)

Education about the lack of realism in pornography and its potential impacts on relationships

Easily accessible support services (e.g., support groups, mentoring, counselling) to help girls build confidence and self-esteem and effectively cope with difficulties surrounding identity, body image and the sexual objectification of girls.



Self Harm

THE ISSUES

Even though focus group participants were never directly asked to consider whether or not self-harm impacts Sheffield girls today, fifteen of the thirty-one groups spontaneously raised the issue of self-harm for discussion without any prompting whatsoever. Furthermore, when the topic of self-harm did come up in these groups, the girls were consistently passionate in their responses, with most adamantly agreeing that self-harm is an enormous, rapidly growing problem that Sheffield schools currently seem unable to manage effectively:

“Self-harm is a massive problem and there's not enough talk about it. It's SO common in schools. I don't even think people realise”

“We didn't do [learn] anything in school on self-harm . . . and that's such a major problem now! I wouldn't know where to go to talk about self-harming and I wouldn't want to go to talk to someone at the school...”

and

“There's nothing for girls our age around stuff like self-harm. Girls are cutting themselves up left and right but nobody does anything about it.”

The groups shared that girls are often using social media to compare their pictures of self-harm in an effort to attract attention to themselves:

“Self-harm is increasing and becoming a really big issue. It sounds sick but it has become some sort of trend or fashion statement now”

“It's like an attention thing because they're not getting it from anywhere else and doing that is getting them attention”

“It's just overwhelming for teachers. It's a fashion thing now. Some girls have been egging each other on and self-harming . . . saying, 'How many can you do?' on Snapchat and Facebook. It's like a craze”

“Girls do it [self-harm] in school and they do it on Snapchat and then send the pictures to people, don't they? It's awful. Nobody is doing anything about it. Nothing. They're obviously looking for attention and having problems dealing with life on their own.”

Many girls further verified that self-harming is considered a 'fashionable' thing to do now:

“It's like if I went to the doctor's now because I'd done something to [cut] my arm again, it would be like, 'Oh, you're doing it for fashion; you're not doing it for anything important, are you?' But I actually am [doing it for important reasons]”,

“I was just scrolling through Facebook one day and . . . you can get this little like tattoo sleeve thing that makes it look like you self-harm. It was originally for the 'Emo look'.”

In addition to wondering out loud why so many girls are often resorting to self-harm as a means to get attention, most girls consulted agreed that those with serious mental health conditions are no longer taken seriously enough if their self-harming is noticed:

“The girls who are slipping through the cracks are those who are genuinely self-harming for mental health reasons. You can't distinguish between a person who's just doing it for the fun of it and somebody who's actually got problems, so you can't actually tackle the issue at heart because you can't figure out why it's happening. So if teachers see it, they just assume that everyone's doing it. But there needs to be education. There needs to be – somewhere! – because it's just not right. Because the girls who really need help are just slipping through the net because there are that many girls doing it for fashion. But even those girls need help too if they're that desperate for attention.”

In the hopes of having their voices heard and helping other Sheffield girls who self-harm get the help that they need, many girls were willing to share their personal reasons for self-harming in the past. Several girls admitted to self-harming in an effort to get attention but also clarified that they only felt desperate enough to seek attention through self-harm whenever they were feeling ignored or neglected by their parents/carers or when they were having trouble dealing with difficult relationships. One girl spoke about how her self-harming started with curiosity,

occasionally continued due to self-loathing, and then eventually took on a life of its own:

"Sometimes I wanted to take it out on myself because I really didn't like myself. Other times it was because other people have done it. So my first time, I was like, 'I'm gonna try it'. And sometimes it was because that's now the only thing that I know."

Another girl who had been sexually exploited and repeatedly raped shared that her self-harming was intended as a cry for help but that even after she cut a highly visible body part a couple of times, still nobody took any notice of her:

"I did it [self-harm] because I thought that's the way of telling people that I needed help. They can't miss it. They'll just be like, 'Oh my God, what's up with you?' But they still didn't. At that time I couldn't speak and ... the way I tried to show people was self-harming myself but it still didn't work! They were just like, 'What the f**k are you doing; are you stupid?' That's all they said! So I was like, 'Oh my God, why can't people get this??' Seriously."

For many girls, bullying often preceded the onset of self-harming behaviours and these girls generally felt that self-harming helped them cope with the overwhelming emotional pain that they felt as a result of being bullied:

"I used to self-harm because of bullying. The pain of that felt better than the pain of being bullied. People go, 'Why did you do it?' It's because it [self-harming] takes away the pain of what you were feeling before"

"I self-harmed because of bullying . . . I didn't have enough support; I couldn't talk to my family about it at the time. The only person I could really talk to about it was my other friend who was also self-harming. Girls are doing it and just suffering in silence..."

"It's down to confidence and self-esteem. Loads of girls start self-harming when they feel really low inside..."

"When girls get bullied, a lot of them get depressed and don't know how to deal with it so self-harm or kill themselves. Self-harming happens a lot."

THEIR SOLUTIONS

When focus group participants were asked what could help Sheffield girls who self-harm, they focused on both education and support services. The girls suggested that self-harm education for young people, parents and teachers should be incorporated into the general school curriculum. They also wanted education around self-harm to be offered in an easily accessible, non-school-based setting where girls who are self-harming can access intensive education and support services privately and confidentially.

The girls consulted clarified that any support services offered should take into account what they consider to be the special needs of girls who self-harm: to feel connected to others, to have a strong, positive female role model, to receive adequate attention (so that they don't feel they need to 'bottle up' their emotions so much), to receive support to help build confidence and self-esteem, and to access early mental health services for issues they perceived to be related to self-harm (e.g., depression, ADHD, anxiety, autism) before mental health deteriorates to the point where self-harming seems to be an unfortunate but inevitable 'solution' to help the girls cope with emotional pain.

The girls frequently complained about the excessive length of NHS waiting lists and how difficult they perceive it is for them to qualify for NHS mental health services:

"It shouldn't be that you have to be so severe or serious in order to access NHS services. They're very hard to access ... so a lot of people get turned away if they're not struggling so much yet that they can't function at all."



THE PERCEIVED SERVICE GAP

School-based education about self-harm to increase awareness among young people, parents and teachers

Confidential, private and non-school-based education and support services for young girls who are self-harming

Early intervention to help build girls' self-esteem and confidence and to teach girls strategies for coping with difficult emotions in healthy ways

Support groups for girls being bullied (given the reported link between bullying and self-harm)



Bullying

THE ISSUES

Group participants consistently agreed that large amounts of money are already spent on anti-bullying campaigns but complained that the way this funding is currently channelled fails to effectively combat the massive problem of bullying:

"There's always money for bullying and there's always going to be policies in place. They aren't effective but what can we do about it? The more you report it, the worse it gets. So what can be done?"

"I think there will always be bullying. Just cancel out some of the things that we're already doing that just aren't good enough"

and

"...bullying needs to be dealt with from a different angle using the funds we already have because people aren't really responding to what we already have in place."

