Public Petitions Committee

Tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland

Written submission from the Women’s Support Project

The Women’s Support Project - http://www.womenssupportproject.co.uk is a feminist voluntary organisation, recognised as a Scottish Charity. The Project works to raise awareness of the extent, causes and effect of male violence against women, and for improved services for those affected by violence.

Key themes in our work have been highlighting the links between different forms of male violence and promoting interagency responses to the abuse of women and children.

Main areas of work are: support for women whose children have been sexually abused or exploited; raising awareness of the harmful impact of commercial sexual exploitation and highlighting male demand as the root cause; improving service responses to violence against women including delivery of training; public education. The Project is based in Glasgow and works across Scotland.

Our work has entailed awareness raising work on sexual exploitation with a preventative focus on what makes young people vulnerable to being exploited or becoming a predator / abuser. This has included issues such as:

- Tightly gendered roles with restricted choices,
- Highly sexualised representations of women,
- Pressure on young men to adopt stereotypical hyper masculine roles,
- Influence of pornography on young people’s sexuality and behaviour,
- Abuse in Teen Relationships

This work has been delivered in a variety of settings including:

- Schools
- Youth and community projects
- Parents Events
- Community groups
- Conferences
- Multi Agency training

We have delivered sessions to:

- Young people
- Young women’s groups
- Parents / carers
What are the most common types of CSE your organisation has witnessed in your service users?

In terms of what has been reported to us via these sessions and follow up contact, the most common types have been:

Grooming – primarily online via chat groups, social networking sites, gaming sites with more young women being targeted than young men. Young men are also at risk and may find it particularly difficult to seek support and report.

Peer to peer grooming and abuse, especially through the use of mobile phones and new media. Young women have spoken about the increasing pressures they can face to take and share sexualised and naked images with partners, peers and strangers. This can and has led to sexual harassment and sexual bullying, which can make them more vulnerable to further sexual exploitation. Young men have identified the pressure they can also face to have these types of images, which they often do not consider to be abusive. Young men can struggle to recognise this type of behaviour as predatory and harassing, when it becomes normalised and acceptable. Not only are they vulnerable to being groomed and exploited, they are also vulnerable to adopting damaging patterns.

It should be noted that a range of professionals identified concerns that young people are involved in behaviours and relationships that could make them vulnerable to grooming and exploitation. The concern is that there are numbers of young people who are already involved in the early stages of exploitative relationships without recognising them as such.

Professionals in Adult Support and Protection have also identified concerns that vulnerable young people become vulnerable adults. Many of their service users who have been sexually exploited as adults, were also involved in sexually abusive or exploitative as children / young people.

In the last 3 years or so, how many cases of CSE involving your service users have you known or strongly suspected?

The few cases brought directly to our attention had already been dealt with via other agencies’ Child Protection Procedures and Criminal Justice.

There have been other cases where those who attended sessions have subsequently followed up on suspicions and proceeded with Child Protection Procedures.
In direct work with young women, none have disclosed sexual exploitation but high numbers have disclosed experiences of sexual bullying, sexual harassment and sexual violence. All these are serious offences and concerning in their own right but also indicate numbers of young men who are engaging in abusive and violent sexual behaviours.

**What are the main routes or pathways through which the young people you work with have become involved in CSE?**

In our awareness raising work, a number of means have been identified. Young women have been introduced to predators via friends, peers and community members. This can be aided by the use of mobile phones and new media. Predators have engaged with young women, developing “relationships” which are exploitative and abusive and can move from the online world to the offline world.

For young women aged 17 – 19, they have been targeted via recruitment posters for escort agencies in colleges and universities. Young people are made more vulnerable to becoming involved in the commercialised sex industry through increasing financial pressures.

Young women have been approached online by “Modelling Agencies” asking them to take sexualised pictures and share them. This cynical exploitation of the needs of young women to be externally viewed as attractive places them in

We have also encountered numerous cases where sexualised images of young women have been taken without their consent or shared without their consent.

**Could you give an example of good practice you have witnessed through multi-agency working?**

As we are a national project – we have been involved in a number of partnerships focusing on raising awareness of sexualisation and sexual exploitation. The aim of these is to find ways to increase the capacity to challenge the broader culture, which increases young people’s vulnerability.

- In Central Scotland and Perth / Kinross— we were part of a multi - agency Working Groups developed to host large-scale public awareness sessions with parents and professionals looking at the risks and vulnerabilities of young people in online settings. Over 4 one-day sessions, over 2100 people heard from professionals in Violence Against Women, Criminal Justice, the Police and Education. Some follow on work with young people is taking place in Perth via the TESSA project
- In Renfrewshire we delivered a series of awareness -raising sessions to Multi – agency Child Protection Network Groups on sexualisation and sexual exploitation. This is being followed with a cascade model of
capacity building through local agencies and services, parents groups and community organisations to raise awareness of sexualisation and sexual exploitation.

- In East Ayrshire a joint pilot with Learning and Development and Violence Against Women Multi Agency Partnership will train up Local Champions on sexual exploitation that will deliver awareness raising throughout the work force and in local settings with young people and communities.
- In South Lanarkshire we have worked via Child Protection and Education Support Services over the past 4 years to engage with Guidance and Pastoral Care Teachers in a training programme which will lead to direct education work with young people. From this, a pilot peer education model supporting young people to develop innovative ways to inform other young people about sexualisation and sexual exploitation is planned.

**Could you give an example of unhelpful practice you have witnessed through multi-agency working (or lack of it)?**

Not at this stage but there is a need to ensure that all developing education and preventative work takes account of issues around gender and violence against women.

**What changes would be most helpful in preventing young people getting involved in CSE and in helping them escape it?**

Whilst we need services and support for young people who are being groomed or in exploitative situations, we also have to consider preventative work in a broad sense.

We must take a longer-term view that seeks to address the growing pressures exerted through our mainstream culture for children and young people to adopt age –inappropriate sexualised behaviours. This needs to be supported through regulation.

We need to deliver media literacy with children and young people to support them make sense of the messages they receive but this needs to be delivered alongside education work on relationships particularly looking at consent. Comprehensive sex education should include discussions on social issues, gender roles and key issues such as respect and negotiation.

Prevention is not only preventing young people becoming victims of CSE but also preventing young people becoming predators or accepting predatory behaviour as normal. Work needs to take place with young men on how to develop and maintain positive relationships.

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