Report

Themes arising from the Violence Against Women and Girls Conference: June 2023

Authors: Dr Louise Oliver and Dr Orlanda Harvey

(Bournemouth University: Faculty of Health and Social Sciences)

Acknowledgements

Contents

The Organisations

Bournemouth University (BU) has more than 19,000 students and we are ranked as one of the top 200 young universities in the world. Our research shapes and changes the world around us, providing solutions to real-world problems and informing the education we deliver. Our vision of Fusion brings together these three key elements of education, research and practice, creating something which is greater than the sum of its parts. Through the impact of our research and education, and the contribution of our staff, students, and graduates, we are able to deliver the third aspect of our purpose, to enrich society. It is this focus on Fusion which is reflected within this research project, as we value the interaction between academic research and front-line professional practice.

Soroptimist International (SI) is a global voluntary women's organisation active in 132 countries worldwide and there has been a club in Bournemouth since 1938. The word **Soroptimist** comes from the Latin words soror (sister) and optima (best) – the best for women. Through awareness, advocacy and action at international, national and local levels, we are committed to a world where women and girls achieve their individual and collective potential, realise aspirations and have an equal voice in creating strong and peaceful communities. All our work is linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals whether it's local, national or international. All projects work towards ending poverty, eradicating hunger, providing education for all and preserving the environment.

1. Introduction

This report draws together the information gathered in relation to tackling issues around violence against women and girls (VAWG). This information was collected at the joint Soroptimist International Bournemouth (SIB) and Bournemouth University (BU) 'Violence Against Women and Girls: Social Justice in Action' conference on June 29th 2023. The event was co-funded by BCP Safer Community Partnership, SI and BU. The aim was to raise awareness of issues relating to VAWG, and bring together diverse professionals, including NGOs, charities, frontline staff, academics and students, all of whom work or have an interest in VAWG, to share knowledge, explore limitations and seek solutions to sustain social justice.

2. Terminology

Although the project team acknowledges that there is a great deal of conversation and controversy around the language which professionals use to describe those who experience abuse and those who abuse others, particularly to avoid labelling and defining people by the abuse either given or received, in this report the term victims/survivors will be used to refer to those who experience abuse. Those who have been abusive to their partners will be referred to as perpetrators.

3. Background

The term VAWG was adopted from the UN 1993 declaration on the elimination of violence against women. It defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."

The UK Government's 'Violence Against Women and Girls' Strategy examines a range of abuses which are disproportionately gendered, including domestic violence and abuse, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, as well as related issues such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), honour-based abuse, revenge pornography, modern slavery, and trafficking (UK Home Office, 2021).

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is an umbrella term used to cover a wide variety of abuses (ONS, 2023) against women and girls, including:

- domestic homicide
- domestic abuse
- sexual assault
- honour-based abuse (HBA)
- stalking

Abusive treatment also includes behaviour that is coercive and controlling (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021).

This report does not seek to reiterate the data in detail that is available elsewhere in relation to VAWG in the UK, and a recent Focus Report for the House of Lords (Tudor, 2023) has a comprehensive summary [available at this link]. What the current UK data highlights is that a significant problem with VAWG still exists within the UK, for example the victim was female in 74.1% of domestic abuse-related crimes, in 86% of sexual offences and 91% of rape offences recorded by the police in the year ending March 2022. Perhaps more concerningly, a recent Ofsted Report on sexual abuse in schools in England (2021) found the occurrence of sexual harassment was commonplace, which encompassed such behaviours as girls reporting:

- *sexist name-calling (92%)*
- *rumours about their sexual activity (81%)*
- *unwanted or inappropriate comments of a sexual nature (80%)*
- *being sent pictures or videos they did not want to see (88%)*
- *being put under pressure to provide sexual images of themselves (80%)*
- *having pictures or videos that they sent being shared more widely without their knowledge or consent (73%)*
- *being photographed or videoed without their knowledge or consent (59%)*
- *having pictures or videos of themselves that they did not know about being circulated (51%)*
- *sexual assault of any kind (79%)*
- *feeling pressured to do sexual things that they did not want to (68%)*
- *unwanted touching (64%)*

4. Methods

Ethical approval was obtained from Bournemouth University Ethics Committee. The research aims were built on the notion that there is already a lot of published research which addresses VAWG yet societal change remains slow. Therefore, the aim of the research was to explore current good practice and perceived potential barriers and facilitators to implementing change. To do this, delegates were offered the opportunity to engage in two different qualitative data gathering activities:

1. Problem and Solutions Trees, a useful approach for this type of research (Snowdon et al. 2008). This is a visual method, in which two trees are drawn: one looked at the current challenges faced and the other looked at what could be done. These were available for participants to add to throughout the day.
2. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) workshop: Conference participants chose to join in facilitated conversations using the AI method (Cooperrider et al. 2007). These focussed on identifying good practice and exploring innovative ways to bring about change.

In both activities participants were given the option to anonymously contribute their thoughts.

Participants: The conference was attended by over 200 professionals; the majority of participants worked in southern England and came from non-governmental organisations, charities, social services, academia and the criminal justice system. It is impossible to break down the findings by professional or organisation, as participants added their comments anonymously and not all participants engaged in the activities.

3. Key Points Arising

A number of key issues were extrapolated from the information gathered.

The first set of issues came under the area of **changes needed in social policy and direct practice** (top down and bottom-up working). This focussed in particular on:

   a) Long-term, sustainable funding to resource support, interventions and preventions.
   b) Increased flexibility in support so that the services 'fit in with the clients' not 'the clients forced to fit in' with services.
   c) Wraparound support for frontline staff working in this field.

d) A need to create more safe spaces in places where victims/survivors can go to without suspicion from the abuser, e.g., GP and school.

e) A need to make reporting easier from members of the public to professionals, including quick referrals as they are better than none.

