

Tackling youth sexual aggression

Observations from the Y-SAV Project



“As young people, we observe anxiety among decision-makers in addressing issues relating to youth and sexuality. Through this statement we want to say that discomfort in talking about youth and sexuality is not more important than young people’s wellbeing, safety, health, pleasure and our human rights.”

FROM THE YOUTH STATEMENT MADE AT THE Y-SAV FORUM, MARCH 2013



Sexual aggression and victimization is a serious problem among Europe’s 12 to 25 year olds, posing a threat to young people’s sexual health and wellbeing. This is the experience of agencies across the European Union (EU), but until now there has been no attempt to gather or compare data. The knowledge base on the issue is very limited, reflecting the difficulties of addressing this sensitive and often unseen problem as well as the differing levels of focus on the sexuality of this age group across European states.

The EU-funded Y-SAV Project, ‘*Understanding and Addressing Youth Sexual Aggression and Victimization as a Threat to Young People’s Sexual Health in Europe*’ ran between June 2010 and December 2013. Y-SAV formed an expert network of more than 130 people and agencies concerned with addressing youth sexual aggression and victimization – people like you: professionals, researchers and policy-makers – and engaged them in dialogue and research.

The project has undertaken three main activities: it mapped the prevalence, risks and responses in each country using existing studies; it has developed tools and guidelines to help standardise data collection and research across Europe in the future; and it undertook extensive stakeholder consultations in nine countries.

This report summarizes the observations, recommendations and examples of good practice from these three Y-SAV activities.



It is important to understand and prevent sexual aggression in the 12–25 age group: adolescence and emerging adulthood are key periods in the development of healthy sexual behaviour and

relationships. Experiences during these years help to shape attitudes to sexuality and gender roles as well as the scripts that guide the behaviour of young people in their future sexual lives. In the current context where media and virtualized socio-sexual interaction are so prevalent, it is critical that young people receive the support they need to develop a positive sexual health lifestyle and the competencies for positive sexual interaction.

WHAT IS YOUTH SEXUAL AGGRESSION AND VICTIMIZATION?

- ▶ Sexual aggression has been defined as behaviour with the intent or result of making another person engage in sexual activity or sexual communication despite his or her unwillingness to do so.
- ▶ Sexual aggression and victimization is common in the youth age group, 12 to 25.
- ▶ Youth sexual aggression can take many forms including different kinds of physical and emotional coercion, like relentlessly talking someone into sex, or withholding affection until sex is agreed to, threatening or using violence, as well as taking advantage of an inability to resist due to alcohol or drugs.
- ▶ There are many grey areas in sexual aggression and there are many sexual pressures and types of unwanted sex that do not fit neatly within the legal framework of sexual violence, but nonetheless require society's action.

Mapping the evidence

In December 2012 Y-SAV published reports covering 27 European countries. These outline government policy, legislation, services and the agencies providing them, prevalence research, risk factors and any evidence-based interventions. The Y-SAV review of the prevalence research showed that a high proportion of young people in some countries have experienced sexual aggression, with a number of studies finding over 40% of girls and young women affected.

The prevalence research varied enormously: studies varied in the age groups they considered, their methods, and their definitions of sexual aggression and victimization. This made it impossible to draw conclusions about the overall scale of the problem across the EU or make country comparisons. Some countries had no prevalence studies to offer, others as many as sixteen. The majority restricted their findings to heterosexual relations – less than a third of countries had data on same sex aggression.

With thorough reviews of the legal and social situation, and their comprehensive listings of active agencies, the country reports provided a vital foundation for the next stage in Y-SAV's work. These reports make useful reading for anyone working in youth sexual aggression and victimization in one of the EU states. View them at: ysav.rutgerswpf.org/country-reports

Progress in research

Faced with the disparity of studies and their data, the Y-SAV project identified a need for harmonization in research and tested the Potsdam Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale for the purpose, originally designed

and tested in Germany. The instrument measures self-reported sexual aggression and victimization since the legal age of consent or in a specified time period. It integrates four dimensions: the coercive strategies used; the sexual acts involved; the relationship between victim and perpetrator; and the genders involved and their roles.

