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Exploring the impact of gender-sensitive approaches to youth offending

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About the Author

Carlene Firmin MBE is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bedfordshire, where she leads their work on peer-on-peer abuse and exploitation and heads the work of the MsUnderstood partnership (MSU). MSU is currently supporting 11 local multi-agency partnerships to build their responses to abuse between young people, sharing the findings of this work with Pan-London and national decision-makers. Carlene also acts as a consultant to local authorities, national bodies and voluntary sector organisations developing responses to adolescent safeguarding auditing cases, producing strategic documents and protocols, and advising on the commissioning of services. She is increasingly developing her thinking about the influence that public-space environments have on the safety of young people, developing problem-solving approaches that recognise these issues as child protection concerns.

Prior to this Carlene was the Principal Policy Advisor to the Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups for two years, Assistant Director of Policy and Research at the children's charity Barnardo's, and for five years researched the impact of criminal gangs on women and girls, at the charity Race on the Agenda.

Carlene has been a columnist for Society Guardian for the past four years, and has had a number of papers published in academic books and journals. She is a trustee of the Prison Reform Trust and in 2010 founded 'The Girls against Gangs Project' to train young women to influence policy on serious youth violence.

Carlene was featured in Glamour Magazine's 35 most powerful women under 35 in 2011, the Black Powerlist 2014, received a London Peace Award in 2008, and in 2011 was awarded an MBE for services to Women and Girls' Issues.

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Introduction

'People want to be seen as like the alpha male, like the rude boy, the bad boy. They'll be scared of him, they want to be the biggest, the best'

'It's a power thing, and also not everyone says anything to them anymore. Like I've seen a boy just punch this girl in the face on a bus and none of his boys have said anything. Or this one boy was coming at me in the chicken shop, going to take off his belt saying he was gonna lash me with it cos I wouldn't give him my number. And that makes girls think they need to be more violent so they can try and stand up to them; or just seem really girly so they look like a pussy for hitting you'

These are just two of the many gendered messages I have heard from young people in the youth justice system over the past ten years. Whether looking at girls who were holding firearms for their partners or boys who were exploiting their peers, it has been clear to me that young people's offending behaviour is informed by gendered expectations and pressures that, in turn, inform their decision making.

Yet such statements are not that surprising. Research tells us that young people are informed by gendered social norms and, at a time where they are still developing, will be exposed to these values in a range of social settings including their schools, families and peer groups (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002; Messerschmidt, 2012; Ringrose & Renold, 2011; Warr, 2002). Despite this knowledge, policy and practice I have engaged with over the course of my career has demonstrated to me that our work with young people who are offending is largely gender-neutral. This has ramifications for both young men and young women and requires attention.

I have encountered these patterns over the course of my career- whether advising the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups, exploring the impact of serious youth violence on women and girls at the charity Race on the Agenda or supporting local authorities to build a response to peer-on-peer abuse at the University of Bedfordshire. In these roles I have engaged with young people in custody, pupil referral units, youth clubs and on the streets, and taken their voices to decision-makers to create policy and practice that is responsive to the age and gender-specific aspects of young people's lives. To date much of this work has been conducted with a primary focus on safeguarding and child protection. However during the same period I have also been alerted to the role of the youth justice system in addressing young people's experiences of violence and abuse – and more specifically the extent to which the practice of this sector is gender-specific.

It was a desire to explore these issues that led me to design this six week Winston Churchill Fellowship – to identify and share gender-sensitive responses to youth offending. At the same time as I have been alerted to the gaps in our own practice, I have been informed of potential solutions in other parts of the world. Before

embarking on my Fellowship I only knew what I had identified on the internet or heard at conferences. I wanted to immerse myself in the practice of others to fully ascertain the extent to which it may be transferable to England's youth justice system.

Having undertaken a six week Fellowship to this end, this report:

- Outlines the policy and practice context in which my Fellowship was undertaken
- Outlines the programme for my Fellowship
- Documents the thematic findings that surfaced across the three countries visited
- Makes recommendations for how my learning can be implemented in England's policy and practice framework over the coming two years

In total this report finds that to create more gender-sensitive responses to youth offending there are a number of principles, and not necessarily projects, that can be taken from other countries and implemented in England. These are principles that are shared across the projects that I visited, and as such there is potential for them to also be realised in youth offending practice in England. Upon reflection the principles that I have identified are not necessarily gendered, but they are principles that create a working environment in which gendered practice can flourish. I was surprised with this conclusion but pleased to have reached it, having learnt, and had my ideas challenged, more than I had anticipated during my Winston Churchill Fellowship.

