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Black Girls Navigate the Physical and Emotional Landscape of the Neighbourhood: Normalised Violence and Strategic Agency

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Abstract

This article considers how young black women living in gang-affected neighbourhoods in an urban area in England, UK navigate their safety in public and private spaces, and how these spaces overlap and intersect. Drawing on a project with eighteen participants aged fourteen to nineteen, the research seeks to understand how the participants inhabit, navigate and strategize for their safety through their narratives of life and survival in an unsafe neighbourhood. Findings indicate that they experience sexual harassment in public spaces and gang-associated sexual and physical violence as common, accepted aspects of their everyday realities, from as young as twelve. The narratives suggest that participants navigate complex friendship groups to protect each other and their families through tight codes of trust, secrecy, privacy and conflict-management strategies. This article seeks to bring attention to how young women utilise their agency to illuminate the coping strategies they draw on to navigate their physical environments. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for interventions.

Keywords: Peer-on-Peer Violence, Navigating Safe Spaces, Coping Strategies, Gang-Associated Sexual Violence.

Introduction

A growing awareness of the harmful effects of youth violence in disadvantaged

communities is spurring children's services to find ways of engaging young people.

There is recognition that exposure to youth violence has a major impact on children's

and young people's psychological and mental well-being, powerfully affecting their

life chances (Firmin, 2009; Beckett et al., 2013; Pitts, 2013; Walsh, 2018). Studies

examining the ways in which young people encounter violence outside of the home

environment indicates a multi-faceted phenomenon that poses powerful challenges for safeguarding professionals (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019; Firmin, 2019; Lloyd, 2019). However, whilst there is a growing body of work on the impact of youth violence, the violence experienced by young black women in their neighbourhoods is often overlooked (ROTA, 2011; Medina et al., 2012; Thapar, 2019). There is therefore much we do not know about violence affecting black girls' everyday interactions and in particular, how they utilise personal agency to navigate unsafe spaces. In this paper, we explore how young black women living in a gang-affected neighbourhood navigate risks to stay safe. We present the findings of a study that engaged young black women in discussions about safety to provide insights into how they make sense of their experiences and how they develop coping strategies within their complex worlds. For the purposes of this paper 'black' is defined here referring to individuals of African and African-Caribbean origin as well as persons of mixed ethnicity (African or African-Caribbean and another parentage, usually white British).

Background

Studies have demonstrated that street-based encounters such as sexual harassment and sexual and physical violence are not uncommon for black girls living in socially and economically disadvantaged communities affected by 'youth violence' - the term most commonly used in the literature (Miller, 2008; Pearce, 2009; Disle and Liddle, 2016; Firmin, 2017; Firmin and Pearce, 2018). These studies emphasise that what Firmin (2017) specifies as 'peer-on-peer violence' needs to be understood through a contextual lens because of the intersecting factors that impact young people's lived experiences (Firmin, 2017; Firmin and Abbott, 2018; Lloyd, 2019). Specifically, Firmin (2017) elucidates the ways that peer-based feuds can result in serious violence

for young people in their neighbourhoods. Much research has highlighted the ways in which the contextual features of urban disadvantage can heighten the risks for children of being sexually exploited (Miller, 2008; Pearce, 2009; Beckett et al., 2013; Berelowitz et al., 2013; Pitts, 2013; Firmin, 2018). A number of scholars have examined how poverty, social inequalities, parental neglect, and domestic violence can render girls living in gang-affected neighbourhoods vulnerable to sexual exploitation and gang-related sexual violence (Beckett et al., 2013; Coy, 2009; Pearce and Pitts, 2011; Young and Trickett, 2017). Moreover, research indicates that for girls living in gang-affected neighbourhoods, being associated with a gang might offer protection from males in other gangs (Pearce and Pitts, 2011). Thus, it must be recognised that contextual factors such as poverty, racism and gender play integral roles in creating the social contexts that place girls and young black women at high risk of gender-based violence (Miller, 2008). For example, Firmin (2017) has developed a contextual safeguarding model that addresses the dynamics of structural and situational inequalities that frame young black people's lives (including poverty, discrimination and community violence), and heightens their risk of victimisation. Research clearly shows that the home environment, and in particular, parental neglect, can increase children's risks of victimisation in public domains. For instance, some studies have found that children from disadvantaged communities that are neglected in the family environment have an elevated risk of sexual exploitation (Firmin, 2013; Hickle and Hallett, 2015; Horvath *et al*., 2014). Additionally, there is ample evidence that children in the looked-after population, as well as those excluded from education (scenarios within which black children are over-represented), are all at increased risk of sexual exploitation (Gazeley and Dunn, 2013; Beckett et al., 2017; Hamilton, 2018). Furthermore, as Firmin (2011) in the UK and Miller (2008) in the US have

