

Making Camden safer for Young Women and Girls

Perspectives of young women and girls from Camden, in relation to personal safety and sexual violence – Camden SNB/STCA youth team.

Camden Safer Neighbourhood Board
November 2022

“ The song reminded me of what my mum went through. She was getting hit by my dad a lot of times. It was very scary but you kind of got used to it ”

“ Police and schools don't take the issues seriously ”

“ Boys need to be taught how to respect women. They are being taught all the time the opposite ”

1 Introduction

Camden Safer Neighbourhood Board is one of 32 safer neighbourhood boards across London that are funded by the Mayor of London to support and contribute to his consultation and accountability structures regarding policing. This work in the past has predominantly focused on regular public consultation events and engagement with the Metropolitan Police and Camden Council through the borough's Community Safety Partnership.

During the pandemic the SNB's engagement work through its events were halted. So for our 2021/22 contract with the Mayor's Office for Police and Crime we focused on delivering three small pieces of Action Research with local community organisations as partners. The three themes were:

- **Girls and women's safety – the perspectives of young women**
- **Islamophobic hate crime – views from users of Somali community organisation**
- **Young people's perspectives on making Camden safer and relations with the police**

This report focuses on young girl's views on women's safety that were shared through a series of focus groups conducted by Somers Town Community Association Youth Team over a six week period in summer, 2022.

2 Context

On 3 March 2021 Sarah Everard was murdered by serving Metropolitan Police Officer Wayne Couzens. This tragedy is now a seminal case. It has been at the centre of a number of recent incidents which have highlighted how deeply ingrained sexual violence and misogyny are in British life and its institutions (1).

The respected campaigning organisation End Violence Against Women (EVAW) in their snapshot report for 2021/22 reflect back on a momentous year (2). They conclude it was a year when a huge and long overdue national conversation took place in the UK around sexual violence and attitudes towards women and girls. Following a succession of horrid murders and institutional failures that have compounded the hurt of grieving families, left women more vulnerable and failed to address the long standing challenges in this area:

- **The murder of Bibba Henry and Nicole Smallman and subsequent actions of Met Police Officers in the aftermath of the tragedy (3)**
- **The murder of Sabina Nessa (4)**
- **The outcry following the Everyone's Invited website highlighted systemic problems in both state and private schools in failing to tackle accusations of sexual violence. While appearing in some instances to turn a blind eye to sexual violence (5)**
- **The case of Child Q. A 15 year old girl strip searched at school by Met police officers facilitated by school teachers (6)**

The above are of course the headline cases over the past 2 years. But beneath these are the trends which encapsulate many more personal tragedies and trauma. The EVAW report effectively summarises the developments.

- **Femicide** – 141 women were murdered by men in 2021. An increase on the previous two years.
- **Domestic Homicide during the pandemic** – The largest proportion of Domestic Homicide deaths were committed by intimate partners (49%), with 85% of the victims being women. The majority of perpetrators are men (80%) so this is a crime in the majority of cases committed by men on women. Majority of victims are white (76%) but the 24% figure of victims from Black and Minority Ethnic groups highlights the huge disproportionality affecting those communities and is an indicator for the need for more targeted preventative work with these communities.
- **Domestic Abuse** – The number of police recorded domestic abuse-crimes in England and Wales in the year ending March 2021, was 845,734.8, a 6% increase on the previous year. However police referrals to the Crown Prosecution Service for a charging decision have decreased by 3% to 77,812. And for the third successive year, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) charging rate for domestic abuse-related crimes in England and Wales decreased to 70% in the year ending March 2021,9 down from 76% in the year ending March 2018.10. The actual volume of prosecutions has decreased for the fifth time in a row, to just 54,515.1.

- **Sexual Violence** – The EAW report makes for hugely disappointing reading with regards to the countries poor record in relation to reducing and prosecuting acts of sexual violence. Figures for the 12-month period ending in September 2021 show that sexual offences recorded by the police were the highest on record, at 170,973 offences. This is a 12% increase from the same period in 2020. Rape accounted for 37% of these offences – 63,136. – During the same period, Home Office data shows the downwards trends in outcomes for police reports continuing – with just 2.9% of reported sexual offences and 1.3% of recorded rapes resulting in a charge or summons. This has fallen from the previous 12-month period to September 2020, in which charges or summonses were brought in 3.6% of sexual offences and 1.5% of rapes. The EAW report also details the compounding impact of race, sexuality and regional variances in the experiences of women. As the report states:

The data also shows 41% of rape victims and survivors are ‘withdrawing their support for action’ during the criminal justice process. This illustrates that there are many barriers obstructing victims and survivors’ access to justice and a system that is stacked against and failing them.