Policy and Practice Context in England

Over the course of my career I have noticed a gradual shift in England's policy and practice response to young people affected by violence and abuse. When I started researching why young people were carrying weapons back in 2006, for the charity Race on the Agenda, gender specific responses, the impact of harmful attitudes, and young people's experiences of domestic and sexual abuse were noticeable only by their absence in English policy. When young women began reporting, back in 2008, that serious youth violence was having a gendered impact on their lives, netting them in to weapon carrying, drugs holding and sexual exploitation, their experiences were not reflected in central government policy (Firmin, 2008; 2011). However, the previous five years have seen a shift in the recognition of this issue, and since 2010 the Westminster government, led by the Home Office has:

- Launched the 'This is Abuse' campaign to raise awareness of young people's awareness of consent, healthy relationships, and the warning signs of abuse
- Changed the definition of domestic abuse to include 16-17 year olds, in recognition that teenagers, as well as adults, were experiencing abuse in their intimate relationships (Home Office, 2013)
- Recognised the age-specific needs of girls who experience violence and abuse, compared to adults, in their violence against women and girls strategy (HM Government, 2013)
- Included girl-specific resources for youth offending service via the youth justice board
- Become increasingly concerned about the sexual exploitation of young men and young women, including that which is perpetrated by their peers
- Recognised that harmful attitudes towards masculinity, sexuality and relationships underpin both violence against women and girls as well as serious youth, and gang-related, violence (HM Government, 2013)

With an increased recognition of the issues, however, has come a desire to find solutions and a concern that these may be more punitive than preventative. This was most starkly identified with the change in definition of domestic abuse. While this policy move demonstrated that government was acknowledging the issue, it also placed this recognition within a definition that had previously been reserved for adults. By including young people's experiences in this way there was a risk that the operational response to domestic abuse, that had been designed for adults and built under the original definition, would too be extended to young people without due consideration for their age-specific needs.

In addition to concerns about the importance of age-specific responses to young people's experiences of violence and abuse, the youth justice system was continuing to ask questions about the extent to which their interventions were gender-appropriate (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2015). An increased awareness of

young women in street gangs and young men exploiting or abusing their peers brought to sharp relief the need for a youth justice system that could accommodate the gendered connotations of young people's offending (Beckett, et al., 2013).

It was at this juncture, with a need for age-specific responses at one end and gender-specific practice at the other, that this project was developed. It was intended to inform this policy landscape, identifying the core components of gender-specific responses to youth offending (both within and outwith formal justice routes) to address young people's experiences of gender-based violence and abuse. Both the Home Office and Youth Justice Board were engaged at the outset of the planning for the project, and it is envisaged that this report will support the development of a more gendered response to young people's offending behaviour over the course of the current parliament and beyond.

Programme Itinerary

The trip was designed in three parts, conducted over one six-week visit. Each segment focused upon a specific aspect of building gendered responses to youth offending. It was envisaged that the findings of each segment would be brought together in this report to identify roles for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, young people, and wider communities, in responding to young people's involvement in offending both nationally and locally.

Stage 1: *Community-based responses to violence amongst young men and young women in marginalised communities: New Zealand*

This portion of the trip was hosted by an organisation called 'The Project', based in Auckland, New Zealand. The Project works with primarily Tongan and Samoan adults and children impacted by violence and abuse, as well as having strong connections with Maori communities. During my time with them I:

- met workers who delivered interventions with men convicted of domestic abuse offences
- spoke to gang-associated young women and young men, and visited projects developed to support them to exit
- observed street-based interventions with young people
- attended a protest march related to Maori rights
- observed meetings of Maori women discussing violence against women and girls service provision
- met with workers primarily supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and questioning (LGBTQ) young people from minority communities
- spoke to activists, politicians and young people seeking to prevent violence and abuse

This stage enabled me to fully immerse myself within the social and professional practices of marginalised communities in New Zealand, and build a holistic understanding of their responses to violence and abuse. Having the time and space to reflect on the importance of culturally-specific practice highlighted recommendations to me that I had not considered before I visited New Zealand – an oversight on my part given that over 40% of England's current youth custody population is from a black or minority ethnic background (an increasing disproportionality in a shrinking custodial population).

Stage 2: Preventative practices through whole-school approaches and bystander intervention: Australia

This aspect of the trip was more focused on the prevention of offending through the work of mainstream government departments, voluntary sector providers, and

particularly women's organisations in developing policy and practice in Victoria and New South Wales. During my time there I:

- attended a prevention forum meeting, coordinated for my visit, where I met with in excess of 60 professionals working in the state of Victoria across research, the voluntary sector and state departments
- visited projects which had developed bystander initiatives to shift environments in which harmful attitudes persisted
- met with activists who had created materials to address the impact of pornography on young people;
- learnt about whole-school approaches to gender equity being developed in Melbourne schools
- visited children and families state departments in Victoria and New South Wales to share ideas about responses to peer-on-peer abuse
- heard about non-criminal sanctions for young people with harmful sexual behaviour
- met with those researching gender-based violence, consent and sexuality across both states

The structures and language I encountered during this part of my trip were most akin to those already in place in England. It therefore provided the most in terms of easily transferable ideas into my home context, but probably challenged me the least in terms of generating ideas that questioned current practice in England. Nonetheless, it was interesting to see the ways in which progress on prevention had been achieved in a policy climate similar to that of England, and generated some helpful recommendations for developing what we already have in place.

