



# Gang Associated Girls: Supporting young women at risk



February 2020 · Florence Eshalomi AM

# Executive Summary

Across London youth violence is a serious issue. The ripples of youth violence impact everyone from mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, friends and the local community. Despite the wider impacts, support programmes often focus on young men. Whilst there is good work going on to rehabilitate and support young men away from criminality there is little support available for others, particularly girls and young women who may be associated with a gang.

My research into support for gang associated girls has found that we still need to understand the risks that gang associated girls are vulnerable to and fund services that can help them to change their lives so we can fully tackle the cycle of serious youth violence.

Abianda, Redthread and St Giles Trust gave their time to inform this report and discuss the issues that they face in supporting gang associated girls. Their input has been invaluable in recognising the challenges gang associated girls face and understanding the support that is currently available to them.

## Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1**

The Violence Reduction Unit should commission a strategic needs assessment of gang associated girls to provide a better understanding of the scale of girls and young women with gang associations in London which could then influence future commissioned services.

### **Recommendation 2**

MOPAC should work with specialist organisations such as Abianda to develop training to help professionals to identify girls and young women who are associated with gangs. This training should be rolled out to police officers and could be offered to employees in key partner organisations such as social workers, youth workers and teachers.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Mayor should ensure funding is available to reflect the scope of issues that gang associated girls face so that visible, gender-specific services can be tailored to their needs.

### **Recommendation 4**

The Mayor should provide funding for early intervention schemes to support girls and young women in understanding and building healthy relationships. This should be prioritised through funding streams such as the Young Londoners Fund, the London Crime Prevention Fund and the Violence Reduction Unit.

# Girls and Serious Youth Violence - A Hidden Issue?



Youth violence is a serious issue across London. Research and policy making largely focuses on the resulting criminality visible in our communities and in the media; that of young men and knife crime. However, we sometimes fail to see the full impact of serious youth violence and gang crime; and without a full understanding of the criminality, exploitation and behaviour patterns this fits into we risk treating the symptoms rather than finding a cure.

**G**ang associated girls are a part of this picture. Conversations with practitioners such as Abianda, Redthread and St Giles Trust show that gang associated girls are subject to some of the most serious crimes, that can range from threats to themselves and their family, sexual abuse, county-lines activity and modern slavery. Practitioners working at Redthread told us young women are known to attend hospitals with invisible injuries like mental health related trauma.<sup>1</sup> Because these injuries are not visible and are not necessarily perceived as signifying gang violence they

are unlikely to be recorded by public sector agencies. The scale of wider underreporting can be demonstrated by police recording. The Metropolitan Police Service only record 6 gang associated women and girls on its Gangs Matrix, representing only 0.2% of the total cohort compared to 99.8% for men and boys.<sup>2</sup>

Because young women on the periphery of gang violence that may need support are not being identified, funding is disproportionately channelled into supporting young men. In contrast, support services for young women

are less discernible and young women often have no platform to vocalise their needs. If we are to fully tackle gangs and gang violence we have to make sure that the needs of all those affected, including gang associated girls, are heard and supported.

## Young Women and Gangs

*“While these young women may be perceived as less visible to the police and therefore used to transport items... social media and the vast amounts of information which young people receive through this medium means that they have less anonymity amongst peers, and this can lead to them being identified as associating with a gang and therefore placed right in the middle of conflicts and potentially subjected to the same violence a male would be.” (Sadiq Khan, November 2019)<sup>3</sup>*

Discussions around serious youth violence are often based on the assumption that this involves young men, both as victims and as perpetrators. Data gathered from City Hall figures shows that in the first nine months of 2019, the Metropolitan Police Service only identified one female perpetrator who committed a crime as part of a member of a gang. The number of female victims recorded is higher at 92.<sup>4</sup> However, this is still a huge under-identification of gang affected girls.

The identification of young people also varies across boroughs. In 9 out of London’s 32 boroughs, no female victims or perpetrators of gang crime were identified by the Metropolitan Police Service.<sup>5</sup> However, responses to freedom of information requests which I sent to all London councils found that 1049 women and girls had identified gang association as a factor in assessments by their children’s services department.<sup>6</sup> Because there will be gang associated girls not identified by public

**1049** women and girls in London had gangs identified as a risk factor during assessments from council’s children’s services

## **6** women and girls on the Metropolitan Police Service Gangs Matrix

services and agencies it is safe to assume that this figure still does not represent the true scale of this issue. Women and girls may fly under the radar with support focussing on the needs of young men as a result.

Victimisation can present itself in different ways and the impact of gang association on young women is different to that for young men. Redthread, a charity that works to integrate trauma-informed youth work into the health sector, explains it like this: “Young women and young men present with very different symptoms. Women are much less likely to present with an injury like a knife wound and are much more likely to present with mental health issues related to trauma.”<sup>7</sup> Whilst a knife wound is clear physical evidence of violent assault, the trauma of witnessing such an assault or experiencing sexual assault or rape is not always visible. Wider discussions about serious youth violence do not always recognise this type of psychological trauma as part of the cycle.