observed, for black girls, racial stereotyping and gendered experiences intersect in nuanced ways to render them particularly vulnerable to violence.

In short, because of their social location, black girls that are marginalised in multiple ways are exposed to a variety of risks, including particular kinds of gender-based violence such as gang-affected violence and sexual exploitation (Miller, 2008). More importantly, black girls may live in environments that are especially stressful because of the fact that violence can be experienced differently by black girls and black boys (Miller, 2008). For these reasons, we are keen to advance our understandings of how race, gender, class and age impact on black girls to heighten risks for them in their neighbourhoods. The research presented here therefore seeks to understand how young black women navigate risks in their neighbourhoods and to explore their narratives of experiencing violence. A primary objective of the research is to learn more about how young black women utilise their agency to navigate unsafe spaces. The primary research question was: How do young black women make sense of the neighbourhoods they inhabit?

Method

This exploratory research employed a qualitative research method mixing the use of photographs taken by the respondents themselves to stimulate group discussion, and to give people an opportunity to record and reflect on their daily lives (Collier and Collier, 1986; Wilson et al. 2007). The approach essentially enables participants to represent their experiences through photographs and narrative (Wang and Burris, 1997). This methodology was particularly appropriate for this study for two reasons: first, the use of photographs can act as a stimulus for marginalised and lesser-heard

voices (Migliorini and Rania, 2017; Woodgate et al., 2017; Liebenberg, 2018); second, bearing in mind that we had to engage the young women in relationships of trust, the method had the potential to give them more control over the expression of their experiences (Rose et al., 2018). Specifically, because we were asking vulnerable young women to discuss a sensitive topic that is emotionally difficult to address, and as they may have initially found it difficult to name and discuss their experiences, we chose to use this approach in an effort to engage them in a meaningful way. It is suggested that in some situations in qualitative research, images are better able to arouse emotions and thoughts about experiences in ways that the process of narrating alone cannot (Harper, 2002). For example, Liebenberg (2018) surmised that the process of interpreting an image fosters a more critically reflective space. For these reasons we saw the use of photographs as a means to facilitate dialogue with this marginalised group of young women (Coemans et al., 2017; Noland, 2006).

Sampling

Eighteen young women from a youth club located in an inner London local authority were recruited to take part in the study. The neighbourhood where the youth club is located is a socially deprived area affected by poverty, high youth unemployment and gang-related activities. Since the research explores sensitive topics and the young women were vulnerable, we worked very closely with two youth workers from the agency, one of whom was a trained counsellor, to access and recruit the young women; because the young women regularly attended the youth club, these gatekeepers had a crucial role in preparing them for the study, as well as providing emotional support during the research process. All of the participants self-identified as black British; seven identified as black Caribbean, six as black African, and five as

mixed-heritage (with one black African or Caribbean parent). They ranged in age from fourteen to nineteen with the average age being fifteen, and all lived in the immediate neighbourhood surrounding the youth club.

Ethical Issues

The ethical issues arising were important considerations for us as we were perpetually mindful that the research topic was sensitive and that the young women were vulnerable. We therefore took precautions to minimise any harm to participants. An information sheet describing the aims and process of the research which included answers to hypothetical questions about the study was given prior to the focus groups. It was important to engage an age-appropriate approach that considered the young women's needs in terms of their capacity to understand what they were consenting to (Munford and Saunders, 2004; Bernard, 2013; Carlile, 2016). We used tools that were specifically designed for use with young people (Carlile, 2012, 2016) to obtain informed consent from all participants. If those who were under sixteen expressed a wish to take part but their parents did not give consent, we encouraged them to inform their parents of what they were agreeing to.

