



## **Child Sexual Exploitation: We Need Better Training for Social Workers**

Following yet another report on child sexual exploitation, and another government missive on social work failings, it's surely time to address the root of the problem.

This is quite lengthy so apologies for that, but in order to do the subject justice we need to understand where the problems are.

Let's start with social work training. There are a number of key areas which need to be covered in order to ensure that students are equipped to practice. These are generally, but not exclusively, reflective practice, legislation, communication, partnership working and human growth & development.

Within these subjects there is scope & flexibility for lecturers to provide teaching on certain areas of interest and expertise. But there is no requirement to cover sexual exploitation, domestic and sexual violence or victim blaming. There is also no requirement to encourage students to apply a feminist, or gendered, analysis of those subjects. This means that there is no recognition of gendered crime and no understanding of the role of women and girls in a patriarchal society. This is clear from my years of social work and as a social work lecturer. So many times I have had to challenge rape myths or male violence myths with students who don't understand where these views come from.

So, having had adequate, degree level education and skills development, the students qualify and go out into social work. They have learned what legislation applies to which area, how to use different communication skills and the role of theories in working with vulnerable people.

What they haven't learned is that male violence against women is an epidemic, that domestic abuse interventions should focus on the perpetrator not the victim, that young people are coerced and manipulated into sexual exploitation by adult men who rape and traffic them. They have not learned to believe.

Placed in a busy child protection team they quickly discover that there are no resources to do the job properly. The funding for the team is non-existent, and the case loads are unmanageably high. Why? Well, local authorities have repeatedly had their funding cut. The financial investment in health and social care has been reduced to the bare minimum which means that savings are made by reducing staff numbers. Reducing staff numbers means increasing case loads on those staff left, thus increasing the stress and anxiety of social workers which impacts on staff trying to deliver safe and effective interventions.

The newly qualified social worker feels overwhelmed by the amount of cases allocated. They have supervision with their line manager (if they have one) and expect to talk about reflective practice.

For example, how can I practice better? What experiences have I had which enhance or impact



my practice? What attitudes, values or judgements am I applying?

Sadly, most managers don't have time or inclination for this anymore. They focus almost entirely on case loads; what's happening with X? How many times have you visited Y? Is the paperwork completed?

Supervision has become a paper exercise in box ticking and back covering. That's not what it was meant to be.

There is a huge gap in social work education which means that, no matter how good you are, you do not understand the structural and political impact on patriarchy on women and girls. And if you don't understand it, how on earth can you be expected to be a safe practitioner?

So what can be done? It would be pointless for me to write about the problems without offering some solutions, so here they are;

1) Social work education needs a massive overhaul. There should be clear structured guidelines on what must be included in teaching in relation to any kind of domestic or sexual violence. Currently, there are none, and these subject areas are generally not covered in education. Why on earth not? It's absolutely essential that all student social workers are taught about the institutional disbelief of professionals when women and girls disclose. They absolutely must be able to critically reflect and analysis their OWN values and where they come from.

2) Students should be able to demonstrate their understanding of patriarchy and gendered crime in order to successfully qualify. This would mean that social workers would enter the field with a much more informed understanding of how to work with sexual exploitation, rape and/or domestic abuse. They would be able to chair meetings or attend MARAC's and challenge the horrendous victim blaming that is present at every single one I've ever attended.

3) Funding. It always comes down to funding. The government MUST invest in health and social care. Recruitment and retention levels are dire because there's no money to employ staff and those who are employed are exhausted and over worked. If the government really wants to tackle exploitation and abuse then they should ring fence money specifically to do this. Increase the budgets for local authorities, pay social workers decent salaries, ensure that all frontline teams are fully staffed, ensure all teams have a manager (believe me, this is so often not the case...), and ensure that there is a budget for resources.

4) investment needs to be made into services specifically for women and girls. Women's services deliver amazing work on the bare minimum of funding. Ask yourself why services and organisations that work for and with women and girls are so poorly valued. Social workers are not experts in everything, and should be referring onto those who have the knowledge & skills to work with specific situations. For example, Rape Crisis, Women's Aid or other voluntary sector organisations. Put the money in and I guarantee you will see the results.

There is always discussion about how to improve social work, and this is not meant to be a definitive piece. I also need to make it clear that I believe in social work and believe we can, and must do better.

If only someone would listen.