

**'ALL FIRED UP NOW': THE SAFE CHOICES LEAVING CARE
AND CUSTODY PROJECT PROGRAMME ON SEXUAL
EXPLOITATION**

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE SAFE CHOICES PROJECT

- The Safe Choices Leaving Care and Custody project was a London-based programme delivered by The Children's Society and **nia** from 2012-2017 across London, and funded by the Big Lottery. The project aimed to address sexual exploitation and violence in the context of gang association, including links to young women's own use of violence. Young women were eligible for support from the project if they were in custody (or had been in the last three months) and/or were preparing to leave care (or had recently left care).
- A 'gender informed approach' was the underpinning framework, creating a space that enabled young women to look at and question social constructions and their own understandings of gender norms.
- The project involved three strands of work: groupwork and one-to-one support for young women, and training for local professionals. Only the first two were included in this evaluation.
- Numbers of young women that engaged with support did not meet original or revised targets, because of gaps in staffing and the length and intensity of individual support work.
 - 304 young women engaged with specialist support from Safe Choices, representing 73% of the target of 415.
 - 178 young women were leaving or had recently left local authority care (53.1% of the target of 335).
 - 126 young women leaving custody received support through a groupwork programme (158% of the target of 80).
- The evaluation drew on: project monitoring data (available for 160 young women from 2014 onwards); interviews with young women that engaged with individual support; focus groups with 25 young women in custody about the groupwork programme; case closure forms (n=14); pre/post forms about young women's changes in knowledge (n=16); data from the outcomes tool My Wheel) for 43 young women; annual interviews with workers and managers (n=18).
- It is not possible to report on all project targets and outcomes, because of gaps in data, the development of outcomes tools throughout the project, changes in monitoring databases and the limited resources available for this external evaluation.

OUTCOMES AND LESSONS LEARNED

- The project filled a gap in provision for young women over the age of 18 and for young women in custody, especially since current understandings of sexual exploitation apply only to those under 18.
- Young women valued the skills of project workers for creating spaces where they felt comfortable, able to safely explore experiences of sexual exploitation, and challenged to develop new understandings.
- Relational support combined with expert knowledge of sexual exploitation and violence was singled out by young women as what differentiated the project, and key workers, from other services and professionals. This enabled the building of trusting relationships.

I can talk to her about what's happened in the past, I don't know why, but I feel comfortable. It makes it easy as I don't have to explain why things happen, she explains to other professionals. Some people you know are judging you, but she doesn't... Sometimes police and Social services don't listen to young people... I've never found anything she's kept from me, whereas for other professionals, I have. [Worker] is the only one I can trust out of all the professionals (Young woman, 21).

- Flexibility to support young women for as long as they needed was perceived by workers as crucial, and the initial six-month limit on engagement with workers was extended.
- The emotional toll for workers of ending support with young women was high. An interim recommendation for the team to spend time exploring this together led to greater confidence when stepping back, although anxieties remained about the lack of available wider and social support for young women.
- The most demanding and complex aspect of Safe Choices work identified by workers was challenging victim-blaming of young women by other professionals.
- Unpicking how young women's sense of self was linked to sexual availability was a recurrent theme of the work undertaken with young women.
- The gender-informed approach was experienced by young women as a revelation. This was the element of the project that 'stuck', including for the minority of young women who were uneasy with a feminist analysis.
- That a significant proportion of young women were from minority communities underscores the need for projects to be rooted in an intersectional analysis that addresses race/ethnicity.
- Four key insights about the groupwork programme were identified as significant themes to the young women:
 - learning about women's inequality;
 - linking sexualised sexism in popular culture to their lived experience of sexism;
 - challenging the normalisation of men's violence;
- building relationships with other young women. For some young women, abusive and non-consensual practices were named for the first time, which may radiate long lasting change.

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INTRODUCTION

Safe Choices was a London-based programme for young women, addressing sexual violence and exploitation in the context of gang association through intensive therapeutic work. The underpinning framework was a gendered analysis of young women's lived experience, creating a space that enabled young women to look at and question social constructions and their understandings of gender norms. The Safe Choices Leaving Care and Custody project was a partnership between nia and the Children's Society (TCS), run over five years from 2012-2017 and funded by the Big Lottery. It evolved from previous collaborations between TCS and nia, including school-based sexual exploitation prevention work, and a pilot project supporting young women involved in gangs or gang-related activity. There were three strands to the project: individual support; a structured groupwork programme; training for professionals. The project was highlighted as a model of promising practice in an influential 2010 report on gang-associated sexual exploitation.¹

In 2012, the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) at London Metropolitan University were commissioned to evaluate the programme.² This final report pulls together findings from the full evaluation period, and includes reflections on both the development of the project and data on meeting outcomes. Three interim reports were completed during the evaluation; we note later how recommendations from these shaped the delivery of the project. The training for professionals was not included in the evaluation, to focus the limited resources available on the work with young women.

The title of the report is taken from the words of a young woman in a focus group in custody, who said the programme had left her '*all fired up*' about changing her life and advocating for women's rights.

THE CARE AND CUSTODY PROJECT

Young women were eligible for the project if they were in custody (or had been in the last three months) and/or were preparing to leave care (or had recently left care) and were gang-associated and/or had experienced sexual violence/ exploitation in the context of groups or gangs. In 2012, the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act designated all children (under 18) that are remanded in custody as having 'looked after' status, further blurring the boundaries between care and custody. This means that young women recorded under each pathway in this project are likely to have experienced both, and/or been legally classified as both.

Young women could, and did, engage in both groupwork and individual support.

¹ Firmin, C. (2010) *The Female Voice in Violence project: A study into the impact of serious youth and gang violence on women and girls* London: ROTA.

² CWASU also evaluated the Safe Choices 'Reaching Communities' sister project. See: Coy, M. (2016) '*We don't get this at school: The Safe Choices Reaching Communities Project final evaluation report* London: CWASU. Available online: <http://www.niaendingviolence.org.uk/perch/resources/safe-choices-reaching-communities-evaluation-final-report-2016.pdf>

A 'gendered understanding' of sexual violence and exploitation was an explicit thread to be weaved throughout. The term 'gender-informed approach' was used to capture this in programme materials. This approach makes a distinction between biological sex at birth and gender as the set of rules, norms, behaviours into which women/girls and men/boys are socialised, usually according to biological sex. Core to the project was exploring with young women how these rules and norms were present in their everyday lives, including in networks, friendships and relationships and through messages from popular culture: how young women lived 'discriminatory sex-role differentiation'.³

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION: CHANGING CONTOURS OF POLICY AND INTERVENTION

The policyscape and mediascape surrounding sexual exploitation has changed significantly since the inception of the Safe Choices project in 2012. Widely reported convictions of groups of men for abusing young women have stoked policymakers' and media concern about the adequacy of responses to sexual exploitation. Reports and Serious Case Reviews⁴ that have exposed institutional failures to protect young women from sexual exploitation have intensified national and local pressure to develop interventions.

The Safe Choices project focus on gang association also resonated with recent policy priorities. At the time the project was developed, pioneering research on gang-associated sexual exploitation revealed how sex is used as a weapon between young men in gangs, and young women as currency with which to settle scores and enhance men's status and authority.⁵ The subsequent Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) inquiry into sexual exploitation in the context of gangs and groups concluded in 2013⁶, pushing the issue onto policy and practice agendas.⁷ This inquiry report confirmed that young women are subject to a range of sexually exploitative practices, which many practitioners fail to identify. Research published as part of the inquiry explored young people's experience of gang-associated sexual exploitation. Common themes were the gendered patterns of sexualised violence - reflecting (and reproducing) tropes about sexual reputations - and that young women are perceived to be consenting to sexual exploitation and abuse.⁸

The two contexts that Safe Choices focussed on, care and custody, reflect knowledge on links with sexual exploitation and abuse. That a significant proportion of young women living

³ Bartky, S. (1990) *Femininity and domination: studies in the phenomenology of oppression* London: Routledge p.18

⁴ E.g. Bedford, A. (2016) *Serious Case Review into Child Sexual Exploitation in Oxfordshire: from the experiences of Children A, B, C, D, E, and F* Oxford LSCB; Griffiths, S. (2013) *The Overview Report of the Serious Case Review in respect of Young People 1,2,3,4,5 & 6* Rochdale LSCB; Myers, J. & Carmi, C. (2016) *The Brooke Serious Case Review into Child Sexual Exploitation* Bristol LSCB.