Equally, it was important for us to keep in mind at all times that taking part in the research may trigger memories of trauma and cause some distress for participants (Bernard, 2013). We were very mindful of the limits of confidentiality when working with participants under the age of eighteen (Morrow and Richards, 1996). We made clear to them that, if they disclosed something during the focus group that indicated they were at risk of harm, we would discuss our concerns with them and encourage them to report it to the relevant agencies (Bernard, 2013). All names have been

anonymised to shield the identity of the young women and the agency they were recruited from. The ethics committee at the authors' institution granted research approval.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection procedures involved two focus groups guided by semi-structured interviews with the eighteen young women. Four young women did not participate in the second focus group because there had been a stabbing in close proximity to the youth club a few days previously and their parents, fearing for their safety, did not allow them to be out the house on the day we conducted the second focus group. Focus groups are a particularly useful form of group interview for exploring participants' reactions, beliefs, experiences and feelings about a particular subject (Krueger, 1994; Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013). The focus groups took place in the youth club where the participants were recruited and were jointly facilitated by the authors. Participants used their smartphones to take photographs and each participant received a gift voucher of £15. Because all of the participants regularly spent time at the youth club and were acquainted with each other, with some belonging to the same friendship groups outside the club, they were generally at ease in the focus group. Notwithstanding, it was important to create a non-threatening space, particularly for those that may have felt uncomfortable speaking up.

We used a semi-structured interview guide for the focus groups, which lasted approximately ninety minutes each. Our goal in the first focus group was to prepare the young women for the project. In this focus group, we asked the young women to describe their neighbourhoods and to tell us what they felt makes a space safe and

what strategies they used to navigate their way around their neighbourhoods. This first focus group therefore enabled them to identify key issues pertinent to their lives and the challenges and risks they navigate on a daily basis. It also provided an opportunity for the young women to annotate maps of their neighbourhoods, identifying some of the key places they could photograph. Following the first focus group, over a period of one month, participants were asked to take photographs of places in their neighbourhoods that represented something about safe or unsafe spaces for them. They then had to select a number of photographs, which were printed, and used as stimulus for the group discussion in the second focus group, where the participants had to describe what the images captured in the photographs signified for them about safe or unsafe spaces (Noland, 2006). The discussion was steered by the following topic guide: What does this image mean to you? Why did you choose this image? How does this image reflect your experiences of safety?

With the permission of the participants, the focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed and uploaded into NVivo for data management to facilitate the qualitative analysis. Data analysis was guided by some of the procedures from thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved multiple readings of the transcripts by the researchers to develop a line-by-line open coding of each transcript. After developing a set of initial codes, we conducted a more detailed selective coding, which we then used to categorise into a number of themes. The development of the final coding scheme was an iterative process (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009), and themes were analysed separately by the two researchers to enable the identification of patterns. The final stage of analysis involved more fine-tuning of the coding and breaking down of the codes into several subthemes, which were then organised into thematic categories,

to explore the interrelationships among them (Braun and Clark, 2006).

Findings and discussion

In this section we will look at some of the key themes which emerged. We address the ways in which young women pay constant attention to their surroundings; the relative safety of home; and their fear of people from out of the area. We move on to address issues of agency and the considerable safety strategies developed by the young women. The next segment addresses the normalisation of what is often gendered violence. In conclusion, we amplify the young women's advice for police and social workers.

Geographies

Paying attention: 'We actually move like boys'

One of the strongest themes which emerged from the focus groups was the way in which the young women paid close attention to what was around them and their awareness of the risks associated with their social locations (Miller, 2008). Road layouts, CCTV, local business and police work hours, seasons, and weather were all noticed and given significance. The young women kept their eyes, ears, and alertness honed and primed at all times. The way they embodied gender (Butler, 1990) and how they were being perceived by others was an integral part of their awareness. Being looked at by both police and other young people functioned as a panoptic disciplinary gaze (Foucault, 1977), impacting how the young women presented themselves. One participant explained: You have to look on the cameras, you have to think, "maybe this camera is watching me"…' As well as sensing when and how they are being watched, some of the participants talked about the gendered ways in which they

moved through space, or performed gender (Butler, 1990): 'We actually move like boys. Right now in the hood the girls have to be like boys. If not you're a bitch [vulnerable due to being perceived as feminine]'.

