VAWG in a digital space

Who are EMPOWER?

EMPOWER is a network of stakeholders delivering services in relation to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, and Northamptonshire. This includes statutory bodies such as the police, crown prosecution service (CPS), local government, and third-sector organisations supporting VAWG survivors and perpetrators. EMPOWER is also a 9-month research project (concluding July 2023) identifying issues and co-producing targeted projects to uncover and explore problems and potential solutions to VAWG. The next steps from these mini-projects will seek to ensure the network's sustainability and undertake co-designed and co-produced research to develop effective solutions to VAWG-related issues in the future.

What key issues have been identified by EMPOWER so far?

Stakeholders prioritised five key issues at the beginning of the project. These are:

1. Accessing and engaging in the criminal justice system
2. Multi-agency/Multi-systems working
3. Education (intervention and training)
4. What works (using best-practice/evidence-based working)
5. Culture in the criminal justice system

Each of these issues was explored via a workshop including researchers and stakeholders, which led to the identification of mini-projects designed to explore the issue further.

This briefing summarises the *Violence Against Women and Girls in a Digital World project* that emerged from Workshop 3 (Education). During that workshop, the theme of digitally-mediated violence, and the role of technology in influencing identities was a recurrent theme.

What were the key aims of this sub-project?

1. To establish from the literature and secondary analysis of any available data, the likely pathway from consumption of problematic online material to i) perpetration of violence against women and girls, ii) victim of violence, or iii) any combination of these roles.

2. Unpicking what might make most difference, to whom, and under what circumstances (differential impact) through knowledge co-production.

What did we do for this project?

- We performed a brief literature review examining academic sources, reports produced by individual organisations, and government policy documents.
- We completed two focus groups with young people (aged 17-19) and practitioners working in the field of violence against women and girls in secondary schools, ground-truthing some of the key messages emerging from the literature, and using their insights to formulate research questions for future, larger-scale research projects.

What did we find?

Our literature review identified that digital technologies can be framed in two ways. First, and most commonly, that cyberstalking, non-consensual sharing of intimate images (commonly known as "revenge porn"), and online harassment have all contributed to the broader landscape of violence against women. Perpetrators often exploit the anonymity and accessibility of digital platforms to target victims, leaving them vulnerable to emotional, psychological, and sometimes even physical harm. Social media, messaging apps, and online forums have become spaces where misogynistic attitudes can thrive, exacerbating the issue.

Second, digital technology use has a role to play in the evolving identities of young people, including their feelings and attitudes towards themselves and the people around them (including their social cognition), and the behaviours they enact.

We tried to deploy linear, time/occasion-based approaches to understanding pathways to violence/desistance in our focus groups. This approach did not resonate with our participants. Rather, there was a natural gravitation towards a more multisystemic approach, that is, considering the ecologies or multiple systems in young people's lives. This led us to represent multisystemic resilience *to* violence against women and girls, and the many systems that need to be deployed to enable this resilience.

What does this mean?

- A multi-systemic approach is key as this takes responsibility away from any individual child, and acknowledges the systemic responsibilities to keeping children and young people safe/maximising opportunities/reducing risk.
- Focussing on a multi-systemic approach, there appears to be gaps in knowledge regarding young people and what makes the most difference e.g., to which child/young person, under which conditions.
- The role of 'digital' in this space is complex and we need to determine how 'digital' sits within this multi-systemic approach.

Thanks to all of our EMPOWER partners who contributed to this work.

Authors: Diane Levine

You can find out more about the EMPOWER project here: https://le.ac.uk/criminology/research/empower.

To get in contact, please email project lead: Dr Emma Sleath (emma.sleath@leicester.ac.uk)