_____

Bangkok, Thailand
17-20 September 2012

Media as a Site to Prevent Violence against Girls and Women

Expert paper prepared by:

Marai Larasi, MBE*
Joint Chair of the End Violence Against Women Coalition, UK
and
Director of Imkaan
UK

This paper explores the media as a site of primary prevention of violence against women and girls (VAWG) / gender-based violence. The UK-based coalition End Violence Against Women (EVAW), in its Prevention Strategy (2011), defines primary prevention as

> *'approaches which aim to prevent violence before it occurs. These might be initiatives targeted to whole populations or specific target populations to change the social, cultural and structural context within which violence occurs'.*

(End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2011)

Violence against women and girls is a global problem that has deep and far-reaching implications for all our societies. While the direct impact on women and girls is well documented, there is also increasing evidence which highlights the social and economic consequences for wider communities and country states. Violence against women and girls is costly; it damages and destroys lives, while also placing pressure on state budgets in terms of health, criminal justice interventions and lost productivity among other areas.

In considering the impact of VAWG on women and girls, it is important to acknowledge that this violence affects every aspect of our lives, from health and well-being to access to rights and justice. If, as responsible societies, we are to create a truly equal world i.e. one in which girls and women are able to fully participate, exercise autonomy and thrive, VAWG must no longer be a *'normal'* and accepted part of our realities.

Yet, given the scale and scope of violence against women and girls, it is understandable that we are tempted to relegate it to the category of those social problems that are viewed as inevitable. After all, despite the good work that we have done, and decades after feminist activists started setting up rape crisis centres and refuges, the demand for such services has not lessened. We know this because women and girls are still being abused and killed. We know this because rape crisis centres, women's refuges and community support services are still overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of women and girls that they are working with. We know this because some of the most vulnerable women and girls do not, or are not able to, access services. We know this because as some forms of VAWG have become mainstreamed in some regions, there are practitioners and policy makers from a range of disciplines seeking to develop the latest response, the new approach i.e. that will deliver the most 'effective' response while demonstrating *'value for money',* yet VAWG persists. So, while we continue to offer vital, life-saving services which empower women and girls, we are still always

'chasing our tail'. Violence against women and girls is showing no signs of going away. So what is missing in approaches and our strategies?

If we are to really address violence against women and girls, then we must begin to develop and implement effective strategies for preventing this violence from happening in the first place. To date, where VAWG services exist, priority has understandably been given to responding to the support needs of girls and women and in some cases, their children. Given that much of this work remains grossly under-funded it is unsurprising that prevention falls off the agenda of many frontline services, government departments and international agencies. In addition, in the struggle to obtain much needed funds - which increasingly rely on outcome-based evidence - it is much easier to demonstrate the difference that interventions make when they are focussed on recovery, risk management, safety planning, etc. It is much harder to truly evidence the impact of prevention initiatives – particularly primary prevention initiatives. But the case for prevention must nevertheless be made.

A Framework for Prevention

In June 2011 EVAW published its report, '*A Different World is Possible: A call for long-term and targeted action to prevent violence against women and girls'*. The report utilises an adapted version of an interactive model '*Factors at play in the perpetration of violence against women and children and sexual orientation violence*' which was developed by Carol Hagemann-White et al. This '*model of perpetration'* identifies '*multiple and intersecting factors'* (including media violence) through which VAWG arises at different levels in society, i.e. from the macro to the ontogenetic, while also identifying the necessary interventions which are required at each of these levels. This paper draws on the approaches and principles of '*A Different World is Possible'* and uses the model of perpetration as a tool for both critiquing the current media failings with respect to VAWG, as well as presenting the media as an important site for VAWG prevention.

The Media

The media plays an important role in mirroring and shaping attitudes around a whole plethora of issues from smoking and drink-driving to gender roles and norms. With the growth of the internet, new media and the associated expansion of social media platforms such as Facebook™ and Twitter™, the media is perhaps more diverse and powerful than it has ever been. In the global north, it is now completely normal for Heads of States, celebrities and

campaigning organisations to all have Twitter™ accounts, feeding information through on a moment by moment basis.

So how do the various media forms currently reflect and shape attitudes around VAWG?