Stage 3: Preventing violence against women by working with adult men in local communities and addressing harmful attitudes amongst young people: Brazil

The final stage of my trip, while also concerned with prevention, was designed to focus particularly on how this could be achieved primarily through work with boys and men. Hosted by the NGO Promundo in Rio I:

- learnt about preventative programmes for working with young men and young women on gender identity and relationships – and importantly how these programmes have been adapted and extended into other countries
- visited projects that worked with adult men convicted of domestic abuse offences
- visited an anti-violence project for young people based in the middle of a favela, and met with the youth-leaders who have attended their programmes
- met with professionals who are evaluating the pacification programmes being delivered within some of the favelas
- spoke to practitioners who are developing community-based sexual exploitation prevention campaigns

- learnt about public awareness-raising campaigns led by men to challenge harmful attitudes towards women and girls

During my time in Rio I was able to identify ways in which safety can be created even in the most violent of environments. Importantly, I was able to consider the role that men, and wider communities, played in creating a sense of safety. While clearly a different cultural and environmental context to England, the achievements of the projects I visited in Rio pointed me towards some core components of effective violence prevention practice that could be adapted and applied elsewhere.

While I took different lessons from each section of my trip, reflecting on what I learnt enabled me to draw these together and excavate some thematic findings to be shared in this report. It is these themes that I have used to build my recommendations which conclude this document, with plans for how I intend to pursue them with key partners over the coming 24 months.

Findings

Over the course of my six week trip, themes emerged across the three countries that I visited which have implications for building a gendered response to youth offending, particularly when that offending is related to violent and abusive behaviours:

1. Identity, belonging and culturally specific practice
2. Community based responses and bystander intervention
3. Creating safe spaces
4. Youth leadership
5. Providing an authorising environment

This chapter outlines these five themes, considering their relevance for policy and practice in England before using them to build recommendations for policymakers and practitioners concerned with youth offending.

Identity, belonging and culturally specific practice

Tongan and Samoan young people anti-violence protest

Perhaps the most stark, yet unexpected, lesson that emerged across all three countries I visited was the importance of supporting young people to develop safe identities in communities to which they feel they belong, as a means of preventing violence. In supporting young people to understand their heritage, and that of their families and friends, practitioners enabled young people to develop an identity that was not informed by violence or a need to have control over others. Having a strong sense of self enabled young men to challenge harmful ideas about masculinity, and supported them to critically assess stereotypes with which they were confronted. Such an approach was important for young people who had already committed offences as well as acting as a preventative mechanism, that offered a framework in which gender-sensitive practice could flourish.

Anti-exploitation football campaign poster

In Rio football is a sport of cultural identity: young people from across classes and communities look up to footballers and hold them

in high esteem. Knowing this, a campaign was launched fronted by footballers to challenge the sexual exploitation of women and girls in advance of the World Cup. It was felt that given the audience the campaign was trying to reach, engaging with culturally influential aspects of local life would be most effective.

Infant on a Maori protest in New Zealand

In New Zealand all of the work that I observed engaged young people in discussions about their cultural identity. Whether it was through engagement in activism (even from the youngest of ages), supporting young people to identify what they wanted from their constitution, or speaking in a range of languages, violence prevention was rooted in an understanding of history. Those young people I spoke with were surprised to hear that such practice was not routine in England, particularly with reference to understanding the process of colonisation and how this linked people from England to others around the world. Maori, Tongan and Samoan young people with whom I met were able to talk in detail about colonisation, how that had influenced the nature of the communities in which they now lived and their heritage. This process contributed to these young people having a strong sense of self and clarity about their relationship with state structures, their families and peers (from a range of backgrounds).

Aboriginal artwork in a violence against women service, Australia

In Australia aboriginal art was displayed in all of the violence against women and girls services that I visited. Anti-violence messages were communicated through this art work, while also providing a sense of connectivity for indigenous women who were accessing services. Practitioners who were working with aboriginal young people also explained how they used

resources that drew upon cultural specific points of reference, including imagery and symbology, to engage young people in anti-violence education.

Work with adults in New Zealand was also situated within culturally specific frameworks. Practitioners working with men who had abused their partners delivered services in a range of languages including Tongan and Samoan. Workers reported that it gave the men who took part in the programme the space to freely express themselves and removed potential barriers to engagement. In addition, workers described approaches which challenged assumptions about, or defences of violence built upon, a misappropriation of culture. When programme participants claimed that men's abuse of women was informed by the 'culture' of their communities or by their faith, workers were able to challenge and correct myths coming from the same communities themselves. Such an approach was also reported by workers in Rio when challenging men and boys who leant upon myths about culture in their communities to justify the abuse or women or girls.

While it may not be obvious, developing safe individual and community identities is critical for preventing violence and other offending behaviours. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that violence against women and girls and violence between young men in the UK is underpinned by harmful attitudes about masculinity (Barter, 2011; Beckett, et al., 2013; Coy, Thiara, & Kelly, 2011; Firmin, 2013). Furthermore, research into gang-related violence in the UK has suggested that street gangs provide young people with a sense of belonging and community (Khan, Brice, Saunders, & Plumtree, 2013; Ralphs, Medina, & Aldridge, 2009). In affording young people a sense of belonging, grounded in their own histories, interventions across the three countries were able to combat the drivers of offending that are linked to gender identity and a desire to belong. Projects demonstrated alternative identities to young people and adults that were safe and healthy in ways that enabled, rather than undermined, a cultural sense of self. Young people were not going against their cultures by being non-violent – instead they were embracing them.

This way of working was underpinned by community engagement - a thematic finding to which this report will now turn.

