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| The International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, trafficking and violence at the University of Bedfordshire (IC), welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for input ‘Looking back, looking forward’ from the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material.The IC is committed to increasing understanding of, and improving responses to, child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking in local, national and international contexts. We achieve this through: academic rigour and research excellence; collaborative and partnership based approaches to applied social research; meaningful and ethical engagement of children and young people; and active dissemination and evidence-based engagement in theory, policy and practice.The Our Voices programme of work at the IC focusses on understanding the role of participatory and rights based approaches with children and young people affected by all forms of sexual violence in research and practice.The content of this submission focuses on the role of young people in the design and delivery of future work that aims to prevent the sexual exploitation of children and young people. |

***Question:* How can the impact of the mandate be further enhanced in the future? Where are the major gaps in advocacy and awareness?**

**Context and current gaps**

It has been thirty years since the United Nations Generally Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). This convention, and article 12 in particular, has led to the creation of more spaces for children and young people to be involved in consultation and decision-making about various aspects of their lives. Research findings however illustrate that opportunities to engage in debate and decision-making are often restricted to those children and young people who are deemed capable and reliable (Hill, 2006; Horwath *et al*., 2012; Brodie *et al.,* 2016). It has been argued that this therefore often excludes those young people who are perceived to be ‘too difficult’ or alternatively ‘too fragile’ (Horwath *et al.,* 2012; Warrington, 2013; Cody, 2017a). Understanding of the inter-relationship and mutual dependency between children’s participatory and protection rights continue to be limited and poorly demonstrated in practice relating to sexual violence and others forms of abuse (Warrington and Larkin, 2019). Horwath *et al.* (2012) in a paper exploring the participation of young people affected by violence note that when young people come to the attention of statutory agencies, this often leads to what the authors describe as a ‘protective’ and ‘caring’ response where participation is viewed as less important. Warrington (2013), in discussing work with young people affected by sexual exploitation in the UK, highlights this tension between protection and participation. Warrington (2013) illustrates how professionals appear to struggle to see young people as both ‘victims’ and ‘active agents’. This means that children and young people who have been affected by sexual abuse and exploitation are often not included in decision-making about their own needs, or in discussions about how to help or improve responses for others (Brown, 2006; Warrington, 2013; Brodie *et al.,* 2016; Cody, 2017a).

**EVIDENCE OF THE VALUE AND CONTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES IN PREVENTION EFFORTS**

**Strong cumulative evidence highlights the importance of centralising participatory and rights based approaches with children and young people affected by all forms of sexual violence**.

Such approaches may contribute to different levels of prevention through:

* **Countering children’s experiences of being disbelieved, silenced or ignored.** Evidence globally from survivors of all forms of sexual abuse, highlights victims experiences of disclosure and recognition are overwhelmingly characterised by being disbelieved, unheard or ignored (Allnock and Miller, 2013; Cossar *et al.,* 2013; Alaggia *et al.,* 2017). Comprehensive efforts to challenge cultures of silence (and related impunity) require promoting the validity of, and respect for, victim’s and survivor’s voices and influence.
* **Enhancing children and young people’s sense of control and self-efficacy**. The experience and effects of sexual trauma are widely accepted to be characterised by a catastrophic loss of power and control, self-blame and destruction of trust (Finkelhor and Browne, 1985). The global move towards adopting trauma-informed approaches in work with children and young people affected by sexual violence, highlights the importance of centralising opportunities for empowerment; meaningful participation and influence in decision-making; peer support; and trust building approaches within professional responses (Muraya and Fry, 2015; Sapiro *et al.*, 2016; Cody, 2017b; Bush, 2018; Hickle, 2018).
* **Supporting justice and challenging impunity through enabling children’s safe involvement in child-friendly justice processes.** Evidence highlights how current approaches to prosecution in cases of sexual violence are experienced as traumatising for the children and young people involved (Beckett and Warrington, 2015). Child-friendly/centred justice processes which prioritise children and young people’s participation rights – prioritising their voices, choice, control and influence in the process are required to support recovery and wellbeing and increase successful prosecution(Beckett and Warrington, 2015).
* **Preventing future re-victimisation.** Emerging evidence indicates that young people affected by sexual abuse and exploitation may wish to engage in activities that can help raise awareness and improve the situation for other young people (Cody, 2017a). Evidence also indicates that such engagement can have a positive impact on young people’s own sense of self-worth (Batsleer, 2011; Levy, 2012; Hagel, 2013) and improve young people’s own knowledge and understanding of sexual exploitation,thus potentially reducing future re-victimisation (Hamilton *et al.,* 2019).
* **Enabling more effective awareness raising and advocacy through young people’s involvement in prevention.** Evidence from consultations with young people, including those impacted by sexual exploitation, suggests that messages developed by young people, particularly those affected by sexual violence, may be more effective than messages solely derived from professional perspectives (Cody, 2017a). Evidence demonstrates that during adolescence peers are very influential in young people's decision making (Burton *et al.,* 2011; Stanley *et al.,* 2015). Research also indicates that young people impacted by violence are more likely to talk about this with their peers (Barter *et al*., 2015). Involving young people, particularly those affected by the issues may, therefore contribute to more effective and influential messaging and impact.

In addition to recognising the value of participatory approaches in championing the prevention of sexual violence towards children and young people, it is essential that such approaches are rooted in safe and ethical practice.

* **Any involvement by children and young people, particularly those with lived experience of exploitation and abuse, must prioritise their wellbeing.** The IC has a long history of working collaboratively with young people and have developed an ethical framework for involving young people ethically in research (Warrington, 2018). This learning has been drawn on and adapted for use in advocacy work. The IC is currently working with NGOs and youth advocates in three European countries to understand both how young people can safely and ethically get more involved in developing their own advocacy activities that address sexual violence in different ways; and the value of doing so. In order to ensure that such work is safe, ethical and positive, there are a number of pre-requisites that are needed which include solid relationships with young people, a range of skills and a number of resources. The learning from this project will be available in the next six months at <https://www.our-voices.org.uk/>

For further information on the work documented in this consultation response or to explore any of the recommendations in further detail please contact claire.cody@beds.ac.uk or visit [www.beds.ac.uk/ic](http://www.beds.ac.uk/ic) and [www.ourvoices.co.uk](http://www.ourvoices.co.uk)

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