



National Rapporteur on Trafficking in
Human Beings and Sexual Violence
against Children

Reliance on resilience

*The characteristics (of the approach) of
sexual violence against young women
in Amsterdam*

Management Summary

trafficking sexual
in violence
human beings against
children

Summary

Practically half of all girls experience a form of sexual violence during their lifetime.¹ Sexual violence often has profound, long-term physical and emotional consequences. In Amsterdam professionals also have major concerns about signs of transgressive behaviour and sexual violence against young women. Young women and girls who usually stay under the radar, who are deprived of assistance and support in their environment, are isolated and exposed to harassment and sexual violence.²

This emerged during a discussion held at the mayoral residence in Amsterdam in July 2019. The discussion, together with earlier signals from the city, prompted Amsterdam's Municipal Executive to highlight the approach to tackling harassment and violence against women as a priority. The approach has been implemented in the 'Programme against sexual harassment and sexual violence' consisting of a package of measures.³ One of those measures involves visualising the problem. The municipality of Amsterdam requested assistance from the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children in obtaining a coherent picture of the problem in Amsterdam, and in providing action perspectives to strengthen the approach to tackling sexual violence in Amsterdam. This constituted the reason for conducting this study.

The aim of this study therefore was twofold: to obtain greater insight into the nature of victimhood in sexual violence in Amsterdam, and to provide action perspectives to adequately address this problem. To that end, various sub-questions have been formulated in this report. The sub-questions focus on three aspects: who are the girls who are facing this problem, what are they experiencing and how are the city authorities concerned dealing with it. Ten cases submitted by the City of Amsterdam were examined for this purpose. Each case involves one girl, who professionals in her environment believe has fallen victim to sexual violence. The girls in the selected cases have almost always been on the radar of the municipality and other authorities in the city. Various professionals were also interviewed about their general views on both sexual violence and the other problems of these girls in Amsterdam. The consequences of this selection for the generalisability of the results for a larger group of victims are discussed in the research justification.

This summary recaps the combined findings and sheds more light on the nature of the problem in Amsterdam. On that basis, action perspectives for the municipality of Amsterdam can be outlined from the perspective of the victim, the professional and the municipality of Amsterdam. This has resulted in a number of guiding principles for strengthening the approach, which are described at the end of this summary.

1 National Rapporteur 2019 (Sexual Violence against Children Victims Monitoring Report 2017–2018)

2 City of Amsterdam (2020). Council letter '*Programma tegen seksuele intimidatie en seksueel geweld*' ('Programme against sexual harassment and sexual violence'). Consulted on <https://www.amsterdam.nl/jijstaatnietalleen/maatregelen/>

3 City of Amsterdam website <https://www.amsterdam.nl/jijstaatnietalleen/maatregelen/> (consulted on 28 August 2020)

1.1 Sexual violence in Amsterdam: the characteristics of the phenomenon

The ten cases examined in this study present a worrisome picture. The girls in the case studies, as well as the families they come from, have to deal with an accumulation of problems. They are experiencing problems in several areas of life. According to the majority of the professionals interviewed, it usually begins with a lack of basic safety within the family, for instance, as a result of domestic violence or messy divorce issues. Other problems also play a role, such as absence from school, addiction, poverty and delinquent behaviour.⁴ The differences between the two cultures in which many girls live, moreover, are usually described by the professionals interviewed as an additional complicating factor in their development. This is believed to give girls an additional incentive to find out where they belong. There are few protective factors, such as a support network.

In these cases the multiple problems, which begin in early youth, appear to be closely linked to experiencing various forms of sexual violence. According to a number of the professionals interviewed, the sexual violence experienced by these girls is a consequence of being unsafe in the past. The signs of sexual violence described in these cases related not only to unprotected casual sexual contacts and sharing revealing photos on social media, but also to exposing, sextortion, suspicions of girls being recruited to visit hotels, exchange sex and maintaining a network of boys for places to sleep. However, most of the girls do not consider themselves victims, according to the professionals involved. Furthermore, it is notable that the girls themselves not infrequently seem to be perpetrators of exposing, sextortion or the ‘recruitment’ of other girls.