Community-based responses and bystander interventions

Challenges to myths about culture and identity were embedded through wider community engagement in violence prevention within the three countries visited. In the absence of such practices there was the potential for individual interventions to engage young people in messages that were not being adhered to, or recognised, by the wider communities (including peer groups, schools and families) of which they were a part.

Voluntary sector agencies in Australia had developed and piloted bystander interventions with commissioning bodies. This approach ensured that agencies who were commissioning services and developing policies also adhered to the principles of equality to which they held others to account. VicHealth, a health promotion foundation in Victoria, developed a bystander initiative for the council of the City of Melbourne. The programme trained staff within the council to act as positive bystanders, creating a climate in which sexist attitudes and gender inequality were not permitted. A worker who had been involved in the initiative two years prior to my visit reflected that the training was most effective when the policies and procedures of the council encouraged bystander engagement. Simply training professionals in the absence of any attention to the wider cultural practices of the council limited the extent to which individuals felt able to challenge sexism. The fact that this initiative targeted the council was significant – it set a standard through leadership for others to follow, demonstrating through their own commitment the practice they expected from others.

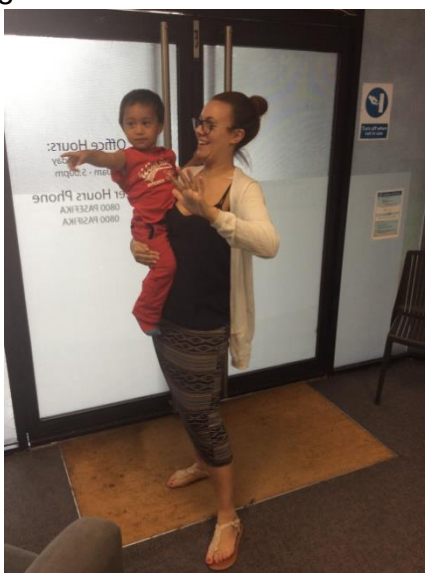
A similar approach was identified in New Zealand. Work with men who had abused their partners was conducted with the support of the wider communities of which those men were a part. Leaders in the churches that they attended and other individuals who the men identified as being of significance for them attended graduation ceremonies when men completed the anti-violence programme. In addition, The Project engaged with leaders in local churches and other community structures to challenge attitudes towards women and girls within those institutions. This process ensured that when workers challenged individuals about cultural or religious defences of abusive behaviour, the institutions to which these individuals were associated could reinforce this challenge. Although arguably a contentious approach, and one that risked shaming men in front of their peers, workers were clear that it was intended to root individual interventions within the wider community – seeing a challenge to wider cultural norms as central to shifting individual attitudes towards violence.

Image from a Marae in Wellington New Zealand

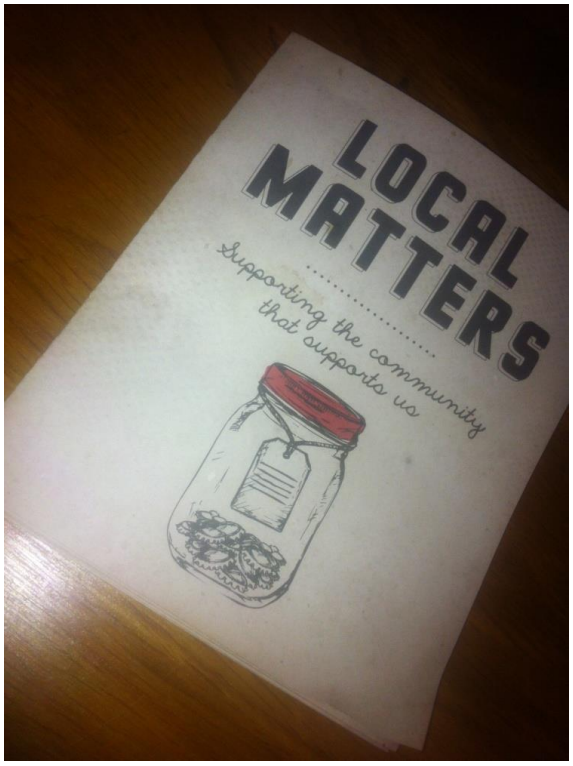
This approach to community engagement was supported through the leadership of Maori women in anti-violence work, including the refuge movement and interventions with gang-

associated women and girls. Meetings took place on the 'Marae' – sacred areas of Maori land upon which discussions were held and customs followed. By holding anti-violence meetings in these environments workers were supported to recognise the services that they delivered as being part of their own cultural practices, approaches supported by the wider Maori communities.

While in New Zealand I also observed workers from The Project, who were part of the communities with whom they were working, walk along the street and talk to young people – inviting them into the project for something to eat. The following day the same young people visited the project, sat with us and talked about their ambitions for the future. Some were daughters of gang members who talked about criminal associations and pressures to engage in offending behaviour, including some daughters of gang members. As they were part of the same community as the young people, workers were able to challenge the ideas that some young people had and emphasise their aspirations as something to be realised. Workers supported young people to see education as a right and part of their community identity – making engagement in it both acceptable and encouraged.