The instrument, piloted in ten Y-SAV network countries, is part of the provision of a set of good practice criteria for measuring sexual aggression developed to promote the comparability and strengthen the quality of the methodology used in empirical studies across Europe. It has now been made available in nine languages. For more information, have a look at: ysav.rutgerswpf.org/research-instrument

Stakeholder consultations for a deeper understanding

Consultations were conducted in nine EU member states (Ireland, Spain, Lithuania, Greece, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands); a total of 73 organizations and 20 individual experts participated. The participants identified the main shortfalls and opportunities to address youth sexual aggression and victimization across areas ranging from the policy and legal framework to the nature of local interventions. The consultations produced recommendations to improve responses to youth sexual aggression at both the EU level and the level of individual member states. All full stakeholder consultation reports can be found at the Y-SAV website: ysav.rutgerswpf.org/recommendations

Recommendations for research and monitoring

- ✓ Use a uniform set of quality standards and indicators in your monitoring
- ✓ Disaggregate data by gender and age
- ✓ Integrate sexual violence questions into annual health surveys
- ✓ Obtain ethical approval for your research and make provision for support and/or referral
- ✓ Coordinate research on scale and risk to facilitate country comparisons
- ✓ Link individual risk factors to national risk factors: e.g. individuals' attitudes to sexual violence could be linked to national levels of sexual offences against the age group, their drinking behaviour to the country's youth drinking culture
- ✓ Complement quantitative surveys with in-depth qualitative analysis of the understanding of sexual aggression among young people and the social construction of their sexual relationships
- ✓ Use the right definitions and the right language:
 - » Adopt an explicit definition of the concept of sexual aggression and victimization
 - » Distinguish youth sexual aggression from child sexual abuse, according to the relevant legal definition
 - » Use language appropriate to the age group you are working with
 - » Describe sexual aggression in terms of behaviour (e.g. 'used the threat of violence to make another person have sexual intercourse') not categorical labels (e.g. 'raped another person').

1 HOW THE LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK HELPS AND HINDERS US

A fundamental problem of working with teenagers and young adults is the way they fall between two stools. Sometimes regarded as children, sometimes as adults, often they are not addressed as a group with specific needs. This is exacerbated by varying ages of consent across Europe, from 13 in Spain to 18 in Malta, and the gap that appears between that age of consent and the legal definition of adulthood. The *UN Child Convention* sets this at 18 years, but this has not been accepted as the legal norm. The child protection system is inadequate to deal with the sexual life of young people: child sex abuse responses view under-18 adolescents as the passive victims of adults, disregarding their sexual agency as well as their potential for aggression. Meanwhile responses framed by domestic violence often focus on women in long-term relationships, ignoring the specific dynamic of intimate adolescent relationships. The 12–25 age group does not get the specific attention and protection it needs.

In the EU it is left to member states to determine their criminal and procedural law, but two Council of Europe conventions promote the harmonization of statutory rights on youth sexual aggression and victimization, the *Lanzarote Convention* and the *Istanbul Convention*. These cover the protection of children against sexual exploitation and the prevention of violence against women respectively. It is to be hoped that all member states will ratify both of these conventions.

Legislation on rape and sexual violence describes what are considered criminal sexual acts by law. Within the EU, three types of rape law can be distinguished that draw different lines with regard to the level of coercion or unwillingness that must be expressed for the act to be considered a crime: a law based on violence or threat; a law based on violence and a helpless state; and a law based on non-consent. In countries where a violence or threat-based definition of rape is still in order, a perpetrator can only be convicted when there is physical proof of force.