Every girl participating in focus group discussions readily acknowledged that the impact of bullying is often devastating for victims, with several girls having personally known girls who attempted or committed suicide after being bullied, but girls steadily reported feeling tremendously disappointed by school and teacher responses to bullying:

"I used to get bullied and it got to the point where I started to self-harm. Then the self-harm led to me having suicidal thoughts. And I went to teachers and told them I was getting bullied and they didn't listen or do anything to help. They don't even ask..."

"There's a lot of bullying at school and the school doesn't do anything effective to help you. It just keeps carrying on. People constantly abusing you about your sex, your colour, making comments about your body weight, the size of your body parts and how you look really affects you in school..."

"So many girls die from bullying. The teachers don't do much to help. They don't listen!"

"Intervention comes in for one or two days to teach people about bullying, but they don't seem to be teaching teachers how to deal with the problem of bullying"

"At my school especially, I find that a lot of stuff just gets brushed under the rug because they don't want to have a bad reputation."

Some girls complained that their schools only give 'lip service' to caring about bullying because nothing changes for the better when they raise concerns to school staff members:

"Schools say bullying is bad and they won't accept it, that they'll sort it. But then nothing really ever happens. It just carries on."

Some girls took the strong anti-bullying messages sent out by their schools to heart and therefore did report being bullied only to feel misunderstood (or even blamed) for somehow causing their own bullying:

"In my school, they take bullying very seriously. Like that's their top priority. It's a really important thing to them. But at times, they're not able to understand what we're trying to say ... The teachers don't care. They think if you're ever bullied it's probably because of you, something you've done"



"Girls have gone to the Head of the Year about being bullied and she has blamed them for provoking it somehow. You'd be surprised how often that happens. Or they say 'You're overreacting', 'I'm sure they didn't mean it', or 'I'll have a word with them'. The only time anything ever super changed has been when my parents got involved..."

However, most girls perceived that the majority of bullying victims choose to remain silent due to the belief that speaking up and reporting the bully will only cause the bullying to get worse:

"For somebody that's getting bullied, it's very hard for them to admit that they're getting bullied because if the bully finds out, they're going to bully them even more. It just got worse for me when I told and I had to have three months off school because of it..."

"The girls that are getting bullied don't want to do anything about it because in the beginning, they think they can deal with it themselves. But in the end, they can't."

Some girls also pointed out that some bullying victims might not always even be aware that they are being bullied; victims might simply dismiss the abusive comments since they are the comments of supposed 'friends'.

The girls universally agreed that girls are most often bullied by other girls, with female bullies typically targeting their victims' insecurities about physical appearance, body size/weight and body shape:

"Girls are supposed to be cute and pretty and if you're not, it's a problem. But it's not like that for boys so much..."

"If you're pretty, then you'll fit in. And if you're different, then people don't like you; they try to bully you."

Girls reported being bullied for being fat, skinny, unattractive, disabled, in care and from single-parent households. Several focus group participants admitted to bullying other girls simply because they themselves had been bullied by others in the past:

"If you've been bullied all your life, it's about time you started to bully someone else, isn't it?"

"You end up bullying others because you know what it's like to be bullied so you've got other people now to feel your pain."

The girls also complained about how much social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr) contributes to bullying (please refer to the 'Social Media' section of this report for more detail on such 'cyberbullying').

Bullying was revealed to be particularly troublesome for black and minority ethnic (BME) girls. Many BME girls spoke about the pain of being bullied for their skin colours or for wearing hijabs (traditional Muslim head scarves). They shared quite candidly about the daily stress of being bullied with racist comments and

harassment, often leaving them feeling "alienated", "different", and "worthless":

"Some girls like me don't even have social lives at all because of feeling different and insecure since we're bullied for skin colour. And we feel like other girls are better than us because we're different colours, cultures, traditions and religions."

Several Roma Slovak girls also identified themselves as victims of racially-motivated bullying:

"While we going to toilet and the girls saying look at all these Slovaks. They always in here. Bullying us, saying we don't smell nice..."

"Some people ... call us 'gypsies'."

Interestingly, when Roma Slovak girls are bullied by other Roma Slovak girls, they reported usually trying to resolve the problem with the bully themselves. However, they shared that they typically will not even try to approach a white British bully, believing that such a bully would not even consider listening to them, let alone have a discussion with them likely to end in satisfactory resolution.

THEIR SOLUTIONS

The girls put forward several ideas that they thought might help Sheffield more effectively redress the problem of bullying. First, although some girls believed that more attention should be given to trying to make the bullies stop bullying ("The people being bullied shouldn't HAVE to be made more resilient, should they? ... They [bullies] target certain people because they think they're weak or that they don't have anyone to support them"), most girls suggested that the most money and time should be spent on trying to support the victims of bullying through non-school-based support groups:

"There needs to be something outside of school to turn to for that help with bullying"

"Instead of trying to get all of the bullies to stop, it might be better to just accept that it's not going to change and help the victims get into a support group. Bullying is never going to stop no matter how much you try"

“A lot of girls haven't got friends and that's why they get bullied – because they're walking around on their own. If there was a support group for them, then they'd have friends...”

When asked how schools and teachers might more effectively intervene with bullies, several girls suggested clear training for teachers on how to explain potential choices and consequences for the bullies:

“You don't just tell them to stop bullying people. You tell them if you don't want to stop, then face the consequences – and here's what they are!”

When asked to identify 'the best thing a teacher can do for bullying', the girls consistently highlighted the importance of any direct discussion with the bully being done privately:

“Take the bully out of the lesson for a private conversation so nobody knows what's going on. If they know, people are going to go talking even more so the bully is likely to get worse just to save face and all.”

Some girls also suggested that having peer mentors available to approach and caution bullies to stop before any teacher or authority figure would become involved might be a good idea. Other girls recommended that bullies should be confronted and required to pay a fine every time they bully someone. When girls were asked to identify 'the worst thing a teacher can do' with regard to bullying, the agreed response was simple:

“Leave it. Not doing anything is the worst thing you can do.”

The girls also suggested that perhaps having just one or two designated teachers assigned to deal with all of the bullying problems in the school might be helpful:

“Girls are selective about who they will talk to about bullying. You don't really want to talk to someone that you don't really know...”

Some girls recommended that it would be an even better solution if this designated person would be an unbiased youth worker or other professional not already associated with the school.

Furthermore, the girls often mentioned the importance of boosting awareness about different types of bullying whilst also using positive role models to build girls' confidence and self-esteem:

“Part of the problem might be that girls aren't even aware that they're being bullied. It knocks your self-esteem to a point where it's almost like you're agreeing that it's kind of like your own fault...”



“A lot of girls who are being bullied need a role model and a lot of them don't have that role model to look up to ... they don't see how they're special.”

Other suggestions pointed to the need for a greater number of more accessible bullying support services in Sheffield, a closed, online support group through Facebook or other social media to support victims of bullying (“...have an online support group since the anonymous aspect of being online might help girls come forward...”),

“...showing the impacts of what bullying actually does do to affect girls since that might be more hard-hitting than telling them statistics”

and for girls to completely disengage from their mobile phones and all forms of social media.