One participant talked about having to stay on constant alert, explaining, 'it's so unpredictable, you don't know what could happen … that's how you have to be, you can't walk around happily singing your songs in your headphones'. She clarified that this constant scanning of her environment applied to potential police surveillance as well as peer-related dangers: ' … you better be alert … if I am hearing footsteps behind me I'm gonna turn around, flashing lights I'm gonna turn around'. She explained that she keeps her music turned down so she can hear everything. She was very clear that she would not be taken by surprise from behind that if she had to turn around, it would already be too late: ' … I don't look back. You could look back and get acid thrown in your face. So you have to know'. Others look back constantly: another participant explained, 'I have to look back, every second, like what's that, what's that, what's that?' Awareness of their surroundings extended to keen observations of road layouts and pedestrian traffic; as both Beckett et al., (2013) and Berelowitz et al., (2013) find, urban landscapes contain their own specific dangers. A participant showed us a photograph of a quiet street with cars parked along the side of the road and small front gardens, explaining that it was her aunt's house in a nearby town, away from the area where everyone knows her. She explained: ' …(i)t's not a road where you come in on an accidental turn … I feel safe … it's not a place that people go to. If you walk on this road, you have to be there for a reason'.

As well as awareness of one's surroundings and road layout, the young women's sense of risk and safety was also very consciously oriented in time. Perhaps counterintuitively, it seemed that busy, dark night time streets were safe spaces for these young women. Another 'safe space' photograph shown to us was markedly different from the calm afternoon image of an aunt's quiet cul-de-sac of semi-detached houses. It depicted a rainy, dark street. Red and white lights glinted off the rain spattering on the glass wall of a bus stop. The street thronged with people hustling through the night, hoods pulled up. Firmin (2018) identifies the potential for risk in night time forays across urban transport systems, but the data suggests that young people can sometimes feel comfortable going out at night. Whilst their feelings about police were ambivalent – being always on the alert for the panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1977) of CCTV and 'lights flashing' - they also felt safer near the 24 hour police station in their neighbourhood. One young woman explained, 'I've watched guys who've had a fight run into the police station and be safe. So I know personally if I ever had an altercation I could run there and be safe. And it's 24 hours as well'. Another pointed out, 'the 24 hours shop is another place that is safe'. The young women planned when they would leave their houses to coincide with the emergence of an active night-time population under cover of darkness. One explained: 'I am in my bed at like seven o'clock then like, ah I need something to eat or something, I am just gonna wait until it gets a bit later, because … I know that I am gonna see so many people on the high street'. In contrast with their feelings about night-time safety, the young women were not looking forward to the long, hot summer evenings, fearing the lifting of the cover of darkness, and anticipating danger in the lighter evenings. One of the older young women explained: '…it's not that bad right now … come Summer, it's … gonna be like, "… I'm gonna slice your face"'.

The young women's sense of safety was consistently tentative. As one of the young women told us, 'nowhere's safe to be honest, when you think about it you can always bump into the wrong person … anywhere I go, I don't care if it's the nicest area, I will always register things around me, the police station, the train station, somewhere public. All the time'. As Gollub et al., (2019) find, exposure to this kind of constant risk of violence can lead to reduced mental wellbeing. The ways in which the young women described their experience sounded all-encompassing, absorbing much of their emotional and mental energy.

The safety of home: 'I can tell this place from the back of my hand'

The young women felt ambivalent about their local area and their houses. In some ways they felt safer in the familiar spaces around where they lived and at home; in other ways, as Miller (2008) found, social location can be associated with increased risk of violence for young people, and the familiar streets around where they lived were perceived as seething with constant danger. As one of the young women noted, 'every little movement, every little thing you need to notice it, because it could be one little thing that you don't realise and you are gone in that second'. They talked about needing to stay close to home, and were consistent in trying to keep their actual home address private, even from their best friends.