A boy accessing The Project via a detached intervention



Community business leaflet, Melbourne

In both Australia and Brazil I also observed the engagement of businesses in violence prevention. In Rio construction companies had funded the work of Promundo and other organisations to conduct violence prevention work. However, one of these companies also recognised that they were employing large numbers of men, bringing them into Rio and away from their families, and holding risks related to a rise in demand for prostitution and exploitation. As a result this company asked Promundo to conduct training with the men who worked on its construction sites which challenged stereotypes about masculinity and promoted anti-misogynist messages. Like the work of the council in Melbourne, such approaches exemplify leaders demonstrating positive social norms by engaging in anti-violence work, rather than simply funding young people to think differently. These practices recognise that

changes in individual behaviour are best supported in environments which adopt the same values that young people are expected to hold.

Through bystander interventions?, the involvement of local businesses, the rooting on interventions with pre-existing cultural structures and the engagement of wider communities in individual practice, all countries demonstrated contextual approaches to violence prevention. Much intervention in England, particularly that which is delivered in the youth justice system, attempts to change young people's behaviours in the absence of any change in the environments in which they spend their time. Therefore, we expect young people to change attitudes towards masculinity, for example, without also addressing the cultural contexts in which those attitudes have formed. As a result young people are required to act in ways that go against wider societal norms. Such an approach appears limited, and the practice identified in the three countries I visited demonstrated that community-wide engagement, of a variety of sorts, is a potential component of anti-violence practice to reduce youth offending.

The fact that the work I engaged with was also gendered is of note. Observed community interventions sought to challenge gendered social norms as a means of preventing violence, rather than simply communicating anti-violence messages. This approach therefore created environments in which alternative masculinities could be explored – be they on constructions sites, in council offices or on the streets. Enabling adult men to challenge harmful gender norms in turn built the scaffolding upon which young people could do the same.

Given that research tells us that young men in the UK may adopt harmful norms as a means of achieving safety in violent environments (Hallsworth & Young, 2011; Pitts, 2013), my visit demonstrated that community engagement in gendered activism also created safety for young people to desist from offending: a sense of safety that the following chapter will explain.

Creating safe spaces

Through the engagement of communities, and the rooting of interventions within heritage and cultural histories, the projects visited during my trip were able to create safe spaces in which young people could learn and develop. Research tells us that as young people move through adolescence a range of social environments become important for their development (Messerschmidt, 2012; Warr, 2002). During this time young people will spend significant amounts of time in schools, with their peers and in public neighbourhood spaces such as parks, shopping centres and streets, increasingly gaining an identity independent to that of their families. As a result all of these spaces are sites of socialisation for young people which, alongside their homes, are environments in which social rules inform decision making.

As has already been demonstrated in this report, projects that I visited sought to engage with a range of social spaces to address harmful gender attitudes that underpin violent and abusive behaviours. While such an approach complimented the individual interventions being delivered to young people, it also created safe environments in which young people could engage with services. Nowhere was this impact more apparent than on my visit to a project – Fight for Peace – situated in the middle of Mare, a favela in the North Zone of Rio.

Anti-violence artwork outside Fight for Peace, Mare RIo

Mare is home to approximately 132,000 people, over half of whom are children and young people, and has been affected by social exclusion, poor access to public services, drugs, gangs, criminality and violence over a number of years. When I visited Fight for Peace I was told that from 1998-2008 200,000 young people aged 15-24 had been killed in Brazil – 30,000 in Rio. It was against this backdrop that Fight for Peace were delivering their services to young people. Upon entering the building, which has a central spot in Mare, I was confronted with a sense of calm and playfulness. Young people were engaging in an exercise class while others gave me a tour of the building and talked about what they had learned during their time with the project. I sat in a room with three young men and one young woman who could

all talk clearly about their views on homophobia, sexism, violence against women and masculinity. It was a conversation that nearly moved me to tears – I could not believe the clarity with which these 17 year olds could discuss such fundamental social issues, and how we rarely afford the same opportunities to young people in England. But what was most important was that when asked all young people in the room said that they felt safe at Fight for Peace, despite feeling unsafe in other parts of Mare. The project had managed to create a sense of safety in one of the most challenging of environments I had ever encountered which, in turn, enabled young people to engage in the opportunities made available to them while they were there.

Fight for Peace works by engaging young people in combat sports such as boxing and martial arts, embedding these activities within a wider programme that involves personal development, education and youth leadership. In order to participate in the sporting activities young people also have to complete this wider programme and it is in this setting that they are supported to have discussions about gender, sexuality and identity. As all young people go through the programme, and are supported to develop into young leaders, an environment is created in which they are all made aware of structural inequalities and strive to work against these. This in turn creates safety – an experience that was lacking for so many young people that had taken part in the programme.

While my experience in Rio was most pronounced, it was not the only space in which I witnessed the creation of safety in wider environments of harm. Young people who were growing up in a gang-affected neighbourhood in New Zealand had been supported to reclaim a public space that was becoming increasingly violent. Workers supported them to paint the walls of an outside space where they wanted to spend their time, but currently couldn't due to the sale of drugs and the violence that came with it. Outside activities were then run in this area slowly turning it into an environment in which criminality and violence could not persist.