THE PERCEIVED SERVICE GAP

Effective school strategies and training for teachers on effective bullying intervention strategies

Awareness-raising around social media and the forms that bullying can take for girls, teachers and parents

Easily accessible, private, non-school-based support services to help victims of bullying (e.g., a bullying support group, workshops/counselling to help build confidence and self-esteem)



Social Media

THE ISSUES

Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat) has become an integral part of modern society and powerfully influences Sheffield girls today. Only a handful of the one hundred and twenty-six girls consulted did not use social media but most of those girls admitted to having had an 'online presence' in the past. Although many girls reported generally enjoying their time using social media, they also readily acknowledged that online interactions can quickly sour, causing girls to suffer serious emotional distress, social isolation or embarrassment, and loss of personal safety.

Pornographic Pictures

In addition to vocalising unease about how frequently many girls post pictures of self-harm on social media sites (e.g., "On Tumblr, there are SO many pages of girls uploading self-harm photos and comparing them.."), the girls also expressed concern over how often boys and older men use social media to solicit naked pictures of themselves and their friends. The girls reported feeling tremendous social pressure to comply with these demands that they supply pornographic 'selfies' (i.e., self-portraits) to male acquaintances, boyfriends, and often total strangers. Even though some girls reported that

"... they [the school] drill into you now that once you send a message or a picture, it can't be taken back"

many girls continue to see nothing wrong with supplying their boyfriends with naked images of themselves or allowing boyfriends to take their own pornographic pictures during their intimate times together. After (or sometimes even before) a breakup occurs, these girls are horrified to learn that their naked pictures have been publicly posted on social media sites, quickly saved by many of their peers, and rapidly circulated throughout schools and social networks. The girls shared that many girls victimised in this manner face such widespread humiliation and bullying as a result of their private pictures becoming public that they often suffer serious depression and other mental health issues, with some eventually attempting suicide as a means of escape.

Sexual Exploitation

The girls consulted were also quite concerned about older men using social media for the purposes of sexually exploiting young girls in Sheffield:

"You can be the smartest girl in the world but you don't really realise that you don't know who is really on the Internet."

There was much discussion about young girls' emotional vulnerability and how older men sometimes create 'fake' profiles, claiming to be younger than they really are, in order to lure young girls into an emotional attachment with them. These men then tell the girls what they want to hear, meeting their emotional needs and giving them attention that they often are not finding elsewhere:

"I'm not even going to lie – sometimes I did believe him. Like I WANTED to. You're not going to think, 'Oh, he's just lying'..."

"He told me don't tell anything to anyone about us. So obviously I thought, 'Okay, he likes me so I'm not going to tell anyone' . . . He said they won't understand because I'm older than you"

"I was thirteen, yeah. So I just thought, 'Oh, it's my life. I do whatever I want. Don't tell me what to do; I know what to do. I'll keep myself safe.' But you don't. You just think you're mature but you're not. You're still a little girl. You don't even know what you're doing at that age."

After the emotional attachment is forged, men start demanding naked pictures of the targeted girls and/or pressuring them to meet up in person, aiming to engage the girls in sexual activity. Girls who fear losing their connections with these men are likely to comply. Several girls shared that they had actually met up with older men they met online and also knew of other underage girls who had done the same:

"Young girls getting picked up in cars by older men they've met online – that's a big problem now for girls mostly."

Cyberbullying

The girls identified cyberbullying as another worrying social media issue, with some girls judging this online bullying to be worse than bullying that happens in person:

"If it's on Facebook then EVERYONE hears about it and comments on it. So in a way, cyberbullying is worse than face-to-face bullying"

"People become more brave on the Internet than they are face-to-face."

Despite the perception that "Facebook or Twitter or Skype bullying can lead to arguments and to people feeling suicidal", most girls admitted to feeling helpless to escape cyberbullying – yet are also unwilling to simply 'power off' or 'log out' as teachers and other professionals often advise:

"Sometimes online bullying can be worse because you can't escape from it. Your phone will always be there; it will be pinging in the night and you can't get to sleep. You can't escape it. I would just turn it off or throw it at the wall, but then you wonder what people are saying behind your back and you WANT to know."

Some girls reported that

"...bullying happens a lot through fake Facebook profiles and pages. Anyone can create a fake profile or page and pretend to be you."

Once cyberbullies have created online identities posing as their victims, they often post pictures and comments deliberately intending to create a widespread, negative impression of the victim, hoping to ruin her reputation. However, the girls were also quick to point out that cyberbullying is not always so obvious:

"Sometimes girls aren't even aware that they're being bullied and just shrug it off, saying it's just their friends messing about."

Other Issues

Several other issues girls struggle with as social media users emerged in group discussion. Some girls complained of losing any sense of privacy or anonymity through participating on social media sites, yet believe that if they do not maintain an online presence, they will be 'left out' of their friendship groups. Many girls struggled with intense interpersonal 'drama' and conflict with their peers and boyfriends caused by jealousy or anger over various social media activities (e.g., postings, likes, comments). Other girls reported feeling 'addicted' to social media, sharing frustrations over obsession with checking their mobile phones for social media updates and completely unable to stop despite negative consequences. Finally, several girls had noticed other girls posting pictures of alleged physical abuse injuries online only to find that others simply dismissed these postings as attention-seeking behaviours rather than questioning if they were, in fact, 'cries for help'.

THEIR SOLUTIONS

The girls consulted suggested several solutions to help address the issues raised concerning social media use. Firstly, they recommended efforts to help increase understanding of the potential 'real-life' consequences for girls sending out naked pictures of themselves to anyone at all, including current boyfriends. In conjunction with this increased awareness, they suggested that girls should receive some support around developing the assertiveness skills that they need to be empowered to say 'no' when boys/men pressure them to produce pornographic pictures.

Next, the girls decided that there should be much more focus on increasing awareness of how older men attempt to groom and sexually exploit young girls via the Internet. However, the girls generally agreed that awareness alone is not enough; supportive services aimed at building girls' self-esteem and confidence, thus helping girls break away from dependency on male attention and approval, should be helpful in decreasing young girls' risks of being sexually exploited online.

The girls also believed that a stronger message should be sent to the general public regarding the need to take pictures of self-harm or alleged abuse posted via social media very seriously. They suggested that such activity should not be so readily dismissed as 'attention-seeking', but rather that young people and adults should be actively encouraged to report the activity to a person or organisation capable of effectively intervening. The girls also mentioned that they would welcome guidance about how they might helpfully approach the girl who posted the pictures as well.

It is important to note that none of the girls viewed simply 'powering off' and not accessing social media sites as a viable solution to cyberbullying. Furthermore, the girls consulted failed to identify any alternative strategies for resolving the problem of cyberbullying.

THE PERCEIVED SERVICE GAP

Services to increase awareness of how girls can be sexually exploited via the Internet

Support services to help build girls' confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness skills

Support services for both girls posting questionable material online and also for girls who are distressed regarding the online activity of others

A service that assists girls with identifying and understanding realistic strategies for coping with cyberbullying – bespoke strategies which girls can accept as suitable for addressing their unique situations online

Sexual Exploitation

THE ISSUES

Although the sexual exploitation of young girls was already briefly discussed in the 'Social Media' section of this report where the focus was on older men grooming girls via the Internet to solicit pornographic pictures or arrange in-person meetings, focus group participants voiced such serious concerns about sexual exploitation that it also emerged as a major theme in its own right, clearly deserving of special consideration.