A Conducive Context

The United Nations definition of violence against women and girls acknowledges its relationship to women's status in society i.e. VAWG occurs within, and contributes to a wider context of structural gender inequality. This inequality is the most significant of a number of conditions which, in combination, create a *conducive context* i.e. the conditions in which VAWG occurs and is allowed to persist.

The *conducive context* is not a static back-drop to VAWG, it provides an on-going 'feed' of messages, ideological perspectives, codes, guidelines and even laws that promote and reinforce the acceptability of varying degrees and forms of abuse of girls and women. As such, the media is one of a range of apparatuses which shapes the landscape in which VAWG occurs. For example, in the UK, as in other countries in the global north, there has been an unprecedented increase in the use of sexualised imagery in the media. So-called 'lad's mags'[1] with brand names such as Loaded™ and Nuts™, advertising campaigns, video games and music videos are full of images which have become progressively more graphic in their nature. At the same time, the internet has made pornography, including extreme pornography, more accessible than at any point in our history. Throughout the media, women and girls are consistently portrayed as objects which are sexually available to men, who by default have access to male privilege and entitlement. With the advent of social media platforms such as Facebook™ and Twitter™, and video-sharing websites such as YouTube™, individuals are able to develop and transmit their own messages and videos including those which objectify and even directly attack women such as Facebook™ 'Rape' pages. This objectification of women is also further amplified by factors such as 'race' and age. For example, black feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1992) have critiqued the ways in which black women's bodies are portrayed in popular media, i.e. as a signifier of deviance and lasciviousness, and have linked this to legacies of colonialism and racism.

Worryingly, there is also a growing trend in which girls and young women are often ascribed 'sexy' adult-like characteristics while adult women are infantilised in order to construct a

---

[1]Magazines targeted at male audiences which have high levels of sexualised content

4

feigned 'innocence' which is also marketed as sexually appealing. Equally problematic is the juxtaposing of sexually suggestive content / nudity onto child-like backdrops sending out an array of inappropriate messages which blur the lines between childhood and adulthood. For example the pop singer Katie Perry's video for her song 'California Gurls'[2] is set in a candy-land, complete with 'gummy-bears' and lollipops. At different points in the video, the singer is featured lying naked on a pink candy floss cloud while in one scene a young woman is unwrapped like a sweet from a clear plastic wrapper.

This on-going objectification of girls and women, including the media blurring of lines between childhood and adulthood, creates a landscape in which VAWG is normalised. Linda Papadopoulos in her 2010 review of the sexualisation of young people states

> '*There is significant amount of evidence linking stereotypical attitudes to women's sexuality, adversarial sexual beliefs, acceptance of the 'rape myth' and sexist beliefs with aggressive sexual behaviour'*
>
> (Papadopoulous, 2010)

However it is not just (re)presentations of women that are problematic. The presentations of men tend to reinforce dominant notions of masculinity. Men are portrayed as sexually powerful, aggressive and 'in control'. One example of this which caused outrage was a 2007 advertisement launched by the fashion house Dolce and Gabbana. The advertisement features a shirtless man holding down a woman while four other men look on[3]. The advertisement was eventually withdrawn after complaints from women's groups.

Although the proliferation of images and messages which reinforce gender stereotypes is in itself problematic, the situation is further compounded by the lack of alternative messages. There is very little in the media or indeed in formal educational structures which counteract or support any analysis and interrogation of the ways in which girls and women are represented.

---

[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_TU6nFGQ5w

[3] http://peacehopetrees.tumblr.com/post/14504147327/feministblackboard-dolce-gabbana-this-ad-is

(Re)presentations of Violence Against Women and Girls in the Media

The media approach to the portrayal of VAWG is often problematic in a number of ways. This includes victim-blaming, sensationalising, distorting information, misrepresenting the legal context and presenting male perpetrators as either monsters or distressed and long-suffering. In addition, forms of VAWG such as female genital mutilation and forced marriage, which disproportionately affect girls and women from black and minority ethnic communities or from particular regions, tends to be exoticised and othered. This a particular area of concern for Imkaan as noted in the 2011 report *The Missing Link* which states

> *'The sensationalisation of female genital mutilation by the media was considered to be unhelpful in preventing female genital mutilation'*

(Imkaan et al, 2011)

This and other issues were highlighted in January 2012, when EVAW along with three other UK-based women's groups gave evidence to the Leveson Inquiry[4] into press standards. The EVAW submission included ten egregious examples of UK media reporting on VAWG. The following three examples demonstrate some of the media failings in reporting around VAWG. The fourth example was not included in the submission but highlights a number of issues.

