



Commission on Young Lives Call For Evidence: Violence And Exploitation of Girls and Young Women, Including Around Criminal Gangs. Written Evidence By AFRUCA Safeguarding Children

About AFRUCA

1. AFRUCA – Safeguarding Children¹ is a national charity founded in May 2001 to promote the well-being and protection of children in Black and Ethnic communities across the UK. With offices in London and Manchester, we provide prevention and early intervention services, working with children, families and communities. We provide prevention programmes, working with communities and practitioners in different fields to improve skills and enable better intervention in families. In the past one year, our child protection service has provided direct one to one support to over 100 families including vulnerable, at risk children while providing basic online child protection training to over 5000 individuals. We also offer services to support families where children are at risk of county lines, as well as a Youth Violence project to support young people at risk of involvement in the Criminal Justice System.
2. In March 2023, we launched a new project to help tackle the exploitation of young women and girls in Manchester called the Phoenix project. This new project will support 25 young women and girls at risk of gang violence, exploitation and grooming each year, providing one to one support, mentoring and group activities for service users.
3. We submit this evidence to share learning from our work at AFRUCA. We hope our evidence would provide insight into the issue of vulnerability of young women and girls and how this can be addressed.

Our Evidence

1) What leads to vulnerability and crisis for girls and young women, including around criminal gangs and why aren't services as effective as they need them to be?

Our work with young people at AFRUCA as part of our Phoenix project and our other youth and county lines projects across Manchester confirms that some of the factors that lead to vulnerabilities and crisis in young women, especially in relation to gang violence include risk factors in the individual's background. These risk factors include poverty, deprivation and

¹ <https://afruca.org/>

financial inequalities, especially No Recourse To Public Funds, which creates massive vulnerabilities for young women and girls and push them into extra familial harm. Additionally, cultural, religious and patriarchal social influences devalue female roles, lead to a violation of the rights of young women and girls and exacerbate their vulnerabilities to different forms of harmful practices and abuses, including sexual abuse². Young women and girls' experiences of discrimination and repression are based on their gender with age often discounted as a factor. Hence, there are a plethora of cultural and religious practices in the UK which are abusive towards girls or minimize the abuse, violence or harm towards girls.

Additionally, delays in diagnosis of Special Educational Needs (SEND) and Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) diagnosis can result in added vulnerabilities. For example in our services we have seen young women who have been at risk of or been victims of child trafficking as part of county lines, as they had been targeted and groomed by traffickers specifically because of their neuro-diversity.

Many young people live in chaotic home environments. Exposure to violence within the home and being unsafe and marginalized in their neighbourhoods combined with low socio-economic status can push young people into harm's way outside the home. Our experience shows that the specific risks between males and females vary, as young women and girls are more likely to be coerced into gang involvement through peer pressure compared to their male counterparts. Young women who suffer from poor domestic abuse by witnessing or experiencing it themselves, or who have poor quality family attachments are also more likely to deviate and be induced into gang affiliations, CCE and CSE. Young women and girls will be more drawn towards gang affiliation if the things they are seeking in the home, such as love, healthy relationships, bond with parents, carers and/or siblings are not provided.

Our work at AFRUCA demonstrates that services to address these issues are inadequate or remain ineffective. This is because in many cases, young women are unfortunately adultified or sometimes even victim blamed as opposed to offering mentoring or support. There is no hiding or disputing that girls have been treated very differently compared to their male counterparts. Our work shows that this has had and continues to have an effect on how service responses are shaped, especially in relation to young women and girls from Black, Asian and other communities. In many non-white communities, the gender expectations of women and girls include being useful, pleasing and compliant, which can become a barrier for young women who would like to disclose issues surrounding violence and gang affiliations. The young women and girls who do not conform to societal gender expectations, are often most likely at risk of entering the criminal justice system or care system. Our experience shows that these categories of young women and girls are usually dealt with more harshly by their families, communities – even services, as they are seen as 'deviants' of womanhood, promiscuous or "asking for it". This creates further barriers and prevents young women to access safe spaces due to these gender based expectations often pushed by professionals, as well as family members, communities and peers. Until services and professionals can let go of gender expectations and remember the notions of childhood innocence and vulnerabilities of our young women and girls, services will continue to struggle and remain ineffective when attempting to support them.

² AFRUCA Safeguarding Children: Exploring The Sexual Abuse of UK Black Children Within and Outside The Home Before and During Covid 19. August 2020. <https://afruca.org/briefing2>. Accessed on 20 April 2023

2) What data is available of the prevalence and nature of violence and exploitation of girls and young women including in and around gangs?

Data for young women and girls at risk of CCE/CSE, Serious Youth Violence and gang-involvement remain low. There are many factors responsible for this. First, since the Rotherham grooming gangs were convicted, there seems to be a dangerous idea promoted that only young women and girls of White British descent are at risk of CSE. We believe this has been a barrier to young women from the Black, Asian and other ethnic background reporting any CCE/CSE, SYV and Gang-involvement cases. Data is also low, as we are of the view young women and girls are not taken seriously by services, based on the narrative that women and girls are less likely to attract police action. This often leads to young women and girls who are involved in CCE/CSE, Serious Youth Violence and gang involvement being doubly traumatised. This has a negative impact on their mental health, leading to complications further down the line. This also causes a sense of invisibility. The fear of not being believed, or the culture of disbelief results in under-reporting and is another factor preventing data being collated. Many a times, young women and girls have been interrogated about their traumatic experiences without appropriate support, a minimization of their experiences or subtle threats by interrogators. This can contribute to more mental health complications for young women, and can lead them into withdrawing reports made of traumatic experiences. Professionals often find it hard to spot when young women and girls are at risk of any CCE/CSE, SYV and gang affiliation. We have noted from our work that even if a young woman or girl is missing from home, some professionals will not refer these young girls to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) irrespective of whether the indicators of exploitation are present or not. Instead, they are referred to as 'truants' or 'runaways'. Due to a reduced number of young women and girls being referred into the NRM, again, it is no surprise there is hardly any data available. There are many barriers which can lead to hindrances in reporting. This means the necessary data is not collated to enable services tailor the right help to young women and girls at risk.