Several girls readily recalled past situations where they initially failed to see that they, or other girls around them, were being sexually exploited by older men:

"You see him start buying her stuff, picking her up, being nice to her, I don't know, listening. He's like a proper nice person and then starts getting her to do sexual stuff and getting her to do things for his mates. And she thinks he cares about her, but no..."

"I know of some lads who are using every girl. One day he'll have sex with one. The next day, he'll have sex with another. The next day, sex with another. And sometimes then he'll start selling her around to other men."

During discussions about sexual exploitation, the girls generally agreed that despite their perceptions that sexual exploitation is a rapidly growing problem for Sheffield girls, most are still very unaware of what 'grooming' is and of how the grooming process progresses. They also pointed out that girls often fail to consider that older women can sexually exploit young girls as well. The girls called for all sexual health classes to focus on sexual exploitation and the grooming process quite heavily:

"I think there needs to be stuff about sexual exploitation. Like how to recognise if you're being exploited. A young girl might not realise that she's being groomed"

"I got to know him and then he just started saying stuff to me. And obviously, when you're thirteen, you don't really know. He was saying like, 'Ah, I love you, I want to be with you, I'll do anything for you', and all that. So it gets to your head, oh he likes me, and everything. At the time I thought, 'Well, he's my boyfriend, so why not?' He even lied to me about his age. He didn't even give me his full name."

Several groups of girls suspected that Roma Slovak girls may be at particularly high-risk for sexual exploitation. Many girls shared concerns that young Roma Slovak girls may often be unaware of how men might perceive them and then attempt to exploit their vulnerabilities:

"The Roma Slovak girls coming up to the youth club at like eight or nine years-old are really sexual. Like they'll put on music and dance really provocatively and the guys will be like dancing around them. And it's like a lot of young Roma girls having sex. Like twelve year-olds getting pregnant in the Roma Slovak community and they're all like really sexually active."

When asked to describe the role of a female, Roma Slovak girls did respond with a strong focus on forging romantic (though not explicitly sexual) relationships with men, explaining that a girl should "take care of her beauty to attract a man", "look after her man", "be nice", "have boyfriends", "get married" and "have sex to get children". However, although clear awareness of sexual exploitation issues was indeed never communicated in any of the Roma Slovak groups conducted, Roma Slovak participants also consistently disclosed a general distrust for boys and men:

"None of the [Roma Slovak] girls trust boys. You can't really know if they really love you or if they are just saying"

"You can't trust boys because they just gonna sleep with you and afterwards they just gonna say 'bye-bye' so you can't trust them. You just need to keep that in your head."

Every Roma Slovak girl consulted also agreed that girls should not go outside alone at night or wear provocative clothing around men if they do not want to be raped:

"... if a boy likes you then he'll have sex with you ... it's her own choice if she wants to show off her body by what she wears, but it's not safe because it will make a guy want to rape her..."

“I know of someone who is twelve years old and . . . her boyfriend called his five friends and then they raped her . . . and she got in hospital for some months. One was twenty-four. And she got pregnant from it. She gave up the baby; she had an abortion. But it's her own fault because she was wearing short things and that.”

Most of the girls consulted believed that having confidence and high self-esteem would help protect young girls from sexual exploitation and abuse of male power:

“If you have confidence and self-esteem, you wouldn't be like that vulnerable and you wouldn't be sexually exploited. Because some older men take younger girls for granted because they don't have that confidence. And like an older man has more power.”

In all groups, girls who had been sexually exploited admitted to intense fear about speaking up and telling someone about the sexual exploitation once they realised what was happening, often due to fear of being judged harshly:

“I thought people are going to judge me and call me a slag or whatever. But then I thought, 'You know what – let 'em.' He was the mature man. He knew what he was doing.”

However, some girls also mentioned that if their parents had directly asked them if they were being used sexually then that question might have opened the door to honest communication:

“I could have gone to my Mum and my family when it [the sexual exploitation] was happening, but I wouldn't have. I didn't want to go to them because I thought they were going to judge me and I was gonna ruin everything, the relationship they had with me. I wouldn't go to them myself and tell my family what was happening. No. I wouldn't do that. BUT if we were sat there and they had asked me and really seemed to care, then I would have told them. Parents should ask if she's alright and don't expect she's just going to tell them if they don't ask. Parents need to pay attention.”

THEIR SOLUTIONS

The girls consulted often generated several ideas to help address the problem of Sheffield girls being sexually exploited. Firstly, they advised that more resources should be channelled into widespread education about the nature of sexual exploitation and the grooming process itself.

Next, the girls recommended that services be put into place to help increase young girls' confidence and self-esteem as safeguarding measures to build their resistance to those who would seek to sexually exploit them. Participants were hopeful

that enhancing girls' confidence would help them feel more able to speak up and tell someone in cases where sexual exploitation had already started to progress.

Furthermore, the girls stressed the need for police to take all allegations of sexual exploitation very seriously and to work to increase awareness (particularly among young girls) about how seriously they do respond to such concerns:

“I think that guy, if he had stopped and thought that maybe I would go to the police, maybe he wouldn't have done it [sold me as a prostitute]. But I think he thought that I wouldn't be believed.”

The girls also envisioned a mentoring programme for the sexually exploited girls of Sheffield where they might go to find support from other girls who have been in the same situation but who are now recovering well. It was suggested that this proposed mentoring programme might bring hope to girls at a time in their lives when they feel very alone and unsure that anyone can truly understand what they are going through.

THE PERCEIVED SERVICE GAP

Widespread education surrounding sexual exploitation issues, the grooming process and police response to such matters

Support services to increase awareness of sexual exploitation issues whilst also building confidence and self-esteem for young girls, particularly those in the Roma Slovak community

A mentoring programme for sexually exploited girls



Sexual Health & Choices

THE ISSUES

Most of the girls consulted admitted to being sexually active themselves and shared that intense peer pressure to lose their virginity starts around age twelve:

"It's just like the mad rush from Year Seven to Year Nine to lose your virginity. I'm not even exaggerating. People actually do ask you and it's like you're 'late' if you haven't [had sex] by Year Nine. That's like a topic of conversation..."

And

"I was a virgin until like seventeen ... and I felt so stupid. I hated it when people would bring up sex because I was so embarrassed and I knew it would come to me and I'd have to say, 'I've not had sex', and I was so embarrassed by it..."

The girls reported that girls today are losing their virginity as young as age twelve but most generally agreed that the majority of girls lose their virginity between thirteen and fourteen years old. The girls often blamed clothing manufacturers and the media for sexualising girls from very early ages:

"I think it's just that young people these days want to be older than they are. For example, there were little padded bras ... for like eight year-olds."