States that ratify the *Istanbul Convention* are obliged to criminalize all non-consensual sex acts, but currently only three states in the EU have a rape law based on non-consent: Belgium, Ireland and the UK. Redefining



EXPANDING THE DEFINITION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Stakeholders observed that different legal definitions of domestic violence and/or gender-based violence often do not take account of the needs of younger victims. The legislation is primarily concerned with the protection of people, mostly women, who face marital violence or violence perpetrated by a co-habiting partner. This shortfall and the need to make definitions more inclusive is increasingly recognized.

For example, in 2013 the UK government approved a change in its definition of domestic violence. Before, the official definition was limited to people of 18 and older who are in abusive relationships; on 31 of March 2013, the definition was expanded to include controlling behaviour and 16 and 17 year olds.

rape in law from a crime of violence to a crime against integrity, based on non-consent rather than coercion, is a way to support the vulnerable and may strengthen young people's concept of sexual integrity and self-determination. A rape law based on non-consent, not on coercion, could gradually make the need for clear consent a natural condition for all sexual acts, as it requires everyone involved to take active steps to obtain clear consent.

Disparities in legal and other responses to youth sexual aggression and victimization, including rape, correspond to levels of reporting of these problems: countries with higher levels of reported cases have a more robust legal and social response in place than countries with low reporting rates. This seems to be a vicious circle: assuming the difference in reporting is in some part due to willingness to report, it is hard to promote reporting without the adequate social and legal attitude and support in place, while achieving that without higher levels of reporting is clearly a challenge.

Recommendations to the EU

- ✓ Hold states accountable for their dual responsibility in preventing and responding to sexual violence, and direct them to address youth sexual aggression and victimization more specifically
- ✓ Recognize youth as a distinct state of development different from childhood and adulthood within policies on gender-based violence, and recognize the needs of young people of 12–25 years old, but most notably those between the age of consent and legal adulthood
- ✓ Officially recognize and involve young people as valuable partners in addressing and understanding the dynamics of youth sexual aggression and victimization
- ✓ Financially support mutual learning between member states on the eradication of youth sexual aggression and victimization
- ✓ Fully incorporate sexual health and the promotion of respectful sexual relationships within EU health policies and programmes
- ✓ Work towards harmonization of rights-based comprehensive sexuality education across the EU territory
- ✓ Ground policies on evidence and facilitate the standardization of data collection on youth sexual aggression and victimization
- ✓ The EU should sign and ratify the *Lanzarote* and *Istanbul Conventions*, and take into account the specific needs of adolescents and young adults in their implementation

Recommendations to national authorities

- ✓ Consider young people (12–25 years old) as a specific age group and target cohort in policy making on sexual violence
- ✓ Use a more positive approach in policy making on youth sexuality and recognize young people as sexual agents
- ✓ Create conditions for meaningful youth participation at all stages of decision-making
- ✓ Establish reporting protocols on child protection and sexual violence instead of mandatory reporting legislation that can compromise confidentiality and professional judgement
- ✓ Assure sustainability of funding and continuity of services on youth sexual aggression and victimization
- ✓ Change the rape law from coercion to non-consent
- ✓ Use the signal function of such a law – 'a no is always a no' – in youth education
- ✓ Widen the sexual aggression crime catalogue (in countries with narrower legislation)
- ✓ Exchange good legal practices, in investigation and assessment
- ✓ Promote reporting of sexual crimes to the police
- ✓ Improve the legal support of victims

2 PREVENTION OF YOUTH SEXUAL AGGRESSION AND VICTIMIZATION

Stakeholders at all levels point to the need for strategies to prevent youth sexual aggression and victimization by addressing its root causes. Because it can reach a high proportion of young people, in-school and out-of-school comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a critical part of primary prevention. Existing sexuality education programmes have serious limitations: they are sometimes influenced by religious concerns, usually subject to parental approval, delivered by non-specialists and often focus on only the physical side of sex.



CAMPAIGN IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Dutch 'Speak easy about sex' campaign aims to prevent unwanted sexual behaviour among young people 12–18 years old.

An online game (www.canyoufixit.nl) and a poster campaign promote open communication about sex and asking about the other person's desires and limits rather than assuming consent.