⁵ Beckett, H with Brodie, I; Factor, F; Melrose, M; Pearce, J; Pitts, J; Shuker, L and Warrington, C. (2013) *It's wrong...but you get used to it' A qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation* Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

⁶ Berelowitz, S., Clifton, J., Firmin, C., Gulyurtlu, S. & Edwards, G. (2013) *"If only someone had listened": Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups Final Report* London: OCC.

⁷ Disley, E. & Liddle, M. (2016) *Local perspectives in Ending Gang and Youth Violence Areas Perceptions of the nature of urban street gangs* London: Home Office

⁸ Pearce, J. (2013) A Social Model of 'Abused Consent' in Melrose, M. and Pearce, J. (eds.) *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking* London: Palgrave Macmillan

in and leaving local authority care experience sexual exploitation is well documented.⁹ Multiple placement moves that disrupt young women's sense of relational security, and targeting by perpetrators who recognise their unmet emotional needs, are care-associated practices that contribute to sexual exploitation.¹⁰ Young women in custody are likely to have experiences of men's violence, not least because of the known links between offending and coercion and manipulation by partners and peers.¹¹

As policy attention on sexual exploitation has increased, so too have interventions in London. Specialist voluntary sector sexual exploitation services are increasingly recognised as able to form and hold relationships with young people where statutory sector agencies struggle.¹² A number of organisations now offer specialist support for sexually exploited young people, and some also focus on the gang context. This created a crowded field for Safe Choices to sustain referrals and demonstrate the relevance and success(es) of the project. The gender analysis on which the project is based initially marked Safe Choices as unique, although over time other projects began to claim this approach. It is questionable, however, how organisations that do not have decades of expertise on gendered violence can achieve the same depth of understanding. A previous evaluation of a Safe Choices project¹³ found young women highly valued a feminist approach that situates sexual exploitation in the context of gendered inequalities, and explores their experiences of social and sexualised sexism. A similar view was expressed by young women who participated in focus groups for this evaluation.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

There were originally eight thematic areas for the project, based on a structured toolkit developed for Safe Choices.

- Endings and evaluation
- Relationships
- Sexual violence and exploitation in gangs and groups
- Girls, gangs and risk
- Young women, gangs and serious youth violence
- Anger
- Identity
- Consequences

⁹ Office of the Children's Commissioner (2012) *Briefing for the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education, on the emerging findings of the Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, with a special focus on children in care* London: OCC

¹⁰ Coy, M. (2009) 'Moved around like bags of rubbish nobody wants': how multiple placement moves make young women vulnerable to sexual exploitation *Child Abuse Review* 18 (4) 254-266

¹¹ E.g. Firmin, C. (2011) *This is it. This is my life... Female Voice in Violence Final Report* London: ROTA

¹² Gilligan P. (2016) Turning It Around: What Do Young Women Say Helps them to Move On from Child Sexual Exploitation *Child Abuse Review* 25(2) 115-127

¹³ Coy, M. (2016) *'We don't get this at school: The Safe Choices Reaching Communities Project final evaluation report* London: CWASU

As the project developed, delivery drifted away from this structured approach. In part, this reflects how manualised programmes that are responsive to participants require ongoing flexibility and revision.¹⁴ The toolkit was also designed for preventative/early intervention work with young women, and those that were referred were older and in need of more intense support and advocacy.

As the project developed, there were further changes to its original formulation. The project outcomes, configuration of the staff, and monitoring systems were all redesigned. While both organisations were aware of problems, making adaptations to resolve them often took time, slowed down by layers of decision-making and consultation.

Each organisation employed one worker to deliver the direct work with young women. Strategic managers at both organisations lead on raising the profile of the project at local and pan-London multi-agency networks and building external partnerships. Since the project inception, staff teams in both TCS and nia changed, and the project at times creaked under the strain of many handovers and gaps, with some posts vacant for months at a time. Two project workers eventually became managers. Yet different working practices in the two organisations also led to workers feeling conflicted or confused. In 2015 the project was significantly restructured, with the operational manager at TCS seconded to nia. The aim of this move was to join up both practice and ethos across the two organisations. A joint work plan was developed, which included synchronising data monitoring systems.

Changes in external partners also affected project delivery. The closure of Downview Youth Offending Institute in August 2013 and HMP Holloway in July 2016 meant fewer routes through which to access young women in custody, although Downview re-opened to young women following Holloway's closure. Relationships were established with Medway YOI, Kent, and HMP Bronzefield, Surrey (the latter through a support worker that specialises in domestic violence and sexual exploitation).

PROJECT OUTCOMES

The targets for the programme were:

- 80 young women leaving YOIs will receive targeted support to access appropriate services they are entitled to and will be able to make informed choices helping them to improve their confidence and life chances;
- 335 young women leaving care in London will receive targeted support and advocacy and will report improved well-being, less isolation and better life chances.

These targets, combined with an overall goal of 415 young women, lurked as 'unrealistic' and 'pressure', for the following reasons.

- The work with young women was more intensive and long term than originally envisaged, involving far more advocacy than was built into its design, and the targets

¹⁴ Phillips, R. (2015). *British domestic violence perpetrator programmes: 'programme integrity' within 'service integrity'*. Unpublished PhD thesis, London Metropolitan University

were set for a project mainly delivering short-term prevention. The six month limit on engagement with the project was unrealistic, given the long term nature of the work.

- As the project become more established and the profile of young women more complex, and local services eroded by funding cuts, it became increasingly difficult for cases to be closed where workers perceived they were cutting young women adrift. The six month time limit was therefore stretched, with young women receiving support for longer.
- Young women were older than anticipated, which brought a series of challenges: not only it is harder to engage statutory services in meeting their obligations when young women are approaching adulthood, but the content of the project was devised for younger age groups.
- The much larger target for young women leaving care compared to those leaving custody proved to be particularly difficult to reach, as take-up of the project among leaving care services was thin.

By the end of the project:

- 304 young women engaged with targeted specialist support (73% of the overall target of 415);
- 178 young women that were leaving or had recently left local authority care engaged with Safe Choices (53.1% of the target of 335);
- 126 young women leaving custody received support through a groupwork programme (158% of the target of 80).

That Safe Choices fell short of this overall target is itself notable: numerical outputs rarely do justice to the intensity and skill of support, where the aim is to make meaningful and transformative change *with* young women. Exceeding the target for young women in custody reflects both the relationships forged with young offenders institutions and the dearth of specialist support for women in prison, especially around VAWG.

A NOTE ON THE PROJECT NAME

The project was titled Safe Choices as it developed from an earlier project and toolkit, which had built a solid local profile. In the initial stages of this Safe Choices project, workers became aware of the inadvertent message: that young women were responsible for exploitation because of their own choices. Recent inquiries into professional responses to sexual exploitation have consistently identified a perception that young women were 'choosing' to have sexual relationships and/or 'lifestyles'.¹⁵ Both TCS and nia were keenly aware of the implications of the project name, and the risk of amplifying this framing with both professionals and young women. The decision to keep the project name was pragmatic, in that referral pathways were already established.