FOI data has found that charge rates for white rape victims and survivors was 6.7%, for Black victims and survivors the charge rate was 5.5%, for mixed race victims 4.5% and for Asian victims 3.7%. This means that cases with white victims and survivors are 1.2 times more likely than those with Black victims and survivors to result in a charge, and 1.8 times more likely than when victims are Asian (6.7% vs. 3.7%).

- **Police Abuse** – The EAW report highlights abuse of women amongst police ranks and an institutional failure to address it as possibly being part of the problem as to why the Police are performing so badly in this area: At least 15 serving or former police officers have killed women since 2009; More than 750 Met police employees have faced sexual misconduct allegations since 2010, yet only 83 were sacked; Undercover police officers deceived protesters they were spying on into sexual relationships, with the knowledge of senior officers; One woman a week reports domestic abuse by a police officer; A super-complaint highlighted systemic failures to hold such officers accountable; Nearly 2,000 officers faced accusations of sexual wrongdoing since 2017. Over 60% did not result in disciplinary action. Just 8% were dismissed. Nearly 300 officers had previously been reported for misconduct.
- **Sexual Abuse in schools** – The Everyone’s Invited website has highlighted more than 50000 testimonials from school girls citing their experience of sexual abuse in schools. EAW stated that they had been raising concerns about systemic sexual abuse in schools and institutional failures to address it for many years with little acknowledgement and no follow up action.

The EAW Coalition’s report sets a sobering context with regards to efforts to address Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). Much of the context appears to be systemic and institutionalised such as the low prosecution and conviction rates for rape. According to EAW the response from Government has been focused largely on safety in the public realm and increased CCTV, improvements in lighting and more visible policing. They suggest a broader approach is needed with a focus on prevention and addressing misogyny. They also state that current developments are marginalising black minority ethnic and other women disproportionately affected by VAWG and served less well by government bodies.

3 The Focus Groups – Approach, Structure and Participants

Somers Town Community Association’s Youth Team held 4 focus groups involving young women and girls in the Somers Town area over the months of August and September 2022. They spoke to 26 young women aged between, 12 and 17.

The questions set

The session opened with the song ‘Lesley’ by the musician Dave which was used to introduce the subject. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkLXli7Kbs8>

The participants were then taken through the following questions.

- 1 Does the subject/lyrics of this song resonate with you personally or somebody close to you?
- 2 How widespread do you think sexual violence is in our society?
- 3 Do you think the outcry after the murder of Sarah Everard will result in real change? If not why not?
- 4 What do you think politicians and leaders in public authorities in Camden should be doing to address violence against women and girls?
- 5 Have you or somebody close to you ever reported an act of sexual violence to the authorities (schools, police etc)? What was the experience like?
- 6 Is there a role for educating boys and men? If yes how do we do this?

Getting the woman and girls to open up and discuss the issues freely was a challenge. The participants were inhibited in engaging fully in the discussion. This may have down to a lack of confidence, the very personal nature of the issues being discussed and that the relationships with the facilitators were relatively new.

Feedback and issues from discussions

The song provided a good opener to the session as the story clearly resonated with the young women. All the participants stated they knew of somebody close to them whose own experiences had parallels with the song. One participant spoke candidly about domestic violence her mother had experienced.

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There was a strong sense that sexual violence was not something that was out of the ordinary. There was an overwhelming feeling that this was an issue women and girls just had to deal with. There was a sense of resignation throughout the discussions.

There was unanimity that sexual violence is widespread across society and normalised. The participants spoke of the links between verbal abuse escalating to threats and potential violence. They also spoke of the everyday use of language and stereotyping that added to a situation where women/girls through ‘banter’ can be the subject of joke amongst groups of men/boys.

The depiction of women in the media was mentioned as a negative factor. Most did not feel confident to report any incident to a police officer or teacher.

When asked if they thought the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving Metropolitan Police Officer would lead to real change. The response was overwhelmingly disillusioned and apathetic. There was a lack of belief that institutions, professionals and politicians could make a difference and actually cared.

There was also a sense that girls from poorer backgrounds and minority groups receive less support and care. They didn't see any evidence that this would or could change.