Despite the prevalence of sexual activity among very young girls, many girls expressed frustration over feeling social pressure to dress and present themselves in provocative, sexually alluring ways whilst also feeling socially judged and condemned when they actually engage in sexual activity:

"Girls aren't supposed to be sexual in the slightest. Girls are meant to be like really innocent. That's the thing – if a girl has sex with lots of people, then she's a slut or a whore. If a guy has sex with a lot of people, then he's a player and he's got good game. If people find out, girls have got the shame walk and guys are walking around high-fiving each other."

Several girls also reported concerns that they often see very large age gaps between young girls and their older sex partners, highlighting the power imbalance in these relationships and

commenting that young girls are more likely to feel more pressure to have sex before they are truly ready when they are in relationships with older males.

Many of the focus groups featured strong debates over the appropriate age for sexual health to be taught in schools. Approximately half of the girls consulted felt that sexual health should be taught earlier in schools:

"I think they teach you about STIs and using a condom too late, because they do it at the end of Year Nine, so when you're fourteen. At least a third of my year had already had sex by then. It needs to be taught earlier. Adults need to realise that if they don't teach it earlier, people are still going to be having the sex. It's just not going to be safe sex..."

"I think having sex education early makes girls more aware of what is happening and I think it makes them realise before doing anything sexual to think about whether it's right..."

"...not everyone starts having sex at the same age. So they should start talking about it in school before kids might even start having sex, so I think twelve is the right age."

The rest of the girls generally thought that sex education should be taught later, generally worrying that early teaching leads to underage sex and teen pregnancy:

"I think sometimes sex education is a bit too much because they reach girls before they need to have it and that's how more girls get pregnant..."

"Teaching it [sexual health] too early increases the awareness of sex which causes problems. And then kids start doing stuff and then they don't want to but don't know how to stop. They do sex education in Year Seven now..."

The girls very frequently complained that very little is being done to help girls understand how to make good choices about sex from a relationship perspective:

"Sexual Health needs to be offered more from the perspective of healthy relationships, boundaries, coercion, consent and rights. To know what a healthy relationship is, the forms domestic abuse can take, and to know how to keep a relationship balanced"

"We already focus on sexual health a lot in school, especially in PSHE lessons. But more should be taught in school about psychological pressure around sex"

"It would be good to talk to girls about the difference between consent and coercion because some girls think they're consenting but they're really feeling pressured. Girls think as soon as you've started the lead-up to sex, like foreplay and stuff, that they can't turn around and then say 'no'"



"I wish they would teach about what's a healthy vs. an abusive relationship in Sexual Health. They don't really do that. A lot of boyfriends try to control their girlfriends when it comes to sex"

"Sex education in school is more about the basics – the biology of sex"

"They [the school] don't talk to us about how to make decisions about sexual activity for ourselves. They keep it strictly medical..."

"...My school did touch on issues of choices about sex and offered some case studies about choices but only for about fifty minutes and it felt very rushed. I would like much more time spent on that."

Several girls also expressed a desire for more school-based education around LGBT relationship issues to help girls who struggle with clarifying and/or accepting their unique sexualities.

Many young girls who are sexually active and have related concerns admitted they are reluctant to visit the Sexual Health Clinic for help, fearing that strangers will judge them harshly if

they are seen attending the clinic. Several girls also resisted going to the clinic for help due to shame stemming from the belief that they should have better protected themselves from disease and pregnancy in the first place:

"There's a lot about sexual health already but it's true that many girls are scared to access the Sexual Health Clinic for fear of seeing someone they know there or for being judged by the staff there."

All of the girls agreed that clear assurance of privacy and of staff sensitivity to handling personal information discreetly is essential before any young girl will willingly take advantage of the sexual health services currently available in Sheffield.

It is noteworthy that in two of the four groups conducted with the Roma Slovak girls, 'Sexual Health and Choices' was identified as the top concern, with the girls collectively spending the most money of all on this topic. With the help of a translator, they explained that they do not want to be pregnant, have babies, be ill, or be raped:

"Some girls don't know [about sexual health] but they're not bothered. It's important to talk to girls about sex because if they're gonna do, they need to be careful so they don't get pregnant. It's more important that the other ones ['Spending Options' topics] because if you have it [sex], you gonna get pregnant. I'm too young to have children; I'm only like fifteen. Because you'll get pregnant and then you can't get education and that."

Furthermore, the Roma Slovak girls in the other two groups specifically asked for help with making sexual choices, particularly regarding how to know when they are ready to have sex and with whom.

All of the Roma Slovak girls consulted expressed interest in working and although all eventually wanted to have at least one child, many wanted first to go on for higher education and find work to earn money:

"...some [Roma Slovak] girls don't just want to have babies and stay at home . . . It needs to always be the girl's choice what she wants to do with her life."

Most claimed that they wanted to wait until their mid- to late-twenties before becoming pregnant. Several Roma Slovak girls mentioned that their Mums encouraged them to wait to have children until after they complete their education and find work, but many girls feared that they would not be able to afford higher education. Nearly all of the Roma Slovak girls who were asked reported that even if their own Mums are not employed outside of the home, they nevertheless encouraged their daughters to prioritise work and education above starting a family during their early adult years.

THEIR SOLUTIONS

The girls had several suggestions about how to improve sexual health services in Sheffield. First, to help girls feel more comfortable accessing existing services, they recommended that Sexual Health Clinic receptionists might discreetly offer a list of sexual health conditions, and simply ask them to silently point to the reason(s) for the visit. The girls explained that they often felt embarrassed being asked to state their concerns out loud and worried that they might be overheard by other clients. They also preferred to be addressed by first name only to help them feel more assured of confidentiality. They also shared that they would appreciate a support service to help accompany girls who fear they're pregnant but who don't have supportive family members or friends who will go with them to the Clinic for a pregnancy test:

“I went with my friend and she wasn't pregnant, but in a way, I felt sorry for her because I've got a family there for me if I was to fall pregnant. She doesn't have that. It's proper sad.”

Alternatively, they would welcome a mobile service that comes to meet girls for anonymous testing and support in a suitable location.

Next, the girls felt that current education on sexual health could be improved by including teaching on how to recognise sexual abuse within relationships, spending a significant amount of time focusing on making choices about sex, bringing in specially trained workers who are confident talking about a wide range of sexual topics since both the teachers and students often seem uncomfortable engaging in discussions about sex together, and give more attention to LGBT issues (especially working to increase awareness about transgendered people).

THE PERCEIVED SERVICE GAP

Education about sex from the perspective of relationships (consent vs. coercion, rights, boundaries, self-awareness, choosing partners, effective communication, sexual abuse within relationships, etc.), including more focus on LGBT issues

Support services to help girls access the sexual health services already available

A support group for parents of LGBT girls

A support group for girls struggling with sex and relationship issues

Bespoke support services around sexual health and decision-making for Roma Slovak girls



Mental Health Issues

THE ISSUES

When asked to consider the topic of mental health, the girls consistently voiced major complaints about the perceived inaccessibility of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) due to excessively long NHS waiting lists as well as unreasonably high thresholds that girls must meet to qualify for any intervention at all:

“The waiting times for most everything can be too long, especially for intervention regarding mental illness”

“To be considered 'high-risk' these days, you have to practically be slitting your wrists right in front of them”

“It shouldn't be that you have to be so severe or serious in order to access NHS services. They're very hard to access...”

and

“CAMHS, the mental health service, needs to get better because I feel like it only treats people who are really severe, but maybe people are getting so severe in their mental health problems because the waiting list is so long that by the time they actually get the service, lots and lots of things have already deteriorated even worse.”