1. The **murder** of a woman by her male partner was labelled the 'Facebook murder' (victim blaming & sensationalism)

   Media outlet: Daily Telegraph, and others
   Date: 1 September 2009
   Headline: Man murdered wife 'after she changed Facebook status to single'
   Story summary: report from criminal prosecution of man for murder of his partner

   Available online at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/6122306/Man-murdered-wife-after-she-changed-Facebook-status-to-single.html

2. The **rape** of two young girls by multiple perpetrators was reported as an 'orgy'

   Media outlet: Daily Mail, and others
   Date: 17 March 2011
   Headline: Six footballers jailed over gang rape of twelve year old girls in midnight park orgy
   Story summary: conviction of six men for rape of two girls
   Available online at:

---

[4] http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/hearing/2012-01-24am/

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1367377/Six-footballers-jailed-gang-rape-12-year-old-girls-midnight-park-orgy.html#

3. Editorialising about 'harmful practices' – why do they do that to their daughters?

   Media outlet: The Daily Mail, The Sun, The Daily Telegraph and others
   Date: various
   Headline (example): Honour crime up by 40% due to rising fundamentalism
   Story summary: crime figures used to make an argument about violence against women being caused by increasing fundamentalism
   Available online at:

   http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1233918/Honour-crime-40-rising-fundamentalism.html

   http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/6655561/Honour-based-violence-is-biggest-problem-facing-women.html

4. The **murder** of a woman and her children by her partner is contextualised by her conversion to Islam – her partner is described as a '**monster husband'**

   Media outlet: The Daily Mail
   Date: 15 February 2011
   Headline; 'Muslim convert' wife murdered along with her two children by monster husband had only stayed with him for 'sake of the kids'
   Story summary: speculation about the couple's life and the circumstances under which the victim was killed

   Available online at:

   http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1356503/Muslim-convert-wife-murdered-2-children-monster-killed-himself.html

These examples are by no means exceptional or specific to the UK. Online samples taken from news reports from India, the USA and the Caribbean highlight many of the same issues, particularly of victim-blaming and sensationalisation.

It is clear that across our societies, we are failing to effectively challenge the media's role in contributing to, and maintaining a conducive context in which violence against women and girls occurs. Furthermore, much of the media approach to VAWG is largely counterproductive and damaging, and worryingly can have a negative impact on women and girls themselves.

Moving from Risk Factor to Preventative Tool

Despite the overwhelming challenges presented by the current situation around media conduct and approach to VAWG, the picture is not a completely negative one as is emphasised by *Zero Tolerance* in '*Handle with Care: A guide to responsible media reporting of violence against women*'. '*Handle with Care'* points out that there are many examples of good practice in reporting of violence against women and girls. These include stories which give voice to survivors without sensationalising their experiences as well as issue based stories which actively seek to build awareness and support VAWG initiatives. Examples include:

1. Media outlet: The Herald Scotland
    Date: 15 February 2010
    Headline: Children's views are stuck in the past
    Story summary: Commentary on a study of children's attitudes to gender violence

    Available online at:

    http://www.heraldscotland.com/blogs/scotland-now/lucy-adams-children-s-views-are-stuck-in-the-past-1.1006673

2. Media outlet: The Guardian
    Date: 23 July 2012
    Headline: The laudable drive to change attitudes towards violence against women
    Story summary: The work of the Director of Public Prosecutions to challenge attitudes to gender based violence

    Available online at:

    http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2012/jul/23/attitudes-domestic-violence-women

In addition to the examples of good practice in reporting, it must be noted, that platforms such as Facebook™ and Twitter™ can be hugely beneficial to VAWG campaigners. There are growing numbers of online communities which are providing alternative voices and perspectives without having to rely on mainstream media to focus on the pertinent issues. For example, The Everyday Sexism Project '*exists to catalogue instances of sexism experienced by women on a day to day basis'*. Women are able to submit examples (stories, images etc) of 'every day sexism' which then become a part of the project's Twitter feed. Everyday Sexism

has over 8,000 followers is constantly raising awareness of the normalisation of behaviours, attitudes and structures which form part of the conducive context in which violence against women and girls occurs.