¹⁵ See e.g. case reviews in note 4 and the OCC report in note 5.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

This final report draws on the following sources.

- Monitoring data about the profile of young women who engaged with the project, that was available in a comparable format for analysis (n=160 young women)
 - This includes data from 'My Wheel', introduced part way through the evaluation and available for 43 young women.
- Seven focus groups in HMPs Holloway and Bronzefield, and Medway Secure Training Centre (n=25 young women)
- Telephone interviews with three young women
- Pre and post forms completed by young women about their confidence to recognise violence, understand their emotions and seek support (n=16)
- Case closure forms supplied by workers from the monitoring database (n=14)
- Annual interviews with workers and managers (n=18)

The project received ethical approval from London Metropolitan University's Faculty of Social Science and Humanities Research Ethics Review Panel. All young women were asked for their consent to participate in the evaluation by project workers, and this was renegotiated at the beginning of telephone interviews and focus groups. No questions asked about young women's experiences of exploitation or violence, and it was emphasised that there was no expectation to share why they were involved with Safe Choices, as the focus was their views of the project.

DATA COLLECTION

There are significant gaps in data which limit the ability of the evaluation to comment on outcomes. This was a very small-scale evaluation with limited time and capacity. A key aim was to place young women's voices at its heart. However, reaching young women for interviews proved extremely challenging. Telephone interviews were the most realistic option to gather their feedback. Young women who were nearing the end of engagement with Safe Choices were asked by workers if their telephone numbers could be passed onto the evaluation team, but many were unavailable when contacted. Of those who agreed, only three were ultimately available and completed telephone interviews. These three young women had different pathways to Safe Choices: through a foster carer; a friend; groupwork in custody. There is a lesson for future projects about the resources required to meaningfully engage young women in participation in evaluation.

Engaging with young women in custody was more straightforward, and most were very keen to share their views on the groupwork programme. Seven focus groups in three settings were conducted from 2013-2016, with a total of 25 young women participating. These often had to take place immediately or shortly after the final programme session, as young women were likely to be moved or released from custody. Some element of reflection was lost, but content was fresher in young women's minds. As recording equipment was not permitted in custody, detailed notes were taken of discussions. In addition, young women were asked to write their thoughts on sticky notes under different headings: what stuck with me; what I would change; one word to describe the programme.

There is limited evidence about outcomes for young women. Throughout the project, different recording systems were used. Initially nia and TCS used their own, and in 2014 this was transferred, to harmonise data capture. TCS later moved to a new system, meaning there is not comparable data for the whole project. Data about the impact of the work is evident in case files (five of these were examined in year two), but it proved to be too resource intensive process to mine these. Practitioners were primarily responsible for data collection, which was unsustainable as caseloads become larger and more complex. Different monitoring and outcome measurement tools were also developed and introduced throughout the project, again limiting the possibility to compare data over its duration. That some young women actively disengaged when they were told support would be coming to an end also hindered efforts to collect data, as they were not able to complete feedback forms. Just 16 young women completed pre and post forms that explored changes in knowledge and perception as a result of engagement with the project.

The significant challenge, then, was to measure and make visible the impact of the project's work. This is especially true for small scale evaluation where measurement of impact is limited to changes in knowledge and understanding rather than long term behaviours. Practitioners' perceptions, their practice-based evidence of what works and why/how, are an important source of knowledge in this report. Yet there is clearly a gap in more systematic charting of what the project achieved. The value of developing Theory of Change approaches, with milestones and activities mapped against achievement of outcomes, has gained in prominence since the inception of Safe Choices. Some carefully designed and tested scales/tools exist¹⁶, which have sought to define and capture outcomes in ways that are meaningful to young women and can be aggregated for organisational learning and evaluation.

Safe Choices workers and managers were interviewed annually about their experiences of delivering support and training for professionals. Staff turnover during the project meant that some were interviewed only once; others changed role (two moved from support worker to project manager, for example) and were interviewed on multiple occasions. These interviews were initially conducted face to face, and subsequently over the telephone to minimise pressure on their schedules.

DATA ANALYSIS

The available monitoring data and the pre-post forms completed by young women were analysed in Excel. A proforma captured key information from the case closure forms, which were then analysed thematically for patterns relating to outcomes.

¹⁶ See e.g. 'Space for Action' scale in Kelly, L., Sharp, N. & Klein, R. (2014) [Finding the Costs of Freedom. How women and children rebuild their lives after domestic violence](#) London: CWASU/Solace Women's Aid and 'Supporting Survivor Outcomes' tool in Scott, S., Williams, J., McNaughton-Nicholls, C., McManus, S., Brown, A., Harvey, S., Kelly, L. & Lovett, J. (2015) [Briefing 5: A briefing for service providers and commissioners: Measuring outcomes for survivors of abuse and violence](#) London: NatCen

Analysis of focus groups and interviews with both young women and workers/managers drew on Jennifer Mason's¹⁷ approach of identifying 'facets' in qualitative data.¹⁸ It moves beyond thematic summaries to view data as the surfaces of a gemstone, which fall into light and shadow, depending on how it is turned. The aim is the 'pursuit of flashes of insight'¹⁹ rather than 'maximum coverage of data'. Illuminating the facets/insights from the evaluation data involved multiple readings of workers and young women's words, in both notes from interviews/focus groups and the sticky notes. The aim was to identify where interviewees articulated change or shifts in thinking, especially how this related to sexual exploitation and violence. For instance, when one young woman suggested that learning that women's inequality was not limited to the gang context, it was possible to link this insight to how young women were enabled to reflect on sexism in their own lives. Four key insights about the groupwork programme were identified through this process: learning about women's inequality; linking sexualised sexism in popular culture to their lived experience of sexism; challenging the normalisation of men's violence; building relationships with other young women. Each was sense-checked for relevance with project workers/managers, who reported that they resonated deeply with their practice-based evidence. The insights are integrated into the discussion of outcomes for young women later in the report.

ACTION-ORIENTED EVALUATION

Several recommendations from interim reports were implemented. These included changes to both project delivery and evaluation data, and demonstrate the value of interim snapshots:

- employment of a groupworker rather than sessional workers, to ensure consistency for staff and young women;
- alignment of data monitoring systems, based on the greater administrative resources of TCS;
- revisiting of how the programme builds in intersections of gender, race and class;
- self-referrals were accepted from 2014;
- an initial three-way meeting model between the young woman, referrer and Safe Choices project worker was adapted the referrer simply acted as a facilitator of an introduction but did not attend the actual initial session;
- references to motivation and responsibility were removed from the feedback sheet, as they may have inadvertently reinforced notions that young women were making good or bad choices;
- initial approaches to risk assessment were shifted towards safety planning;
- workers spent regular, scheduled time together for joint reflection and development of project approaches and materials;

¹⁷ Mason, J. (2011) Facet Methodology: the Case for an Inventive Research Orientation *Methodological Innovations Online* 6 (3) 75-92

¹⁸ Marine and Lewis (2014) use this methodology to mine young women's accounts of coming to feminist consciousness, to identify to 'moments where participants offered particularly clear or insightful reflection'. Marine, S. & Lewis, R. (2014) I'm in this for real: Revisiting young women's feminist becoming *Women's Studies International Forum* 47 (A): 11-22

¹⁹ Mason, J. (2011) Facet Methodology: the Case for an Inventive Research Orientation *Methodological Innovations Online* 6 (3) 75-92 p.76

- specific discussions explored the complexities and anxieties of closing cases;
- standardisation of technology and resources that enabled remote working across the two organisations so that workers could securely access email and case files in between outreach appointments.