Many girls argued that the 'average girl' in Sheffield is slipping through the cracks of current service provision and that all girls should have access to regular support services as a preventative measure, to help girls cultivate and maintain good mental health rather than waiting to intervene after problems are more serious:

“Middle class, average girls are lacking the attention they need because they aren't identified as 'vulnerable' or being in need, yet they struggle with lots of family and friendship problems.”

Some girls believed that current mental health services for girls were not only inadequate but actually completely missing:

“I don't see ANY mental health support for young girls out there.”

Other girls cautioned against the assumption that girls will naturally learn how to cope with difficult emotions effectively without supportive services:

“Young girls should be given the opportunity to learn how to deal with difficult emotions. Nobody should just assume that somebody's teaching them at home or whatever because it's probably not happening”

“Dealing with difficult emotions is hard. And some girls can get through it on their own, but some need that little bit of a boost and to know that there is somewhere to go to talk – to talk day or night or whatever.”

Although the focus groups generally agreed that all Sheffield girls would benefit from widespread preventative mental health support services as well as easily accessible CAMHS services for more serious intervention needs, there were also distinct and interesting differences between the unique mental health concerns of various subgroups within the general population of girls consulted.

Young Carers

Girls identified as 'Young Carers' frequently reported suffering from anxiety, commonly due to conflicts between their home carer responsibilities and school/work demands. Young Carers often shared that they felt overwhelmed by pressure from teachers or employers who claim to be sympathetic to Young Carers' circumstances yet then impose unfair consequences for non-attendance or inconsistent performance:

“It's better to admit that you don't get it if you don't understand a Young Carer's unique situation and needs because claiming you do when you don't is insulting. It's like lying.”

One Young Carer shared that she repeatedly felt misunderstood at school:

“I think there's a real service gap when it comes to mental health and schools. There aren't enough teachers who are trained specifically to deal with mental health issues.”

Several other girls admitted to worrying about the mental health of Young Carers they know and suggested that more money should be available for Young Carers to have both day trips (to help them escape, relax and recover from the stress of daily demands) and spending money (“Most Young Carers I know haven't got anything for themselves, so even a little spending

money to look after themselves would help...”).



Girls with Eating Disorders

Girls who struggle with eating disorders reported that many of the early warning signs of eating disorders go unnoticed due to widespread dieting among even very young girls at school, often resulting in the undesirable effect of normalising eating disorders to a certain extent. They also pointed out a general lack of education and focus on mental health issues in schools, but particularly around body image-related depression. Other girls who did not admit to having eating disorders themselves but who have friends suffering with Body Dysmorphic Disorder shared that they particularly see no anonymous and accessible support around mental health for girls beginning to struggle with very early signs of body dysmorphia.

Young Mums

Young Mums reported a general lack of services geared towards their unique needs, but specifically desired extra support to help them cope with fear, anxiety and depression which can all be intensified if Young Mums find themselves isolated and alone (before or after the birth) or very fatigued from childcare responsibilities:

“There is a service gap in not having any support to help you go to the Clinic to get tested for pregnancy or to help you tell your parents that you're pregnant. A lot of Young Mums are so scared and carry the baby to nearly full-term because of that fear without getting any of the prenatal support that they could have had”

“After the birth, the hospitals should allow Young Mums to stay in a separate section where their parents can help them during the night so they're not alone and scared all the time with a new baby”

“Some young Mums don't have family support or close relationships with friends and their confidence/self-esteem can get really low. You're on your own and it can turn into depression but you've got a baby to take care of.”

Young Mums also commonly shared feelings of despair over not seeing any way to get back into education whilst also managing childcare responsibilities:

“If you don't have family there to help you look after your kid, it's hard to even think about going to back to school.”

Some Young Mums also struggled with low moods stemming from the stigma attached to being a Young Mum and feeling judged by strangers as a benefits liability.

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Girls

Black and minority ethnic (BME) girls were commonly troubled by depression, low self-esteem, and feeling 'insecure', 'alienated', 'worthless', isolated and inferior

“I feel like other girls are better than me because I'm different”

due to racism and bullying. Not always sure where to turn for helpful advice in coping with mental health issues, many BME girls disclosed that they either isolate themselves or turn mainly to their friends and family for support, but interestingly, never their Fathers. Since the girls do not feel they can reveal everything to family members (most typically, their Mums), they are often left only with the advice and support of their peers. The oldest daughters in Muslim families also admitted to frequently feeling overwhelmed and anxious due to heavy home responsibilities (e.g., taking care of younger siblings, cleaning, cooking) whilst also trying to ensure that all coursework for school is completed on time. Several BME girls voiced needs for emotional and mental health support along with time management assistance but believed that such support is not available to them.

Roma Slovak Girls

Although nearly all of the Roma Slovak girls consulted readily admitted to having difficulty trusting those outside of their families (e.g., school staff, social workers, police officers, strangers, boyfriends, female friends), all were also surprisingly eager to engage in counselling. Despite previously claiming that they would only be able to trust Roma Slovak professionals, eventually all of the girls agreed that they would engage with an English-speaking counsellor if that counsellor would show them respect and reassure them that they would be receiving more than just one counselling session:

“Yes, we would like to talk to people about our problems. It's even okay if we have to talk in English”

“It [having difficult emotions] ALWAYS happens. You're always gonna have those feelings. It only helps if you talk to someone more than once.”

When asked if they ever needed a support service that wasn't available to them, they answered:

“Yes. Like talking to someone who can listen to you. Somebody to talk to about things that you don't want to talk to nobody about but you should.”

Roma Slovak girls commonly reported that they struggle with anger and fear due to being bullied as well as feelings of isolation and despair stemming from inability to speak English well. Many shared that they experience extreme anxiety when approached by the police due to a general lack of trust but most Roma Slovak girls did allow for the possibility that some police officers may be 'good':

“We can't ever trust police because we don't know who they are. But some police officers are good; some are not very good.”

When asked if they would be willing to trust police officers enough to talk to them or request their help, they replied: “Yes, but not because we want to. Because we have to because they're police. But if they're nice to you and they asking you questions then you can talk to them.” Additionally, although most Roma Slovak girls consulted expressed interest in higher education, some also confessed that they worry that they would never be able to afford it.

Girls in Abusive Relationships

Girls identified as being in abusive relationships often admitted to difficulties with depression, anxiety (“...always walking on egg shells...”), self-harm, fear, feelings of helplessness, poor confidence and self-esteem levels and gradually becoming desensitised to various forms of abuse, sometimes even perceiving that abuse is simply 'normal' behaviour:

“Sometimes it takes somebody telling me, 'Hey, that's not right' before I realise what's happening [abuse]. And then when I see it, I get really upset. It's scary how I might not even notice it anymore.”