Anti-violence artwork in a reclaimed neighbourhood, Wellington New Zealand

Furthermore, in Australia I met with CASA house who were delivering the sexual assault prevention program in secondary schools (SAPPSS) in the Victoria area. The methodology for SAPPSS featured six components: partnership development; a review of school policies and procedures; staff professional development; train the trainer workshops so that teachers could co-deliver the programme with CASA house; delivery of a student curriculum for middle school students; and finally a peer educator programme delivered to senior students. The process attempted to embed

an education programme within a wider commitment to changing cultural practices within a school context. By working with school staff, adapting policies and procedures, and skilling up older students, a favourable climate is created for the delivery of an education programme – the content of which compliments the wider school ethos rather than jars against it. The workers I met with reported that at present the peer educator component was the most challenging to deliver, but they were confident that over time young people who had engaged in the original curriculum would be supported to also become peer educators to younger students.

Each of these examples demonstrated the importance of achieving safe environments to enable the delivery of interventions. In Rio the aim was violence prevention, in Australia it was to reduce sexual assaults, and in New Zealand the focus was criminality – but in all cases these goals could only be realised once safety had been created. Importantly different projects achieved this end through a variety of models. In Rio safety was achieved in a physical building located in an unsafe area, in New Zealand the public area itself was reclaimed, and in Australia the school environment was the site of attention.

It was inspiring to see that even in the most challenging of environments safety was possible – it made me think of schools I have visited in England that are struggling to manage the impact of gang-associated violence on their students. In these instances young people have brought the trauma and violence from the streets into the school, which in turn becomes as unsafe as the street. Yet projects such as Fight for Peace demonstrate that it is possible to challenge the norms of the street and offer an alternative, even when located within geographical spaces of crime and violence.

On reflection the relationship between safety and intervention then appears circular. Once safety was achieved the intervention could be delivered, and through the delivery of interventions safety could be sustained. In all three countries sustainability was realised through the leadership of young people – who were supported by workers to take forward messages and maintain the safety that had been achieved – a factor that the following chapter will consider.

Youth leadership

During adolescence young people are influenced by their peers more than at any other time in their life (Warr, 2002). Peers can set social norms and values that in turn inform young people's relationships and sense of self. In some settings peer influence can outweigh that of a young person's family, particularly in social contexts where peers are dominant such as in schools, youth clubs and other environments in which young people socialise. This level of influence means that peers can act as a positive influence for change as well as a driver of harmful ideals. By creating environments that are safe, that challenge harmful attitudes and that are embedded within local communities and histories, the projects I visited had built the social architecture in which positive peer influence, through youth leadership, could flourish.

During my time in New Zealand I attended a number of events associated to Waitangi Day – a public holiday to recognise the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's founding document, on that date in 1840. The date is used by Maoris to discuss the extent to which the treaty has been honoured and to debate policy and practice changes they would like to realise over the coming year. Violence prevention was a central point of discussion at the events I attended and many of these debates involved, or were led by, young people.

One group of young people had visited Maori young people across New Zealand, in schools, pupil referral units, custody and youth projects to gather their hopes for the future of their country. This same group presented the views of their peers to an audience of activists who responded with so much support that at one point some of the presenters cried being so overwhelmed with the validation that they had received. What stood out to me most about this group of young people was their ability to critically engage with the constitution of their country, with a passion that was built upon a belief of their place in the world. These young people had a vested interest in the welfare of New Zealand and this was evident in the way that they presented their ideas. They had also been supported to consider violence, and other forms of offending, as related to structural inequalities, and wanted to see these addressed in order for safety to be realised.

Youth Leaders at Maori event on Waitangi Day

As noted previously, youth leadership was also a core component of whole school approaches identified in Australia, and the Fight for Peace project in Rio. Like the young people in New Zealand, those I met in Rio were able to connect their experiences of violence to the structural inequalities that plagued Mare and those who lived there. Therefore, young people had ambitions to work in human rights, activism and youth engagement, seeing these as routes through which violence, and other forms of offending behaviour, could ultimately be addressed.

Youth Leaders at Fight for Peace, Mare Rio

The young people I met in Rio were also instrumental in ensuring that Fight for Peace remained a safe and equal environment for their younger peers who were accessing the service. They believed in all components of the programme that they had been involved with and could talk about them all. As such these young people were ambassadors for the project and were able to implement it in their daily encounters with one another.

Therefore while those delivering whole school approaches in Australia had found the youth leadership component the most challenging aspect of their programmes, the work in these other countries demonstrated that it was possible. I couldn't help but wonder whether this was related to the commitment of both workers in Rio and New Zealand to embed programmes within an educational package that engaged young people in the histories of the countries they were living in. This aspect was less apparent in the whole school approaches I encountered which, while targeting school cultures, didn't necessarily seem to connect such interventions to the cultural history of the environment in which the school was based. By grounding youth leadership activities within the histories, and present struggles, of the geographical sites in which they were delivered, the young people I met were clear that what they did had a direct impact on the communities in which they lived and of which they were a part.

Creating an authorising environment

While youth leadership was central to much of the work I encountered during my trip, it was enabled through a broader 'authorising' environment created by voluntary services, state departments, community members and policymakers.