In the 2014 interim report we noted that the six month limit on engagement with Safe Choices was unrealistic, given the long term nature of the work. The Mayoral Strategic Framework for responding to gang-associated women and girls²⁰ is clear that services should be flexible in responding to young women's needs. The six month time limit on support was therefore extended. Being able to support young women for as long as they needed was perceived by workers as crucial. A project worker reflected on how this had enabled her to support young women through court cases.

If I had a timeframe, I'd never be able to support [young women] through court. For two young women, I was able to be there every day (Project worker 2).

The following sections of the report turn to analysis of the available monitoring data and outcomes for young women.

A PROFILE OF THE YOUNG WOMEN

Data about the young women that engaged with Safe Choices is drawn from the database developed by the Children's Society. Despite initiatives to improve the consistency of data recording, there remained large gaps in some of the fields. There is also a discrepancy between the overall number of young women and the number for whom monitoring data is available. The new database held by TCS only includes young women supported by Safe Choices since 2014, with four young women engaged in one to one support carried over from their initial referral in 2013. Data supplied for the 2013 interim reports is not in a comparable format with that available from 2013-2017. Information about the profile of young women in this report is based on the detailed monitoring data covering the period 2013-2017, and mostly from 2014 onwards. This data is available for 160 young women. Where the care/custody pathway was recorded (128 cases), young women were evenly split between experiences of care (52%, n=66) and custody (48%, n=61).

Analysis of the profile of young women below draws on this data for 160 young women.

ETHNICITY

Ethnicity was recorded for 141 of the total 160 young women for whom data is available. All missing cases were for young women engaged in groupwork.

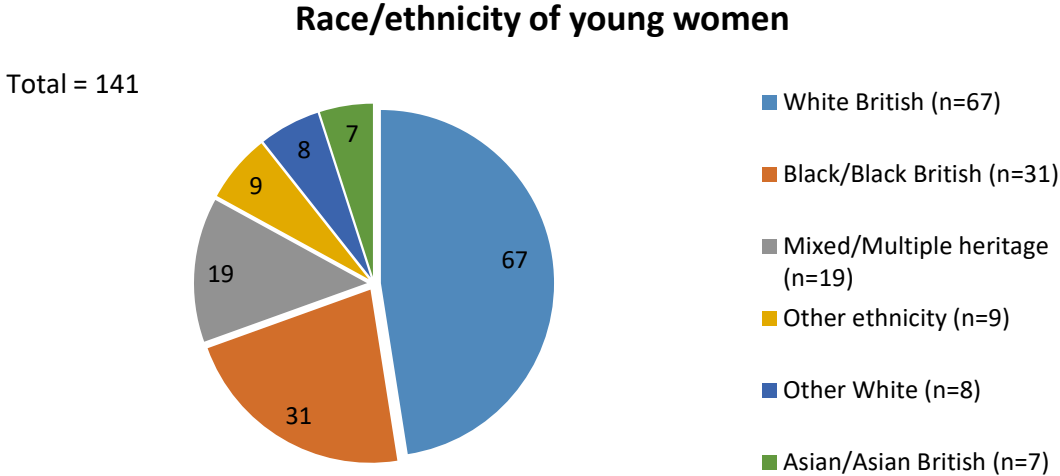
As Figure 1 shows, Safe Choices supported a significant proportion of young women from black and ethnic minority communities. This reflects the over-representation of women from

²⁰ MOPAC (2013) *Strategic framework for responding to gang-associated women and girls* London: Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime

minority groups in custody²¹ and local authority care.²² While research has long documented the diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds of young women who are sexually exploited²³, this is not acknowledged in dominant media narratives.²⁴

- Two fifths of young women (42%, n=67) were White British.
- One in five (19%, n=31) were Black/Black British.
- One in ten (11%, n=19) were of mixed heritage.

Figure 1: Race/ethnicity of young women who engaged with Safe Choices²⁵



For at least two young women, addressing racialised sexism²⁶ - sexualised expectations around black women - was explicitly identified in case notes as a core part of the support work. Notes indicate that this included exploration of how young women experienced and navigated racist tropes about black women as sexually available.

AGE

The average (mean) age was 20 years old for young women in both the care and custody pathways (data available for 152 young women). The range for young women in the care pathway was 15-25 and in custody 16-29. Figure 2 shows the clustering of young women in

²¹ Prison Reform Trust (2017) [Counted Out: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Women in the Criminal Justice System](#) London: Prison Reform Trust.

²² Zayed, Y. & Harker, R. (2015) [Children in Care in England: Statistics House of Commons Briefing Paper 04470](#) London: House of Commons Library; See also Lees, S. (2002) Gender, Ethnicity and Vulnerability in Young Women in Local Authority Care *British Journal of Social Work* 32 (7): 907-922

²³ Patel, N. & Ward, J. (2006) Broadening the discussion on ‘sexual exploitation’: ethnicity, sexual exploitation and young people *Child Abuse Review* 15 (5) 341-350; Pearce, J., Williams, M. & Galvin, C. (2003) *It’s someone taking a part of you: a study of young women and sexual exploitation*. London: National Children’s Bureau; Gohir, S. (2013) [Unheard Voices: Sexual Exploitation of Asian Girls and Young Women](#) Birmingham: Muslim Women’s Network

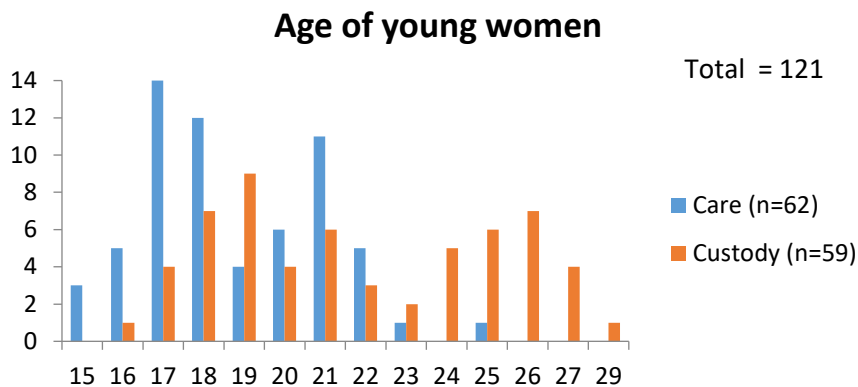
²⁴ Cockbain, E. (2013) Grooming and the ‘Asian sex gang predator’: the construction of a racial crime threat *Race & Class* 54(4) 22-32; Gill, A. & Harrison, K. (2015) Child Grooming and Sexual Exploitation: Are South Asian Men the UK Media’s New Folk Devils? *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 4(2): 34-49.

²⁵ Categories are aggregated here to preserve anonymity, as some referred to just one young woman.

²⁶ hooks, b. (2004) *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* London: Routledge

the care pathway at younger ages than those in/leaving custody (data available for 121 young women).

Figure 2: Age of young women who engaged with Safe Choices by care/custody pathway



That Safe Choices provides support to young women through transitions over the age of 18 was identified by workers as an important added value of the project.

We give support throughout transition, where they lose other professionals as they turn 18, we're sticking by them... we follow their journey, bridging that support (Project worker 3).

Safe Choices was also differentiated from current policy and much practice by recognising that sexual exploitation does not stop at 18, and therefore neither should specialist support.