### *What does Gang Association mean?*

*Gang association and gang involvement are two separate things. Somebody can be gang associated because a family member, friend or partner is involved in a gang or because they live in an area where a gang operates. Gang involvement by contrast means making a choice to be involved in the criminal behaviour of a gang and accepting the possible consequences of this.*

Individuals who are gang associated may not recognise themselves as at risk because they do not see themselves as part of a gang. However, this does not reduce their risk. They are still in danger of criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation, trauma from witnessing crimes and attacks from rival gangs made in retribution for gang activity.

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has made it clear that by failing to recognise the part young women play in gangs we are leaving them vulnerable to harm.<sup>8</sup> Abianda, a social enterprise that works with young women affected by gangs, told us that criminals consider young women to be less suspicious to the police, so are being expected to take on bigger roles within gangs. With these bigger roles comes bigger risk, but it is also very rare that this relates to an increase in sharing of wealth from the gang or respect within the gang towards young women. For example, girls may be used by gang members to transport items for county lines operations because they are deemed to be less visible to

those authorities looking for gang association and so are less likely to be investigated. In effect young women are being criminally exploited by male gang members partly because we are failing to spot the signs of gang associated girls.

Gang associated girls are largely absent from public discourse around violent crime, with media reporting and funding concentrating on young men with gang involvement. This means public agencies risk missing the signs of gang associated girls and do not offer support services to help them. If we do not offer adequate support to women and girls at risk of gang associated harm, then we will miss a vital opportunity to tackle violent crime.

## Case Study: X and the Multi-Agency Violence Unit Approach

"X" was referred to the Multi-Agency Gangs Unit due to witnessing the murder of Child P. X lived in an area with links to other gang nominals who were making ongoing threats to her as a result of witnessing the murder.

The Multi-Agency Gangs Unit worked with X:

- \* relationship building with X to start to build rapport and a trustful/safe space
- \* safety planning with X to support her to keep herself safe due to ongoing threats (direct and via social media) and being labelled as a snitch by the local young people
- \* Support for X in relation to police requests for witness statements

which she felt unable to do due to fear of retaliation

- \* Trauma informed approach allowing X a safe space to explore her feelings of fear, anxiety and loss surrounding witnessing the murder and the impact upon her particularly regarding the isolation from her peers and feelings of being treated and branded as a 'snitch' and 'grass'
- \* Explored her process and understanding of PTSD with regards to X's symptoms which included lack of sleep, panic attacks and hypervigilance
- \* supported X to access her GP and through this made a referral to counselling services

- \* worked jointly with New Horizons to support X to find safe and stable accommodation outside of the area

### Outcomes:

- \* positive relationship with X who engaged in support service
- \* X was able to keep herself safe and recognise the impact of social media
- \* X was supported to move out of borough whilst maintaining direct and indirect contact with her family
- \* Reduction in risk posed to X throughout the intervention of the Multi-Agency Gangs Unit



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### **Recommendation 2**

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The Mayor has introduced support services to help combat the challenges posed by gang-related county lines activity. His Rescue and Response County Lines project works to support those caught up in county lines drugs gangs. Between September 2018-June 2019 Rescue and Response referred 46 females and 167 males for intervention.<sup>10</sup>

## **Gender Responsive Approach to Gang Associated Girls**

A gender specific approach is crucial in supporting gang associated girls. When we think about early intervention activities to help divert young people away from crime we commonly talk about activities like boxing and football. These are extremely important and valuable projects that make a real difference to the communities in which they operate but may be more likely to appeal to young men.

As noted previously, girls suffer different types of trauma to young men and thus will need different support to move forwards. Saint Giles Trust, a charity that provides peer-led services to young people caught up in gangs, said: 'Girls need a different approach to boys. Programmes for boys that are slightly amended to work for girls will not produce good results; girls suffer different trauma, there are different ways of engaging them. There needs to be a gender responsive, adaptive approach.'<sup>19</sup>

The young women concerned received support from Abianda that was tailored to meet their individual needs. Abianda's engagement rate of 70% shows that a gendered response to gang association can have a real impact.<sup>11</sup> However, if the capacity of the programme was increased, it is clear that more than 46 young women could benefit from this support.<sup>12</sup>

The Mayor has led the way in working with specialist organisations to provide a gendered response for gang associated girls. He has done this whilst facing more than £1bn of cuts to his policing budget since 2010. If City Hall received the funding it needs to meet this demand then organisations like Abianda that offer specialist support could help more young women and girls in London.