The relative safety of home meant that a lot of the young women tended to avoid leaving what they perceived to be 'their area'. Notwithstanding situations of domestic violence and abuse, many urban youth have been found to feel safer near their families and friends (Zuberi, 2018), especially where there are supportive family

members (Culbya et al., 2019). One of the young women explained, 'to be honest, my circle is East Oakway only … If I'm going out it has to be for a proper reason … I'm talking … not far at all, all on the radius and that, so I can go there, that's my circle'. One young woman showed a photograph of an isolated alleyway opening onto a block of flats and strewn with rubbish. She surprised us by describing it as a safe place and explaining that it was the point on her walk home at which she knew that if she had to, she could get to her house or to the house of a close trusted friend or relative quickly: 'I can run home from there. Once I see here I know that there's so many places that I can go'. Knowing the local area meant that she had options in terms of where she could hide and be protected. Another young woman agreed: 'Yeah … I feel one hundred and ten percent safe. I can tell this place from the back of my hand'.

In contrast with research illustrating the safety offered by supportive family members as opposed to the physical homes themselves (Zuberi, 2018 and Culbya et al., 2019), most of the young women categorised their houses as inherently safe places which they themselves felt a responsibility to protect. One explained, 'I just feel safe at home … I don't know, I feel like nothing can really happen to me, coz I'm not involved in anything'. In order to maintain the safety of home, the young women all protected their addresses carefully. As one participant explained, '… it's about having the initiative to keep your family safe as well. I don't want people coming to my front door. No one has ever been to my house'. As long as their addresses stayed a secret, home was, for many of the young women, the only safe space in their area. As one explained, 'if I stay at my house, no one's coming'. Her friend suggested, 'but you could go to the shop and something could happen'. She responded, 'Yeah of course, one hundred and ten percent, that's why I'd rather not leave'.

Whilst their homes and local known friends and acquaintances were considered to be safe features of their local area (Zuberi, 2018), the young women also saw danger at every corner. One described walking home to her block of flats from the high street: **'**I don't feel safe going home to my building … there's these crack heads and they're taking up all the stairs and the lift takes so long'. There was a sense that the area had become less safe over time, and the young women reflected on changes associated with growing older: **'**… I remember the days when … my mum would give me a little £3 like go to your little holiday club …I had no worries in the world, I wouldn't even need to turn around, I could walk around … with my music fully blown'. This young woman was recounting a time before she was fearful of both local drug addicts and of her own peers. It was an era before gendered lines became blurred- as she explained, 'now, in this generation where girls are seen the same as boys' and anyone could be attacked.

Agency: safety strategies

In the face of frequent and life threatening violence; parents whom the young women were protecting from the true extent of their experience; and poor relationships with police, their choices seem to be greatly constricted. Rather than understanding adolescent girls as inevitably making bad but informed decisions about actions which put them at risk, we offer an alternative conception, viewing the young women as having agency; of being in possession of a wide range of resourceful safety strategies (Bernard, 2020; Yossi, 2005). One of the girls' sense of agency was limited to what we might call 'shapeshifting': she explained how she wore an implacable mask on her face; how she chose to carry herself in East Oakway; and when to vanish from the

area to stay at her aunt's house. How the young women perform an empowered conception of their gender (Butler, 1990); where they choose to spend their time; and carefully risk-assessing their routes around the city could all be seen as judicious, practical choices.

One of the safety strategies described by the young women involved careful preparation for visits out of East Oakway so that that the journey did not go through any rival areas, and to ensure that they were already known and chaperoned by someone local to their destination. Social connection was seen as a real protector (Zuberi, 2018), whilst the idea of simply travelling to another area for a look around was not open to them. As one explained, 'obviously you think about the journey and that … Well I can't just go there and roll up when I don't know anyone from there'. Travelling through the city was fraught with danger. If her bus unexpectedly terminated before arriving into the safety of East Oakway, one of the participants said that she would try to disguise herself and get away quickly: 'I put my hood up yeah and head down'. This situation was potentially more serious for this participant- a young woman who was often mistaken for a boy due to her masculine appearance, demeanour and clothing.