Presentation on an creating an authorising environment, Melbourne

The term 'authorising' environment was first presented to me at a seminar I attended in Melbourne. The organisation 'Our Watch' – established to 'drive nationwide change in the culture, behaviours and attitudes that lead to violence against women and children' – used the term to explain the context required to deliver whole school approaches to gender equality. According to Our Watch an authorising environment has been created in the state of Victoria as a result of:

- National and state plans to address violence against women
- Projects funded by State governments
- A delivery model that works in partnership with the education department of the government
- A precedent that had been set by previously established work on prevention in three geographic areas of the state
- A sound evidence base to guide the work
- Access to a tested and evaluated curriculum

It was in this context that the whole school approaches mentioned previously were being developed. Projects I met with during my time in Australia concurred with this position stating that without the support of national and state governments achieving consistency across schools would be a significant challenge. Working in partnership with the education department was noted as being particularly important.

However it wasn't only government departments that were perceived as creating authorising environments in which interventions could be developed. The community

led practice in New Zealand engaged with women and men in local areas who had cultural status and therefore influence over others. By working with these individuals to promote programmes, ideas and policy calls, wider engagement was facilitated. It was in this sense that I was particularly impressed with The Project's work with adult men perpetrating violence against their partners and with LGBTQ young people and adults. By engaging influential individuals in local areas, and having a good knowledge of local environments, workers were able to challenge harmful attitudes and create safer and more inclusive climates. Workers themselves talked about going through a process whereby their own attitudes were challenged, and emphasised the importance of on-going reflection to ensure that they held themselves to the same standards in their personal and professional lives.

This approach enabled The Project to influence as well as engage with the neighbourhoods of which they were a part: building gender specific approaches to all facets of community engagement, including the response to young people's offending behaviour.

Art work setting out the values in The Project, Auckland

The creation of an authorising environment was both a cause and consequence of the other thematic findings documented in this report. Ultimately this is a finding demonstrating the importance of leadership at all levels in order to develop gender-sensitive responses to youth offending in general, and young people's abuse of their peers and partners more specifically.

Conclusions, recommendations and next steps

When I first designed my six week trip and applied to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust I was searching for projects that could be recommended for England's youth justice system to build a gender-sensitive approach to youth offending. However, what I learnt across all three countries, and articulated in the five themes outlined in this report, is that it is principles that I identified and not projects I visited that can be translated into English policy and practice. This is emphasised by the fact that despite the three very different cultural landscapes I visited over the six week period the same themes emerged across all countries, and potentially could be implemented in our own systems and policies.

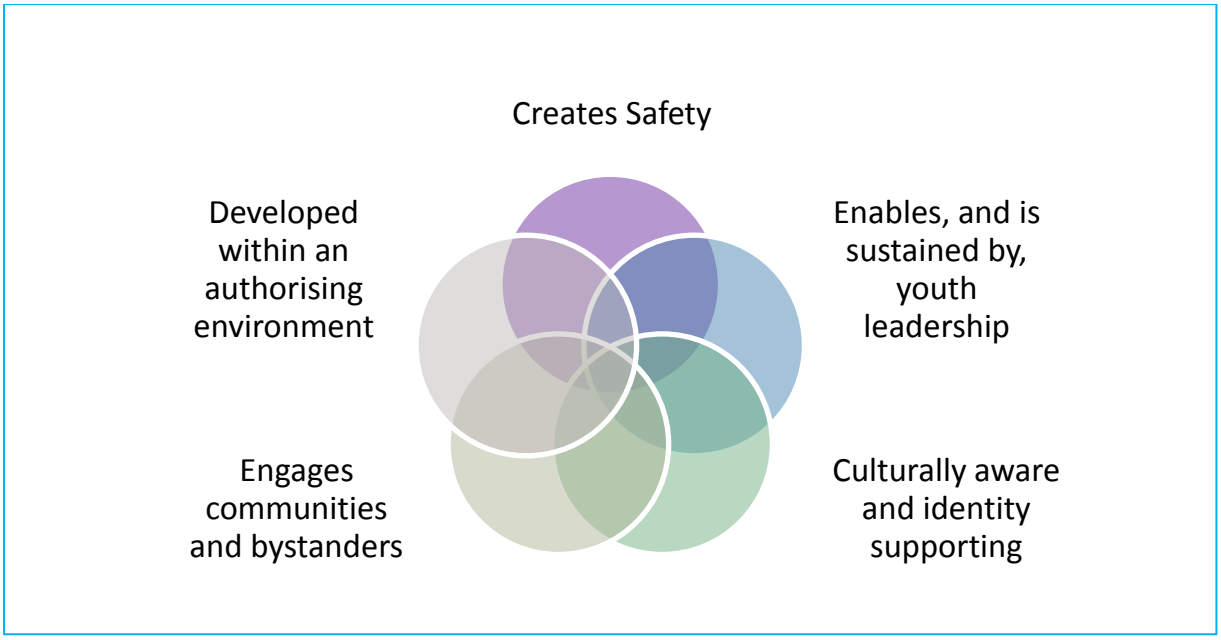
Reflecting on the youth justice system, and wider policy development concerned with violence and abuse between young people, there are three areas where changes are required to realise the successes of the projects with which I engaged:

- Our response to young people who are offending and to those who perpetrate domestic and sexual abuse is largely individualistic: we assess and intervene with individuals, and in some cases young people's families, in order to prevent offending behaviour. Such an approach falls short of the wider community and school based responses to gender-based violence seen during my trip.
- Despite an increased interest in the experiences of young women in the youth justice system, much of the work delivered with young people is gender neutral and is unable to engage with the gendered dynamics of offending that research has associated with sexual and domestic abuse.
- Practice that is culturally aware, and supports young people to locate themselves and their peers within the history of England and its global relationships, is significantly lacking. As such while we support young people to belong to their families (through interventions and support in this space) support to belong to wider communities in which young people live requires greater consideration.