Good CSE programmes should not only address the risks and the physical aspects of sexuality, but also look at the emotional aspects of relationships, as well as the gender stereotypes and myths that normalise sexual violence. Sexuality education should also demonstrate how to create ethical, respectful sexual relationships. A positive approach towards sexuality and the recognition of adolescents as young people with sexual feelings can lead to a more open communication between young people.

Recommendations

- ✓ Use a positive approach towards sexuality and focus on attitudes and skills-building
- ✓ Focus more on boys and masculinity within prevention of youth sexual aggression and victimization
- ✓ Secure youth participation in the design and delivery of comprehensive sexuality education
- ✓ Create and monitor minimum standards for comprehensive sexuality education
- ✓ Provide adequate and sufficient training to professionals so they can in turn deliver sensitive and non-judgemental support and advice to young people
- ✓ Invest in complementary out-of-school prevention programmes addressing sexual aggression and victimization to reach those young people who are marginalized from mainstream education

3 CARE AND SUPPORT TO YOUNG VICTIMS

The care and support to victims of youth sexual aggression is inconsistent. Not all countries have developed or adapted services specifically to meet their needs. Some countries have initiatives to provide sexual health and rights counselling and support on sexual violence to young people; others have established one-stop rape crisis centres, combining the legal, medical and mental health services on one site. These are the exceptions. In many instances people younger than 18 are referred to child support services, while those over 18 have to seek support at services that are often centred on domestic violence.

Recommendations

- ✓ Establish or support youth-friendly services that are accessible to a diverse group of young people and take account of their realities and needs
- ✓ Create conditions for meaningful youth participation in the design, evaluation and implementation of services on youth sexual aggression and victimization
- ✓ Provide education for professionals so they are able to respond to young people's needs and rights and can give sensitive and non-judgemental support



CAMPAIGNS IN IRELAND AND UNITED KINGDOM

The '2in2u' campaign implemented by Women's Aid Ireland draws back from a narrow definition of domestic violence and aims at awareness raising on healthy relationships and the more subtle forms of coercive behaviour within relationships (stalking, being too pushy and controlling).

www.womensaid.ie/campaigns/2in2u.html

The UK's 'This is abuse' campaign encourages teenagers to re-think their ideas about whether violence, abuse or controlling behaviour is acceptable in relationships and directs them to help and advice. thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk

4 AWARENESS RAISING AND CAMPAIGNING

Project Y-SAV identified a gap in awareness raising and campaigning: government sponsored campaigns predominantly deal with physical violence towards women in long-term relationships and child sexual abuse and do not sufficiently appeal to young people or address youth sexual aggression and victimization. These campaigns often focus on the female victim and her need to report and seek support, not addressing the role of men and boys as perpetrators, perpetuating the myth that male sex drive is uncontrollable and women must be responsible for setting limits on it.

Recommendations

- ✓ Invest in campaigns that address the full spectrum of youth sexual aggression and victimization including the 'grey areas' of more subtle sexual coercion and pressure, target boys and men, and reach out to bystanders
- ✓ Realize the potential of social media to reach out to young people



ONE-STOP CENTRES FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE

In Sweden there are 30 regional Children's Advocacy Centres where children subjected to sexual or domestic violence meet police, prosecutor, child psychiatrist/psychologist, child physician and social worker under the same roof, for investigation, support and rehabilitation. This one-stop location offers the minimum required help as soon as possible and the victim is not obliged to pass through different services at different locations.

5 TREATMENT OF PERPETRATORS AND THOSE EXHIBITING RISK BEHAVIOUR

There is an increased recognition that tailored prevention is needed for youth, particularly adolescents (12–18 years old), that does not target them only as passive victims of sexual violence, and also addresses sexual coercion and violence within peer-to-peer relationships. Countries differ in their ways of dealing with young people with aggressive and/or coercive sexual behaviour and in who deals with them. However, there is agreement among stakeholders that treatment programmes for young people who have committed a sexual offence are not sufficiently established or integrated into the legal system in the majority of the countries.