In line with young people interviewed by Zuberi (2018) whose safety strategies included being polite with the local drug dealers and confidential about their activities, the young women in this study frequently used a well-mannered but evasive way of interacting with people as a safety strategy. One participant explained that if she was out of East Oakway and was asked where she lived, '… I'd be like, "oh did you say where am I from? Oh, Oxtown!" (laughter)'. Prevaricating around where they

were really from was the norm. The young women used this friendly, evasive demeanour to distance themselves from potential trouble with outsiders, but they also leveraged it with people perceived as dangerous in the local area. Around older drug dealers ('olders'), this could extend to them shapeshifting; attenuating themselves. One of the young women described this: 'So when we were around them boys the way we're speaking to each other is different, it was as if we were a different person'. Her friend clarified what she meant: 'Well not a different person, it was still us, but we diluted ourselves'. They also talked about being polite and respectful as a way to disarm potential conflict. One young woman described having to walk past people taking drugs in an alleyway on their estate: 'they just let me through. They asked me … for a pound, I gave them a pound, you know. I respect them'. There was a sense that the older young women in the group had developed a calm but assertive way of talking to people through time and experience. Another explained, 'we know how to move on the streets so … if we know like a young person from the area and they move on us [approach us aggressively], we're like, "no, we're not doing that fam", literally'. The Somali Muslim girls were also able to draw on their religious clothing to enhance this aura of respect, and felt that this protected them from street harassment by older Somali men: 'When you're wearing a head scarf and there's other Somalis trying to move to you, they won't move to you if you're wearing a head scarf'. Whilst Firmin (2011) acknowledges that intersections between race and gender can make young women more vulnerable to violence, this strategy indicates a potential opportunity for increased safety inherent in the girls' religious symbols. For one of the participants, this polite, assertive approach extended to avoiding unwanted sexual contact. She explained that it was important to manage young men's expectations before going somewhere with them: '…you can do it in a non-offensive

way as well … I've been in a crack house with a boy and [he has] tried to touch my leg, but when I have moved he has clocked … that I'm not having it … You've got to set the level before you go anywhere'.

Blood and gender: normalised violence

Given their normalised strategies of avoiding unwanted sexual contact, one of the issues we wanted to understand was how the young women analysed misogyny and gender norms inherent in their neighbourhood interactions. We found that gendered violence was particularly normalised among the young people, something reflected in national debates about youth violence in general (Medina et al., 2012; ROTA, 2010; Thapar, 2019). The young women also talked about getting involved in violent situations themselves because of boys, but also *to be like* boys.

Normalised gendered violence: 'you have to stand there and firm it'

The young women described a neighbourhood where sexual harassment and violence was the norm, and this is reflected in the literature (Firmin, 2017; Firmin and Pearce, 2018; Miller, 2008). As one explained, '(t)here's a lot of desperate men out there … they just cat-call you and stuff. You just ignore them, they won't do anything'. The group discussed how Somali men would sometimes target young Somali women, explaining: 'there's … a lot of older males, Somalis … trying to chat to you like ... I'm seeing them pull up with cars like, "let me talk to you", "good legs" and that … sometimes they are like older than your dad'. Other stories were told about how girls had to expect a level of violence in their relationships with the boys they knew: 'I know a girl … she had a altercation with a boy … he came and he sliced her in the face'. The group agreed that in fact there was an acceptable level of violence, and

how they had to just accept it without too much complaint ('stand there and firm it'): as one young woman explained, 'I've been slapped in my face to be honest … Of course a slap is gonna hurt you yeah, but it's not gonna scar you. Yeah you'll get over it… Obviously you are gonna run your mouth a bit, but you have to stand there and firm it'. The young women knew that being hit by a boy was not right, but at the same time, they accepted it as normal *for them.* As one participant explained: '…it's not normal for a girl to be hit but from what I know from what I've seen, it's kind of normal for us. If a girl and a boy have an altercation, you're gonna get slapped if you're a girl. So that shit's normal to me…' She saw it as her own responsibility to ensure that it did not happen again: '…you just think to yourself … what am I gonna do to make sure this doesn't happen next time?' She explained that being slapped was actually 'the best case scenario for you … better than getting punched or stabbed'. The drug dealing territorial conflict between neighbourhoods also engendered violence directed at young women in the area. As they explained, '… boys in Woods Gate are dangerous you know. You've got boys slicing girls in their faces'. Scarring a girl from East Oakway was seen as a way to attack the boys they were friends with.