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND VIOLENCE

Increasing policy awareness and action surrounding sexual exploitation of young people has led to a broadening of what the term encompasses. Margaret Melrose has argued that this has led to the concept becoming 'elastic', creating confusion rather than clarity in practice responses.²⁷ A conflation with sexual abuse also further muddies understandings, as the dynamics of sexual exploitation are obscured.²⁸ While sexual violence shades into exploitation, notions of exchange and gain for perpetrators are commonly defined as distinguishing features of the latter.²⁹

Safe Choices workers advocated for a wide understanding of sexual exploitation, as they supported young women exploited in gang contexts, by peers (*'being passed from boy to boy'*), and by predatory older men, as well as experiencing multiple forms of sexual violence. However, echoing Margaret Melrose, some workers noted that the stereotype of a much older man exploiting a very young woman³⁰ – meant that cases were missed by

²⁷ Melrose, M. (2013) Twenty-First Century Party People: Young People and Sexual Exploitation in the New Millennium *Child Abuse Review* 22 (3) 155-168

²⁸ Kelly, L. & Regan, L. (2000) *Rhetorics and Realities: Sexual Exploitation of Children in Europe* London: Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University

²⁹ See e.g. the current policy definition of sexual exploitation in Department for Education (2017) [Child sexual exploitation: definition and guide for practitioners](#) London: DfE

³⁰ Melrose, M. (2004) Young People Abused through Prostitution: Some Observations for Practice *Practice: Social Work in Action* 16(1) 17-29

professionals who only identified exploitation in this pattern. The gang-associated focus inevitably led to this as a key context for sexual exploitation amongst the young women supported by the project.

Monitoring data does not enable identification of the ways in which all young women were sexually exploited, For the final year of the project TCS began recording this but data is only available for a small proportion (n=20), with the most common form 'older adult' (n=6), followed by exploitation by peers (n=4), and gang-associated, familial and online exploitation at three cases each. Case closure forms also documented a range, confirmed by interviews with workers:

- gang-associated exploitation, including sexual 'ownership' of young women and grooming by individual gang members;
- abuse and violence from peers;
- older men manipulating young women into sending naked photos over the Internet, and into meeting up for sex, in exchange for money;
- older 'boyfriends' grooming young women into the sex industry.

A project worker provided an example of a young woman who was repeatedly texted by boys at school, telling her she was beautiful and they could introduce her to other boys who would take care of her if she had sex with them. In this way, a young woman was '*making decisions that she would think would gain her more friends, but led to more pain*' (Project worker 3). Unpicking how young women's sense of self was linked to sexual availability was a recurrent theme of the work undertaken in this project. The following sections explore the feminist analysis of the project, before turning to reporting on outcomes.

THE GENDER-INFORMED APPROACH

The gender-informed approach to the project was, at the time of its inception, an alliance between nia's political analysis and expertise and TCS that had developed single sex support services, but perhaps had a descriptive understanding of gender inequalities. Over the life of the Safe Choices Care and Custody Project, this changed significantly. Workers reported that the project's feminist analysis was amplified as they began to adapt the programme. This is an important lesson. It demonstrates that when engaging with young women about their everyday lived experience, a feminist analysis becomes more relevant and that an outcome of the project partnership between the two organisations is the cascading of feminist knowledge.

There were two elements to the feminist ethos of the project, both valued by young women: the gender-informed analysis of sexual exploitation and violence that connects social and sexualised sexism to young women's lives; and a feminist relational approach to women supporting women. These principles are translated into work with young women by Janet Batsleer³¹ as: valuing active participation; connecting private 'troubles' with public 'issues';

³¹ Batsleer, J. (2013) *Youth Working with Girls and Young Women in Community Settings Farnham: Ashgate* (2nd edition)

and promoting relationships with workers and other young women. The feminist analysis and how it shaped practice, particularly the groupwork programme, is discussed below.

A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

The project analysis located sexual exploitation as a form of violence against women and girls and as a practice of gender inequality.³² It offered young women an opportunity to interrogate men's non-consensual sexual practices and shifted responsibility to perpetrators.

Addressing the intersections of race and class was crucial. One young (white) woman raised in an early focus group that she felt the session on gangs stereotyped black and minority ethnic communities. Some staff were also troubled by an emphasis on young women as '*seeing young women as female and that's it*'. Project managers and workers discussed how to ensure that the programme drew on an intersectional analysis that addressed the interlinked dimensions of sexism and racism.

As the programme was revised, materials about sexualised popular culture were incorporated, such as music videos and magazines, to ignite discussions about representations of women's bodies in mainstream popular culture. How sexualised sexism³³ was introduced to the young women was carefully planned. For instance, workers parodied Page 3: '*I would say things like "I really like opening a newspaper and seeing a pair of tits looking back at me"*'.

This was a subject that most animated young women in the focus groups and a key insight into how the project facilitated shifts in thinking. Several young women talked about 'flicking past' images in magazines and now seeing the objectification of women's bodies.

Pictures of women, like Page 3, you don't see men like that. It's all about women, where's the fat men next to an advert for liposuction? Why not pictures of men sitting on my legs? It's wrong, you wouldn't see men like that. Why are women used like that? (Young woman, FG5).

Another young woman in the same group chipped in with '*it's all about our bodies*'. Young women therefore connected the use and abuse of women's bodies in sexualised sexist popular culture, and in their own lives. This moves beyond superficial discussions of 'body image' to young women's embodied sense of self. In the midst of a discussion about representations of women's bodies in magazines, one young woman commented:

I see a little bit more. It showed how women are seen much differently than men. They talk about equality, but women are used basically (Young woman, FG4).

³² Coy, M. (2016) Joining the dots on sexual exploitation of children and women: gaps in UK policy approaches *Critical Social Policy* 36(4) 572–59

³³ Coy, M. (2014) *Sexualised Sexism: Popular Culture, Sexualisation and Violence Against Women and Girls* London: End Violence Against Women

A discussion between young women in prison highlighted how connections were made between representations of women as dehumanised objects and men's practices; one young woman began to claim more for herself.

Men do look at girls like they're...

*Men look at you like they're hungry. Men introduce girls as their girlfriend,
but men get to keep their names*

Women as objects, that's what society thinks

*I don't want to be the naked girl in the picture, I want to be known for me
(Young woman, FG4).*

These discussions, where young women began to share their perspectives, were what the project hoped to achieve, particularly to build solidarity with young women who were isolated from their peers.

DELIVERING A GENDER-INFORMED INTERVENTION: THE GROUPWORK PROGRAMME

Delivery of the groupwork programmes in prisons and YOIs was perceived by all workers and managers as filling a desperate gap in support for women who had few social, economic and personal resources. In part this was '*bridging between prison and the outside world*', but it was also about the opportunity to talk about sexual exploitation and violence through a feminist lens. It has long been documented that significant proportions of women in prison have experienced violence in childhood and adulthood.³⁴

Feminist groupwork has become embedded in some women's support services. Core practices are a women-only space for support from other women, locating individual experience in social contexts of inequality and building women's capacity to influence their lives.³⁵ Overall the approach seeks to share power between facilitators and participants, by valuing their experience.³⁶ It is built on a relational approach that prioritises the building and strengthening of relationships, trust and empathy.³⁷ All these elements were integral to the delivery of the Safe Choices groupwork programme. Workers noted how young women engaged with this participatory, relational delivery, especially in hierarchical and authoritarian custody settings.

³⁴ Corston, J. (2007) *The Corston Report: A report by Baroness Jean Corston of a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System* London: Home Office; Williams, K., Papadopoulou, V. & Booth, N. (2012) *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds* London: MOJ; ³⁴ Prison Reform Trust (2017) *Counted Out: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Women in the Criminal Justice System* London: Prison Reform Trust.

³⁵ Butler, S. & Wintram, C. (1991) *Feminist Groupwork* London: Sage; Cohen, M.B. & Mullender, A. (eds.) *Gender and groupwork*. London: Routledge

³⁶ Mullender, A. and Cohen, M.B. (2003). Introduction. In M.B. Cohen & A. Mullender (eds.) *Gender and groupwork*. London: Routledge

³⁷ Butler, S. & Wintram, C. (1991) *Feminist Groupwork* London: Sage; Cohen, M.B. & Mullender, A. (eds.) *Gender and groupwork*. London: Routledge

Young women are really keen to get on board and take part, it's such a different style to what they're used to in custody (Project worker 1).