Girls in Supported Accommodation and Secure Units

Many of the girls consulted who were living in supported accommodation or secure units shared that they struggle with depression and low self-esteem due to difficulties coping with the stigma and embarrassment of living in such settings:

"You get discrimination from other people when they find out you're living in supported accommodation. They call you a 'chav' and all ... I feel like people judge me for how I look and living in supported accommodation"

"If people ask me where I've been, I wouldn't even tell them where I'd been because it would be embarrassing to say I've been in a place like this. It's not good."

These girls were generally interested in receiving additional support to cope with depression and other related mental health concerns:

"It would be good to have a girls-only service where if you're depressed you can just go and talk to somebody any time. You need at least one person to talk with to get you through depression and I couldn't always find that."

Girls living in supported accommodation and secure units often admitted to suffering anxiety over issues such as finding work, understanding how to budget and learning how to save or invest money wisely. Most were open to receiving practical support around these issues in the hopes of effectively reducing their anxiety levels.

Girls at Risk of Antisocial Behaviour (ASB) and Crime

Girls identified as being at risk of antisocial behaviour (ASB) and crime highlighted problems with continuity of care, stressing the emotional impact that anticipating losing touch with valued professionals (e.g., Community Youth Team workers, social workers) after reaching the age of eighteen can have on vulnerable young girls. These participants often reported very gradual, lengthy processes of opening up, trusting only select helping professionals, and found that the sudden loss of that consistent support could have devastating effects on mental health. These girls expressed a desire for a support service to help them bridge the gap between seventeen to nineteen years of age, thus smoothing their transitions into adulthood.



Girls in the Youth Justice Service

Girls from Sheffield's Youth Justice Service shared that their top mental health issues included anger management problems (sometimes resulting in anxiety that inability to control angry outbursts will interfere with future employment), depression and self-harm. Many generally felt quite positive about most mental health support services they had received so far and also underscored the value of such services:

"Girls might be driven to do it [crime] again if why they're doing it in the first place isn't taken care of. It's about supporting them without just chucking them in jail. Not every problem has the same solution."

Girls in the Youth Justice Service were very particular about how mental health support services should be delivered to them. They valued one-to-one time and were reluctant to discuss their problems in group settings. Respect for their privacy emerged as a major concern along with the need for professionals to consult them first before making decisions that will impact their lives. Many girls reported that they feel especially guarded with professionals who ask probing questions too soon and they find themselves unable to respond:

"It's like so intimidating if you're suddenly just sat in this room with this worker asking loads of questions and you don't know the answers. And then they're like proper probing into your life. It would be better if I could choose what I wanted rather than them just tossing me into the deep end and stuff."

Some girls in the Youth Justice Service also complained about professionals viewing them in an inaccurately negative light due to past antisocial behaviours.

Sexually Exploited Girls

The girls consulted who had been sexually exploited often reported histories of self-harm and many continued to struggle with depression and anxiety in relationships with boys or men:

"Trusting men is different from trusting women. It puts you down when you talk to men about certain stuff. Like sexual exploitation."

Although some sexually exploited girls did acknowledge eventually building positive, transparent relationships with the male professionals assisting them with mental health issues, these relationships were relatively rare and cultivated only through a significant investment of face-to-face interaction over long periods of time. These girls also consistently revealed reluctance to talk about any of their mental health issues to any professional, male or female, who had not first spent time getting to know them:

"When somebody comes in to talk to you, they need to sit and have a decent conversation with you first. They can't just come in and expect you to talk about personal stuff when you don't even know them"

It was not uncommon for a sexually exploited girl's mental health issues to require that she be accompanied by a trusted female whenever her interaction with a male was necessary.

LGBT Girls

Young girls identifying as LGBT generally agreed that they should be receiving specialist support services around mental health issues unique to their life issues:

"The risk of mental health problems, depression and suicidal ideation is about four times the norm for LGBT teens so I do think there needs to be extra support for us. We have Fruitbowl [a social and support group offered through The Sheena Amos Youth Trust] but that's it."

Girls in Care

Girls in care (i.e., 'Looked After' girls) generally struggled with feelings of depression and loneliness, often related to losing contact or relationships with friends or family members after moving house. Some girls feared losing trusted and valued social workers and other professionals as they near their eighteenth birthdays. Distress over friendship and relationship problems was commonly reported, with Looked After girls often confessing to having low levels of self-confidence and to feeling tremendously vulnerable.

Girls at Risk of Exclusion from School

Girls at risk of exclusion from school tended to report serious problems with being bullied and/or having trouble 'fitting in' with

peers, often leading to depression, anxiety and self-harm:

"I think it's disgusting how people can get bullied for no reason... Self-harm happens a lot. And I tend to worry a lot and be anxious."

Girls with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

SEN girls admitted to often feeling 'stupid' and alienated, particularly when they fail to understand what others are trying to communicate and have to ask:

"Don't just assume that I know what something means because if I don't, I don't want to have to be the one to bring it up that I don't get it. It makes me feel stupid for not knowing and having to go out of my way to say that."

Regular self-doubt and a general sense of insecurity appeared to have an overall negative impact on the mental health of girls with Special Education Needs.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) Users

Girls identified as previous or current Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) users generally believed that their own mental health would have benefitted from earlier intervention, particularly through girls-only support services around anger management problems and general emotion management:

"There's a stereotype that girls are too emotional but they're not. It's just that sometimes we don't know how to handle our emotions."

CAMHS users also expressed a desire for services to be offered to help those who care about them and others who have mental health issues:

"They [friends and family members] don't know how to help us because they haven't been through it [mental illness]. They don't understand it so a support service to help them help us would be good."

THEIR SOLUTIONS

The girls considered the steps that might be taken to help improve mental health for Sheffield girls and generated a variety of recommendations. First, the girls generally agreed across

focus groups that the 'normal' or 'average' Sheffield girl should be receiving easily accessible, regular and gender-specific emotional support as a preventative measure:

"I think every girl in Sheffield needs a support service that can be trusted to help them share their personal experiences, talk about their feelings that they hide from others and get through their difficult situations"

"There should be more in place for just girls-only general emotion management"

"We all need support on issues like confidence and self-esteem"

"We need somewhere girls can go . . . where they know they will be taken seriously because a lot of girls don't reach out for help for fear of not being taken seriously."

Part of this service should help support Sheffield girls who do not have mental health issues themselves but who are involved with others whose mental health is problematic.

Next, the girls envisioned round-the-clock emotional and time management support for Young Carers and some BME girls who, being eldest daughters, may struggle to shoulder exceptionally heavy caregiving roles and responsibilities in their home lives. As one Young Carer explained:

"You can't always get out of the house . . . There needs to be more availability because you never know when there's going to be a crisis and those are the times when you need that support so it should be 24/7 availability."

The girls also recommended that a mental health support service should go into schools to offer easily accessible one-to-one counselling or mentoring sessions, specifically targeting younger girls who cannot access help on their own without their parents or GPs knowing and supporting them:

"Having a mentor or counsellor could lead them to feel more comfortable and therefore be more able to share their problems."