With regards to question 4 they want leaders to put in place more trustworthy police officers, teachers and youth workers. They called for more CCTV around the neighbourhood, in order to stop women getting hurt even in houses. More community based wardens and police officers.

Boys should be educated from a young age about consent in sexual relations and their responsibility to challenge group behaviour. Quite often negative group behaviour develops because bad behaviour is not challenged.

'Boys need to learn what consent means and the consequences if you don't. Families struggle with this for lots of reasons. It should be happening in schools'

On question 5 only one participant spoke about their own experiences with their parent's relationship. The participants may have had personal experiences but were not inclined to disclose.

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There was a unanimous feeling that educating boys should be a priority. There was a lot of focus on individual men who hurt women. This was thought to be important. But there was not any focus on wider attitudes to women and girls that affect all men and women.

'Boys need to be taught how to respect women. They are being taught all the time the opposite'

They felt educating boys could be done through programmes in schools delivered by people from outside with real experience. There needed to be changes across society in the media and elsewhere about how women are depicted.

4 Conclusions

The case of Child Q in Hackney and the admission by the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police that his force failed the victims of Rochdale Child abuse/grooming scandal (7) have added to the need for public authorities to address the multi-faceted challenges of addressing violence against women and girls. Both cases have a common thread in that they demonstrate the need for public bodies to listen and genuinely engage and believe young people, and recognise the intersectional exposure that can compound negative and sometimes devastating experiences involving public institutions. They must also acknowledge that racism, sexism and the stereotyping do play a major role in how different groups are treated by professionals and institutions.

Placing the voice of those most marginalised and affected is therefore critical as is building trust and confidence in our institutions which for many has been shattered. The feedback from these focus groups was not surprising. They demonstrate the need to do more work with girls and young women from poorer and minority ethnic groups across the borough.

The response from Camden Council and the Met has in some way begun to address the issues raised from the focus groups about safety in public spaces. With regards to a deeper and long term response such as that advocated by EVAW and articulated from the focus groups around prevention, educating boys and men, increasing trust in institutions, challenging the perpetuation of misogyny in wider society there is a lack of evidence of any emergent change.

Much, more work needs to be done. Particularly to generate a sense amongst young women and girls from communities/socio economic backgrounds that may make them more susceptible to be impacted by sexual harassment/violence, that things can change. The sense from these focus groups from the participants is that nothing can and will change was the most, stark and sobering outcome.

This is not to blame the participants. This is their reality and the facts back them up. All the evidence as set out in the context section of this report catalogues a litany of institutional and political failures with little evidence of any trends in a positive direction.

Camden has a foundation to really make headway on this most challenging and entrenched issue. Ensuring young people and particularly those from the most marginalised of groups are central to this response is crucial.

5 Recommendations

We have five practical recommendations for local public bodies to consider

- 1** Camden Council should seek to develop/deliver further research/consultation with young people on the subject area to inform its plans moving forward. It should place the empowerment of young women and making their voices heard in this area a priority. With an onus on those girls and young women from the most marginalised and affected groups who care too often the ones who don't have a voice. This should include a survey preferably across all Camden schools and regular focus groups that can track attitudes and confidence.
- 2** Camden's Youth Service should assess available Peer led programmes that aim to educate young men with regards to relationships, sexual conduct, attitudes to women and challenging inappropriate behaviour amongst their peers. The aim should be to deliver selected programmes to young people in schools, youth clubs, colleges and in community settings with rigorous evaluation.
- 3** Trust and confidence in our institutions in this area amongst girls and young women is low and impacts on reporting of incidents. There is therefore a need for a structure of third party reporting for girls and young women to report incidents of sexual harassment/ violence confidentially that does not involve schools and the Police. Such mechanisms could be developed amongst trusted community organisations.
- 4** The Council has recently organised a series of 'walkabouts' open to local women to gather views to improve women's safety in public spaces. Schools and the council could look at delivering a similar initiative with local schools. This would be more challenging to arrange but should be attempted with young people at the heart of organising them.
- 5** Senior leaders at the Met, Council and Schools need to be seen to be giving greater focus and urgency on this agenda and delivering actions that are making visible change. There needs to be a focus on empowering young women and girls through these processes. Viewing them as essential contributors and frankly owners of the process, rather than end consumers.

6 References

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 - 3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murders_of_Bibaa_Henry_and_Nicole_Smallman
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 - 7 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/apr/12/gmp-police-chief-apologises-rochdale-grooming-gang-victims>
- 'Lesley' by Dave**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkLXli7Kbs8>