Running the groups required assertive and respectful facilitation, particularly when young women turned up late, walked in and out, disrupted discussions or became distressed by the content. One project worker described paying attention to multiple layers of discussion, using an example of the sexualisation of women's bodies in popular culture.

You unpick the sket/ho language with the room, and you're trying to challenge, not just managing the young women's responses, but also challenging the stereotypes and the third thing is the interaction between the two (Project worker 7).

Feedback from young women in focus groups supported workers' perceptions: their skills created an environment 'we were able to say what we wanted to say', valuing workers as 'comfortable, approachable', 'sort of like me' 'understanding', despite fearing initially that they would 'not trust the workers'.

YOUNG WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES: LEARNING ABOUT WOMEN'S INEQUALITY

Sticky notes about 'what stuck with me' from custody focus groups showed that what resonated with young women was discussion of gender and power: stereotypes of, and differences between, women and men and women's rights, 'freedom for women'.

I was astonished to see how usual stereotypes associated to men/women (male/female) relationships have evolved and still are dominant in our daily lives (Young woman, sticky note, FG2).

How women are in the world, men at the top. [The programme] showed us we get treated differently... (Young woman, FG5).

The subject that covered freedom – overlooking the suffragettes, the exercise of power, restrictions and control. Seeing that the notion of the 'glass ceiling' is spread across industries, workplaces and not only gangs (Young woman, sticky note, FG2).

This 'astonishment' expressed about awareness that the gang context reflects women's wider inequality raises questions about the limited reach of contemporary feminist activism. Despite a vibrant resurgence, young women who are in multiple ways socially marginalised appear not to have access to a feminist analysis. The project offered young women this knowledge and perspective, and most grabbed onto it to understand and reframe their own lives. For example, one young woman observed how women and girls have less freedom than men and boys.

Why are women 'allowed' to do things men just do? (Young woman FG5).

For another, actions that appeared to offer the same route to power as enjoyed by young men were an illusion because of the ways in which young women that transgressed gendered norms were labelled.

We're trying to do what boys do as we have no power, but we get called bad names. Like if a girl sells drugs, they get a bad name, but if a boy does it, he's a 'G'... Women, if we sleep with 10 men, we're a slut, but a man, he is a 'G'. If we do something [sexual] then we get knocked down, but for a boy to do it, he gets lad points. Everything is just different. If you show off your belly you get called a slut, but men walk around without their top on (Young woman, FG5).

Two young women, however, resisted the programme's feminist perspective. One reported that

It was over the top with women and equality. I felt they were pushing their thoughts onto me (Young woman, FG7).

Another young woman reported that she already knew everything the programme covered, and there was no point as *'nothing will change when I get out'*. What needed to change, she thought, was her, and a short-term programme was not enough to achieve that. In a discussion of rejecting men's abusive behaviours, a young woman said, *'it's hard to do out there'*. This distinction between 'intellectual' and 'experiential' empowerment was documented in pioneering research with young people about heterosexuality³⁸: that knowing about safety and signs of abusive behaviours is different from being able to apply these in real life contexts. Young women's perspectives on project outcomes are discussed below.

OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG WOMEN

Young women will receive targeted support to access appropriate services they are entitled to and will be able to make informed choices helping them to improve their confidence and life chances

Young women will receive targeted support and advocacy and will report improved well-being, less isolation and better life chances

This section explores the available data on outcomes under the following headings: an initial discussion of engagement with Safe Choices; targeted support to access appropriate services; improved confidence and life chances through addressing safety and violence; improved wellbeing and less isolation.

³⁸ Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, C., Sharpe, S. & Thomson, R. (1998) *The Male in the Head: young people, heterosexuality and power* London: Tufnell Press

ENGAGEMENT WITH SAFE CHOICES

Workers noted that on occasion, social workers compelled some young women to engage with Safe Choices, sometimes under threat of having children removed. This did not create the foundation for constructive relationships; even where compelled young women were in a space to address their life circumstances, they were suspicious of the relationship between Safe Choices and statutory agencies. Compelling young women to engage with support is an unhelpful reproduction of the dynamics of power and coercion that characterise abuse and exploitation. Despite Safe Choices workers explaining this to referring professionals, they often found little understanding.

Engaging with young women for one-to-one support was not always successful. One worker described considerable advocacy with 'professional networks', including social workers, personal advisors, and foster carers, although the young woman herself had not taken up support. This is an example of how case advocacy can become system advocacy: through ensuring that one young woman's rights and entitlements were realised, it is possible that wider changes in practice occurred.

For the three young women interviewed about their experiences of the project, feeling safe with Safe Choices workers and able to talk with them was what they valued most. All three were still engaged with support, and talked of initial mistrust; one young woman said she tested her worker's boundaries by being rude at first, but nevertheless the worker demonstrated acceptance and thus built trust.

I want to talk, I can tell her anything. We've been talking about changing my life. She's just different. You get workers and the different ones. She's one of a kind. If I'm angry, I take my anger out on other workers, not [worker]. I don't go to her angry and if I do, she's treated me nice (Young woman, 18).

In the 2014 interim report, it was recommended that Safe Choices invest time as a team exploring how to manage the emotional toll of ending support from Safe Choices. Workers then became more confident about the gradual process of enabling young women to rebuild their lives.

We're constantly reviewing and getting them to a place where they don't need the support. We start stepping back and reducing contact, slowly, until they feel ok, they have other services or coping tools and positive activities (Project Worker 3).

Without feedback from young women that had reached the end of support from Safe Choices, it is only possible to make observations here from workers' perspectives. In the early and middle years of the project, the possibility that young women could reconnect with the project, should they need to, appeared to offer a safety net that softened the finality of case closure. As the end of project funding loomed and support was ending without the options to say to young women that they could contact workers in the future, a different perspective on closing cases emerged.

We talk about endings from the start... young women disconnect towards the end... It's hard, some push away and say what's the point? (Project worker 4).

Anxiety amongst workers over closing cases was significant, and exacerbated by the diminishment of alternative support services because of public spending cuts. This made one core outcome – enabling young women to access appropriate services through targeted support – more challenging.

TARGETED SUPPORT TO ACCESS APPROPRIATE SERVICES

The role of Safe Choices as a bridge to other support services was perceived by workers as pivotal, creating a path for young women to engage with statutory professionals such as social workers and prison officers. This 'unlocking' of other positive relationships can be linked to a relational support approach.³⁹ For one young woman, the relationship and trust with her keyworker enabled relay of information to other professionals.

I can talk to her about what's happened in the past, I don't know why, but I feel comfortable. It makes it easy as I don't have to explain why things happen, she explains to other professionals. Some people you know are judging you, but she doesn't... Sometimes police and Social services don't listen to young people... I've never found anything she's kept from me, whereas for other professionals, I have. [Worker] is the only one I can trust out of all the professionals (Young woman, 21).

Completed feedback forms were available for 16 young women. These rated, on a scale from 'all of the time' to 'never', how confident they felt about:

- recognising controlling behaviours in relationships;
- having the right to give or withhold consent to any sexual activity;
- understanding my feelings (such as fear, frustration, sadness, powerlessness);
- trying something new
- feeling supported and listened to;
- knowing where to seek help/support if needed.

As these forms were completed at the beginning of involvement with the project, and at the point of case closure, baseline data makes it possible to measure change in young women's perceptions. While these numbers are very small, analysis of responses shows that:

- the only strong statistically significant change was in young women's knowledge of where to seek support;
- a slightly weaker significant change was found for young women feeling supported and listened to.