Recommendations

- ✓ Invest in mandatory educational programmes both for young perpetrators and young people who exhibit risk behaviour
- ✓ Secure the institutional, organizational and financial sustainability of these educational programmes by, for example, embedding them within the state's legal and institutional systems



THE NETHERLANDS' RESPECT LIMITS PROGRAMME

Young offenders in the Netherlands can be sent to a mandatory educational programme, 'Respect Limits', instead of going to prison.

The main purpose of the training programme is to encourage juvenile sex offenders to change their behaviour by recognizing and respecting limits, developing a different attitude and adequate skills, and learning from mistakes.

The programme has been practised in the Netherlands for over 25 years. Respect Limits is approved by the Ministry of Safety and Justice. A study revealed that 97% of the youngsters did not commit a further sexual offence after finishing the training.



What you can do

- ✓ Join the Y-SAV network at ysav.rutgerswpf.org
- ✓ Visit the Y-SAV web site and promote it to others
- ✓ Read the country reports and research papers
- ✓ Follow up on the recommendations for policy and practice
- ✓ Contact Y-SAV with your own responses
- ✓ Use the Y-SAV research tool in your own studies and share your results
- ✓ Distribute the Youth Statement



ysav.rutgerswpf.org



TACKLING YOUTH SEXUAL AGGRESSION: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH



Dating violence; nightlife harassment and violence; night club commenting and groping; sexual harassment at work; coercion and aggression under the influence of alcohol/drugs; pressure of peers into sexually harassing behaviour; relentlessly talking someone into first intercourse; not accepting limits set; demanding sex in exchange for love or friendship; taking advantage of someone's lack of assertiveness; persistent pushing for sexual relations; stalking; display of excess sexual preoccupation; preoccupation getting out of hand; sexual coercion out of lack of knowledge, lack of skill, uncertainty, anxiousness, miscommunications; on-going inequality in terms of persistent initiative and giving in; persistent compliance and surrender to avoid worse; webcam aggression; unwanted 'sexting'; forced exposure to sexual images in social media; exhibitionism; pressure to watch porn, to copy porn; sexual hate crimes because of deemed non-conformative feelings or behaviours; extreme employment of the double standard; sexual aggression out of boredom and frustration; honour-related violence; forcing someone to have sex for money; forced prostitution; sexual violence by youth gangs and as part of broader urban violence; etc.

Issues

Adolescent assertion of identity and autonomy; rapid hormonal changes; emotional and social uncertainty; intense social life and youth activities; experimentation with alcohol and drugs; sexualized youth cultures; omnipresent sexualized media and commerce; double messages; sexual double standards; heteronormativity; lack of experience; lack of information and knowledge; a whole new virtualized sexual world; readily available sexual explicit materials; first sexual experiences; peer pressures; sexuality loaded with meaning; low body esteem; contradictory messages (media versus parents); lack of knowledge of one's body; cultural diversity; changing bodies; adolescent impulsiveness; sensitivity for social pressures; pressure of gender stereotypes; sensitivity for gender stereotypes; extensive use of the internet; extensive use of social media; gender differences in sexual motivation and meaning; guilt and shame and anxiety; lack of supportive structures; defective (inter)national responses; young people's sexual rights controversial; abstinence-only education; adolescent sexual experimentation; etc.

Context



Y-SAV is a collaborative project of the following partners: Rutgers WPF, the Netherlands; Department of Psychology, University of Potsdam, Germany; Faculty of Law, Stockholm University, Sweden; MTVC Training, Research and Development Centre, Lithuania; Department of Social Work of the Technological Educational Institute of Crete, Greece; YouAct, Europe; and of these affiliated partners: Slovak Academy of Sciences, Slovakia; Društvo ŠKUC, Slovenia; Papardes Zieds, Latvia; Technical University of Lisbon, Portugal; University of Warsaw, Poland. A full list of partners and respondents is available at: ysav.rutgerswfpf.org

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