There were conflicting feelings about why girls were starting to become much more centrally involved in the ongoing violence. This was partly viewed as being related to their relationships with boys, but was also seen as something girls were entering into in their own right, perhaps because sexualised violence has historically been overlooked in relation to debates about youth violence (Medina et al., 2012; ROTA, 2010; Thapar, 2019). Whilst in some ways the young women represented their boy colleagues when they were out of the neighbourhood, sometimes this morphed into them being more than just proxies for the boys: '… sometimes they see girls the same

way they see a boy innit … they think, "cool it's a girl so what?"' For one of the girls in the focus group who had a masculine demeanour and clothing, this was especially dangerous. As her friend said, 'If she walked Woods Gate they will think she is a boy. Oh shame, you are not ok'. On one hand she felt that young women were being unfairly positioned as targets: '…girls are getting targeted for speaking to this person. Like you should be entitled to speak to anyone if you want to … Just coz you two have got postcode wars [disagreements between groups of young people in neighbourhoods which ar ein close proximity], that's nothing to do with the girls'. On the other hand, girls were not perceived as wholly lacking in agency, as one participant suggested: 'Unless the girls are out there actually causing problems, out there to harm the boy'. Another agreed: 'girls want to be involved nowadays … there's girls doing things for boys and the repercussions are coming back onto the girls'. As another woman discovered, if young women become too successful, wealthy and famous within the neighbourhood paradigm, they can put themselves in danger. She explained, '… if you're making money … Boys will say "you're the chap like, you're doing the thing" ... So girls are getting amped [excited] thinking "well I can do what this boy can do, and I can make money", and then they get carried away and they put themselves in a whole different ball game'. The situation had become equally dangerous between young women themselves. Aliyah explained that this was the point at which she had really had enough: 'When I retired yeah, girls was kidnapping girls and I said "saaafe" [I am distancing myself from that]'.

In line with findings on the prevalence of sexual violence towards gang-affected black girls (Firmin, 2009), the older young women had some sage advice for the younger ones: that boys were an unnecessary hassle. An indication of real danger was when

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they started to treat them like one of the boys. One young woman explained: 'Boys are long. Stay away from boys … they start talking to you a certain way, the way they swear at you, they'll be hitting you, stuff like that … you will know the difference'. She told a cautionary tale about a young woman who had been abandoned in a park holding her boyfriend's drugs and then arrested after multiple police arrived in a van: '… they gonna search you and you're going down because he's not taking the blame for you. Chill out innit don't put your trust in boys because it's fun in the Summer, it's fun on Snapchat. No they won't have your back like they are supposed to'.

In addition to the untrustworthy behaviour of the young men of their own age, older adult men were perceived as sometimes lacking in any kind of control over their violent urges. The young women explained that adult men can hardly help themselves: '(t)hey've crossed that line and they don't know where the line stopped, they can't come backwards now'. The young women talked here about the dangers of being trafficked for sexual exploitation: 'These man will [kid]nap you, you're in the back of a … van, you're going to some far place, like Dover or somewhere, and then you're locked in some room and you're getting raped out and that, for no reason just for entertainment'. The stories these young women told were shocking in their violent content, and they were doled out in the focus group as a warning to others. A participant explained: 'I've got a friend … she can't have kids and her fingers are missing. All of them'. Even this young woman was perceived as someone who should have known better. She can be seen to have perhaps normalised gendered violence in her analysis: 'She must have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and man must have [kid]napped her, and chopped off her fingers'.

Blame and responsibility: 'Look, girls are putting themselves in that predicament'.

There was a sense among the young women that they had all been through a stage of putting themselves at risk of sexual violence through making themselves sexually available. It was deeply problematic that these young women seemed to consider that it was their own fault if they allowed it to happen again. One participant acknowledged that this was a regular part of growing up: '… back then like, of course as a young girl when you're fucking with loads of boys like and that, you're gonna be seen as that bitch that "yeh … I know that she is that type of ho".' Unwanted sexual contact came as part of the territory: '… people would say "oh I heard this happened to you", and I'm like, "yeah but what can I say?" … Get over it … Yeah I did it. And what? … Look, girls are putting themselves in that predicament.' Another participant explained that some of young women's vulnerability was due to their need to maintain their heteronormative status as a decorative accessory: 'Boys like to use girls … to use their wants and needs to get them to do what boys want them to do. So if a girl wants a new bag, they like to use that aspiration … to make them do what they want … Nowadays girls are doing it for the image'. This scenario could be understood as one way in which young women's bodily capital is manipulated (Wacquant, 1995; Mears, 2015).