³⁹ Shuker, L. (2013) 'Constructs of Safety for Children in Care affected by Sexual Exploitation' in Melrose, M & Pearce, J. (2013) (eds) *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Young women in focus groups also talked about seeking support from prison staff, friends and peers, suggesting that new networks of support opened up. In part, this was through a shift in sense of self; young women were encouraged to see that Safe Choices practitioners valued them. It is also perhaps reflective of how they were enabled to name their experiences as abuse and that they were therefore entitled to support and understanding. That at least 14 young women engaged with individual support following the group programme also reveals how participation directly enabled the accessing of specialist support services.

IMPROVED CONFIDENCE AND LIFE CHANCES: ADDRESSING SAFETY AND VIOLENCE

Safety planning with young women was integral to the individual support, although practice evolved over the project as the knowledge base and confidence of the team grew. Initially workers struggled to formulate a risk assessment tool that captured the young women's circumstances, and switched instead to a more proactive safety planning.

The challenge was to equip young women with information and respect their capacity to make decisions, while recognising that those decisions may expose them to abusive and predatory men. Treading a balance between surveillance and safety planning was important and complex.

We're not doing the work if we go in and advocate for what the young women wants, because we're not keeping her safe because she's saying I don't want agencies involved. I don't want them checking up on me, I want to go where I want to go, but we know where she's going, and she's going to be abused. They're still children that need to be supported (Project manager).

The DASH risk assessment tool⁴⁰ was used where young women were experiencing violence from partners, and basic safety planning techniques included safe words for telephone calls, identifying safe locations, and practising assertiveness when making refusals. Both TCS and nia followed internal safeguarding processes, and managed tensions when referrals to statutory safeguarding services were necessary. However, procedures, information and code words can only go so far. Ensuring safety was also limited by inadequate material resources, which deepened as public spending cuts began to squeeze availability of local housing.

How can young women move on if they're frightened of where they'll be living? (Project worker 1).

Lucie Shuker has argued that the notion of safety with respect to young people in local authority care and sexual exploitation should be expanded to include psychological and relational security, as well as physical safety.⁴¹ Safe Choices worked with this comprehensive

⁴⁰ Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment and Honour Based Violence (DASH, 2009) Risk Identification and Assessment and Management Model

⁴¹ Shuker, L. (2013) 'Constructs of Safety for Children in Care affected by Sexual Exploitation' in Melrose, M & Pearce, J. (2013) (eds) *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

construct of safety, through prioritising a relational approach to support and young women's embodied sense of self. While a relational approach is becoming more established as the bedrock of good practice, it is far from universally applied, and to some extent differentiated Safe Choices from other professionals.

To unpick young women's experiences of violence, workers used the Power and Control wheel to '*expand their sense of what violence is*' (Manager 1), often cutting the wheel into segments and inviting young women to piece it back together while they discussed the different elements. Expert knowledge of the dynamics of sexual exploitation was singled out by one young woman as the reason she had stayed engaged with her keyworker.

She knows a lot about sexual exploitation, I've never met anyone that knows as much as she does. It's not as easy as saying stop talking to someone or stop going somewhere and she gets that (Young woman, 21).

Analysis of the focus groups with young women in custody shows that challenging the normalisation of violence against women was also a core theme of the groupwork programme. For some young women, this led to a rejection of previously accepted practices. One example was of partners checking mobile phones to track activity, which would have been considered '*normal*', but was now recognised as a controlling behaviour that young women would '*refuse*' and '*recognise as a warning sign*'.

Some young women spoke of finding the groupwork programme tough because it led to them reflecting on experiences of violence that they now saw through a new lens. As one young woman in prison said '*I thought a bad relationship was normal*'.

[What has changed] is how I see everything, how women and men are seen in relationships, what I accept. Women are seen as staying at home, back in the day, men go out to work, are in control of the relationships, make the money... Back in the day men could hit women, it wasn't an issue to give her a slap, that was acceptable and a lot of men still have that (Young woman, FG5).

Another young woman described the programme as an '*eye opener*', because of a change in her perception of sexual consent.

I understand things differently. Like, if a person doesn't say anything and you're in a relationship, that's still rape. I didn't know that before (Young woman, FG6).

Unpicking young women's beliefs about sexual consent and pressures to comply with expectations to be sexually available was a key element of group discussions.

A lot of them were saying why does she have sex with him? We ask them, do you feel like she had power to say no? Do you feel like she had the choice? It's always a good discussion. It makes them talk

about what things young women can go through, they give examples of people they know who've been in that situation (Project Worker 2).

Some young women recognised abusive and controlling behaviours as 'normal', but nevertheless named it as violence, and perceived they were responsible: *'I would blame myself, I was running my mouth, I deserved it'*. This self-blame reduced through the programme because men's responsibility for their violence became visible. For some young women, abusive and non-consensual practices were named for the first time, which may enable long lasting change.

IMPROVED WELL-BEING AND LESS ISOLATION

Data from case management/monitoring and feedback from focus groups can be used to draw conclusions about how Safe Choices led to improved well-being and reduced young women's isolation.

In 2014, Safe Choices introduced 'My Wheel', a version of the popular outcomes wheel. This is a visual tool for young women to represent how they perceive aspects of their life, using a score of 1-5. There are nine domains on the TCS wheel: safety; hopes and dreams; 'having my say'; where I live; education, employment and skills; family/carer; friends; physical health; mental and emotional health. Data for 'My Wheel' is available for 43 of the young women. Of these, 21 report an increased score, 21 a reduced score, and one with no change. There is no breakdown of the domains in which change occurred.

A project manager also commented on the limitations of the wheel, since the process of unpicking experiences of violence and abuse with young women, particularly where grooming has been involved, may lead to young women feeling less safe, less positive about their friends/family and health than when they first engaged with the project. As one project worker observed

Young women's emotional wellbeing [might be] further at risk when they understand they're being abused and also at risk as they challenge perpetrators and they sense losing control. Professionals don't understand that young women's vulnerability increases (Project worker 4).

A total 68 young women were recorded as having 'action plans' which detailed the content of individual support; the 43 for whom My Wheel scores were available, plus a further 25. Action plans were co-produced with young women to identify needs and strengths, and linked to the My Wheel domains. There was an average of nine actions per young woman, with the largest focus on 'safety' (n=170, followed by mental and emotional health (n=88), then education, employment and skills (n=76). While follow up information on the achievement of the actions is not available, data on the development of action plans shows the areas where support work was focussed.

Several young women in focus groups described feeling more in control of their emotional responses as a result of the groupwork programme.

I think this group has made me calm down. I used to get upset at little things. Now I am trying to communicate with people, trying to find out why, rather than have a fight (Young woman, FG6).

As an expression of self-development and improved wellbeing, being able to regulate emotional responses is significant. That the programme addressed anger from an analysis of gendered inequalities said to young women that anger is a reasonable, justified, emotional response to abuse, injustice, feeling under threat. The programme therefore rejected the idea that the young women are social problems, angry and unmanageable service users, offenders, sexualised commodities for men's pleasure, and in doing so enabled the women to see themselves as more than this.

Reducing young women's isolation drew on a combination of practical and emotional support. This included identifying new activities and hobbies, e.g. sport, where young women might make friendships. Enabling young women to form connections with each other was also a key goal, especially where they had become used to rivalry between each other for men's attention/affection.

There is a lot more empowerment, being sisterly to each other in the groups, even when they have ex partners in common from rival gangs, appreciating they have more in common can make relationships with each other. The expectations of other women are so extreme they're so quick to judge each other and now I see them being supportive to each other... having that time to talk things through and get things off their chest. It might be they've had shared space to share experience, similar experiences (Project worker 1).

Similarly, young women reported that the sharing of stories and different perspectives was one of the most valuable elements of the groupwork programme.

