

Executive Summary

Discussion Paper: Understanding Sexual Violence Against Children as a Rights Violation

Background

The discussion paper is written by Helen Veitch and Claire Cody and was commissioned by Ignite Philanthropy to inform a re-framing exercise and explore, in more detail, the complexity behind violence against children and, more specifically, sexual violence against children (SVAC). Helen and Claire recognise that as white, middle class, women educated and living in the United Kingdom, our positioning informs the paper and creates 'distance' from some of the important issues outlined. We therefore see this paper as a starting point for further discussion among others working within the SVAC sector to see if these same issues and reflections resonate and how different experiences, insights and positioning uncover other equally important challenges to confront and address.

How sexual violence against children is currently framed

Although a number of theories and framings have informed and influenced SVAC, it is predominantly framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and interpreted as a 'child protection' issue rather than a 'child rights' issue. Interventions on SVAC are dominated by the socio-ecological practice model, consequently, policy and practice on SVAC does not appear to be adequately informed by a strong theoretical basis. This gap is most obvious when compared to the way that feminist theory informs work on sexual violence against women. Sociology of childhood, the most relevant theory for the 'children's rights' sector appears frustratingly absent from policy discussions on SVAC. Important and relevant issues to the SVAC sector, such as adultism, children's activism or children's sexuality, are therefore rarely explored outside academia. As a result, interventions on SVAC feel out of touch with both the progressions in theory that have taken place over the past twenty years and the current reality of children's lives.

There are three key debates:

- 1. A colonial, Euro-centric construction of childhood:** Development psychology, the UN Convention and sociology of childhood have all been critiqued as having Eurocentric constructions of childhood and embedded colonial legacies. There is consequently a call for decolonisation of the child protection sector where interventions working with children in the Minority and Majority World contexts have been unduly influenced by colonialism, empire, race and white supremacy.
- 2. A lack of analysis of children and power:** the issue of sexual violence was first raised by feminists who identified patriarchy as at the core. In comparison, the child protection sector does not analyse children and power. The breaking away of child sexual abuse from feminism resulted in essentially non-feminist analyses of child sexual abuse.
- 3. Protection versus participation:** although support for children's rights to participation has led to an acceptance that children have agency, the notion of 'agency' for those who are experiencing sexual violence has not been fully interrogated or understood contextually. There are therefore calls for analysis of assumptions about agency and recognition that it is 'dynamic, situated, and contextual'.

In conclusion, the issue of SVAC is one of intricately intertwined taboos – sex and power - that require particularly careful navigation when the concept of childhood is added. It requires acknowledging and

addressing a power dynamic that, although not a taboo, is a 'given' in most societies - that of adult power over children. This power dynamic is hard to deconstruct as it requires the exploration of an extremely uncomfortable issue for many adults which contravenes a key marker of adulthood for many societies – that of children's sexuality. Additionally, preventing and responding to the sexual abuse of children requires a nuanced examination of a complex situation - children's agency and constrained choices within their experience of sexual violence.

These issues can be tackled by exploring how those within feminist research and practice and those aligned to the field of sociology of childhood have dealt with and responded to similar challenges relating to knowledge and power such as:

- Acknowledging power differentials between actors at every level in efforts to address SVAC.
- Recognising structural issues and how historical, cultural, economic and socio-political factors impact on the design and implementation of activities addressing SVAC.
- Valuing and acting on local, 'lived' and contextual knowledge as a first step in designing research, programmes and advocacy efforts.
- Engaging young people in all aspects of the fight against sexual violence as a violation of their rights – as activists and researchers, as well as designers and implementers of services for their peers.

Five ways forward are identified:

- 1. Recognising and increasing children's social power:** Apply learning from feminist scholars and activists who have addressed the issue of power to the children's rights sector by using theory from the sociology of childhood paradigm to explore the power and political issues constraining practice. This will help ensure broader structural issues on sexual violence against children are addressed.
- 2. Recognising Children's Sexualities:** The lack of political will to address the sexuality of young people is increasingly acknowledged as having a negative effect on prevention efforts on sexual violence. Local, contextual understandings of children's lived experiences of sexual violence should be incorporated into the development of SVAC policies and interventions. This can be achieved by, for example, creating opportunities to explore sex and sexuality with children and young people that do not focus solely on risk and harmful experiences but also on healthy experiences and sexual agency.
- 3. Acknowledging Children's Agency:** There is a need to move beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood and agency, this exploration needs to be applied and contextualised to policy and practice. There are excellent existing examples from within the child protection sector of how children and young people can be more involved in identifying problems and solutions within their own communities when adults (including donors) allow them the space to do so.
- 4. Decolonising approaches to SVAC:** The 'decolonisation of childhood' involves confronting the power and privileging of Majority World actors in all aspects of work addressing the sexual violence of children (donors, practitioners and academics). This could be achieved recognising the value and richness of other knowledge systems (indigenous and children's knowledge) that can help the sector understand contexts, realities and influences that impact on addressing and responding to sexual violence.
- 5. Recognising the value of different forms of evidence:** Hierarchies of evidence that view qualitative data from children and young people as the least valid and knowledge from large-scale quantitative studies as the most valid should be challenged. Work should focus on intersectional and participatory research methods to ensure that issues or communities of children that have traditionally been left out of the debate on sexual violence are recognised and responded to and that children and young people with lived experience can meaningfully and safely engage in research processes.