3) What data is available of the prevalence and nature of violence and exploitation of girls and young women including in and around gangs?

Our view at AFRUCA is that the same serious approach we take when identifying the signs of exploitation in young boys and men, is the same signs we should look out for in young women and girls. For example, when a young man goes missing from home, county lines is the first thought process likely to run through a professional's mind. Hence, many young men and boys are identified and placed on the National Referral Mechanism. If a young boy or man begins to act out, those who are trauma informed might believe this is a trauma response of some kind and they may need to be placed on a CAMHS waiting list for referral. This is because the symptoms displayed might be classified as those of neurodivergence. However, with young women and girls, in our experience, the case is often different. As mentioned, the moment a young woman or girl has gone missing, a professional's thought process may be that they have gone to stay with friends or they have gone gallivanting with their boyfriends. There is no identification of exploitation or grooming and certainly no referral to the National Referral Mechanism, or any assumption that this young female may be vulnerable. If a young woman begins to act in a certain way, or presents certain behaviors, there is no thought process that this young woman or girl may need a diagnosis as she may be neurodivergent or that the outburst may be a trauma response. It is often believed that the young woman or girl is attention seeking or it is because she is spoiled and wants to have her own way.

4) How can girls and young women at risk be supported to prevent violence, exploitation and crisis and to support them to succeed?

We believe it is crucial for parents to have very early intervention and support so they can protect their children. Child protection awareness is crucial for all parents because many do not understand how their children are or could be at risk of harm – in the home and externally. Hence, we spend a lot of time and energy at AFRUCA to deliver different forms of child protection sessions, online, face to face, for communities, faith groups, international students etc. We believe the more parents are aware of how their culture and religion can negatively impact on children (at least according to UK law), they would be able to make changes in a positive way. Crucial is for parents to understand extra familial harm. We note that many newly arrived parents might not understand such risks exists for children – this is after all the UK. Hence, they might not understand that the kind uncle down the road who buys take-away for the children is actually grooming them in order to exploit them. As part of our support service for parents of children at risk of county lines, we work with parents to understand these risks and how to better protect children, hence we run coffee mornings where such issues are discussed. Parents share their experiences of county lines, or gangs and they now have the knowledge to support their children to address this.

Another way in which young women and girls who are at risk can be supported, is by professionals being culturally sensitive. Cultural sensitivity by professionals is critical, because those who are from marginalized backgrounds will have a safe space to disclose incidents of CCE/CSE, SYV, and Gang-involvement without the fear of being judged or not believed. Further training and funding for the police and professionals to improve their skills around not adultifying, not victim blaming nor harshly interrogating young women and girls is needed because signs for young women are almost similar to those of their male counterparts. However, the seriousness with which cases of young men are dealt with should also apply to young women. Young women and girls should receive the right level of tailored support and protection as is afforded young men.

5) Who should be protecting vulnerable girls and young women from exploitation and violence?

Our view at AFRUCA is that everyone has a duty of care to ensure that vulnerable young women and girls are protected and kept safe. This is down from family members, to schools, faith groups, communities, agencies, including the police. Multi-agency co-operation is crucial because such joint-working is necessary to provide each young person with a comprehensive safety and protection plan to ensure they are kept safe. Involving family members in these discussions will allow them to have a voice and also understand how to keep their children safe and tackle certain situations when they arise. Everyone has a duty of care towards girls to protect them from exploitation and violence. Professionals must access the right training to build their knowledge and capacity to become culturally competent and culturally sensitive and work to help break down the barriers for young women and girls in marginalised communities.

6. What do girls and young women at risk need and how can this be delivered at scale?

We need to ensure that young women and girls who are at risk of CSE/CCE, SYV and gang involvement are able to receive individual tailored support. This should include support around confidence building, health relationships and self-esteem building. At AFRUCA, we

launched the “Phoenix Project” in March 2023 to provide both one-to-one and group support for young women and girls at risk of violence and exploitation outside the home. The individual work involves a 10 week training programme taking children through a series of subjects ranging from identity, to understanding grooming and gang indoctrination, building self-esteem, navigating health relationships to self-protection. The group sessions involves creating a safe space for the young people to share experiences and do “fun” things including trips, a Saturday forum once a month and so on. Activities like this can be replicated and scale up across the country.

We also believe those working with young women and girls should have a strong understanding and cultural competence to address many of the issues raised above. We are organising a conference on Adultification of the Girl Child on 27 April in Manchester We plan to follow up with a series of training courses to support professionals – the police, schools, PRUs, youth justice and others to understand how their conscious and unconscious biases, racism and adultification can affect their treatment of young women and girls and hence fail to meet their needs.

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