Furthermore, there is a tendency in the reporting of gang associated girls to link their experiences solely to sexual violence. Funding then reflects this, with gang associated girls receiving funding through projects relating

to violence against women and girls rather than serious youth violence.<sup>13</sup> In its report into County Lines Activity 'Counting Lives', The Children's Society states that "while for boys and young men sexual violence may not be seen as a primary feature, the inverse may be true for girls. During our interviews, professionals reflected on the [different] responses that boys and girls receive when brought to authorities' attention for exploitation, with girls considered under [Child Sexual Exploitation] protocols and boys [Child Criminal Exploitation]. However, we know that there are likely to be elements of both forms experienced by children of all gender identities.<sup>14</sup> In order to avoid gaps in provision, it is essential that we identify all the types of criminality which girls face alongside recognising their role in the bigger picture of gangs.

Across London there are examples of excellent work led by local authorities to support gang affected girls. The example referred to in our case study, taken from the casework files of one of the multi-agency gangs units set up by borough councils, provides insight into the positive impact that tailored and specialist intervention work can have. Before their intervention the subject of the case study was suffering PTSD and living with threats to her well-being. Through their work the risks the subject faced were reduced and she has been given the opportunity to rebuild her life. Intervention that is openminded about labelling the criminality a young woman faces and is responsive and tailored to the needs of the individual is vital in providing a joined up long term solution to serious youth violence.

Responses to freedom of information requests shows that only 30% of local authorities commission services which are exclusively aimed at girls associated with gangs or serious youth violence. This is understandable given the cuts faced by local authorities in recent years. Nonetheless, the work of Abianda and

the Multi-Agency Gangs Unit referenced in our case study shows what can be achieved when gendered-specific support is available.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Mayor should ensure funding is available to reflect the scope of issues that gang associated girls face so that visible, gender-specific services can be tailored to their needs.

## **Empowering Young Women in Healthy Relationships**

Stark feedback from the organisations working with gang affected girls suggests that the young women they support do not always understand consent in relationships. There are common misconceptions around consensual sex within relationships that leave gang associated girls open to sexual exploitation. Rape and sexual exploitation are an extremely traumatising experience, but the victims do not always recognise these as criminal acts perpetrated against themselves.

This may explain why the number of gang related sexual offences recorded by the Metropolitan Police Service has been low. In 2018, there were only eleven gang flagged sexual offences recorded in London.<sup>15</sup>

A representative from Abianda explains that "the complexity of the issues young women are presenting with includes historic violence and historic sexual violence. Nearly all have experienced or witnessed domestic violence and the cycle of power and control in relationships." Childhood experiences can leave young women with unhealthy expectations of how they should be treated in a relationship, perpetuating cycles of power and control. Without appropriate support to break such a cycle a victim can struggle to recognise that they should be treated with consideration, respect and as an equal.

Redthread told us that young women may have “a lot more understanding [of healthy relationships] than we give them credit for but this may not be reflected in how they live their lives.” The jump between what young women understand and how they put this into practise needs to be bridged. It is easy to push the teaching of healthy relationships onto schools, however one of the vulnerability factors that stakeholders listed for gang associated girls was that many access education outside of mainstream provision. Some girls with undiagnosed or unsupported special educational needs and disabilities cannot access schooling easily while others may have been excluded from mainstream schooling and are outside the education system. Offering healthy relationship education through schools would not reach these young women.

The practitioners we spoke to recognised that young men also need support to build healthy relationships, particularly to interrupt cycles of toxic masculinity. If we do not challenge and support young men to have healthy, respectful relationships, any programmes to educate young women that they need to be respected will be undermined. Funding for schemes that empower both young women and men to break the cycle of power and control in relationships is essential to supporting young people away from gang life.

#### ***Recommendation 4***

The Mayor should provide funding for early intervention schemes to support girls and young women in understanding and building healthy relationships. This should be prioritised through funding streams such as the Young Londoners Fund, the London Crime Prevention Fund and the Violence Reduction Unit.





## Endnotes

- 1 In conversation with Redthread caseworkers and practitioners, 12.11.19.
- 2 Metropolitan Police Service Gangs Violence Matrix Q3 2019/10 data, accessed at <https://www.met.police.uk/police-forces/metropolitan-police/areas/about-us/about-the-met/gangs-violence-matrix/>.
- 3 Questioning the Mayor at Mayor's Question Time 17th October 2019, <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/19976>, [date accessed 2019]
- 4 Questioning the Mayor at Mayor's Question Time 17th October 2019, <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/19974>, [date accessed 2019].
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Freedom of Information Requests to all local authorities in London. Available on request.
- 7 In conversation with Redthread caseworkers and practitioners, 12.11.19.
- 8 Questioning the Mayor at Mayor's Question Time 17th October 2019, <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/19976>, [date accessed 2019]
- 9 In conversation with St Giles Trust caseworkers and practitioners.
- 10 MOPAC Rescue and Response Strategic Assessment [date accessed 2019]. An additional 30 young people were supported but their gender is not noted.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Questioning the Mayor at Mayor's Question Time 21st March 2019, <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/6296>, [date accessed 2019].
- 14 The Children's Society Counting Lives: Responding to Children who are Criminally Exploited, July 2019.
- 15 Questioning the Mayor at Mayor's Question Time 21st March, <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/6302>, [date accessed 2019]