The young women did have some empathy and insight into what could make someone vulnerable to sexual exploitation, particularly if they were being neglected at home. This is line with the literature (Firmin, 2017). One young woman described one acquaintance who had been involved 'in the postcode wars … to a point where she was stabbed in her bum'. However, she acknowledged that this young woman had been especially defenceless when it came to becoming exploited: '… she was

vulnerable, her mum had Huntingdon's disease … her father used to beat her, no one's showing her attention at home … so when she thinks the boys are showing her a little bit of attention … she'll get on her knees and she'll do it'. There was a sense that this could become a normalised way of life: '... She was vulnerable at first and boys were taking advantage of her. But then she adapted to how it was, it was normal to her'.

The young women sketched for us a bleak landscape of their gendered world; one which locked them into an inescapably heteronormative framework (Butler 1990) which privileged sexual violence. If they themselves became too successful, gaining a kudos which transcended gender, they would be attacked and brought down. Their world was one that involved feckless, sexually selfish boys who morphed into helpless, sexually violent men; and then degenerated into incapable older men who needed to be looked after.

Limitations

There are some limitations with the research. One limitation is that the sample size is small and is not necessarily representative of all young black women living in gang-affected neighbourhoods, making the findings not generalisable. Another limitation is that because of the sensitive nature of the topic, the focus group dynamics may not have enabled self-disclosure for all the young women, and some may have been a bit more guarded about sharing their experiences with their peers. There were some domineering voices in the group discussion and at times it felt quite competitive with the more forceful voices drowning out the quieter voices. Maybe a mixture of data-gathering methods for example, individual interviews, might have enhance some of the young women's capacities to find their voices (Bernard, 2013). Additionally,

some participants may not have been as open in sharing experiences that indicates signs of vulnerability, as they may not have wanted to be seen as weak, or as victims. All these factors could have affected the data being obtained and must be considered when interpreting the findings. However, despite this, the focus group discussion around the young black women's photographs provided insights into how they made sense of their behaviours and strategies to resist violence in their neighbourhoods.

Implications and conclusions

Further study might investigate the experiences and perceptions of police and social workers, but this paper focuses on the young women's experiences. Pursuant to the study's youth voice-centred methodological approach, we also frame the implications for policy and practice in their voices. Despite the real life and death pressures of growing up in their neighbourhood, the young women had considerable survival resources. They were also open to sharing their ideas for building stronger relationships with the professionals tasked with keeping them safe. For example, they felt that police could perhaps consider a more nuanced relationship with young people which takes geographical conflict more carefully into consideration. There is scope for a much more trusting relationship where local police are open to understanding the potential in supporting young people to feel protected from outsiders within their neighbourhood. One participant also had some useful advice for social workers, focussed on the need to build constructive relationships: '… It's not about the person, like the child, it's all about books and paperwork. They'll be like, "oh yeah let's go bowling" … How was bowling supposed to make me feel safe?' However, she was still open to building relationships: '…I'm not gonna lie, we are like tough pieces to crack, but when we're broken stuff just comes spilling out, we become more

comfortable, and the last social worker I had … I still see her now and it's love'. The research highlighted the importance of having meaningful engagement with disaffected young people to better understand the complexities of their lived experiences. Social workers must find ways to listen to the voices of marginalised young black women to appreciate the intricacies of their lives in order to know how they can effectively be supported. The findings suggest that the challenging context of the young women's lives contributed to a state of constant hypervigilance, which is bound to have an effect on their well-being. Additionally, social workers have been criticised in the past for what appears to be a lack of professional curiosity about the circumstances of black children in need of support and protection (Bernard, 2020; Bernard and Harris, 2019). Thus, a commitment to trauma-informed interventions with young black women affected by gang-affected violence necessitates social workers developing relational ways of engaging them in order to be fully cognizant of the ways in which their circumstances and environments will impact on their coping mechanisms.

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