The second main area was **the identification of what needs to be continued (and developed) in policy and direct practice.** Examples of local and national good practice were identified in the following areas, participants were in agreement that these should be continued and built on:

a) Multi-agency working.

b) Legislation and policy to intervene/prevents VAWG.

c) Support for those experienced VAWG e.g., support groups and refuges.

d) Small charities working together.

e) More knowledge exchange and training about VAWG, for example, more conferences which bring different professionals together.

f) A broad range of evidence-based offender/perpetrator programmes.

g) Early intervention work especially more work done in early years education around relationships, gender and family violence.

h) Awareness of these issues within the public domain particularly in social media.

Although this report is focussed on supporting women and girls who are experiencing abuse, all the changes suggested above would also positively impact men who experience abuse and women who abuse.

Discussion

Many of the findings will not be unexpected to professionals and academics working in this field. It is not a surprise, nor were our delegates unique, in the call for an increase in long-term, sustainable funding to resource support, interventions and preventions e.g. (Levell et al. 2021, Stöckl and Quigg 2021). This is a problem that is rooted in the very structure and social constructs of UK society. Despite the substantial developments made regarding VAWG, with legislation being changed, services and agencies adapting procedures and people working hard, sometimes impacting upon their own wellbeing to make positive change, there are aspects which remain slow to change. This continues to have an impact on how gender, relationships and violence are experienced, understood and responded to, by both the public and professionals. The need to amplify the voices of people aligned to tackling VAWG, especially in

social and broadcast media was raised in order to reach a wider audience. It was felt this was a key action in relation to making further positive change.

Adaptable services and safe spaces: There is a focus, now particularly, in charities and academia demonstrating the need for co-creation of policy, research and services (Hughes and Duffy 2018). A focus on this when policies are reviewed, and services reorganised could lead to an increased flexibility in support so that the services 'fit in with the clients' not 'the clients forced to fit in' with services. This would also address such issues as the need to create more safe spaces in places where victims/survivors can go to without suspicion from the abuser, e.g., GP and school. It would also impact on the access to services, making referrals easier, because "it is better to have a quick referral with limited initial information which can be explored with the person being referred than no referral at all".

Support for professionals: When considering the needs of those working directly with those experiencing VAWG, the concept of vicarious trauma is well documented (Bride 2007, Morran 2008). The desire for further wraparound support for all frontline staff working in this field is driven from the fact that working with people who experience trauma or commit violent acts are at risk of experiencing vicarious trauma which can lead to burn-out and impact decision-making in practice.

Multi-agency working: The delegates highlighted several areas of good practice and noted that enhancement of these would help to address some of the issues raised. It was acknowledged there were support and resources available and that there were huge benefits in terms of supporting victims/survivors from multi-agency working. Small charities work together, however the need for further pathways and processes to facilitate charities and other organisations to work together to access funding and provide support would also be welcomed.

Support for perpetrators: This was seen as a particular issue in terms of providing services for perpetrators and it was acknowledged that this was more challenging as this was often seen as something that the public were also less willing to support. The focus is more on justice and punishment rather than rehabilitation; again, this is something that has previously been highlighted by researchers and organisations (Drive 2020, Levell et al. 2021). The positive impact of having high level Government led policy on outcomes for those accessing services was also noted.

Knowledge Exchange: It was felt that events bringing together a wide range of professionals was useful in relation to: knowledge exchange, sharing good practices, building relationships, upskilling and also supporting professionals.

Early Intervention: It was also acknowledged that the most beneficial long-term solution was a focus on interventions to prevent VAWG; this was around both early intervention with young people as to what makes a healthy relationship, and re-education for those who were trying to 'be controlling' in a relationship.

Changing the social narrative: It is critical to influence the dominant social narratives around gender roles, sexuality and relationships. A report by the Hope not Hate Charitable Trust (Carter 2021) found that 18% of young men hold negative views about feminists and more young people agree (36%) than disagree (35%) that feminism has gone too far and makes it harder for men to succeed. Among young men, 50% agree while only 21% disagree. They note the impact of online social networks to spread discontent and misogynist views of women's drive for equality. Therefore, it is not surprising that this was an important issue for participants, and a focus on a need to balance out the narrative. This feeds into the need for an increased awareness of these issues within the public domain, particularly in social media, and consideration to ensuring such issues are reported appropriately in the press where guidelines for reporting on VAWG for journalists are rarely followed (Royal 2019). A recent study by Woman's Aid (Davidge 2022) found that attitudes which enable, and excuse domestic abuse are still prevalent in the UK, with those holding stereotypical views of gender roles and underlying misogynistic views being more tolerant of the impact of domestic abuse and less aware of its nature.

4. Next Steps

- Local Area Networking Group – SI
    - Exploration of how to influence and increase awareness in the public arena.
    - Exploration of mechanisms and ways to influence funding and policy that encourages and rewards collaboration between charities and other agencies.
- Academic paper that considers reasons for why, with so much evidence for VAWG, there is still a lot of change needed. - BU

Conclusion

The delegates were positive in that there were significant changes being seen in polices and services to help support VAWG. However, as identified by numerous studies and reports, there remains a need to build on the good practice that this conference has explored, build networks to facilitate change and introduce interventions and support not just as pockets of good practice but throughout services, education, the health sector, employment and wider society.

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