In both the case studies and the professionals’ accounts, social media has emerged as a key factor in the occurrence of these various forms of sexual violence. This is because virtually all forms of sexual violence that have occurred in the cases have been facilitated through social media, for instance, in the form of dates between boys and girls arranged through certain platforms. However, uncertainty has often continued to exist among the professionals involved about many of the suspicions and signs of sexual violence in the cases. This appears to stem from a lack of insight, expertise and common standards on this topic to be able to distinguish, identify and appropriately follow up on the various forms of sexual violence. A lack of appropriate early diagnostics and expert treatment for this target group was therefore identified several times as a bottleneck in the approach by the professionals interviewed.

In the majority of the cases this has resulted in a long history of assistance with many different social workers. Relationship and sexuality problems often failed to be addressed as a result of the bottlenecks described above. Furthermore, interventions and sessions with professionals were not always adapted to the target group’s age or cultural background. At the time of conducting the study – the average age of the girls was 18.5 years, their problems had begun to worsen from the start of puberty – most of them had reached a point at which they had lost all confidence in both themselves and in the social services.

4 For more information on this topic, see also the National Rapporteur 2017 (Sexual Violence against Children Victims Monitoring Report 2016) and the National Rapporteur 2019 (Sexual Violence against Children Victims Monitoring Report 2017–2018).

1.2 Action perspectives

The case studies researched relating to sexual violence in Amsterdam are therefore characterised by multiple and complex problems, which moreover are variable due, for instance, to the influence of social media. This also requires a multidimensional analysis of those problems and the associated action perspectives. We have therefore discussed a number of reference points from three different perspectives: that of the victim (at case level), that of the professional (at operational level) and that of the Municipal Executive (at strategic level). As shown in the report, although different aspects are important based on perspective, together the different aspects are all relevant for a meaningful approach, given the nature of the multiple problems.

1.2.1 Victim's perspective

As this study shows, victims have to deal with many different and also complex problems. Problems that are often rooted in a lack of basic safety, which has failed to be adequately addressed. After a long history of care the girls have often lost confidence in the social services and in themselves. It is particularly important for victims to work on building motivation and confidence. This can be achieved by offering positive future prospects, for instance, by attending school again, or finding a (part-time) job or internship. A too unilateral focus on vulnerabilities and risk factors can in fact have a harmful effect. Moreover, many of the girls will benefit from an unbiased approach by the social services because they do not need the umpteenth adult to tell them what they are doing wrong. In addition, in the interest of the victims, it is important to ensure that the burden of the various ongoing interventions are closely monitored. The research brought to light multiple examples where the combination of various interventions imposed an excessive burden on a girl of that age, which was detrimental to her motivation.

In addition to a lack of confidence in themselves and in social services, the study also revealed that many girls do not have an adequate reference framework for relationships and sexuality. They are unaware of their own sexual wishes and boundaries and therefore fail to recognise when someone transgresses those boundaries. This also applies to sexuality online. The newness of this phenomenon contributes all the more to the lack of an adequate reference framework in this area. Therefore, it is crucial that girls are already offered guidance in their early youth on (online) sexuality, and receive support in their sexual development so that they can determine for themselves what their boundaries are and how they can indicate them.

Furthermore, this study has revealed that many girls can become not only a victim but also a perpetrator of sexual violence by, for instance, 'recruiting' other girls to perform sexual acts with third parties. However, the way in which perpetratorhood unfolds and the manner in which this is linked to victimhood of sexual violence was unable to be clarified during this study. This concurrence and the mechanisms behind it therefore require further attention and research.

Where girls are sometimes unaware of their victimhood, boys are also sometimes unaware of their perpetratorhood because they themselves lack the guidance to be able to make choices in this area. Consequently, it is important for both victims and perpetrators to provide a sexual reference framework to help them identify their boundaries and assess the consequences of their actions for others.⁵

⁵ For more information, see also the National Rapporteur 2017 (Effective Prevention).

1.2.2 Professional's perspective

Professionals find it a positive development that the topic of sexual violence in Amsterdam is high on the municipality's agenda. Sexual violence has been on the agenda for a long time, according to professionals, but the mayor's recent programme has shined a brighter spotlight on it. That focus, and specifically the focus on this vulnerable group, is essential for doing something about this topic and creating awareness among professionals. It is also necessary to gain insight into a problem that would otherwise never have surfaced by itself: you only see it when you understand it.