Finally, the girls proposed offering additional support services for Young Mums, suggesting a service to help anxious young girls go to the Sexual Health Clinic to be tested for pregnancy and possibly inform their parents of their pregnancies. They also recommended that an "honest counsellor" sit down with young pregnant girls before the birth to talk to them about what they can realistically expect after the babies arrive, focusing on how they can more effectively cope with difficult emotions despite sleep deprivation and periods of high stress.

The girls also wanted to see more childcare support for Young Mums who otherwise may feel depressed and hopeless about ever getting back into education.

THE PERCEIVED SERVICE GAP

Readily available and easily accessible emotional support services for all Sheffield girls

Specialist support for Roma Slovak girls (e.g., culturally-sensitive counsellors, enhanced language support services, more interpreters)

Round-the-clock support services for Young Carers

Emotional and financial support for Young Mums

Conclusion

When the young girls of Sheffield speak about their experiences, thoughts and feelings, we must listen. We must put aside our preconceived notions about how we think these girls should be helped and instead take time to reflect on what they are telling us they truly need.

This research has yielded some sobering results, highlighting not only the staggering unmet needs of vulnerable Sheffield girls but also exposing numerous corresponding service gaps within the City of Sheffield. It is our responsibility as parents, professionals and policymakers to respond accordingly, with appropriate funding and creative, effective services that engage Sheffield girls in transformative ways.

Focus Group Questions

1). Let's do a quick round of introductions. Would each of you please say your name, how you found this programme, and describe in one word your experience so far of the services you've received here?

2). Activity: Imagine that you are all on Sheffield City Council's committee of experts and you have to decide on how much money to spend on various services for girls in this area. You each have £170 (play money). Please consider which topics on your Spending Options sheets are most important to girls today and then decide how much of the £170 should be spent on each. (You do not have to spend anything at all on topics that you feel are not important and you are also free to spend the whole £170 on just one single topic. There is also space for you to introduce your OWN topic for the rest of the committee to consider and to decide how much should be spent on that topic.) When you are finished filling in the proper £ amounts on your Spending Options sheet, please come and pay the right amount into each corresponding bag.

3). What sorts of things or 'issues' impact girls like you: (a) at home, (b) at school, and (c) in your social lives?

4). How might it be different to talk about these sorts of issues if this group was not all girls but had several guys in it too?

5). If you were standing on the High Street in Sheffield and asking people walking by to stop and describe GIRLS using a few words or phrases, what do you think they would say? And for BOYS?

6). Think about support services you have received in the past. How would you have made/delivered them differently?



7). Have you ever faced a time when you were in need of a service (specifically as a girl) that was not available? If so, what service was missing?

8). Activity: You are responsible for hiring the people who will be delivering supportive services to girls like you, trying to make a positive difference in their lives. Think of one professional who made a positive impact in your life and then also one professional who failed to make a difference with you. Now, use single words or brief phrases to describe the first helpful person. And now, let's do the same for the person who failed to assist you.

9). Can you think of anything which led to you being a less positive person? Can you think of anything that might have helped at the time but was missing?

10). If you had to decide how important the opinions of your parents vs. your friends are to you, what number (from 1 to 10; 10 = extremely important; 1 = not at all important) would you give to each?

11). Do you see any particular groups of girls lacking attention they need, where you believe extra support will help but nobody seems to be doing much for them (you can consider your own group(s) as well)?

12). Is the possibility of getting caught doing something wrong and being sent to prison enough to make a girl your age change her ways? Why or why not?

13). Is there anything else that we haven't yet discussed that you think is important for Together Women to know about as we consider how to provide a service best suited for Sheffield area girls?

Is it okay to contact you by phone or email if we need to change the questions up a bit and/or ask you something else?

Anybody interested in volunteering or coming to our centre for special events or courses?

Spending Options

The Issue	How Much?
Confidence & Self-Esteem	£ _____
Body Image & Identity	£ _____
Sexual Health & Choices	£ _____
Healthy Relationships & Boundaries	£ _____
Coping with Pornography	£ _____
Domestic Abuse & Personal Safety	£ _____
Coping with Difficult Emotions and Problem-Solving	£ _____
Assertiveness & Communication (being able to get out of difficult situations, language barriers, etc...)	£ _____
Bullying (online, face to face)	£ _____
Your Own Idea:	£ _____

TOTAL = £170.000

GRAND TOTALS FOR ALL GROUPS

Domestic Abuse & Personal Safety: £3,679

Confidence & Self-Esteem: £2,584

Bullying: £2,465

Sexual Health & Choices: £2,445

Body Image & Identity: £2,199

Coping with Difficult Emotions & Problem-Solving: £1,880

Healthy Relationships & Boundaries: £1,810

Your Own Idea: £1,283

(ideas included: Sexual exploitation – £277, Dance groups - £135, 'swimming, karate, sewing, boxing' – £100, 'stop any abuse' – 80, Self-Harm - £75, 'help young people afford clothes to boost their confidence & also to make them look and feel better' - £70, health & beauty – £65, homelessness - £60, food & drink - £60, Youth Club - £60, teaching poor people who have no education - £50, day trips - £50, child abuse – £30, young carers' financial issues - £20, young carer support – £10 sexuality - £5)

Coping with Pornography: £1,235

Assertiveness & Communication: £820

TOTAL: £20,230 (119 of 126 total girls represented)

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

(126 total girls)

Ethnic Origin

White British - 68	Black - 1
Roma Slovak - 24	African - 1
Asian – Pakistani - 12	White Irish - 1
Mixed Ethnic - 6	White Arab - 1
Asian – Bangladeshi - 4	Slovakian - 1
Caribbean - 3	Hungarian Slovak - 1
Asian – Chinese - 1	Albainar - 1
Don't Want to Answer - 1	

Sexuality

Heterosexual -106

Lesbian - 3

Bisexual - 7

Pansexual - 1

Don't Want to Answer/No Answer - 9

Religion

None -56

Roman Catholic - 16

Christian- 19

Atheist - 7

Muslim - 18

Buddhist - 1

Don't Want to Answer - 9

Disability

No - 106

Yes - 16 (Disabilities disclosed included: 2 LD, 1 SEN, 2 Hearing Impaired, 1 ADHD, 1 Dyslexia, 1 Sciatica, 1 Drink-Drugs-Depression, 1 Huntingtons, 1 Aspergers, 1 Anxiety, 1 Talipes (turned feet)

Don't want to answer - 4

SUPPORTERS

Aldine House Secure Children's Centre

Burngreave Young People's Service

The Cellar Space

Chilypep

Community Youth Teams

Double 6 Youth Club

Handsworth Grange Community Sports College

Interchange

Taking Stock

King Egbert School

Positive Activities Sova Sheffield (PASS) Project

Roshni Asian Womens Resource Centre

Roundabout Emergency Hostel

Sheena Amos Youth Trust

Sheffield Foyer

Sheffield Park Academy

South Yorkshire Eating Disorders Association (SYEDA)

Sheffield Young Advisors

Sheffield Young Carers

Sheffield Youth Justice Service

Youth Association South Yorkshire (YASY)

YWCA Peile House Project



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