The best thing of all was hearing the views and experiences of others (Young woman, FG1).

What appeared to be critical in achieving change for the young women was that through accepting others, and being accepted by them in turn, they began to accept themselves.

I've changed. I used to be really judgmental, now I realise everyone's got their walk and you don't know their walk unless you talk to them (Young woman, FG6).

In deciding not to judge others, there is an opportunity for young women to be kinder to themselves. After all, if other women cannot be blamed for the violence they have been subjected to, neither can she. The programme explicitly enabled this: in one exercise, the group together devised a character, which offered workers a way to 'hold up a mirror' to young women's views on the character's actions, and so gently reframe how women are blamed for violence committed against them.

CHALLENGING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The most demanding and complex aspect of Safe Choices work was almost universally identified by workers as challenging professional attitudes to young women. Poor professional understanding of sexual exploitation and decision-making is a consistent theme in both research and reviews of practice in recent high profile cases, including labelling of young women as 'promiscuous' and 'risk-taking'.⁴² Jenny Pearce has conceptualised this as 'condoned consent', a professional discourse that fails to recognise how young women are manipulated and coerced.⁴³ Young people's perceptions of consent are often tied to gendered expectations of how women and men should behave⁴⁴; while the understanding of adults has not been explored to the same extent, research with practitioners indicates that attribution of consent is more likely in scenarios involving sexual exploitation than in other dynamics and situations.⁴⁵

All project workers and manager could recount examples of negative professional judgements about young women, on referral forms, verbal comments, in meetings and/or while delivering training. Some of these were a lack of understanding of the dynamics of sexual exploitation and victim-blame, and often tied to notions that women should protect themselves from violence.

[Professionals] seem to look at them as just equal relationships, they seem to see things in terms of the young women making choices and just making bad choices and not actually seeing the sense of control of abuse or control or power that's being abused... I've seen other professionals around the young people saying well, they just keep putting themselves at risk or they just keep doing this and it's very much their perception is that the young woman is very much in control of this or somehow bringing it on herself... I saw one referral form where the young woman was described as 'getting back in the game'... they're not seeing any exploitation there, they're not seeing concerns that was a 17 year old... It's a lot easier for professionals to just go, well they're making these choices, they're the ones actually putting themselves at risk, rather than actually identifying what we need to be doing to protect them... You challenge the victim blame language, you challenge the fact they're not registering it's an abusive and controlling relationship... (Project worker 4).

⁴² See notes 4 and 5.

⁴³ Pearce, J. (2013) A Social Model of 'Abused Consent' in Melrose, M. and Pearce, J. (eds.) *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking* London: Palgrave Macmillan

⁴⁴ Coy, M., Kelly, L., Elvines, F., Garner, M. & Kanyeredzi, A. (2013) *Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape: how young people in England understand sexual consent* London: Office of the Children's Commissioner

⁴⁵ Reisel, A. (2016) Practitioners' perceptions and decision' making regarding child sexual exploitation: a qualitative vignette study *Child & Family Social Work* 22(3) 1292–1301

In this framing, abusive men's actions become invisible, all the scrutiny is on young women, and workers face the task of unpicking judgments that are deeply rooted in gendered expectations.

We're saying to agencies that it's not about the young woman, it's someone doing this to her (Project manager).

Awareness of sexual exploitation has increased significantly as the issue has gained in traction at national and local levels. Nevertheless, workers remained concerned about the depth of understanding about the dynamics of coercion and control, especially the dangers young women faced when

Professionals don't understand that young women's emotional wellbeing will be further at risk when they understand they're being abused and also at risk as they challenge perpetrators and they sense losing control. Professionals don't understand that young women's vulnerability increases (Project worker 6).

Workers also encountered 'blatant sexism'. One worker described hearing a prison officer 'joking' to young women that '*some girls lay on their backs for any man*' during a discussion with young women about rape and victim-blame, and heard racist comments to minority young women. She challenged and reported this at the time, but left the custody setting feeling that she was '*leaving young women with people who are basically violent to them*'.

Maintaining constructive relationships with agencies was juggled with questioning language and the concepts that sat underneath the words. This challenging of poor and discriminatory practice was described as 'exhausting', and added to the emotional labour of delivering the project.

SUPPORT FOR WORKERS

The emotional toll of work on sexual exploitation is high, and often unacknowledged.⁴⁶ A range of support was introduced for Safe Choices workers, including group clinical supervision. One worker reported that '*you can't put a price on that*', while another suggested it could have been more frequent and individual rather than group. Time for reflection and discussion with each other was highly valued: '*a happy and supportive team*' was attributed to strong and skilled leadership.

A recommendation from an interim report to create scheduled time for workers in the two organisations to spend together sharing anxieties and insights was implemented, but was often difficult to sustain amid intensive caseloads.

Participation in the evaluation itself was also highlighted by workers as a positive opportunity for reflection on their practice.

⁴⁶ 40 See e.g. Myers, J. & Carmi, C. (2016) *The Brooke Serious Case Review into Child Sexual Exploitation* Bristol LSCB.

It's been helpful, really helpful to reflect not just on it, but really realise what you've accomplished (Project worker 1).

Two workers noted their personal growth as a result of delivering the project, especially ability to make constructive challenges to attitudes with which they disagreed.

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Despite many challenges, Safe Choices delivered support and advocacy which was highly valued by young women who would otherwise be no-one's priority, because of their age and multiple needs. The project filled a gap in provision for young women over the age of 18 and for young women in custody, especially since current understandings of sexual exploitation apply only to those under 18. That a significant proportion of young women were from minority communities underscores the need for projects to be rooted in an intersectional analysis that addresses race/ethnicity.

Evaluating the impact of the project is fraught with difficulties, not least because it is impossible to know the extent to which young women were able to realise the new understandings in the future. Changes in assessment tools and inconsistent data recording over the life of the project also limit the possibility of analysing change and measuring outcomes. As noted, partly this is about how the project data capture evolved over time, but it also reflects a more fundamental challenge about how to measure intervention impacts, particularly those that refer to women's sense of self. There are, however, several conclusions that can be drawn from the available data.

- Targets for numbers of young women became unrealistic because of the intensity of specialist support, gaps in staffing and the context of diminished wraparound services that young women could be linked into.
- Investment in ways to measure outcomes and capture impact of the work was introduced during the project, along with new outcomes tools and a case tracking system. For future evaluations, a useful step would be resources for data collection that takes the pressure off practitioners with heavy caseloads.
- Young women valued the skills of project workers for creating spaces where they felt comfortable, able to safely dig into their experiences, and challenged to develop new understandings.
- For young with backgrounds of instability and emotional insecurity, these relationships may be the first evidence that they are worthy of love and respect.
- Some young women that engaged in groupwork reported developing greater control over their emotions, and understanding anger as a justified response to being let down and abused.
- What young women would have changed about Safe Choices was more contact with workers, seeing them more often and longer groupwork programmes. This is

testimony to how these young women valued the project and its relational focus: they wanted more, for longer.

- The gender-informed approach was experienced by young women as a revelation. This was the element of the project that 'stuck', including for the two young women who were uneasy with a feminist analysis. Most, however, welcomed the space to link their experiences with wider social inequalities between women and men.
- For some young women, abusive and non-consensual practices were named for the first time, which may radiate long lasting change.

There is an important limitation to the project's transformative capacity: it is contexts of inequality that make exploitation and violence possible, and the choices of perpetrators, not young women's actions. One worker expressed this as *'our successes stop because we can't pass her into a better world'*, a reality of which many young women were aware. Young women's experiences and opportunities are limited by the choices of abusers and perpetrators. Nevertheless, enabling young women to recognise that they deserve and have a right to live without exploitation and violence is a significant outcome of the Safe Choices project.