It is clear that the media is a hugely influential mechanism which can be a source of harm or a 'force for good'. However given the normalisation of the objectification of women and even of violence against women, it is unlikely that games manufacturers, newspapers, magazines, advertisers and music producers are going to change their approaches without public / political intervention. As such a starting point for country states should be ***investment in public-awareness campaigns which are targeted, on-going and evidence-based.*** It is important that these messages are carefully developed in partnership with organisations and individuals with expertise in VAWG and especially those women's NGOs that are at the coal-face of service delivery and strategic advocacy. Lessons can be learned from other successful government campaigns. For example in the UK, successful campaigns have been run to change attitudes to the wearing of seat-belts and the dangers of 'drink-driving'. Where state or public funded media services exist, e.g. the BBC in the UK, these should provide platforms for such campaigns. Where possible, NGOs working in this area should also produce independent material which can then be distributed through platforms such as Twitter™. For example, UK Feminista has recently launched a campaign film[5] targeted at the Westminster government. While the film is targeted at the government, it highlights areas such as the prevalence of VAWG, the nature of the conducive context, among other issues. The film is available online and is being publicised though platforms such as Facebook™ and Twitter™.

Alongside well-resourced, sustainable and long-term public-awareness campaigns, there is a need to address the way that the media contributes to maintaining and promoting the conducive context in which violence against women and girls occurs. This requires ***a challenge to the sexualisation of girls and women in the media*** as well as ***a challenge to the promotion of problematic notions of masculinity***. In practice this means ***a meaningful***

---

[5] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-4JUPgvDRA

mainstreaming of gender equality into media regulation which is underpinned by legislation. As part of this process, media agencies should be required to ensure that journalists are trained around key issues such as VAWG. It is true that demands for increased regulation are often countered by mainstream media arguments about the need to maintain press freedom. While media freedom is vital, it should exist alongside clear responsibility (as is expected of individual citizens) and not at the expense of girls and women (individually and collectively).

The need for schools to be key actors in preventing violence against women and girls is a vital one. An important element of this should be *curriculum-based activities which offer a gendered analysis and which support media literacy* through providing young people with tools to critique imagery, lyrical content, language etc. This includes developing approaches which support young people to decode the range of messages being delivered through advertising campaigns.

Given the role of advertising agencies in promoting notions of girls and women as commodities and men as the entitled consumers of those commodities, *regulations around advertising should include stringent standards around gender stereotyping, sexualisation and violence.*

Social media has the potential to have a major role in reshaping attitudes to girls and women. As such *urgent engagement is needed with companies such as Facebook™ and Twitter™ to address how social media is misused to abuse girls and women and promote harmful attitudes* e.g. Facebook™ 'rape' pages.

The media educates us, it focusses our attention on issues, it exposes system failures, it entertains us, it sways political will, it helps to elect governments and it can feed their demise. As we seek to eradicate violence against women and girls and as we seek to create a different world, it is crucial that we grasp the importance of media to that process. We will not easily change attitudes, without the use of the media. We will not tell the truth about VAWG in wide, accessible contexts, without the use of the media. We certainly will not prevent VAWG from happening in the first place, if we do not engage with the media as a site for change. We need media to be a key aspect of primary prevention and we must

remember that without primary prevention we will continue to only ever 'put a plaster' on the problem of VAWG.

End Violence Against Women Coalition (2011) *A Different World is Possible: A call for long-term and targeted action to prevent violence against women and girls* London: End Violence Against Women Coalition.

Hooks, b. (1992) *BLACK LOOKS: race and representation.* Boston: South End Press.

Imkaan, City University & Equality Now (2011). *The Missing Link: a joined up approach to addressing harmful practices in London.* London: Imkaan.

Papadopoulous, L. (2010) *Sexualisation of Young People Review.* London: Crown Copyright.

Zero Tolerance (2012) Handle With Care: A guide to responsible media reporting of violence against women.