A significant bottleneck identified by professionals is the lack of early and adequate diagnostics and triage. Professionals emphasised that hardly any of the assistance offered in the history of assistance in the cases seems to tackle the fundamental problems in the girl's life: the basic lack of safety and attachment in early youth, and the relationship and sexuality problems –perhaps ensuing from this – occurring from the age of puberty onwards. This is concerning because the problem has been allowed to escalate throughout the girls' lives. For adequate and early diagnostics the professionals need expertise to be able to make a correct assessment of what is needed, and in what order: how can they 'keep pace' with the complexity of the problem? This also involves particular expertise in the area of relationships, sexuality and sexual violence and the role played by social media in this regard. Furthermore, the correlation with the cultural background of a number of the victims requires the provision of assistance that takes into account the role of sexuality in the specific environment in which these girls grow up.

Based on this study, it could be argued that in principle the knowledge is available in Amsterdam: there is an active youth assistance organisation with specific expertise on the theme, the Centre for Sexual Violence (CSG), and the Sexual Violence Support Centre Amsterdam (SSGA). However, that expertise should be made more readily available to the professionals working in the various executive agencies in the city. Particularly front-end agencies working for instance at neighbourhood level that have a signalling function. They should be able to make an initial assessment of the problem and, where necessary, be able to call in easily accessible additional expertise to be able to assess the signs in an adequate manner and to respond in an appropriate manner. And if this fails, by promptly calling in the additional assistance of the organisation that does have this expertise in-house.

In the area of sexuality (online or otherwise) and sexual violence, besides factual knowledge of the theme, a common system of standards should also be developed. It emerged from the interviews that the way in which professionals identify the behaviour of these girls, is inextricably linked to their own norms and values relating to relationships and sexuality. These can vary significantly among professionals. Moreover, some professionals feel that they are not in a position to voice an opinion about the girls' behaviour. A contributory factor is that social media, and its connection with sexuality, is a relatively new phenomenon, which is not always understood by professionals. There will always be differences in standards relating to sexuality, but creating a certain basic vision⁶ on what type of behaviour and which sexual acts at each development level are concerning, and which are not, should offer professionals more action perspectives.

6 *Het Vlaggensysteem* ('The Flag System'), www.vlaggensysteem.nl, for example could be considered for this purpose (consulted on 28 August 2020).

Another important aspect, which the professionals who were involved in the study stated they needed, is the room to provide assistance tailored to these girls. Professionals want to be able to do what is needed for the child. Even if this means that a decision must be taken beyond the scope of the protocol. In some cases, professionals consider it necessary to depart from the protocol to protect or help the girls but find that they do not always receive administrative backing (see §1.2.3).

Finally, in order to be able to provide tailored assistance collaboration is essential between professionals from the various organisations involved – both formally and informally – from the healthcare services and explicitly from the criminal justice system as well. This entails carefully examining and considering which interventions should be used, at which time and in which order so as to prevent ill-timed or unfocused action being taken in crisis situations. This requires overarching coordination and supervision: not so much from a hierarchical point of view, but rather in terms of establishing coherent links between the various professional domains and organisations, always from a problem-based perspective.

In Amsterdam such a collaboration is already evolving for certain aspects in the Top 1000 for offenders. The pilot in Amsterdam-West in which the complex casuistry of girls' problems is discussed in a multidisciplinary team of professionals from various organisations ties in with this collaborative method of working as does the style of working in the Centre for Sexual Violence (CSG). This enables professionals to reach decisions jointly and to learn from casuistry.

1.2.3 Administrative perspective

The study shows that in terms of the administrative preconditions there is a good basis in Amsterdam for further developing the approach to tackling sexual violence. This may relate to the manner in which organisations have traditionally worked together in the city: with a focus on neighbourhoods and districts, relatively good insight into which environments have above-average vulnerability, collaboration within and between the executive agencies, in which professionals generally know who to approach with certain issues. This is a relevant context in which to start working with this target group and that wish has also been explicitly expressed by the Municipal Executive: sexual violence is high up on the agenda. Efforts undertaken to tackle sexual violence must be consistently maintained in the long term. The problem spans several areas of life – with a lack of basic safety quite often at the top of the list – and moreover is passed down from one generation to the next. It requires perseverance to change this. Recognition of the inextricable link between victimhood and perpetratorhood, and the absolute necessity to additionally prevent, put an end to and punish perpetratorhood is essential in this regard.