For local youth offending services, and other services who work with young people, to explore these three areas for development, an authorising environment needs to be created. It is critical that policymakers in the Home Office and Youth Justice Board consider the extent to which they are supporting and encouraging community informed and gender-sensitive approaches to young people who are offending. The current interest in young people's experiences of violence and abuse, and the need to find solutions to this issue, creates an opportunity to adopt the principles advocated by this report. In order to adopt the principles identified in this report policy needs to be adapted to support practice that is both gendered and embedded in communities.

Should such an approach be adopted we could create a gender-sensitive response to young people offending that:

- Pays attention to the wider environments in which violence and abuse occurs, and seeks to alter these as well as the behaviours of individual young people who offend in these contexts
- Develops multi-agency and community responses to youth offending that seek to create safety for those who have offended in response to fear or their own experiences of violence and abuse
- Supports young people to develop healthy identities that can challenge harmful social norms and critique those systems and structures that reinforce gendered stereotypes
- Locates young people within families and communities that also contribute to their well-being and development
- Is sustained through the leadership of young people and authorised by national and local structures to which professionals, adults and young people look for guidance and support
- Is grounded in England's history, and that of its local communities, enabling young people to recognise their place in the country in which they live



Five principles for responding to youth offending

In order to achieve this I recommend that:

1. Government policy designed to address violence against women and girls, gang-associated and serious youth violence, child sexual exploitation, and other matters related to youth offending, consider the five principles in this report and the extent to which the national strategic approach to youth offending authorises a gendered and community engaged response.

2. The Youth Justice Board encourage and enable local youth offending services to build a picture of, and engage with, local communities. Demonstrating the ways in

which an understanding of local communities can enhance the provision of individual interventions, such advice should provide a means by which work with young people who have committed offences supports them to feel a sense of belonging to their local community and use this as protective factor against future offending.

3. The five principles outlined in this report are drawn upon by the Youth Justice Board and other national stakeholders when seeking to address the disproportionate number of black and minority ethnic young people within the youth justice system.

4. Government departments, potentially starting with the Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime in London, follow the example of the Melbourne Council and engage in a bystander programme to challenge sexism and gender inequality. As commissioners of services for young people at risk of, and engaged in offending, this process will enable them to role model some of the values they require of delivery services.

5. Youth leadership programmes are supported by foundations and commissioners to engage young people in policy influencing through an understanding of the history of this country and their place within it. Such activities could involve:
    - National bodies like Girl Guiding and uniformed youth services
    - Local youth service and youth offending provision
    - Smaller community-based groups such as Imkaan's young women's team and the young people who work with the AVA project to address gender inequality

6. The new assessment framework being introduced in the youth justice system should be used to:
    - explore the environmental as well as individual/familial factors associated to young people's offending
    - design interventions that engage with, and seek to reshape, those environments

A quality assurance framework will be required to review the use of the assessment and identify the extent to which it individualises young people's offending behaviour.

It is notable that the recommendations I have made, and the principles which underpin them, are not gender-specific. However, I learnt during my trip that these are the matters which warrant attention to enable a gendered response to youth offending. Without these components in place it is likely that attempts to gender the response to young people offending will be 'add-ons' to a system that is not intended as gendered. Should the system adapt to apply the principles identified during my visit I hypothesise that a gender-sensitive response to youth offending will emerge.

Next Steps

In order to progress these ideas:

- This report will be shared with the Youth Justice Board and the Home Office and followed with a meeting to discuss opportunities for implementation and further consideration in relation to national strategies on disproportionality, violence against women and girls, gangs and serious youth violence, and child sexual exploitation.

- This report will be shared with grant giving foundations and charitable trusts to explore their ability to fund work that engages young people in policy participation through an exploration of local and national histories of the communities in which they live.

- This report, and in particular the recommendation regarding engagement in bystander programmes, will be shared with the Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime via their gangs and violence against women and girls panels – groups on which I have a seat.

- As the Youth Justice Board's new assessment tool is implemented there will be multiple opportunities to draw upon the findings of this report to identify the extent to which youth offending practice assesses and intervenes with community based risks. I will initiate these conversations through pre-existing relationships with the youth justice board who sit on advisory groups for my work-related projects and to whom I am currently providing advice on sexual exploitation.

- I will convene a roundtable in the next 12 months to engage national decision-makers, youth leadership organisations and youth offending services to consider the principles of this report for preventing, and responding to, youth offending. This meeting will formally identify the extent to which the five principles in this report are already being realised and agree actions to progress and monitor implementation over the following 12 months.

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