Based on the complexity and the variability of the problems described earlier, we have to acknowledge that the approach to tackling it will not fit within the traditional organisational domains in the system. Special provisions in the approach are required. A case breakthrough is sometimes achieved because the professionals involved deviate from the protocol, as has also emerged from this study. The possibility to deviate – with good reason – from the regular working methods and protocols should therefore be incorporated into the system. This requires organisational and administrative backing to legitimise such choices. The guiding principle is that deviating from protocol is not the objective: solving the problem is the objective. This 'route' must be explicitly set out in the system; this will also offer professionals room to make choices in the child's best interests. In certain cases such administrative backing means that the most complicated problems should also end up on the desks of those who have the mandate

to make the most complicated decisions. They can offer support to resolve dilemmas adequately. A set of rules of the game and agreements could be formulated for this purpose.

Another advantage of discussing the most complex case studies at the highest administrative level, is – as equally applies from a professional perspective – that learning ability (based on plan, do, check, act) will be encouraged so that opportunities and obstacles in the system can be identified, and in turn addressed. The casuistic information can be utilised to monitor and strengthen the broader approach to tackling sexual violence. However, this means that these findings and actions must be documented.

1.3 Guiding principles

Based on the findings on the nature of the problem (Section 1.1) and on the various action perspectives (Section 1.2), a number of basic elements can be formulated for a meaningful approach. This is neither a winning formula nor an exhaustive list of effective factors: as the name suggests, they should be interpreted as guiding principles for strengthening the approach.

1. *Keep a sharp eye on basic safety*

A fundamental aspect of the problem is the lack of basic safety and attachment in the girls' early youth, and relationship and sexuality problems – perhaps ensuing from it – occurring from the age of puberty onwards. If this aspect is not initially recognised and addressed, there is a risk that the problem will escalate throughout the girls' lives. For that matter, a focus on safety also means recognising the inextricable link between victimhood and perpetratorhood, and the absolute necessity to additionally prevent, put an end to and punish perpetratorhood in the approach to this problem.

2. *Offer professionals room to provide tailored assistance*

Professionals must be given the room to do what is necessary. Solving the problem always is the central aim. Even if this means that a departure must be made from the protocol (with good reason). This calls for expertise on the part of the professional (see also the following paragraph) and a mandate, with organisational and administrative backing to legitimise such choices. In some cases such administrative backing also means that the most complicated decisions can also be shared by the professional at that level.

3. *Provide available expertise for early diagnostics and referral*

In order to identify, diagnose and provide the appropriate follow-up on the problems surrounding sexual violence as early as possible, the problems (and protective factors) must be clearly identified. On that basis an assessment can be made of the actions and the order in which they are needed. This requires expertise in the field (both actual expertise and a common system of standards) to be able to identify these constantly changing forms of sexual violence and victimhood and perpetratorhood in different cultural contexts. And the possibility of calling in additional expertise, where necessary.

4. *Continue to maintain the learning ability in the approach sustainably and in the long term*

Sexual violence is a broad, complex problem that spans several areas of life. Moreover, the phenomenon itself is subject to permanent change – for example, due to the influence of social media. This study has brought to light that many professionals have consequently found it difficult to identify signs of sexual violence. Developments in the problem must therefore be

continuously considered and reflected upon. So we will know how to deal with them, in order to learn from this and incorporate those insights into the approach, and then monitor it. This should also include permanent professional development for professionals.

5. *Involve the target group*

Much of the above discussed the problems facing the girls in the case studies examined, and the best way to deal with them. We would like to conclude with the reverse: the study also brought to light the opportunities the girls have as a result of their qualities, talent, dreams and wishes. And those who are best-placed to describe how to enter the (often online!) social world of the girls, are the girls themselves. The target group should therefore be involved in further developing the approach.



Who is the National Rapporteur?

The National Rapporteur is Herman Bolhaar. The Dutch National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children consists of the National Rapporteur and a team of enthusiastic employees with a multidisciplinary background.

What does the National Rapporteur do against human trafficking and sexual violence against children?

The National Rapporteur investigates the nature and extent of human trafficking and sexual violence against children in the Netherlands. In the annual monitoring reports and the thematic studies, the emphasis is on monitoring and improving the strategies for tackling human trafficking and sexual violence against children.

Based on information from a wide range of sources, the National Rapporteur advises national and local government, other administrative bodies, international organisations and professionals who provide help and support, on how to prevent and combat human trafficking and sexual violence against children.

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